“A Highly Ambiguous Condition”: The Transgender Subject, Experimental Narrative and Trans-Reading Identity in the Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Angela Carter, and Jeanette Winterson

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"A HIGHLY AMBIGUOUS CONDITION": THE TRANSGENDER SUBJECT, EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVE AND TRANS-READING IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, ANGELA CARTER, AND JEANETTE WINTERTON

by

Jennifer A. Smith

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Dr. Gwen Raaburg, Advisor

Western Michigan University
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“A HIGHLY AMBIGUOUS CONDITION”: THE TRANSGENDER SUBJECT, EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVE AND TRANS-READING IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, ANGELA CARTER, AND JEANETTE WINTERTON

Jennifer A. Smith, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2006

This dissertation examines how the constantly evolving gender identity of a text’s transgender subject relates to the text’s narrative structure and shapes the orientation of the reader to the text. Accordingly, this project examines how these transgender narratives deploy experimental stylistic techniques that enhance the reader’s experience of ceaseless transitioning by revealing gender as a constant process that never solidifies onto a body and by highlighting the text’s own status as process rather than finalized product. Further, this project examines how a transgender subject and his/her relationship to the body, culture, and narrative is involved in the re-vision of three conventional discourses: biography, myth, and romance. Ultimately, this research presents a trans-reading identity as an interpretive framework that reads gender ambiguity and fluid sexuality into as well as out of texts. This reading position provides the reader with interpretive tools that will allow for a multiplicity of gendered reading positions beyond the male/female binary and opens up texts to complex interpretations that highlight the relationship between their narrative experimentation and their critique of stable gender positions. The focal novels are Orlando by Virginia Woolf, The Passion of New Eve by Angela Carter,
and *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson, and this study argues that such transgender narratives allow readers access to not only a trans-reading position but to a new way of viewing the world beyond the confines placed upon them by a monolithic heterosexism.
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Jennifer A. Smith

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The broad concern of this dissertation is the relationship between the gender of a text’s narrator, the narrative form and structure of that text, and the text’s reader. Specifically, this project is concerned exclusively with the transgendered narrator and how his/her constantly evolving gender identity relates to the novel’s narrative structure and shapes the orientation of the reader to the transgender text. Accordingly, this project examines how these transgender narratives deploy experimental stylistic techniques that enhance the reader’s experience of trans by revealing gender as a constant process that never solidifies onto a body and by highlighting the text’s own status as process, rather than finalized product, through aggravating the already destabilized relationship between reader, narrator, and text. This project examines how a transgender subject and his/her relationship to the body, culture, and narrative is involved in the re-vision of three conventional discourses: biography, myth, and romance. The featured authors examined in this project are Virginia Woolf, Angela Carter, and Jeanette Winterson; the focal novels are Orlando (1928), The Passion of New Eve (1977), and Written on the Body (1992), by the respective authors, although additional texts by these authors will also be discussed.

Central research questions include the following: What is the nature of the relationship between a transgender narrator’s subjectivity and the oftentimes experimental narrative through which the narrator’s subjectivity is articulated? How do the experimental styles of some transgender narratives parallel the idea of gender’s transience and instability? How does one textually represent a transgender identity

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that exists outside of and defies the categories of dominant discourse without referring to those ideological categories and the narrative forms used to construct them in order to establish some manner of meaning? Additionally, how does this relationship between the narrator's transgender identity and narrative form further destabilize the reader's relationship to the text? To the narrator? What does it mean to read from a trans position and what does this perspective reveal about dominant assumptions about gender, sex, subjectivity, and their presence within text?

This project begins by reviewing the cultural construction of gender and sex and then examines pertinent elements of gender studies, gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, including theories of the body and textuality. Establishing issues surrounding the emerging field of trans studies, such as the often-contested definition of "transgender" and the possibility of realizing a trans subjectivity, the introduction turns to the focus of the dissertation by discussing various thematic and stylistic features of trans narratives. It then presents a preliminary description of what constitutes a trans-reading position, which will be further elaborated upon in the project's concluding chapter. Finally, this introductory chapter looks to place Orlando, The Passion of New Eve, and Written on the Body and their authors in conversation with one another over history, questioning the social and cultural contexts for their emergence and closes with a brief outline, description of how this study will be carried out, and reflection on its contribution to the field.

Literature Review

Cultural Construction of Gender and Sex

Constructionist feminists, those involved in the field of gender studies, and queer theorists hold that gender is a cultural construction rather than an unwavering
and absolute description of identity derived from one’s sex. Rejecting the essentialist position that biology firmly determines one’s gender, researchers turned their gaze towards culture, emphasizing that gender identities are not absolute or stable across cultures nor are they stable across economic classes and races. Further, some gender and queer theorists argue that sex as well as sexuality are also culturally constructed identity categories that too are constantly in a state of flux, which is a logical consequence once gender is shown to be a composite of complex systems of regulation.

Although predating the discussion of gender’s cultural construction, Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* calls attention to gender as a legitimate category for critical inquiry, focusing on the significance of gender in charting literary history and how the lack of a literary tradition for women hinders future female writers. Most importantly, this essay indirectly makes a nod to how gender is not irrevocably and exclusively tied to one sex or the other. Following, rather than seeing all subjectivity and its subsequent expression as universal, Woolf advocates for a specifically female subjectivity and textuality. Yet, she also refutes the stringent sex roles in Victorian England and the sexual self-consciousness they produced; Woolf found such a rigid separation of the sexes to be damaging and advocated the cultivation of an androgynous mind, an idea borrowed from Coleridge. According to Woolf and Coleridge, a mind where the “two powers preside” is without hindrance and “is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (98). Although Woolf believed that there is a distinct female subjectivity that requires a similarly distinct textual expression, she stated that this subjectivity can only be achieved and expressed if a woman’s mind is androgynous, whereby the brain contains both the male and female working together
in harmony.

While Woolf never claimed that gender is constructed and not inherent to one’s sex, her theoretical discussion of the ambiguous mind indicates that, for her, gender identification is not exclusive to one sex alone, thereby freeing gender from the sexed body, in part. Rather, both male and female minds can (and should) contain characteristics of both genders in order to be capable of revealing and conveying what is “real.” This mixing of genders, at least in the mind, weakened the absolute separateness of the sexes that Woolf observed and critiqued in 1920’s Victorian society and muddies the essential way in which gender was strictly correlated to one’s biological sex and the restrictions on women’s behavior and artistic activity accordingly assigned.¹ In addition, Woolf began drafting notes for Orlando as she concluded writing <i>A Room of One’s Own</i>, and therefore, it serves as a significant influence on that novel, particularly the relationship between Woolf’s discussion of the androgynous mind and Orlando’s apparently androgynous identity, as will be discussed in chapter two.

Following, Simone de Beauvoir pioneered the idea that female identity is not, in fact, innate, stable, absolute, or fixed, despite the fact that she never directly addressed gender as such in her book <i>The Second Sex</i>, first published in France in 1949. As a result of her investigation into what it means to be a woman, female, and feminine, she revealed a fact that proved to be a watershed moment for feminist thought and theory: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.”² Supporting this claim, her book presents a survey of how women and their behavior have been collectively determined by the patriarchal disciplines of biology and psychoanalysis, the restrictive nature of class structures that prevent women from easily attaining material sustenance, and the general treatment and classification of women as...
"other." *The Second Sex* and its examination of what it means to be "other" provides a healthy scrutiny of what had before been taken as a given—women act like women because they are female. Beauvoir revealed that the category of "woman" is constructed and prescribed by scientific and academic disciplines as well as by societal structures and their accompanying values. Further, by implicitly de-essentializing a woman's gender identity and separating its development from biological sex, Beauvoir radically reformulated how gender in general is studied, illuminating its fluidity and setting the course for countless constructionist feminists and later gender theorists and their continued effort to deconstruct rigid and restraining gender roles.³

Most importantly for this project, de Beauvoir's revelation that gender is always a "becoming" rather than a "being" set the foundation for the study of genders—male, female, trans and beyond—that fall outside those conventionally aligned to the male or female sex and that do not, in fact, find an alliance with sex at all. Donna Haraway echoes this idea years later, in terms of socialism and economic demands: "Gender is a verb, not a noun. Gender is always the production of subjects in relation to other subjects, and in relation to artifacts. Gender is about material-semiotic production of these assemblages, these human-artifact assemblages that are people" ("Cyborgs, Coyotes, and Dogs: A Kinship of Feminist Figurations" 328). Haraway's relational conception of gender identity formation speaks to how Woolf, Carter and Winterson each present gender in their respective texts, yet it most directly informs how Carter presents the simultaneous technological and cultural construction of Eve/lyn, who represents a transgender cyborg.

Rather than focusing on gender in order to understand sexuality, as de Beauvoir and countless others had done, in part, Michel Foucault, in the first volume
of his four-volume *The History of Sexuality*, argued that sexuality does not, in fact, derive from one’s gender but, rather, that gender derives from one’s sexuality, although gender is by no means his central concern. He asserts that categories of sexuality were invented in nineteenth-century Europe as individual’s behavior began to be classified in order to be controlled by the medical profession, the socially privileged, the scientific community, the literary and cultural elite, and the systems of punishment they supported, hence Foucault’s claim that the 1870’s saw the birth of the homosexual: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). Thus, gender identities were created around the classification of individuals by the sexual acts in which they engaged, and it is from these categories of sexuality that the stratification and solidification of the male-female gender binary derived, not vice versa.

Within Foucault’s conceptualization of the relationship between gender identity and sexuality, gender becomes conceived less as a behavior that one performs but rather, a representation of certain discourses, in this case, the discourse of heterosexuality. By thus removing gender as the determining factor in one’s sexuality and understanding it as culturally and, in part, linguistically constructed rather than biologically determined, Foucault questions the efficacy of maintaining the sex-gender distinction since sex too, as an identity category, is also the result of installation of sexuality in society: “The deployment of sexuality [...] was what established this notion of ‘sex’” (154). The category of sex, infused as it is with power, became a potent site of regulating bodies, standardizing not only their appearance, behaviors, and drives, but also determining which would be
comprehended as human because “it is through sex [. . .] that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility [. . .] to the whole of his body [. . .] to his identity” (155-56). Therefore, Foucault indicts the maintenance of the sex-gender distinction as complicit in the preservation of heterosexuality’s primary position as the sexual norm, a positioning that results in every other type of sexual practice and those who participate in them being rendered incomprehensible and therefore non-existent. Foucault urges theorists to move beyond the sex-gender distinction and its inherent advocacy of heterosexuality in order to envision identities founded upon the more fluid basis of desire and pleasure: “It is the agency of sex that we must break away from [. . .] to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance” (157). As a result of Foucault’s assault on the polyvalent forces that coincide in the creation and maintenance of sexuality, his theories of sex, gender and sexuality have become a cornerstone of queer theory.

In the wake of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, Teresa de Lauretis, in her essay “The Technology of Gender” asserts that it is more productive for feminists, specifically, to think of gender as a representation produced by various discourses rather than as a mark of sexual difference: “Gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings [. . .] it is the product and process of various social technologies and institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of everyday life” (2). Therefore, by referring to and maintaining the dichotomy of male and female genders, feminists continue to work within patriarchy’s established framework without truly disrupting or destroying it. De Lauretis deems it more productive to define gender as “a symbolic system or system of meanings that correlates sex to cultural contents according to social values
and hierarchies” (5). Doing so allows feminist thinkers and other scholars of gender as well to remove themselves from this system, if only momentarily, in order to provide a more comprehensive perspective and critique of it; most significantly for this project, de Lauretis asserts that conceptualizing gender as a system allows researchers to inhabit “a space outside the gender system” (Gamble 39) so that they can more radically contribute to the “ongoing effort to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms from another perspective” (de Lauretis 25). Consequently, this project reads transgender narratives, particularly those that merge their content and style in experimental ways, as distinct and singular contributions to this effort, as “new spaces of discourse” that revise the prescription of normative gender identities and that ultimately resist these terms’ definitions.

As benchmark ideas in contemporary gender theory, Judith Butler’s interrogations of the normative categories of gender and sex and her scrutiny of the terms through which our sexual and gender identities are constituted considerably extended de Lauretis’s—as well as Foucault’s—argument that gender is “a complex discursive construction” (Gamble 39). As a leading text in what some would term post-feminism, Butler’s book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity de-naturalizes and de-essentializes gender and sex by revealing that “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). Gender is exposed as what one does in order to be represented rather than what one is, and because gender is something that one does, there is room for subverting the parameters established by “the rigid regulatory frame.” In keeping with Beauvoir, Butler states, “If there is something right in
Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (33).

Butler extended her scrutiny to the supposed stability of sex categories, proposing that sex may, in fact, be gender. She explains that the body does not exist prior to its gendered marking; following, sex does not exist prior to gender, prior to its marking by culture. The body and its sexed identity come into being through the discursive process of gendering; Butler states, “‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (7). In collapsing the sex-gender distinction, Butler also called into question the materiality of the body and discounted its significance to the formation of one’s sexed identity, but she goes even further, emphasizing the disintegration of the unified subject. According to Butler, not only is the sex-gender distinction no longer a viable division within feminist argument, but the idea of woman as subject is also obsolete; woman “is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms” due in part to feminists’ work to liberate the category of woman from the confines of representation and its use as “the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of woman” (1). Accordingly, by interrogating the category of woman—its construction and fabrication by the powers that be—feminists have removed it from humanist concepts of subjectivity, a removal that, ironically, the sex-gender distinction had already precipitated: “The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex” (6). With gender revealed to be a construction,
sex to be gender all along, and the subject to be fragmented and perpetually transitory, Butler calls on feminists to envision a new approach to politics, one in which identity does not serve as the basis for action but, rather, one in which identities are interrogated and which allows “cultural [rather than biological and medical] configurations of sex and gender” to become comprehensible (149).

Woolf, Beauvoir, Foucault, de Lauretis, and Butler, in particular, have provided a framework through which to explore the figure of the transgender; as conceptualizations of sex and gender progressed from articulating these categories as a set of behaviors to seeing them as unstable representations of culturally and discursively determined ideals and social artifacts, focus moved away from the female gender to genders in general and to transgender specifically. As research continues into the nature of and relationship between gender, sex and the body, the idea of transgender has morphed from describing those genders that vacillate between the male/female binary to those that attempt to move beyond this binary and supersede it altogether, striving to establish meaning beyond its terms. The texts explored in this study—Orlando, The Passion of New Eve, and Written on the Body—each look forward to the moment conceptualized above by Butler, when identities are no longer arbitrarily moored to the obsolete categories of male/female and all variety of genders and sexes are recognizable and valid, by featuring a transgender narrator who transmits his/her story in an experimental form, thereby facilitating the reader’s placement in a trans-reading identity.

Gender Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory

Questions of gender arose as a result of the international women’s movement in the late 1960’s, and since then, feminism has morphed according to
contemporaneous demands and split into various factions representing the complexity of women’s lived experiences and the often contradictory theories surrounding them. In a historical and political examination of feminism, Julia Kristeva argues that three dominant ways of thinking have emerged in the movement. The first and second can be characterized as a demand for equality and feminism’s dominance, respectively. However, it is the third that promises revolutionary change because in it, “women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical” (Moi 12). As Kristeva describes in “Women’s Time,”

In the third attitude, [. . .] the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics. What can ‘identity’, even ‘sexual identity’, mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged? (33-34)

The novels by Woolf, Carter and Winterson discussed in this project illustrate and depict this third point of view because their radical examination and deconstruction of sexual identity undermine not only the meaning of male/female but the very existence of the oppositional categories themselves. Further, the work of Foucault, de Lauretis and Butler obviously informs the continued development of this third articulation of how to revolutionize conceptualizations of gender, sex and sexuality, and it is this third stance that has brought about the emergence of a broadened field of study focused on gender in general rather than focusing exclusively on the category of woman.

Accordingly, articles and seminars that engaged with what was termed “gender criticism” began appearing in journals and universities in the mid-to-late 1980’s and early 1990’s, and Schor states that, like constructionist feminism, gender studies adopted the notion of the cultural and historical construction of gender as its
basis. However, as these feminists turned an eye towards how female gender is conceived, gender critics scrutinized how all genders are constructed. Schor cites the 1985 publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* as inciting the rise of gender studies, with its application of feminist criticism to the analysis of male-male relationships. Like Schor, Sedgwick herself describes gender studies as focusing on all genders while feminism is a type of gender studies that focuses on women in "Gender Criticism."

Articulating the distinction between feminism and gender criticism more precisely, Sedgwick notes, "'Gender criticism' might here be taken to mean, then, not criticism through the categories of gender analysis but criticism of them, the mapping of fractal borderlines between gender and its others" (emphasis in original, 273). Yet, unlike Schor, Kosofsky sees gender studies as having a definite affiliation with gay and lesbian studies and therefore aligns the initiation of this line of inquiry with an earlier text—the 1978 English publication of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. The distinctions that Kosofsky draws around gender studies to set it apart from feminist criticism are significant because, although each of the texts explored in this study are written by female authors who extensively engage with feminist concerns, the novels are more explicitly and directly concerned with the formation and import of gender categories, as such. Rather than focusing on gender as an isolated element of identity and thereby critically appraising what it means to be male or female, *Orlando*, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Written on the Body* scrutinize the categories of gender themselves and, in some way, look to the formation of a multiplicity of more diverse genders and the eradication of such categories as they are currently constituted and outlined. In addition, because the novels also question categories of sexuality in addition to those of gender, Kosofsky's formulation of
gender studies as more closely aligned to the concerns of gay and lesbian studies describes the most appropriate rubric under which to conduct an analysis of these particular texts.

Related to and growing out of gender and gay and lesbian studies' emphasis on how identities are represented, whether along gender or sexual lines, queer theory's contribution to the conceptualization of identity also informs the direction of this study. Negating the practice of constructing identities and categorizing people around any one characteristic, whether around a normative gender or even one considered transgender, queer theory embraces the fluidity and indeterminacy of all identities. As Annamarie Jagose writes in *Queer Theory*, “queer is less an identity than a critique of identity” (131). Extending gender study's critique of gender as an identity category, queer theory critiques any identity category that groups people by a single feature; more particularly, it zones in on those discrepancies that inevitably appear between sex, gender and sexuality. As it addresses sexuality, queer theory focuses attention on those who do not fit into socially constructed categories of “normal” sexuality as well as on those practices and behaviors that are conventionally judged deviant like masochism, sadism, bestiality, fetishism, fisting, among countless others. It also focuses on those who do not fit into socially constructed categories of “normal” gender, those who do not fit into the male or female boxes to be checked on any number of applications and forms—the transgender, transsexual, cross-dresser, drag queen, butch, etc.

The overlap between the interests of gender and gay and lesbian studies, in addition to some strains of feminist criticism, and those of queer theory is obvious, and categorizing those works that can be considered a work of gender studies or gay and lesbian studies or queer theory is challenging, if not impossible, which may, in
fact, be the point of such works of criticism—to defy categorization, because of their interdisciplinary nature and scope of concern. However, queer theory is particularly significant because it pushes this study to move beyond simply reflecting how *Orlando, The Passion of New Eve* and *Written on the Body* critique the category of gender because theories of sex and sexuality cannot be contained by the category of gender, a point made most radically clear by Winterson's book: How does one discuss the sex and sexuality of *Written on the Body*’s narrator when his/her gender is never revealed? Such an omission of information from this novel, as well as the trans narrators of *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve*, forces the reader to reconsider sex and sexuality and to look for ways to understand these categories outside of their relationship to any formulation of gender, even those formulations deemed trans. Further, queer theory’s refusal to define a “queer” identity, practice, behavior, etc. and its subsequent embrace of uncertainty and ceaseless fluidity hearken to each novel’s destabilization of gender, sexuality, identity, and narrative, among other supposedly stable categories of meaning. As David Halperin describes, “‘Queer’ [. . .] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance” (62), and it is this “horizon of possibility” to which these novels look and point the reader’s attention.

**The Body and Textuality**

Feminist and queer theorists alike have long scrutinized the relationship between the body, gender, sex, subjectivity, and textual representation, in part because the identities of females and homosexuals have been consigned to the material body to the exception of the abstract mind but also because the body has been embraced as a central element in the identity formation of marginalized
individuals—highlighting their difference in a positive light—and has been used as a metaphor for their self-expression. Although some feminist and queer theorists have denied the body’s materiality in order to free themselves of that which, when used in the service of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, has constrained their subjectivity and agency, the substance of the corporeal has never been entirely abandoned by feminist and queer theorists who chose, instead, to reconceptualize the body as a critical element in the creation of positive and substantive female and homosexual identities, and the body has proven to be an important trope in representing this relationship. As Haraway remarks in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980’s,” “Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity” (37-38) and can therefore serve as sites of resistance to and reformulation of this power.

Even in the early scrutiny of the relationship between marginalized identities and writing, the body served as an important metaphor. Woolf remarks in A Room of One’s Own, “The book has somehow to be adapted to the body,” (78) asserting that women’s writing must differentiate itself from the narrative and stylistic conventions established by men in order to represent and express women’s thoughts authentically. Similarly, in the midst of The Well of Loneliness obscenity trial, Woolf pondered in her diary, “What is the difference between the subject & the treatment?” (3:207). Rather than wanting to tease apart this difference, Woolf’s question is more rhetorical than literal in that Woolf believed that there was no difference between what one wrote about and how one wrote about it. As Prosser puts it, “[I]t [Woolf’s question] suggests [. . .] an intricacy of treatment and subject, of body and narrative” (168). Meese echoes this sentiment as she discusses the similarities between Woolf’s Orlando and Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood, citing a connection between depictions of
non-normative genders in novels and the forms of those novels: "There is almost a sense in which these anti-gender novels also result in anti-genre texts," equating what the novels are about with how they are articulated (57). Beyond those texts that work to develop a specifically feminine mode of writing, Meese points out those novels like Barnes's and Woolf's that attempt to work beyond any sense of gender and that use experimental narrative forms that defy affiliation with either masculine or feminine modes of communication. This use of unconventional narrative form to write beyond gender is key to understanding the relationship between the transgender narrators and their experimental narratives featured in this study and to developing a trans-reading position.

The French feminists concentrated directly on the relationship between sexual difference and differences in writing, and Cixous and Irigaray focused on the affect of feminine sexuality and desire on language, from a markedly post-structuralist perspective. Cixous conceived of an *ecriture feminine*; this *ecriture feminine* was not writing by women but, rather, a feminine mode of writing capable of being produced by men or women that exhibits a "decipherable libidinal femininity" (Conley 129). Cixous stresses that "this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 253). Related to Cixous' theory of *ecriture feminine*, Irigaray envisions the feminine as outside of representation, a pre-linguistic femininity: "The feminine has consequently had to be deciphered as forbidden, in between signs, between the realized meanings, between the lines" (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 20). Due to this outsider status, Irigaray describes women's style as that which "resists and explodes all firmly established forms, figures ideas, concepts" (*This Sex Which is not One* 76). Cixous and Irigaray have provided conceptions of gender differences in writing that take into consideration female sexuality and desire and that
attempt to theorize the connection between the female body and textual expression, but both posit this connection as essential and claim that women write in a different mode from men because they are women with distinctive experiences of their bodies.

Wittig, on the other hand, takes to task theorists like Cixous and Irigaray who would identify “feminine writing” because she feels that such a phrase qualifies the kind of writing being produced, rather than describing it. As summarized by Butler in *Gender Trouble*,

Whereas Irigaray seeks to expose the ostensible ‘binary’ relation between the sexes as a masculinist ruse that excludes the feminine altogether, Wittig argues that positions like Irigaray’s reconsolidate the binary between masculine and feminine and recirculate a mythic notion of the feminine. (26) By subscribing to the male/female binary of sexual difference, the term “feminine writing” marks the writing as specific, as aligned with the “myth of Woman” (“The Point of View: Universal or Particular?” 59), and thereby participates in women’s continued domination. Rather than trying to differentiate a “woman’s writing” or “feminine writing,” Wittig calls on minority writers—meaning homosexuals, lesbians in particular—to focus on textual experimentation because it is the best way to “enter the privileged (battle) field of literature, where attempts at constitution of the subject confront each other [. . .] this experimentation is the ultimate subjective practice, a practice of the cognitive subject” (61). Because “gender is the enforcement of sex in language” (“The Trojan Horse” 79), the only way to communicate textually without reinforcing the gender system is to “reduce language to be as meaningless as possible in order to turn it into a neutral material—that is, a raw material” (72), and Wittig names Proust and Barnes as two writers who have succeeded in universalizing the minority of point of view via their textual experimentation. Specifically, Wittig cites
Barnes as an example of a writer who has rendered gender inconsequential by making it “obsolete” ("The Point of View: Universal or Particular?" 61).

Peggy Kamuf, like Wittig, attacks the idea that there exists a feminine writing that only women can produce; however, she emphasizes the material of the female body less than French feminism, in general. Kamuf examines the insistent need to assign authorship to texts via the stamping of an author’s name on the title page. Critically examining the debate surrounding who wrote *The Portuguese Letters* in "Writing Like a Woman," Kamuf calls on feminist critics to move beyond assigning a feminist kind of authority to texts simply by attaching the female name of the author to a text because doing so only participates in the naming mechanism that undergirds phallocentrist ideas of identity and authenticity. Rather, feminist scholars should question this urge to name a text and thereby assign it definitively to a male or female author (285-86). Kamuf argues that the similes "writing like a woman" or "writing as a woman," rather than emphasize the similarity between the two factors being compared, actually points out their unbridgeable difference; even in the comparison of "a woman writing like a woman," the difference between the two factors is emphasized, and no matter how many times it is repeated, the first "woman" will never mesh with the second. Therefore, any individual can "write like/as a woman" because a woman is not the only entity that can write "like a woman," since woman here is a construction composed of the conventional beliefs and stereotypes surrounding what it means to be a woman. Kamuf’s article is important because it urges readers to look at a text beyond the sex (name) of its author and asks what it would mean to read a text without “the concept of an author and hence authorial intention” (297). In an extension of this question, Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body* implicitly asks the question and forces the reader to consider what it would
mean to read a text without a definitively sexed narrator and how the reader creates an identity for the narrator and an entryway into the text in the absence of sex.

As feminism became influenced by poststructuralist theories, the relationship between the materiality of the body and female identity became more contested, as discussed by Butler in *Gender Trouble*. In the concluding chapter “Subversive Bodily Acts,” she remarks,

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.

(emphasis in original, 136)

Throughout the book, Butler’s ideas of performativity indicate that there is no recourse to a feminine identity through various bodily signs or signals and that the body only exists through those signs and signals. These ideas brought about a plethora of criticism, accusing Butler of erasing the body’s materiality and its significance to individual identity. In her subsequent book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* Butler clarifies her theories on performativity and bodily matter initially presented in *Gender Trouble*, explaining that critically examining the notion of matter does not automatically “negate or do away with the usefulness of the term” (30) and that matter does, in fact, have a place in feminist and queer inquiries, only after it has been critically considered and not accepted as unproblematic materiality. She explains that every time we try to return to the body as something which exists prior to socialization, "we discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses
to which that term can be put" (29).

Echoing Foucault and his theories on power, Butler strives to show “the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization” (2). Reinforcing this sentiment, Stone states, “Bodies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities” (10). Further, according to Butler, sexed identity is discursively constituted and is an effect rather than a cause of those utterances that supposedly describe one’s sex, and rather than obliterating the significance of matter, such an “unsettling of ‘matter’ can be understood as initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter” (30). As linguistic significations, these performative utterances are highly unstable, and although their repetition attempts to solidify their meaning, this repetition allows for constant alterations and changes. The instability of language and its signifiers creates pathways for the subversion of these regulatory identity categories and provides a way bodies to matter outside of the current boundaries placed around them.11

Emerging Trans Studies Issues and Theories of Trans Subjectivity

As theorists like Butler revealed that there is no recourse to a “true” identity based on one’s gender, sex, or body and that the male/female binary was anything but “natural,” theories of transgender identity began to be more widely proliferated. Needless to say, the very definition of what the term “transgender” refers to is one of the central issues facing transgender studies. Riki Anne Wilchins describes what little history surrounds the usage of the term:

Transgender began its life as a name for those folks who identified neither as
crossdressers nor as transsexuals—primarily people who changed their gender but not their genitals [. . .]. The term gradually mutated to include any genderqueers who didn’t actually change their genitals: crossdressers, transgenders, stone butches, hermaphrodites and drag people. Finally, tossing in the towel on the noun-list approach, people began using it to refer to transsexuals as well, which was fine with some transsexuals, but made others feel they were being erased.12 (15-16)

Butler articulates a similar summary of what the term “transgender” denotes:

Among transsexuals and transgendered persons, there are those who identify as men (if female to male) or women (if male to female), and yet others who, with or without surgery, with or without hormones, identify as trans, as transmen or tranwomen; each of these social practices carries distinct social burdens and promises. (Undoing Gender 6)

As “transgender” becomes more inclusive of gender and sex identities that could not or would not be aligned with male or female, critics and activists like Kate Bornstein see greater opportunity for increasing the participation in and momentum of the transgender political movement: “So let’s reclaim the word ‘transgendered’ so as to be more inclusive. Let’s let it mean ‘transgressively gendered.’ Then, we have a group of people who break the rules, codes, and shackles of gender . . . it’s the transgendered who are in fact the more inclusive category” (234-35). Beyond assigning countless categories of individuals to the term “transgender” or broadening it for political purposes, Jay Prosser proposes a more postmodern understanding of the term, one that highlights the fluidity that is at the core of queer inquiry in his book Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality. He states that the transition between or, more accurately, within the man/woman dichotomy denotes what
"transgender" has come to mean in the academy: "It is this difference of ambivalence, a wavering around transition—or rather a transformation of transition into a new identity—that characterizes contemporary transgender" (169). For the purposes of this study, Prosser's conceptualization of the term "transgender" as indicating a gender identity that is always and ceaselessly in the process of transformation is most appropriate. The novels to be discussed highlight the notion that a transgendered identity exaggerates the inability for any body to be absolutely gendered and, following, transgender becomes an identity in which the transition between the gender poles, not the achievement of a definitively sexed body and the gender category aligned with it, is constitutive of a valid subjectivity.

Despite the growing use of "transgender" in critical circles due to its inclusiveness and embrace of mutability, "transsexual" continues to be used by some to differentiate an individual who has undergone physical transformation so that his/her body is aligned with the opposite sex. As Wilchins points out in the above quotation, some feel it necessary to maintain a distinction between transgender and transsexual because the traditional goal of a transsexual is to match his/her body with his/her internally "felt" gender so as to pass in society as a member of his/her achieved sex, and therefore more emphasis is placed on the figuration of the material body. On the other hand, transgender does not emphasize bodily transformation but, rather, represents an identity that does not find adequate expression through an alignment with one gender category alone. However, this is not to deny the significance of the body in determining transgender subjectivity; rather, the material of the body still plays a role in this process, but transgender highlights one's ability to express a gender identity apart from that which is conventionally assigned according to one's genitalia and acknowledges that bodily sex, if such a thing even exists apart
from gender, is also perpetually unstable and volatile. After all, if one can change from one sex to another, one can change back or even decide to change to a sex that is somewhere between the two, if the binary is even able to be maintained under such circumstances.

Stone's essay "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," which responded to and takes its title from Janice Raymond's book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (not to mention George Lucas's classic science fiction film of the same name), addresses the impulse of transsexuals to pass as a member of the gender category to which their newly, surgically transformed body is aligned. In this essay, Stone takes on those critics, like Raymond, who perceive male-to-female transsexuals as patriarchal usurpers of women's territory using the most comprehensive and devious means available—they become women. Yet Stone also takes on transsexuals and points out their collusion in the silencing of their own voices, allowing radical feminists and the patriarchal-led medical community to speak for them, because they have refused to claim their histories and construct a powerful counter-narrative.

Stone, examining the origins of transsexual as an identity category, looks at the historical progression of transsexuals' conflicted relationships with the medical community and how transsexuals created narratives about their being in the "wrong body" that met the expectations outlined by the medical community and its own definition of appropriate gender. Accordingly, these transsexual narratives, rather than providing transsexuals with a sense of agency or voice, are complicit in the maintenance of a discourse that sees them as "infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity" (10). For that reason, Stone urges transsexuals to create their own counter-discourse that requires them "to forego
passing” as their newly constructed sex, to embrace their erased history as the “other” sex, and to identify themselves as posttranssexuals because invisibility, although granting them acceptance and a certain measure of peace, also works to erase the substantial power they possess to disrupt the gender binaries and to rewrite the story of sexual transformation and identity (14). She asserts that “the transsexual’s erased history [is] a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender” (11). Applying the metaphors of reading and writing to the posttranssexual body, Stone asserts that

[i]n 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 dissonance created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. (12)

By writing the history of the disjuncture between their sex and gender identity and the process of their bodily transformation, transsexuals can be considered posttranssexuals who contribute to the radical and comprehensive destruction of the male/female and man/woman binaries and who introduce a “myriad of alterities.”

Haraway’s essays “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” and “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others” influenced Stone’s thinking of the transsexual body, and the connection that Stone draws between Haraway’s figure of the cyborg and the transsexual, although Haraway does not make this connection herself, informs Stone’s call to posttranssexuals to claim the histories of their bodies and to create potent narratives that rearticulate what constitutes a “culturally intelligible” body, to use Butler’s term. This connection between Haraway’s cyborg and the transsexual body will be further addressed in chapter three because it is most appropriately applied to the character of Eve/lyn in Carter’s The Passion of New Eve.
In addition, *The Passion of New Eve* represents the most explicit example of a fictional posttranssexual narrative because it is a first-person account charting the history of Eve/lyn’s sexual transformation into a woman wherein Eve/lyn explores his/her position outside “the boundaries of gender” (Stone 11) as s/he struggles to articulate a subject position as the “new Eve.” Further, all three of the central novels refigure the non-normative body as a text that actively disrupts “structured sexualities and spectra of desire” (12), and these transgender narratives thereby present counter-discourses that promote transgender visibility and agency as well as make room for the development of a trans reading position. Stone’s essay is one of the seminal pieces focusing on the transsexual that emphasizes transsexuals’ rightful claim to a subject position and the subversive potentialities of doing so rather than addressing transsexuals as objects in totalizing terms; accordingly, Stone acknowledges in her essay’s afterword the proliferation of work focused on trans issues following her essay’s initial publication in 1988 and delights in her essay’s role in the still emerging field of transgender studies.

As a major contribution to the initial phase of transgender studies, Kate Bornstein’s autobiography, cultural critique, and artistic endeavor *Gender Outlaws: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* represents a postmodern, posttranssexual, although Bornstein prefers the term “transgender,” narrative that demonstrates an alternative way to reconstruct one’s history and retell the story of one’s search for an adequate and comfortable gender identity. Clarifying her terminology, Bornstein uses the term “transgender” to describe anyone who “messes up” the established gender categories, whether a woman working in a predominantly male field, a man who surgically transforms his body into that of a female, etc. She asserts that sex is something people do and that it is not an identity category; rather, Bornstein renames
what most people consider to be sex as “biological gender, which classifies a person through any combination of body type, chromosomes, hormones, genitals, reproductive organs, or some other corporeal or chemical essence” (30). Bornstein emphasizes that gender is a system rather than an innate articulation of one’s sex, echoing Wittig, and identifies sex as those activities one does with another person; she also deconstructs the current models for defining a person’s sexuality based on the sex of his/her partners and looks instead at the endless variety of sexual activities that one can engage in for more accurate descriptors of one’s sexuality. Bornstein fragments her discussion of the political, social, and scientific construction of gender categories by inserting personal narratives of her own sex-reassignment surgery, quotes from limericks and songs, and rhetorical questions in the midst of her argument, using various fonts and margins to further set off these textual insertions. As Prosser describes it, “Gender Outlaw fragments continuous and connective narrative into deliberately disjointed vignettes. Bornstein doesn’t so much narrativize her transsexual life as (a performance artist) she performs it, acting out—without integrating into a single stable gendered identity—its parts” (174). The varied typography used throughout the book further emphasizes Bornstein’s refusal to not be easily categorized, either in her writing or in her gendered existence, “its mosaic of different typefaces and layouts echoing Bornstein’s vacillation between personal disclosure and theorizing” (Gamble 45). As one example of a transgender narrative, Gender Outlaw presents an account in which a stable gendered result is not the conclusion and in which the formal elements of the narrative also refuse an unambiguous generic classification. Gender Outlaw provides a model in which to contextualize the reading of the fictional texts at the center of this study and to formulate ideas about how a text encourages the adoption of a trans-reading position.
In the same vein as Bomstein's autobiographical exploration of cultural mandates surrounding gender, sex, and identity, Wilchins's book *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* also presents her experiences as a trans individual trying to carve out a place in society and culture where gender and sex identity is embraced as fluid rather than ostracized as abnormal and criminal. Similar in subject matter and style—*Read My Lips* is also a patchwork of personal experience mixed with photos, political diatribes, timeline and history of significant trans events, and glossary of pertinent terms—the tone of Wilchins's book is more guardedly optimistic than that of Bomstein's, which is almost idealistic in its energetic and unapologetically outlandish celebration of all that is non-normative. Wilchins, like Bomstein and many others, fights the maintenance of the sex/gender distinction as it is the central mechanism in society's creation of gender and sexuality: "Gender is not what culture creates out of my body's sex; rather, sex is what culture makes when it genders my body" (51).

However, whereas Bomstein focuses on performance and celebration, Wilchins focuses on political activism (she was a co-founder of the Transsexual Menace and the Executive Director of Gender PAC at the time of the book's publication) as she rages against all forms of gender-based oppression, including those studies and theories that only seek to explain the transgender to an academic audience and ignore the danger and pain inherent in trans lives:

No one asks about the crushing loneliness of so many translives, or about sexual dysfunction. Nor does anyone question why so many of us have to work two minimum-wage jobs and suck dick on the side so we can enjoy the benefits of a surgical procedure theorists and academics are casually debating for free. (22-23)
This brief excerpt highlights Wilchins’s tone of frustration and anger as she feels that the real difficulties and pain of trans-identified individuals have no place in theory. However, as she calls on increased activism on behalf of trans individuals, Wilchins struggles to navigate the terrain of finding an identity around which to organize a political movement, knowing that it is necessary to do so but also recognizing that to do so is to establish parameters and boundaries around an identity thus defined: “Too often we allow ourselves to be defined by our oppression: we become the oppression used against us. Oppress me for my gender, I become ‘transgender.’ Then transgender identity becomes one more naturalized category, like male or female. Is that an improvement?” (186). A similar concern is raised by Stone:

Concomitant with the dubious achievement of a diagnostic category is the inevitable blurring of boundaries as a vast heteroglossic account of difference [. . .] suddenly achieves canonization and simultaneously becomes homogenized to satisfy the constraints of the category. (10)

Rather, Wilchins guardedly looks to the creation of a “third force,” a gendered force beyond the binary that is dynamic and constantly in flux, so as not to become naturalized. Read My Lips graphically presents Wilchins’s attempt to answer this question and to cultivate a unified political movement to lesson the suffering and isolation of trans-identified individuals in spite of the contradictions such an endeavor presents.

As texts like Bornstein’s and Wilchins’s emerged along with other autobiographies, biographies, and fictional books focusing on trans individuals, Prosser composed one of the first studies to examine exclusively transsexual narratives. In Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality, published in 1998, Prosser examines transsexual autobiographies and argues that these texts are
crucial to confirming, and even shaping, transsexuals' post-operative identities because, by relating their experiences textually, they are writing their own, newly sexed bodies. Prosser counters Butler's claims concerning the discursive nature of sex and the matter of the body, accusing her of evacuating the significance of the body's physical matter, particularly as it relates to transsexuals' attempts to create a sexed identity. He also challenges her and other queer feminists' use of the terms "transgender" and "queer" in lieu of transsexual, asserting that these alternative terms ignore the significance of material sex to the transsexual. Developing his theory of transsexual embodiment, Prosser reads numerous transsexual autobiographies and two novels—*The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*—arguing that Hall's novel is not, in fact, about lesbianism but is about Stephen's transsexuality and that the narrator of *Stone Butch Blues* is transgender, not transsexual. His book also includes photographs to illustrate his theories about how narratives actually shape and solidify transsexual embodiment but do not completely or exclusively constitute it. Although he places too much emphasis on the connection between body and identity, his book is the first major study of transsexual narratives and is a crucial contribution to trans studies' interest in the intersections between text and the articulation and reading of transgender subjectivities.

In her latest collection of essays *Undoing Gender*, Butler specifically addresses trans identities in detail in the essays "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality" and "Undiagnosing Gender." In this collection, Butler explicitly engages with the political, medical, and cultural practices that regulate the constitution of "socially viable beings" (2) and details what objects and behaviors those individuals categorized as outside of the norm are required to obtain and display in order to obtain a livable life, echoing many of the concerns
expressed by Wilchins in Read My Lips. In the two essays noted above, Butler scrutinizes how the medical field actually prescribes who is deemed to be human by bestowing or withholding recognition on a person based on his/her compliance with established norms. Following, an individual born with indefinite genitals and who cannot therefore be labeled “boy” or “girl” must be made recognizable by immediately having his/her genitals shaped into a recognizable configuration. Similarly, those individuals who wish to undergo surgical transformation in order to become another sex must be diagnosed as having Gender Identity Disorder under the guidelines of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV; one’s desire to undergo sex reassignment surgery must be pathologized by such a diagnosis in order for that individual to have access to the medical, insurance, and legal services that are necessary to realize that wish. In both instances, a purportedly stable gender is imposed upon bodies, either through surgery as an infant or through the performance of the cultural ideal of gender required in order to obtain a diagnosis. Therefore, for those who are transsexual, in this instance, the ability to define oneself, to establish one’s own gender identity, may exist and may be attainable, yet it comes at a price and only, paradoxically, under certain circumstances. As Butler writes, “One only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own” (7). Because everyone must rely on societal standards in order for their “sense of gender” to be affirmed—both those who are aligned with normative conceptions of male and female and those whose gender identity falls beyond the binary—Butler’s latest book calls for the focus to be placed on how society and culture make individual lives livable and how they determine who counts, or matters, as a human being and who does not so that
such standards can be revised.

In “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” Butler discusses what is considered real or possible in terms of knowledge, citing Foucault’s own discussion of the relationship between power and knowledge, finding possibilities for the emergence of new morphologies of the human body in the disruption of the limits that condition knowledge of the body: “The limits are to be found where the reproducibility of the conditions is not secure, the site where conditions are contingent, transformable” (27). Accordingly, the conditions that establish bodily norms and delimit who is/is not human are alterable and “the embodied relation to the norm exercises a transformative potential” (28) because, rather than simply being assimilated into the norm, “unreal” bodily configurations actually show the instability of the “real” and the norms that dictate it. Butler envisions fantasy as central to disrupting bodily norms and for enabling transgender identities to exist as real and as human: “To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, its part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it is” (28). Fantasy, rather being the opposite of reality, actually reveals the limits of reality and thereby provides locations where norms can and should be disrupted and unmoored.

Exploring gender indeterminacy in *Female Masculinity*, which proposed to study masculinity without the male body and focused on female masculinity when it is coupled with same-sex desire, Judith Halberstam turns her attention more broadly to theories of transgender identity and its relationship to postmodern ideas of temporality and geography in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, published in 2005. The overall goal of this book is to “look at how
the transgender body functions in relation to time and space as a rich site for fantasies of futurity and anachronism, and [to] ask here why transgenderism holds so much significance for postmodernism” (15). Accordingly, Halberstam traces the connection between transgenderism and postmodernism that has recently gained circulation, noting Butler’s discussion of transsexualism in Gender Trouble, Baudrillard’s thoughts on transsexuality in The Transparency of Evil and Felski’s “Transsexuality, Postmodernism, and the Death of History.” Butler considers of the transsexual subject as representative of the complexities of lived experience and incongruities of identity within postmodern culture. With a definite opinion on the supposed potentialities of transsexualism, Baudrillard’s discussions of the topic in both The Transparency of Evil as well as in the essay “Transpolitics, Transsexuality, Transaesthetics” are marked by a pessimistic sense of this figure’s status as symbol of “the undifferentiated circulation of the signs of sex” and the resultant loss of desire, as individuals are rendered “indifferent and undifferentiated beings, androgynous and hermaphroditic” (Transparency 25). Further, when he asserts that “we are all transsexuals,” (21), it is not a triumphant proclamation of the end of binary sexuality but rather a rueful articulation of the end of desire, wherein “a postmodern pornography, if you will, where sexuality is lost in the theatrical excess of its ambiguity” reigns (22).13

Baudrillard goes on to assert that, once desire has become eradicated, culture will be characterized by “a pell-mell diffusion of erotic simulacra in every guise, of transsexual kitsch in all its glory” (22). Felski, in her comparison of Baudrillard and Haraway’s divergent opinions of the transsexual subject, summarizes Baudrillard’s stance, describing how he envisions the transsexual as a “nightmarish catastrophe” (229). On the other hand, as Felski argues, Haraway presents the transsexual as a
“liberating icon” and “sees new and unimagined possibilities in hybrid gender identities and complex fusions of previously distinct realities” (229-30). Felski discusses the marked differences between how Baudrillard and Haraway view the transsexual body in order to conceptualize the transsexual’s relationship to the “death of history,” seeing “the figure of transsexuality and transgenderism as the site of deeply invested and symbolically charged rewritings of history and time” and arguing that transsexuality’s apparent signification as the “death of history” is not to be viewed as exclusively negative or exclusively positive (234). In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam incorporates a consideration of spatial localities into Felski’s discussion of the relationship between transsexuality, history and time and, like Haraway, finds untapped potential in foregrounding the transsexual body in re-visionsing the significance of subcultural lives and practices. This project too shares Haraway’s positive conception of the transsexual and implied transgender body and traces in *Orlando*, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Written on the Body* how “the destabilization of the male/female divide [. . .] bring[s] with it a waning of temporality, teleology, and grand narrative” (Felski 226).

In her discussion of representations of Brandon Teena’s life and murder, including the film *Boys Don’t Cry*, and other manifestations of the transgender body in various mediums, Halberstam focuses on “the circuits of influence that allow for the emergence of the transgender body as simultaneously a symbol for postmodern flexibility and a legible form of embodied subjectivity” (*Queer Time* 17), and each of the texts examined in this study also contain such symbolic depictions of the transgender body. Specifically for the purposes of this study and its attempt to articulate a transgender reading position, chapter four on the transgender look in queer film provides a rubric under which to formulate this relationship to certain texts.
that "give the viewer [or reader] access to the transgender gaze in order to allow us to look with the transgender character instead of at him" (emphasis in the original, 78).

As the first full-length study of representations of transgender bodies in film, visual art, popular media, and fiction as they have gained increased exposure in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Halberstam’s book ushers in a crucial direction for transgender studies and lays the foundation for this study’s examination of a transgender reading position, which is examined in more detail below and revisited again in the final chapter. Halberstam envisions “a technotopic vision of space and flesh in a process of mutual mutation” and asserts that “for some postmodern artists, the creation of new bodies in an aesthetic realm offers a way to begin adapting to life after the death of the subject” (103), and this project strives to extrapolate Halberstam’s vision of the transgender body onto texts that feature a transgender protagonist or narrator.

Focus of Dissertation

Transgender narratives that utilize textual experimentation enable the reader to experience the instability of a trans subject position by further troubling the reader’s already unstable relationship to the text, narrator, author, and language, and this unsettling experience is accomplished through a distinctively rich merger of the text’s content with its style and form. This project argues that a transgendered narrator helps to emphasize the fluid relationship between a text, author, and reader through a consideration of the texts’ central thematic concerns about gender and decentered subjectivity and how these concerns are emphasized through the novel’s transgendered narrator. In part, the transgendered narrators of Orlando, The Passion of New Eve and Written on the Body, among others, exemplify the inherent instability of the text and its meaning through their disruption of the male/female binary and
resultant revelation of gender as an unstable and always incomplete category of identity. In sum, this project is concerned with the transgendered narrator and how his/her constantly evolving gender identity relates to the novel’s narrative structure and shapes the reader’s orientation to the transgender text into a trans-reading identity.

**Various Forms and Types of Trans Narratives**

As transgender theories began and continue to develop, the task of reclaiming the histories of those individuals identified as transgendered began as well, and Leslie Feinberg’s work on trans visibility throughout history has contributed greatly to this endeavor. *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* and *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink and Blue* reveal the presence of transgendered individuals throughout history and thereby questions the naturalness of gender predicated on genital or chromosomal sex; these books also present portraits of contemporary transgendered people and their fight for political recognition and justice. Further, her book *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* is a transgender narrative that reveals autobiographical details of Feinberg’s own struggle to find an identity within which she feels validated. Jess, the narrator of the novel, fights with her female gender and sexual identity throughout childhood and adolescence and finally begins to transition into a male, taking hormones and undergoing a double mastectomy. However, when the time draws near for her to make the decision to have phalloplasty surgery, she realizes that she has never really wanted to become a man, but rather, she simply wants to be who she is—someone whose identity does not align itself with male or female—an identity that Feinberg herself has adopted.

Feinberg’s texts join numerous other transgender narratives that have been
reclaimed from the past and are part of a recent influx of books that present first-person accounts of living in between the gender binary. Such transgender narratives, as distinct from transsexual narratives, typically chronicle a person's attempt to find a gender identity that expresses his/her sense of self and depict how this person experimented with gender as a child, became aware of the expectations for behavior and appearance based on his/her sex, and realized that neither "man" nor "woman" sufficiently described whom s/he felt her/himself to be. A number of subjects of transgender narratives pursue some type of physical transformation, but the predominant emphasis of these narratives is on the expression of a fluid gender identity rather than the achievement of a definitively and unambiguously sexed body; the texts explored in this project emphasize how gender is revealed as unstable through bodily transformation and not vice versa. Particularly in Orlando, The Passion of New Eve and other narratives where the narrator undergoes total bodily transformations from one sex to another, gender—rather than being stabilized by these transformations and falling in line with the narrator's "new" sex—is revealed as fluid and indefinite because the narrator's gendered identity fails to align itself consistently and unwaveringly with his/her new body's materiality. Therefore, a transgender narrative typically portrays the individual's acceptance to live between the gender binary. Oftentimes, this acceptance comes with a celebration of his/her ambiguous state, although the pain of society's judgment and the ever-present threat of violence accompany and often trouble his/her newly attained sense of self.

On the other hand, transsexual narratives feature an individual's journey to and achievement of sex-reassignment surgery as the central premise, and Stone describes these texts as "almost religious narrative[s] of transformation" (2). The narrative conventionally recounts how the individual never felt comfortable within
his/her own skin and senses his/her identity as separate from his/her body; the subject of the narrative expresses a deep desire for the integration of his/her sexed materiality and gender identity, for wholeness, and for the ability to pass as his/her “felt” gender. Stone remarks that transsexual autobiographies typically share “the same problems with purity and denial of mixture” (6) because to admit any ambiguity about one’s gender would be to jeopardize their access to sex reassignment surgery as well as the legitimacy of their desire for it. Accordingly, the story depicts the subject’s attempts to transform his/her body to match that “felt” gender identity and to assimilate into that sex/gender category to which s/he feels aligned. Because these stories of transsexual transformation are relatively few in number and because of the difficulties that their authors face, Stone remarks that they are often situated as “narrative[s] of redemption. There is a strong element of drama, of the sense of struggle against huge odds, of overcoming perilous obstacles, and of mounting awe and mystery at the breathtaking approach and final apotheosis of the Forbidden Transformation” (7). Although Stone’s description of this element is tongue-in-cheek, the individual’s expression of wholeness and relief once the physical transformation is achieved concludes these narratives.

However, although the above is a summary of a conventional trajectory for a transsexual narrative, it is crucial that the transsexual narrative not be watered down into a simple story of one person wanting to comply unequivocally to the characteristics and traits of the “opposite” sex; rather, it is sometimes the desire to transform itself, instead of the actual surgical refiguring of the body, that is at the heart of the transsexual desire to “switch” sexes. As Butler points out, “it can be a desire for transformation itself, a pursuit of identity as a transformative exercise, an example of desire itself as a transformative activity” (Undoing Gender 8).
Accordingly, none of the central texts addressed in this study can be classified as transsexual, despite the fact that the protagonists of *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve* each undergo total body transformations, because not only is the desire for transformation not apparent in any of the texts’ protagonists but each text critically questions the ability of an individual to ever complete a transformation. Instead, the texts focus on the transition at the heart of transformation, exploring what it means to occupy this transitory and constantly fluid state. In addition, each of the novels undermines the drama that Stone points out is typical of many transsexual autobiographies. *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve* each satirize the drama of their protagonists’ transformation and *Written on the Body* ignores it altogether.

Beyond labeling a specific narrative as transgender or transsexual, Gamble has noted that narratives that explore trans issues tend to share similar stylistic features. Focusing on critical texts, Gamble remarks that they “tend to mingle the personal with the political and lived experience with theory” (45) or, to put it another way, they deconstruct the barriers between literature and theory. This commingling of genres can be the result of the centrality of autobiographical writing to transgender narratives, as previously discussed in Stone’s essay “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in which she outlines how the “correct” autobiography is needed in order for transsexuals to have access to the medical services they desire and how a posttranssexual narrative charting their transformation can create a powerful counter-discourse. Ironically, however, this mixing of personal and political, lived experience with theory, has been reappropriated by queer theory so that it is not used to present the “correct” story of life dictated by the medical establishment but, rather, to present a disjointed and hodge-podge style as a symbol and expression of transgender identity. Stone’s essay itself is one example of this transgender style, as
it too combines personal experience with theoretical musings. As Gamble notes, "[T]his notion of a transgendered identity assembled, postmodern style, out of fragments collated from a variety of sources, becomes a concept central to theoretical writing produced by the transgendered themselves" (45).

As transgendered critics sought to tell their lived experiences but to also contribute to a political movement or to push the boundaries about how gender is theorized, they juxtaposed the autobiography tendency of self-revelation with more conventional academic modes of writing, as in Gender Outlaw and Read My Lips. As described by Bornstein, transgendered writing is "based on collage. You know—a little bit from here, a little bit from there? Sort of a cut-and-paste thing" (3). Despite Bornstein's casual tone, this idea of a "cut-and-paste" writing style and the intertextuality that it foregrounds contributes to a serious postmodern reading of these texts and how the engage with transgenderism.17 Of course, intertextuality is not unique to transgender texts; as Foucault highlights in The Archeology of Knowledge, a text "is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (23). Yet, Derrida, in his discussion of Maurice Blanchot's La Folie du Jour in "The Law of Genre," refers to the textual mixing of the masculine and feminine topic as transsexual: "The genres pass into each other. And we will not be barred from thinking this mixing of genres, viewed in light of the madness of sexual difference, may bear some relation to the mixing of literary genres" (76). Not coincidentally, Woolf, Carter and Winterson all blend literary genres and sexually differentiated topics in their articulations of a transgender subject position. Further, in The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture, Hassan describes the indeterminacy that often results from highlighting a text's relationship and indebtedness to other texts helps "to delay closures, frustrate
expectations, promote abstractions, sustain a playful plurality of perspectives, and generally shift the grounds of meaning on their audiences” (73). This resultant destabilization of the reader is a significant effect of what Bornstein playfully describes as the “cut-and-paste” style featured in many transgender narratives because it enables the theorization of a trans-reading identity, which would be impossible to conceive otherwise.

**Trans-Reading Identity**

Although much research has been conducted exploring the relationship between gender and reading, only a handful of articles have been written that look at the relationship between sexuality and reading, in particular Jean E. Kennard’s “Ourself Behind Ourself: A Theory for Lesbian Readers” and Wayne Koestenbaum’s “Wilde’s Hard Labor and the Birth of Gay Reading.” Kennard looks to create a theory for lesbian readers, not a theory of lesbian readers. Rather than resist the text, as suggested by Fetterley, Kennard advises lesbian, and all, readers to “lean into” the text to create an opposing reaction; in this way, the polar reader “intensifies the attitude of character or author, embodies it so fully, that the contrasting aspects of the reader’s own attitudes come into the picture” (70-71). Kennard’s theory of the polar reading position is not specific to lesbians alone and seeks to combat the broader concern of “the universality of heterosexual experience” (77) by proposing a theory of reading that includes all readers, perspectives, and experiences. Koestenbaum, on the other hand, theorizes a reading position that explicitly privileges gay male identity and knowingly “oversimplifies” the construction of this reader (176). Through his readings of Wilde’s prison writings, *De Profundis* and “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” Koestenbaum claims that Wilde constructed a gay male identity that is inherently
connected to prison "and that a certain kind of involved, implicated reader is a gay
man in the prison of his identity" (177). However, rather than being an entirely
constricting location, this prison provides the gay male reader with "the rewards of
using gayness to form a reverse discourse based on reading, a *vita nuova* founded,
ironically, on the very name of his [Wilde's] jail" (178). In his theorization of a gay
male reading position, Koestenbaum locates liberatory potential in the prison of gay
male identity—or any identity, since he sees all identity as imprisoning—because it is
only through the adoption of this identity that one is able to read and therefore
produce "new ways of assigning meaning" (188).

Like many feminist studies, the above articles maintain the gender binary and
rely on the existence of a distinctly female (or male) identity on which to construct
their theories of how individuals interact with texts. However, such work in gay and
lesbian reading identities is significant because it reveals cultural tendencies to
universalize compulsory heterosexuality and pushes not only to destroy this tendency
but also fights to have different ways of seeing included in the cultural fiber, making
studies like this one possible. Additionally, Koestenbaum's and Kennard's essays,
and others like them, are important because they focus on the role of sexuality and
desire in the complex relationship between texts and their readers, yet by relying on
the male-female binary, they often inadvertently affirm the heterosexual-homosexual
binary on which the dialectic of gender is based.

Although considerable work has been and is still being conducted that teases
apart the relationship between gender and reading and some has been conducted that
focuses on sexuality and reading, virtually no attention has been paid to the
consideration of a transgender reading position. With the exception of Halberstam's
theories of the transgender gaze and visual art outlined in *In a Queer Time and Place*,

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no critics have tackled the question of what it means to have a transgender entry into a written text.¹⁹ This project's focus is to do just that—to explore how certain novels place the reader in a position to look with the transgender characters and not at them and how these books call on a certain set of reading practices from their readers that contributes to the readers’ assumption of a trans-reading identity. The combination of a transgender narrator and the postmodern literary techniques exhibited by the texts in this study enables the reader to adopt such an orientation to the text, and this study's readings of *Orlando*, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Written on the Body* will attempt to articulate the consequences of this ambiguously gendered re-orientation to the text.

Outlining Halberstam's conceptualization of the transgender gaze will help to establish a foundation for this project. Halberstam directly ties the transgender gaze to her conception of a queer time and place, and in order to understand how the transgender body functions within her theories of spatiality and temporality, it becomes necessary to define them. She outlines the terms as such,

“Queer time” is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. “Queer space” refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics. (6)

Within texts—whether film, art, or novels—that exhibit these notions of queer time and queer space, the figure of the uncertainly gendered body often becomes an apt image employed to represent “other kinds of mobility or immobility” and “a different form of temporality” (77). Critically reading three transgender films—*The Crying
Game, Boys Don't Cry, and By Hook or by Crook—Halberstam establishes an initial theory of the transgender gaze, maintaining that, when the figure of the transgender body is merged with certain stylistic features, the transgender gaze is opened up and enables the viewer (or reader) to see, along with the transgender character, queer versions of temporality and geography. The most successful moments of these texts establish “a transgender gaze capable of seeing through the present to a future elsewhere” (77); again, this “elsewhere” is not simply a new instance in time but also a new instance in space. Orlando, The Passion of New Eve, and Written on the Body all graphically present their transgender characters “seeing through the present to a future elsewhere” in their paradoxically inconclusive concluding scenes, with the reader following the characters’ line of sight and envisioning this “elsewhere.”

Halberstam makes clear that conventional manifestations of narrative are unable to open access to the transgender gaze, as they fail to engage with postmodern ideas that question truth and reality: “[C]onventional narratives cannot . . . allow for the ways in which thoroughly scrambled gender relations might impact the dynamics of looking, at least not for long” (85). Although focused on the visual arts and the process of looking, this idea of conventionality’s inability to “handle” messy treatments of gender and their influence on one’s reception of transgender texts can be applied to how certain unconventional or experimental novels allow for the disruptions that transgender characters cause to the readers who encounter them. In written texts, some unconventional narrative elements that enhance the ways that a transgender body is able to influence the relationship between reader, text, and narrator include emphasizing the ambivalence of language in constructing gender and sexual identity, constantly shifting focalization, inserting intertextual elements, and breaking linear measurements of time.
Related to how transgenderism is formally presented in texts is how the topic is presented in the text’s plot. In film, Halberstam notes two typical methods: “rewind” and embedding. “Rewind” presents a transgender figure as passing, with his/her exposure as transgendered ushering in not only the climax of the narrative but also his/her inevitable downfall. This mode often invites the viewer to look at and fetishize the transgender body. The second mode, which is most likely to open up the transgender gaze, “involves embedding several ways of looking into one, [and] the film deploys certain formal techniques to give the viewer access to the transgender gaze in order to allow us to look with the transgender character instead of at him” (78). Two methods of combining “ways of looking” are ghosting and doubling, both of which help to universalize the transgender position. In ghosting, the transgender character hovers over or “haunts” the entirety of the narrative. Doubling requires the presence of two or more transgender characters that work off of one another in order to gender each other; also, they generate a space in which their gender ambiguity is not remarkable or noteworthy to those around them because the “the male or female gaze” is never acknowledged (79). Halberstam’s theories imply that it is through this second mode—embedding—that the most complete articulation of the transgender gaze is accomplished because “[t]his narrative strategy effectively universalizes queerness within this specific cinematic space” (emphasis in original, 94).

The significance of “universalizing queerness” echoes Wittig’s assertion that, if a text by a minority writer is going to be read as a work of literature and not be held up as a symbol of that minority group, it must universalize its point of view, as Barnes and Proust succeed in doing. In this way, the minority writer’s “queer” subject matter is not a remarkable feature of his/her text. In addition, Wittig too points out that it is through experimentation that the minority subject is able to assert
him/herself as such, which is related to Halberstam's assertion that only unconventional narratives are able to adapt to the presence of a transgender subject and feature the manner in which this presence effects the viewer's "look." As Wittig remarks in "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?", "[L]iterary experimentation is a favored way to bring a subject to light. This experimentation is the ultimate subjective practice" (61). Therefore, although Halberstam is concerned with visual art, her emphasis on universalizing the queer point of view via unconventional narratives echoes Wittig's emphasis on these same issues as they relate to literary works and provides a connection from which to build a trans-reading position.

Finally, in addition to universalizing queerness via the narrative plot, the transgender films Halberstam examines use various emotional tools in order to usher mainstream viewers into the transgender way of looking. In the two films that attempt to articulate a transgender gaze but which are unable to sustain it—The Crying Game and Boys Don't Cry—Halberstam asserts that they "rely on the successful solicitation of affect—whether it be revulsion, sympathy, or empathy—in order to give mainstream viewers access to a transgender gaze" (77). However, in By Hook or by Crook, the directors "knowingly avoid engaging their viewers at the level of sympathy, pity, or even empathy, and instead they 'hook' them with the basic tools of the cinematic apparatus: desire and identification" (93), providing a more meaningful, and blurred, connection between the viewer and the characters depicted on the screen. Again, taking into consideration that novels are a different medium than films, emotionally relating to literary characters, whether through sympathy, empathy or revulsion, is a key feature of readers' interactions with written texts, and the first two novels discussed in this study foster relationships to readers in this
manner—sympathy in the case of *Orlando* and revulsion in the case of *The Passion of New Eve*—thereby giving readers access to the transgender gaze in certain vital scenes. However, *Written on the Body*, as the text that most thoroughly universalizes and maintains the transgender gaze, calls on the readers’ ability to long for and bond with another individual in order for them to assume a trans-reading position via their identification with the novel’s narrator as well as through their destabilized relationship to the text itself.

Finally, for the purposes of this study, poststructuralist and postmodern theories of reading practices that are derived from the foundational theories presented by Barthes in “The Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text” are most helpful and most applicable to the task of articulating a trans-reading identity because they “question both the presupposition of a unified reading subject and that of a text with a determinate meaning” (Schweikart and Flynn viii), two central elements of a trans-reading identity that seeks to fuse the gender ambiguity of the text’s protagonist with the destabilization of the reading subject and indeterminacy of the text. Because, as Barthes states, “The Text (if only by its frequent ‘unreadability’) decants the work [...] from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice,” which is ceaseless and unending, “the distance between writing and reading” must necessarily be eradicated (“From Work to Text” 170). Accordingly, in light of the deconstruction of the text’s ability to convey an ultimate and stable meaning, the reader takes center stage in the analysis of texts, not the author. As Barthes asserts in “The Death of the Author,” the reader becomes “the one place where this multiplicity [of the text] is focused [. . .]. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed” (118). The idea of a trans-reading identity readily acknowledges the reader as a locus of multiplicity and that, by implication,
[R]eading, when properly done, is faithful to the ultimate unreadable otherness of the text, to the way texts disperse themselves and resist efforts to grasp their "essence." The responsible reader must follow the text’s meandering movements, attend to its heterogeneous meanings, restrain the impulse to assimilate these into one point of view, acknowledge the partiality and contingency of all interpretations and their rootedness in the reader’s social and cultural location. (Schweickart and Flynn 17)

Since each of the novels displays postmodern tendencies in their use of language and narrative style, they clearly accept and often exploit the otherness of language that deconstruction emphasizes. Therefore, they force their readers to acknowledge this linguistic otherness and to acknowledge as well, and even to identity with, the otherness of individuals “different” from themselves, in this case, those who are transgender. This project argues that, when this unsettling of the reader’s mastery over the text’s meaning is contextualized within a narrative featuring a transgender subject, the reader assumes a trans-reading identity that embraces the perpetual transitioning and fluidity of meaning and gender identity displayed by such transgender narratives.

As queer theory reveals the complexity of gender and sexual identities, a more complex rendering of gender must be applied to reader-response analysis, one that looks less at prescribing a gender identity or sexuality to readers or to texts and more at how certain texts invite their readers to assume a reading position that is not aligned with either end of the binary but rather with “queer” conceptions of time and place that are articulated via transgender characters. Rather than articulating what it is like to “read like a transgender individual,” this study recognizes the endless
cycling of a such a comparison as well as the cultural construction of the comparative term and is therefore most pointedly concerned with how certain transgender narratives encourage readers to look with the transgender characters rather than look at them and to assume a trans-reading identity.

Historical Context

The project also looks to place *Orlando*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and *Written on the Body* and their respective authors in conversation with one another over time, i.e. examining the historical, social, and cultural relationship between these three texts and their authors. On a broader note, this project will briefly consider the question: what attracts female writers to these experimentations and their critique of gender categories? Also, how does literary history enhance our understanding of the relationship between these anti-gender and anti-genre texts?

As previously noted, many works of feminist criticism have posited that a female aesthetic exists, an *écriture féminine*, that is manifested through fragmented syntax, non-linear plot, ambiguous characterization and narration, etc. Yet, because this project focuses on those texts that postulate transgendered identities that are constantly in the process of becoming, the assertion that these women writers engaged in an experimental aesthetic due to their female identities contradicts the overall aim of this project by essentializing the relationship between "women" and writing style. Rather, it would be more accurate and appropriate to consider how the subject position of "woman," obviously occupied by Woolf, Carter and Winterson, interacts with a text and how any individual who assumes this position necessarily seeks to re-vision language’s complicity in the construction and dissemination of conventional and restrictive gender identities that are predicated on the "fact" of
one’s sex. Cixous does just this when she asserts that one of the few writers who “inscribes femininity” into his work is Jean Genet (“Sorties” 98). Yet, even taking the position of “woman” and looking at how “femininity” is written into texts retains the idea of sexual difference and a unique essence of femininity, and although it is entirely appropriate to consider how Woolf, Carter and Winterson’s experimentation relates to their position as Other, it is crucial to note that these writers introduce transgenderism into the specific texts examined in this study, not simply the feminine. This significant difference must be kept in mind; although related to the “feminine” as an othered position, transgender should not be collapsed into it. In fact, all three writers have a complex and conflicted relationship to feminism because they do feature transgendered characters and are suspicious of some feminist aims to essentialize female identity. At the same time, because work on transgenderism is still in its beginning stages, examining how “woman” writers use “nonlinear, nonhierarchical, and decentering” textual and narrative experimentation to disrupt patriarchal codes written into language can serve as a starting point to begin theorizing how transgenderism’s place in a text can create “an alternate fictional space, a space in which [transgender], [. . .] marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed” (Friedman and Fuchs 3-4).

Each author uses the transgender figure to address a specific concern she had about the time and culture in which she was living and writing. Woolf’s Orlando, although read as a spirited fantasy, is a pointed critique of early twentieth-century English laws preventing women from inheriting and owning property and represents her attempt to remedy Vita Sackville West’s heartache at not being allowed to inherit her beloved family estate of Knole after her father’s death. Because Vita could not own Knole in real-life, Woolf gave it to her in the only way she knew how—in
fiction. Beyond this personal motivation for writing *Orlando*, Woolf centers her mock biography on an examination of the androgynous figure that appeared throughout the artistic circles of London at the time, most notably in the Bloomsbury group, of which Woolf was a central player. Carter was writing in the midst of the cultural upheaval of the sixties and seventies and the emergence of feminism as a potent political movement as well as in the wake of the publication of Jan Morris's transsexual autobiography *Conundrum*, published in 1974. In addition, Carter was most likely aware of the controversy surrounding the male-to-female transsexual tennis player Renee Richards and her attempt to enter a women's tennis tournament in 1976. From this vantage point, she used Eve/lyn’s transsexual body and transgendered mind to critique how some strains of the feminist movement wrong-headedly adopted images of femininity constructed by patriarchy and used them as symbols of unique female power, in particular, the image of the mother goddess. She also presents a post-apocalyptic United States as a commentary on the disintegration of an energetic, young country that has mistakenly founded its values and ideals on false myths, like the Christian origin myth of Adam and Eve and the irreducible sexual difference it prescribes. Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, being the most overtly political of the three texts, also addresses feminism's conflicted relationship to pornography through the character of Leilah and cinema's complicity in the dissemination of myths of femininity through the character of Tristessa. Decades later, Winterson is writing in the midst of a marked increase in trans visibility and activism, when transgendered figures are seen in the media telling their stories rather than held up as freaks or outcasts and the number of memoirs featuring transsexual or transgendered individuals is growing. In addition, the early nineties saw two major developments in England focused on the recognition of ambiguously gendered
individuals; in 1991, Gender Trust was established, a major charity specifically
directed to those who are transsexual, gender dysphoric or transgender serving the
United Kingdom, and Press for Change, a lobbying and educational group that
campaigns for equal rights for all trans persons in England, was established in 1992.
Beyond social and political circumstances that may very well have influenced the
composition of Written on the Body, Winterson’s writing exhibits the fluidity and
relativity of postmodern culture, wherein reality, identity, time, place, etc. are forever
decentered and unanchored and narrative is necessarily ruptured and unreliable.

Although each writer functions within her own distinct historical moment,
Woolf stands as a lightening rod for both Carter’s and Winterson’s work, and as
Armstrong points out, “the pull between different possibilities in Woolf’s work
comes, perhaps, from deep, conflicted rifts in her thought and social awareness which
have been handed on in British fiction” (258). The similarities between how
Orlando, The Passion of New Eve, and Written on the Body engage with gender’s
reformulation in its respective historical period are many. Obviously, all three texts
feature a transgender subject that vacillates between the poles of the gender binary
and depict a body in the ceaseless process of becoming, rather than re-present an
androcentric subject firmly grounded in biological sex, which has always already
been revealed to be uncertain and ambiguous. Orlando, Eve/lyn and Winterson’s
unnamed narrator each embark on a picaresque-type journey to a new place, and the
novels’ plots center on this character’s love for another, thus highlighting the
deconstruction of compulsory heterosexuality, and also feature an inconclusive
ending, wherein the protagonist’s future is left uncertain. Beyond the basics of
characterization and plot, the transgender figure is presented as central to the re-
vision of a selected dominant discourse implicated in the construction, maintenance
and dissemination of conventional gender identities and sexualities; Woolf takes on biography, while Carter examines myths of gender and Winterson looks at the heterosexual romance. These discourses are re-visioned not only in relation to the transgender subject at their centers, but each writer also infuses the transgender body throughout her examination of language’s ambiguity and the disruption of temporal and spatial configurations. More broadly, these writers use their work to create “spaces in which the West’s prevailing conceptual structures were renounced with the renunciation of established narrative forms” (Friedman and Fuchs 11). In fact, Winterson describes such a space in more abstract terms as

> a world apart, a place where the normal weights and measures of the day have been subtly altered to give a different emphasis and perhaps to slide back the secret panel of the heart. Check that the book is made of language, living and not inert, for a true writer will create a separate reality and her atoms and her gases are words. (*Art Objects* 43-44)

Although speaking explicitly about Woolf, Winterson’s comments apply to all three writers as each creates a “separate reality” that paradoxically is very much of the cultural reality in which they are writing.

More specifically, *Orlando* resonates throughout both *The Passion of New Eve* and *Written on the Body*. *Orlando* ties in with the fantastical elements of *The Passion of New Eve*, both books being more self-consciously and explicitly on the edge of reality than *Written on the Body*. As Friedman and Fuchs describe, both *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve*

> test the possibilities of antirealism [...] [and] make use of the hermaphroditic protagonist, the superficial, cartoon-like depiction of rapidly changing external events, and the violation of temporal and spatial verisimilitude,
accommodating difference and otherness through an antirealistic mode. (14)

Accordingly, *The Passion of New Eve* can be read as a postmodern rewriting of Woolf’s story, as Carter re-visions Woolf’s exploration of androgyny into an examination of the hermaphrodite. More specifically, *The Passion of New Eve* literalizes Woolf’s fantasy of a male transforming into a female, yet in an obviously more painful and surgically based ordeal that that described in *Orlando*; as Laing remarks, Carter “split[s] Orlando’s transsexualism and transvestism into two, Eve and Tristessa” (88). A connection can also be drawn between the image of the wild goose featured at the conclusion of *Orlando* and the feather of a prehistoric hybrid bird/reptile caught in amber that Eve/lyn discovers at the conclusion of his/her journey in *The Passion of New Eve*, as both bird images represent an elusive and indeterminate element in each text. Interestingly enough, Carter was actually working on a libretto just before her death tentatively titled *Orlando: or, Enigma of the Sexes* or *Orlando: An English Country House Opera*, which was published posthumously in *The Curious Room*, wherein she “corrected” the apparent snobbery of Woolf’s work, an element of Woolf’s writing that troubled Carter.

The similarities between Woolf and Winterson are striking, particularly in how each author attempts to convey the complexities and nuances of human perception through a kind of written impressionism. Winterson explicitly places her work in the tradition of Woolf, most notably in her collection of essays *Art [Objects]: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* that features two pieces addressing Woolf: “A Gift of Wings” and “A Veil of Words.” Like Woolf and Carter, Winterson is suspicious of realism and its tendency to mirror the dominant culture, remarking that “the doctrine of Realism saves us from a bad attack of Otherness” and “the revolt against Realism was really a revolt of tradition [and] the Modernists were trying to return to
an idea of art as a conscious place” (Art Objects 27, 37). Winterson dedicates her writing to the reclamation of this “conscious place” as well as the Other, and her lyricism and emphasis on the internal wavering of individual consciousness graphically represent her indebtedness to Woolf. Additionally, Written on the Body can be read as a third, more abstract version of Woolf’s Orlando because, rather than provide her protagonist with a name like Orlando’s that can apply to either sex, Winterson refuses to name her protagonist at all, thus extending the gender-bending impetus behind Woolf’s play on names. The entirety of Written on the Body can be read as an extension of Woolf’s meditation on the elusiveness of subjectivity and the difficult task of using words to snare it expressed in Orlando:

Hooked on a well-thrown line of words, is landed, a fine fat fish. She knows how to draw the world out, breaking the air with colour and the beat of life [. . .] the line is out on the water again, catch after catch, drawn from the under-deptshs, the shimmering world that slips through our hands. (Art Objects 64) 21

Finally, in the most general sense, Woolf, Carter and Winterson all illustrate the maxim stated by Winterson in Art Objects: “Art does not imitate life. Art anticipates life” (40), and as art, their books look forward to a conceptualization of life wherein boundaries and divisions are radically deconstructed, and ceaseless ambiguity and play characterize gender and sexual identities.

Outline

Each of the texts discussed in this project illustrates, in some way, Meese’s comment about Nightwood and Orlando; they are both “anti-gender” and “anti-genre.” However, in light of poststructuralist theories of language and meaning, this too-easy equation between the subjects of the novels and how they are expressed, i.e.
a book written by or about females (or written by and about males) requires a specific use of language or structure, has been complicated. Rather than articulating experimental narratives because they must be “adapt[ed] to the [transgender] body,” to follow Woolf’s previously cited comment addressing the relationship between women writers and literary tradition, or lack thereof, the works discussed in this study exhibit experimental narratives that call attention to the reader’s unstable relationship to the transgender subject and text and that present the relationship between postmodern conceptions of time and place and the figure of the transgender body. *The Passion of New Eve* and *Written on the Body*, in particular, also feature a kind of textual/sexual contact as vital to the transgression of boundaries between self and other, internal and external, and binary divisions of gender and sexuality, and the ambiguous gender of the novels’ protagonists present a distinctively queer subversion of such boundaries. Stone notes,

> In a time in which more interactions occur through texts, [. . .] in which multiplicity and prosthetic social communication are common—and consequently when individual subjectivity can be constituted through inscription more often than through personal association, there are still moments of embodied ‘natural truth’ that cannot be avoided. (7)

For the novels at the center of this study, this moment occurs in the instance of erotic contact. When these novels’ protagonists join with other characters in sexual touching, they enact moments of “natural truth” wherein their subjectivity is constituted both textually and bodily, and these moments are often featured as the climax—literally and figuratively—of the narratives.

As for the progression of this project, chapter two focuses on Woolf’s *Orlando* and how Orlando as a transgendered character and the experimental text of
Orlando itself trans-form the discourse of biography, which Woolf reveals as relying on androcentric and patriarchal values, through the charting of Orlando’s four-century-long existence and miraculous transformation. This chapter also looks at an idea that held Woolf’s attention throughout her writing—the attempt to convey accurately “a moment of being”—and reads Woolf’s depiction of such a moment in Orlando’s life as particularly queer, concluding with a discussion of how Orlando is directly concerned with the reader’s interaction with the text and troubles conventional reader identities that place the reader as master of and outsider to the text.

Chapters three and four focus on Carter’s The Passion of New Eve and Winterson’s Written on the Body, respectively, and how they extend and elaborate on Woolf’s ideas of the discursive construction of the body, gender, and sexuality as well as her portrayal of subjectivity as decentered and fragmented rather than stable and whole. In Carter’s science fiction influenced The Passion of New Eve, she de-essentializes all gendered identities by revealing them as founded on false myths, particularly those focused on femininity like the mother goddess, whore and virgin. Through the novel’s narrator Evelyn, who is kidnapped and transformed against his will into Western culture’s ideal woman, Carter trans-forms the myth of the hermaphrodite into a postmodern, transgender cyborg. This deconstruction of myth takes place in a series of speculative environments that reveal the contrast between those settings built upon their own internal logic and those built upon an externally imposed logic, finding both lacking and unable to accommodate an ambiguously gendered subject. In addition, by simultaneously layering narrative upon narrative and gender upon gender onto the novel’s narrative voice, Carter constantly unsettles the reader’s relationship to the text and narrator, rotating him/her through several
gendered reading positions—male, female, and transgender—as Eve/Evelyn her/himself navigates these positions as well, and this chapter concludes by reading *The Passion of New Eve* as a posttranssexual manifesto, a subversive discourse outlined and advocated by Sandy Stone.

In the fourth chapter, *Written on the Body* is discussed, focusing on its ungendered, unnamed first-person narrator who questions and critiques various narratives that attempt to prescribe normative configurations of love, gender, and the body and who struggles to articulate a postmodern language of love and romance. Winterson presents one way of processing a postmodern language of love by explicitly linking the narrator and his/her lover’s skin to various texts and conveying the narrator’s meditation on the connections between these two surfaces, how each is written on by culture as well as by one’s environment, lovers, and one’s self and how these surfaces are then read. Next, the chapter considers how the narrator’s ambiguously gendered body relates to conceptions of time and place that privilege the values of the heterosexual imperative and concludes by proposing that *Written on the Body* most directly articulates a trans-reading identity. The fifth and final chapter attempts to more clearly describe and specify the texture and posture of a trans-reading identity, a position hinted at and introduced by *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve* and realized most fully in Winterson’s text, while looking forward to the continued development of interpretive frameworks that feature transgenderism as a central consideration.

**Method**

Using concepts derived from transgender studies, queer theory, feminist literary studies and reader response theory, this project has been shaped by means of interpretation and close textual analysis. It contains a close investigation of how the
uniquely experimental narrative styles exhibited by these transgender narratives reveal language’s ambivalence in constructing sex, gender, and subjectivity in addition to enhancing the reader’s experience of trans by further agitating his/her already unstable relationship to the text, author, and narrator, displaying a marked emphasis on deconstructive and poststructuralist theories.

As research was conducted, reading and writing for this project moved back and forth between queer, transgender, and narrative theories and fictional texts, as each shape the formation and interpretation, respectively, of the other. In *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*, Warhol describes the place and purpose of close reading in revealing a text’s relationship to the culture in which it was produced; in a close reading, one succeeds in “uncovering the elements of form that signal the scene’s [or text’s] participation in what I am arguing are gendered cultural processes” (26). For the purpose of this study, I conducted close readings of the texts in order to reveal their “elements of form” that signal their refusal to participate in and their critique of conventional and normative “gendered cultural processes” and that indicate an expression of postmodern time and place, because it is in such moments that readers may gain access to a trans-reading position.

Generally, Foucault’s revelation of the heterosexual imperative’s role in the maintenance of sexual difference and Butler’s articulations of the discursive construction of sex and gender undergird the entirety of the project. Specifically, in this project’s reading of Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*, Stone’s essay “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto” provides a framework through which to read this particular novel as a possible transgender counter-narrative, particularly in its focus on Eve/lyn’s transgender sensibility versus his/her transsexual body. Further, Haraway’s theories of the cyborg and its relationship to gender
identity inform my reading of Eve/lyn as a potentially subversive transgender cyborg. Finally, Halberstam's reading of the convergence between the transgender body and postmodern figurations of time and place enables one to read much of Winterson's work, particularly *Written on the Body*, as most profoundly enabling the articulation of a trans-reading identity.

**Contribution to Field**

Broadly, this project adds to the burgeoning field of transgender studies. Specifically, this project addresses the development of a trans-reading position, a position and perspective that reads gender ambiguity and fluid sexuality into as well as out of texts. This reading position provides a reader with interpretive tools that will allow for a multiplicity of gendered reading positions beyond the male/female binary and opens up texts to complex interpretations that highlight the relationship between their narrative experimentation and their critique of stable gender positions. The development of a trans-reading position is unique in the field of reader-response criticism; arguments have been made that there is a distinctive homosexual way of reading a text but no move has yet been made to argue that there is a distinctive transgender way of relating to a text. This project breaks new ground, in this respect, and argues that, just as there is a masculine or feminine reading position, positions that can be adopted by members of the "opposite" sex, so too is there an ambiguously gendered reading position that can be assumed by all readers. *Orlando, The Passion of New Eve,* and *Written on the Body,* among numerous other texts that are still being recovered and read for their contribution to transgender studies, are "truly independent productions within which gender ambiguity is not a trap or a device but part of the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment" (Halberstam 96). This study shows that such transgender narratives
allow readers access to not only a trans-reading position but to a new way of viewing the world beyond the confines placed upon them by a monolithic heterosexism.
Endnotes

1 One year after Woolf’s essay appeared, Joan Riviere published an essay in 1929 titled “Womanliness as a Masquerade” in which she examined from a psychoanalytic perspective various case histories of women who felt anxiety about their female identity when they were placed in situations and circumstances that required them to behave in “unwomanly” ways. Riviere states that these women put on a “show” of their femininity in order to alleviate their anxiety and to reassure those around them that they were in fact womanly women. Riviere concluded her essay by asking how one is to tell the difference between these masquerades and actual womanliness, wondering if the act and the identity may actually be one in the same.

2 Robert Stoller is often cited for introducing the modern meaning of gender as a cultural construct distinct from sex in his book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* published in 1968. In its “Preface,” he asserts, “gender . . . [is] primarily culturally determined; that is, learned postnatally . . . This cultural process springs from one’s society” (xiii).

3 One such theorist is Kate Millett, who showed how cultural discourse reflects a systematized subjugation and exploitation of women in her seminal book *Sexual Politics* published in 1970. Millett’s central tenet involved politicizing the sexual, both biological sex and what she addresses as cultural/political sex (i.e. gender). Vigorously arguing that sex is politically determined, Millett extends this claim to assert that the sexes are historically and culturally constructed and that men’s domination of women is in no way based on absolute biology but on their maintenance of power over them. Further, Gayle Rubin presented in her essay “The
Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” published in 1975 her conception of the sex/gender system. Contextualizing the relationship between sex and gender in economic terms and modes of production, Rubin defines the “sex/gender system” as “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (122). This system thereby maintains the division of sexes and the primacy of heterosexuality and is also implicated in the continued “suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals is therefore a product of the same systems whose rules and relations oppress women” (122). Because women must be controlled due to their capacity for (re)production and homosexuals must be suppressed due to their lack of capacity for (re)production, they are equally subjugated.

4 This volume was first published in France in 1976 and later translated and published in English in 1978.

5 A somewhat contemporary example of this would be Sandy Stone’s assertion in “A Posttranssexual Manifesto” that the doctors who established and ran gender dysphoria clinics in the 1960’s defined the parameters of “natural” gender identity so as to diagnose patients accordingly: “The criteria constituted a fully acculturated, consensual definition of gender, and at the site of their enactment we can locate an actual instance of the apparatus of production of gender” (8).

6 See her book Bodies That Matter for further information on this subject.

7 This transformation of the term “transgender” begs the question: When gender is truly unmoored from the male/female binary (or any other binary), won’t the term transgender itself become illegible and meaningless in such a context?

8 This synopsis is indebted to Toril Moi’s own summary of Kristeva’s
argument presented in Moi’s *Sexual/Texual Politics*.

9 The introduction of the term “queer theory” into popular circulation has been attributed to de Lauretis when she edited a special issue of *differences* in 1992 and titled it “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.” De Lauretis would later renounce the term in a 1994 article “Habit Changes,” also published in *differences*, because she felt it was misappropriated by the publishing industry and therefore lost any political or cultural power it may have previously possessed.

10 In this respect, Kamuf is indebted to Jonathan Culler’s deconstruction of this comparison in his essay “Reading as a Woman” in *On Deconstruction*.

11 Following Butler, Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* argues that feminism must create new conceptual models of the body that problematize the mind/body split, a binary that pervades most theories of corporeality and that assigns women’s identities almost exclusively to the body. Grosz believes that feminists should and must rethink the body outside of the framework established by patriarchy that prescribes women’s bodies as weak, unpredictable, fragile, and unreliable and to re-vision the body’s corporeality as inherent in the formation of “a psychical interiority” and as necessary to the development of one’s subjectivity (xii). Using sexual difference as a rubric though which to explore how the body has been theorized in the past and to imagine new possibilities for theorizing it in the future, Grosz asserts that, because it is a product of its historical representations and cultural inscriptions, the body is never fully complete and is always mobile, unstable, and variable; following, sexual difference is permeable as well, and this mobility between the male/female dichotomy releases women from “a fixed concept of the body” (14), allowing for more indefinite and varied intellectual conceptions of the body that are useful to the feminist project.
In the body of her book *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender*, from which this quote is taken, Wilchins admits to using the terms “transgender” and “transsexual” interchangeably.

This attitude is most graphically conveyed when Baudrillard describes Michael Jackson as “the artificial hermaphrodite of fable, better able even than Christ to reign over the world and reconcile its contradictions” (21-22).

There has also been an influx of non-fiction texts that examine the transgender identity throughout history, look for transgender characters in classic literary texts, and theoretically postulate on the nature and significance of a transgender identity, among countless other critical lines of inquiry. This study is primarily concerned with fictional narratives that feature transgender characters/narrators.

For the purposes of this study, the term “transgender” will be used, unless otherwise noted.

The first documented autobiography by a transsexual *I Changed My Sex!* by Hedy Jo Star was published in the mid-1950’s and was followed by perhaps the two most famous examples, *A Personal Biography* by Christine Jorgensen in 1967 and Jan Morris’s *Conundrum: An Extraordinary Narrative of Transsexualism* in 1974. More recent autobiographies include *Crossing: A Memoir* (1999) by Deirdre N. McCloskey, Jennifer Finney Boylan’s *She’s Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003), Jamison Green’s *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004), and *Wrapped in Blue: A Journey of Discovery* (2004) by Donna Rose, to name only a few titles in this burgeoning area of publication.

Yet, Fredric Jameson in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” does not find any subversive or substantive potentiality in such a practice, asserting “Pastiche
is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive” (114).

18 As a landmark study addressing one of the many ways in which gender informs the relationship between readers and texts, Judith Fetterley’s The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature published in 1978 theorizes the detrimental effects that reading novels written by men can have on women readers. Because those novels assume a universally male readership, they require women readers to identify with male desires and values, thereby immasculating them: “As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (xx). Consequently, Fetterley calls on women readers to resist such universalizing practices by making themselves conscious of and revealing texts’ androcentrism. Further defining how feminist readers should approach canonical texts, Annette Kolodny asserts that “All the feminist is asserting [. . .] is her own equivalent right to liberate new (and perhaps different) significances from these same texts; and at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questions of it” (18). Next, Patrocinio P. Schweickart clearly delineates how a feminist reading practice should interact with texts in “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading” and highlights the second “chapter” in the story of feminist reading practices (the first being the reading of male texts): “feminist readings of female texts” (39) because, in reading texts written by women, feminist readers actually interact with the voice of another woman.

As feminist studies of the reading process commenced, those that focused
on the gender of the reader often concluded that women’s interactions with texts typically exhibited a more relational and emotional quality than men’s experiences of the same texts. Summarizing and presenting their findings in “Gender Interests in Reading and Language” and “Gendering and Reading,” David Bleich and Elizabeth A. Flynn, respectively, found that male readers’ responses to texts exhibited a sense of detachment from the characters and actions while female readers felt a relationship to the characters and entered the world of the story as though they were a part of the action. These findings echo Carol Gilligan’s general thesis in her book *In a Different Voice* that “The differences between women and men which I describe center on a tendency for women and men to make different relational errors -- for men to think that if they know themselves, following Socrates' dictum, they will also know women, and for women to think that if only they know others, they will come to know themselves” (xx). A more recent article by Anne G. Berggren continues to echo this dichotomy. In “Reading like a Woman,” Berggren discusses how women’s reading habits have long been decried by male critics as “unsettled” and “impressionable” and how the idea of a “woman reader” was constructed along the parameters of such critiques. Berggren ultimately defends this “naughty” and “sensitive” kind of reading because “In favoring ‘unsettled’ reading methods over more academic, structured ones, we have absorbed knowledge that wasn’t available through established knowledge systems” (185).

19 Recognizing that cinema and written texts are very different mediums, this study nonetheless will extrapolate elements of Halberstam’s theory of the transgender gaze that are appropriate to written texts and apply them accordingly so as to begin to develop a transgender reading position.

20 In the sketched prologue to the libretto, Orlando and his tutor reference...
Aristophanes's myth of the hermaphrodite, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

21 The narrator of Winterson's novel *The Powerbook* also refers to herself repeatedly at the novel's conclusion as Orlando. For more on the relationship between Woolf and Winterson, see chapter four.
CHAPTER II

VIRGINIA WOOLF’S TRANS-FORMATIVE BIOGRAPHY

When Virginia Woolf set out to write a tribute to her then-lover, Vita Sackville-West, she surely had no conception of the conflicted reception that the product of her passion—*Orlando: A Biography* published in 1928—would receive over the years. In this mock-biography, Woolf details the fantastical four-hundred-year romp of Orlando, a young nobleman in the sixteenth-century court of Queen Elizabeth I, who, in the midst of chapter three, falls into a seven-day slumber after a fierce night of writing and awakens to find that his/her body has been transformed from male to female and lives to see the birth of the modern era during the first part of the twentieth-century and beyond. At the time of publication, *Orlando* was a huge success, selling over eight-thousand copies over six months, whereas her previous novel *To the Lighthouse* only sold almost four-thousand in its entire first year of publication. However, despite *Orlando*’s commercial success and a majority of reviews hailing it as a clever amusement, including Rebecca West’s overwhelmingly positive review proclaiming it “a poetic masterpiece of the first rank,” many critics of the late-twentieth century often ignored it or glanced at it cursorily (qtd. in Scott, *Refiguring Modernism* 592). For example, Mitchell Leaska does not even include it in his *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: From Beginning to End* and A. D. Moody allows for only half of a paragraph on the book in his *Virginia Woolf*. In addition, even though *Orlando* is Woolf’s most direct and sustained examination of gender as an identity category in any of her works of fiction, two critical books whose titles directly address the relationship between Woolf’s work and gender—Nancy Bazin’s
Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision and Jane Marcus’s edited collection titled *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*—either do not mention *Orlando* or afford it only a slight, skimming reference.

This treatment—or lack thereof—of *Orlando* is all the more remarkable considering that Woolf weds her direct examination of gender categories with a playful, yet serious, critique of the biographical genre, simultaneously deconstructing how culture classifies literary works as well as human beings. Although Woolf subtitled *Orlando* as a biography, it is typically categorized and described as a novel, but *Orlando* still follows some of the conventions of biography because it contains eight illustrations of its supposed subject and his/her various lovers, a preface as well as an index. Yet, these conventions are a mix of verifiable historical fact and fiction—the pictures are of Vita herself, her ancestors and Woolf’s niece, and the preface and index humorously mock these elements’ conventionally serious tone—and the narrative itself is infused with fantastical events and characters juxtaposed with features of realist fiction. This array of genre-bending features works to parody biography’s supposed ability to represent and transmit an individual’s life and personality.

In Elizabeth A. Meese’s reading of Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* (1937) and *Orlando*, she describes how she sees the relationship between these texts’ critique of gender and their engagement with generic conventions, stating that “There is almost a sense in which these anti-gender novels also result in anti-genre texts” (57). A more accurate description of these texts’ take on gender and genre would be to describe them as trans-gender and trans-genre, as they do not represent the opposite of genre or gender nor do they oppose these institutions, as such, but are more concerned with trans-gressing or traversing the boundaries that these categories erect and that are, in
turn, erected around them. Reading *Orlando* as a trans-genre text and Orlando as a trans-gender subject more precisely describes the nature of their ambiguities, simultaneously highlighting how generic and identity categories are limiting, arbitrary and prescriptive. In addition, a trans conception of Woolf’s re-vision of gender and genre positions her work as a precursor of postmodernism as it more accurately strives to present an individual’s internal as well as external experiences of life beyond the pervasive binaries that permeate it.

Reading Orlando’s character as transgendered provides a more productive approach to interpreting how Woolf addresses gender in *Orlando* than many currently in circulation. Several readings of Orlando refer to him/her as a “true” transsexual, as a figure who is decidedly male in the book’s initial chapters and who becomes decidedly female for the remainder of the book, ignoring Woolf’s challenge to the integrity of these categories. A majority of critics, however, have read Orlando as the embodiment of Woolf’s theory of the androgynous mind—either positively or negatively—set forth in her essay *A Room of One’s Own*. A *Room of One’s Own* was published in 1929, just after *Orlando*, and was based on a series of lectures Woolf gave at Newnham and Girton in 1928 while she was in the midst of writing *Orlando* and so the intersections between gender and writing were foremost in her mind. Near the conclusion of *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf’s narrator describes viewing a young man and woman meeting at a street corner beneath her window and entering a taxi together. This scene prompts the narrator to ponder the division between the sexes and the effects of this division on the imagination of the writer: “But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete
satisfaction and happiness” (98). Woolf’s answer to this question is “yes,” that two sexes do and should live in the mind of each person and that their union is the most advantageous state of mind, particularly for writers. As Woolf describes, “The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. [...] It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties” (98). Yet, rather than claim that an androgynous mind is one that simply pairs a distinctively male mind next to a distinctively female mind, thus maintaining the sexed categories as discrete and separate, Woolf continues her meditation on the nature of this apparent androgyne, finding a precedent for this sexed merger in Coleridge’s famous description of the androgynous mind in his letters. Only when a writer embraces the multiplicity of sexes in his/her mind can s/he create without being overly “sex-conscious” and exercise his/her imagination without restraint.

Some feminists, such as Elaine Showalter, Eileen B. Sypher, Marilyn R. Farwell, have attacked Woolf’s description of androgyne in A Room of One’s Own and its subsequent influence on and depiction in Orlando as an escape from or disavowal of her female identity. Others have alternately celebrated or criticized it as an ideal myth or naïve fantasy of merging male and female into a seamless unity, like Maria DiBattista, Nancy Topping Bazin, and Roger Poole. More productive readings of Woolf’s androgyne, ones that critically look at how Woolf’s theory of androgyne destabilizes and undermines the gender binary rather than focusing on defining the term, are offered by those that utilize a poststructuralist perspective, such as Toril Moi and Makiko Minow-Pinkney. Moi states that

[far from fleeing such gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. She has understood that]
the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity. (13)

Further, Minow-Pinkney describes Woolf’s conception of androgyny in Orlando as “opening up the fixed unity into a multiplicity, joy, play of heterogeneity, a fertile difference” (12). Similarly, this project is not interested in contributing to the ongoing debate over androgyny’s definition or Woolf’s conception of it.4 Rather, this project proposes that a more fruitful approach to Woolf’s description of gender in A Room of One’s Own and its representation in Orlando is to conceive of it in terms of transgender because this term, unlike androgyny, refuses reference to either term in the gender binary and has come to represent perpetual, unsettled variance.5

Woolf gives her readers an indication of the inherent ambivalence and contradictions in using the term “androgynous mind,” explicitly showcasing her struggle to find the most accurate language to describe a mind unfettered by sexual difference and free to exercise its imagination without restriction. This project presents “transgender” as an appropriate term to describe Woolf’s ideal creative mind. As Marilyn R. Farwell succinctly summarizes, “While we are left with an ambivalent and limited concept of androgyny [in A Room of One’s Own], we are also given the tools to go beyond that” (451), and the following statement is one such tool. As Woolf continues to mull over the character of the androgynous mind and its advantages over those that are overly “sex-conscious,” which she feels typifies Victorian society, she elaborates, “He [Coleridge] meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (emphasis added, 98). Her use of the term “undivided” indicates that a truly creative mind must expel those elements of culture and society that cause arbitrary divisions. Many have
read this statement as a wish for wholeness on Woolf’s part, but describing a mind as “undivided” does not automatically indicate that it is whole. Further, rather than characterized by wholeness, Woolf’s androgynous mind is typified as possessing a kind of translucent transience, a fluid way to think around and through ideas without impediment from arbitrary boundaries of gender, reality, truth, etc. For Woolf, androgyny—or more accurately, transgenderism—emphasizes transparency and transition rather than unity and completeness.

Reiterating Prosser’s definition of “transgender,” which highlights the mutability at the core of queer inquiry, one can see that what “transgender” has come to mean—the transition between or, more accurately, within the man/woman dichotomy—is a more precise description of both Orlando’s character as well as Woolf’s creative mind: “It is this difference of ambivalence, a wavering around transition—or rather a transformation of transition into a new identity—that characterizes contemporary transgender” (169). Conceiving of Orlando’s identity as a ceaseless transition in the midst of gender categories recognizes the uninterrupted fluidity of identity depicted throughout Orlando as well as how Orlando specifically deconstructs the male/female poles of gender. Reading Orlando as transgender celebrates the polyvalent play at the heart of Woolf’s novel and her description of the androgynous mind and frees Orlando, as well as the reader, not from sex categories themselves but from a strict reference to them. Orlando does not transcend sex; rather, s/he transcends reference to it because the sex categories themselves are shown to not refer to an original beyond them.6

The term “transgender” not only aptly applies to the abstract concept of the androgynous mind advocated by Woolf but it also aptly describes Orlando’s subjectivity. Orlando’s nonplussed reaction to his/her overnight transformation
illustrates the transparency of the transgender mind in contrast to the narrator's theatrical shock and befuddlement. Orlando "looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure" (138); s/he remains calm because, despite his/her physical change, "in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, although it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (138). The subsequent chapter reveals a reason behind Orlando's calm reaction to his/her body's physical change when his/her narrator/biographer takes a moment, while Orlando is driving into town, to meditate on the nature of sexual difference:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. [. . .] But here we leave the general question and note only the odd effect it had in the particular case of Orlando herself. For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn. (189)

While describing Orlando's behavior as alternating from one sex to the other shifts value back-and-forth between the two sexes, thus disrupting masculinity's position as primary power-holder, such a description also maintains the inviolability of the sexed binary because the definition of each term remains untroubled. Orlando's identity remains unaffected, despite the change in genitalia, because s/he has always been both male and female, has always wavered within the poles of gender, and therefore, a switch in physical sex would not alter his/her already transgendered identity. Yet, it is crucial to note that the narrator/biographer does not explicitly state that Orlando's
identity is stable; rather, s/he remarks that it was not altered. The difference in word choice is significant because, although Orlando’s identity remains unaltered by his/her sexual transition, it should not be assumed that his/her identity is stable. Rather, this description of Orlando’s identity as “unaltered” actually emphasizes Woolf’s conception of de-centered subjectivity; because one’s identity is always changing, an apparent switch from one sex to another or, more accurately, a realignment of emphasis from one sex to another, would not indicate any real change at all.9 This, coupled with Orlando’s already transgendered status, illustrates that Orlando’s sex “change” proves to be no change at all because it is only one of a plethora of symptoms revealing subjectivity’s constant and endless transitioning. Therefore, a more productive reading of Orlando’s character—much like the narrator of Winterson’s Written on the Body—is one that acknowledges that Orlando’s gender identity, rather than swinging from one end of the binary to the other, actually rests in the midst of the binary and that ceaseless transitioning is his/her gender identity.

Orlando’s sexual transition reveals that his/her identity was always already transgendered and transitory and that switching from the use of “he” to “she” is of no real significance. Orlando’s narrator/biographer recognizes that it is simply a matter of “convention” to switch from using the male pronoun when referring to Orlando to using the female pronoun for the remainder of the narrative—“[I]n future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’” (138)—as though one pronoun does not describe Orlando’s sex any more adequately than the other. It also reveals that his/her body reflected this transgenderism all along. From the beginning, Orlando’s physical appearance is described in terms that mesh masculine and feminine ideals, and the very first sentence of the book, rather than settle the question of Orlando’s sex through its strident affirmation, only succeeds in
undermining its veracity: “He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rapers” (13). If there were “no doubt of his sex,” why then does the narrator/biographer feel compelled to verify it as male? This need to confirm Orlando’s sex immediately reveals what is supposed to be an obvious element of one’s identity as not so obvious or easy to ascertain from the moment the reader first “sees” Orlando.

In this way, Woolf prefigures Butler’s anti-essentialist claims almost sixty years prior to Gender Trouble’s publication in 1990 and illustrates the “stylization of the body” (33) through the imposition of clothes upon it described by Butler. Butler asserts that “there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity” (Gender Trouble 8). English, Russian, and we later learn, Turkish fashions serve to confuse gender identity rather than confirm or reveal it. As previously quoted, the biographer remarks on the discrepancy that often occurs between clothing and gender identification: “[O]ften it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above” (189). Other scenes of cross-dressing, such as when the Archduke Harry dresses as the Archduchess Harriet and when Orlando dresses, after being sexed female, as a male to socialize with prostitutes, further reinforce clothing’s ambivalent relationship to the sexed body. After Orlando returns to England and dresses as a woman of English society, the narrator/biographer remarks that s/he was becoming “a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person,” as she continued to wear the “uniform” of women: “Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely keeping us
warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (187).
Following this statement on gendered behavior, the narrator/biographer presents an extended rumination on the power of clothes to “mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues, to their liking” (188-89). Yet, just moments later, the narrator/biographer discounts this opinion about clothing’s power to shape a person’s thoughts, behavior, and body as well as how one is perceived by others; instead, s/he asserts, “The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex” (188). One’s sex does not determine what clothes one wears nor do the clothes one wears determine one’s sex; this ceaseless ambivalence echoes the similar ambiguity surrounding Woolf’s description of androgyny in A Room of One’s Own. These contradictory statements on the relationship between clothing reveal that there is no positive term to refer to, that gender and language are both imitations of a negative.

The physical description of Orlando that follows the book’s opening statement only re-emphasizes why the narrator/biographer felt obliged to affirm Orlando’s sex. Although s/he had “shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders” of an ideal male body type, s/he also displayed a woman’s rosy cheeks, “teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness,” and most significantly, “eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them” (14-15). This description is echoed by a statement in chapter three that appears just after Orlando’s transformation from male to female: “His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (138). Since this sentiment accurately applies to Orlando both when he is sexed male as well as when she is sexed female, it shows again that his/her physical change is really no “change” at all and that the
“mixture in her of man and woman” has always already manifested itself not only in his/her behavior but also in his/her physicality. Accordingly, Orlando is transgendered from the very beginning of his/her biography and represents an individual whose gendered identity refuses to align with one sex over the other.

In Orlando’s characterization, Woolf points out that the categories of male and female are not mutually exclusive and that the idea of sexual difference is an arbitrary division imposed on fluid and nebulously constituted bodies. Because s/he displays elements characteristic of both sides of the binary, s/he belongs to neither. The narrator/biographer’s description of how others view Orlando after s/he returns to England reveals this constant shifting and the subsequent disruption of sex categories; those traits conventionally aligned with women are italicized while those aligned with men are underlined:

The curious of her own sex would argue, for example, if Orlando was a woman, how did she never take more than ten minutes to dress? And were not her clothes chosen rather at random, and sometimes worn rather shabbily? And when they would say, still, she has none of the formality of a man, or a man’s love of power. She is excessively tender-hearted. [. . .] Yet again, they noted, she detested household matters, was up at dawn and out among the fields in summer before the sun had risen. [. . .] She could drink with the best and liked games of hazard. She rode well and drove six horses at a gallop over London Bridge. Yet again, though bold and active as a man, it was remarked that the sight of another in danger brought on the most womanly palpitations. She would burst into tears on slight provocation. She was unversed in geography, found mathematics intolerable, and held some caprices which are more common among women than men, as for instance
Neither men nor women who observe Orlando are able to read him/her definitively as belonging to one sex to the exclusion of the other. The narrator/biographer, unable to name Orlando’s sex, relies on gender stereotypes to create some kind of frame of reference in order to render Orlando visible. In addition, rather than read the relationship between these listed traits as juxtaposed, thus maintaining the borders around their meaning, the relationship between them is more precisely described as an incomplete fusion, thus compromising these borders. It becomes impossible then to define what is “male” and what is “female.” Woolf slyly reveals, in this collage of male and female characteristics that persists in Orlando’s character throughout the book, that the problem of categorization lies not in Orlando but, rather, in the constitution as well as the very existence of the categories themselves. They prove inadequate and based on random cultural, social, and political biases rather than innate or “natural” modes of being. Throughout Orlando’s biography, Orlando maintains a position in the midst of transitioning.

Further, Orlando is not the only character who dismantles the sanctity of binary gender. Shelmerdine becomes Orlando’s husband after s/he succumbs to the Victorian imperative to marry so that his/her writer’s block can be made unblocked, and yet, this is no ordinary marriage between a man and a woman because neither party believes that the other is truly the sex that s/he claims to be. Therefore, their relationship illustrates the Foucauldian theory that it is the heterosexual imperative that establishes and perpetuates the myth of sexual difference, not an inherent division of nature. As Butler argues in Gender Trouble, “In other words, the ‘unity’ of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality” (31). Later, in Bodies that Matter,
Butler conceptualizes the inherent disjuncture in heterosexuality's reliance on gender to determine desire:

For, if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man, and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever that is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an imaginary logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability. (239)

Hearkening back to Woolf's questioning of stable gender identities, the source of Orlando and Shel's confusion lays not in their anatomy or dress but rather in the conventional differentiations of male and female sensibility. At the first meeting between Orlando and Shel, Orlando exclaims, "'You're a woman, Shel!'" and Shel counters, "'You're a man, Orlando!'" (252). Such questioning continues through their brief courtship when Shel asks, "'Are you positive you aren't a man?" and is echoed by Orlando, "'Can it be possible you're not a woman?'" (258). Neither can believe that someone of the apparently opposite sex could be so sympathetic and possess characteristics supposedly exclusively relegated to their own sex: "For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other's sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once" (258). Orlando is only able to write again after s/he has married Shel, finally making peace with "the spirit of the age" rather than fighting against it: "[S]he need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did" (266). Although Orlando succumbs to the pressure of Victorian society to get married, her marriage to Shel is entirely unconventional and subverts the basic premise defining the institution, i.e. that
marriage is the joining together of one man and one woman. Orlando and Shel's transgenderism make it impossible to classify their marriage in these terms.

Woolf directly identifies the heterosexual imperative as complicit in the establishment and maintenance of sexual difference in Orlando's relationship to Sasha and the Archduke/duchess Harry/Harriet as well. When Orlando first sees Sasha, s/he assumes that the person s/he is watching is male because "no woman could skate with such speed and vigour," and Orlando "was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question" (38). Orlando's initial confusion about Sasha's identity results not only from his/her incorrect generalization about sex and skating ability but also from Sasha's clothes, which are similar to Orlando's gender-obsuring outfit described in the book's opening; the narrator/biographer states that "the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex" (37). However, regardless of Orlando's uncertainty, s/he was immediately peaked with "the highest curiosity," thereby illustrating that desire precedes acknowledgement of sexual difference (37). Additionally, although Orlando eventually identifies Sasha as female, her body retains its transgender mesh: "Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had those eyes" (38); on the same note, no girl ever had legs like that, no girl had hands or a carriage like that, therefore dismantling stereotypical notions of what constitutes a man's hand, a woman's legs, etc. Even the body gives the lie to an inherent and natural sexual difference predicated on physical traits and heterosexual desire. Orlando's transgenderism explicitly implicates the heterosexual paradigm in the maintenance and dissemination of the gender binary.

After Orlando's transformation, s/he again illustrates that desire cannot be
dictated by cultural imperatives. As Orlando contemplates his/her change of sex on the ship bound to England, his/her narrator/biographer comments,

[A]s all Orlando’s loves had been women, now, through the culpable lagardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was as a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man. (161)

Orlando’s steady desire for women, regardless of his/her own sex, pointedly marks heterosexuality as a fiction. Rather than turn away from his/her affection for women and love men now that s/he finds him/herself sexed female, Orlando actually loves women more because of his/her change. Identified as a woman, Orlando does not necessarily desire men, and when identified as male, s/he did not stop desiring a figure who s/he believed to be male also. Rather, s/he laments that his/her desire would not be realized due to societal constraints. Orlando’s interaction with the Archduke/duchess Harry/Harriet also reveals the fallacy of the heterosexual imperative. Orlando first meets the Archduchess when s/he seeks out Orlando because his/her picture “was the image of a sister of hers,” which in and of itself immediately conveys desire’s unruly and unpredictable manifestations (115). However, when the reader and Orlando encounter the Archduchess again it is after Orlando’s transformation and the Archduchess reveals her own transformation: “[S]he turned to present the Archduchess with the salver, and behold—in her place stood a tall gentleman in black. A heap of clothes lay in the fender” (178). Paralleling Orlando’s initial reaction to falling in love with a person presumably of his/her own sex, Archduke Harry “had seen a portrait of Orlando and fallen hopelessly in love with him; that to compass his ends, he had dressed as a woman”
Archduke Harry did what was required in order to get close to Orlando when s/he was sexed male, i.e. make it appear as though his desire was heterosexual by dressing as a woman. As in Orlando’s initial meeting with Sasha, the Archduke Harry too recognizes that homosexuality would not be condoned and so he assumes the dress of a woman to present the portrait of heterosexual desire, but Woolf makes it clear that it is just that—a portrait. Compulsory heterosexuality requires that there be only two genders, when in fact, desire is shown to be polyvalent, and all four of these transgendered characters give the lie to the binary gender requirements of the heterosexual paradigm.

This pervasive deconstruction of gender and sexual binaries informs not only how Woolf deconstructs conventional generic expectations of biography and the reader’s relationship to the text but also culminates in the concluding moments of the book as Orlando comes to embody a transgender version of Woolf’s concept of a “moment of being,” presenting transformation as the only “constant” throughout each of these dynamic relationships.

“That queer amalgamation”: Trans-forming Biography

Woolf strategically chose to feature anti-essentialist views of gender and sexuality in a mock-biographical form, having held a long-standing interest in biography and informing Vita that she sought to “revolutionise biography in a night” (Letters 3: 429) with Orlando’s publication. Displaying many characteristics of postmodernist thought and style, Orlando re-visions the biographical genre through the lens of a re-visioned subject, featuring a transgender figure who defies normative identity categories as its focus of study. Placing a transgender subject at the center of a biography unsettled numerous other binaries inherent in the writing and charting of a life besides the binary of gender. As J.J. Wilson notes, Orlando/Orlando forces
readers to "rethink all our so-called givens, be they taboos, institutions, or other forms of limitations, such as gender, time, space, even death" (179). Or, as Winterson playfully puts it in Art Objects, "Woolf wanted to say dangerous things in Orlando but she did not want to say them in the missionary position" (68). The text of Orlando refuses to draw distinctions between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, reason and imagination, revealing how these lines are so blurry and arbitrary as to be non-existent, like the lines dividing gender identity into either male or female or sexuality into homo- or heterosexuality, producing a biography that eschews such separations.

Woolf’s sustained interest in biography was due in part to her father’s lifelong involvement in the genre. Sir Leslie Stephen served as editor of the massive Dictionary of National Biography from 1882 until 1891 and wrote biographies of Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, George Eliot, and Thomas Hobbes for the “English Men of Letters” series as well.12 Also influencing Orlando’s execution, Lytton Strachey, a friend of Woolf’s and a prominent figure in the Bloomsbury group, felt that Victorian biographies were too long and tediously reliant on facts and so he strove to revitalize the form. In particular, Woolf was familiar with Strachey’s partly fictional study Elizabeth and Essex published in the same year as Orlando and remarked in her essay “The Art of Biography” that she admired Strachey’s Elizabeth because she “moves in an ambiguous world, between fact and fiction, neither embodied nor disembodied” (Collected Essays 4: 225). Woolf was also familiar with Strachey’s volume of short biographical studies titled Eminent Victorians and his biography of Queen Victoria. Another influence on Woolf’s perceptions of biographical writing was Harold Nicolson, Vita’s husband. Woolf reviewed Nicolson’s book Some People, a series of character sketches depicting both
real and fictional personages published just before *Orlando*, in a now-famous essay titled “The New Biography.” In it, Woolf sets forth many of her thoughts on the challenges and possibilities of writing a life that serve as a lens through which to read *Orlando*’s engagement with this genre. After *Orlando*, Woolf continued to explore biographical writing in *Flush: A Biography*, a humorous biography recounting the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel published in 1933. In addition, she wrote a serious biography of her friend Roger Fry that was published in 1940, just prior to her death.

Most significantly, Woolf’s attention to biography grew from her own deep-seated desire to capture the “inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul” (“New Biography” 150). Woolf explored biography because, as a genre, it most explicitly claimed to relay the “truth” of an individual’s life in its creation of a fixed portrait of personal identity, yet the ability to ever truly know another person and to convey this knowledge textually haunted all of Woolf’s fiction and essays. As Woolf remarks in a letter to Vita dated March 2, 1926, “Do we then know nobody? Only our own versions of them, which as likely as not, are emanations from ourselves” (*Letters* 3: 245). Yet, Woolf’s wish to “revolutionise biography in a night” was also political and developed from her observations of the social and cultural limits placed upon individual identity and the exclusion of “improper” subjects—like women and those who behaved “improperly,” i.e. homosexuals—from biography’s pages. Accordingly, Woolf revises elements of biography in order to trouble which lives are treated by this genre and how those lives are treated, recognizing that biography, as it was defined, was not intended to accommodate those persons who lived at society’s margins, including those who troubled gender categories like Orlando. Whether Woolf does indeed “revolutionise
biography" in her parodic, fictionalized biography of a man who changes into a woman overnight is still up for debate; yet, she most certainly revolutionizes how one thinks about biography's supposed capacity to impart the truth of an individual's life, just as she revolutionizes how one thinks about the supposed naturalness and essential character of gender and sexual identities.

The element of biography that intrigued and challenged Woolf the most was its task of conveying the elusive qualities of an individual's personality in conjunction with the concrete facts of that person's life. In one of her most famous quotes concerning the art of biography from "The New Biography," she uses the metaphor of granite and rainbow to describe this contradiction:

On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (149)

Like the dichotomy dividing the sexes and its hindrance of the creative mind, Woolf identifies the dichotomy separating "truth" and "personality" as hindering the biographer's ability to convey, in its totality, an individual's life. Just as Woolf feels that the joining of male/female in the androgynous—or transgender—mind is the ideal condition for creation, so too does she see the joining of truth and personality in her hybrid text Orlando as a possible solution to this separation of fact and fiction in conventional biography.

The narrator/biographer of Orlando constantly brings this confusion of categories to the reader's attention as s/he struggles to write both the surface and
depth of Orlando’s life, professing to use only the facts but often stopping to ponder what facts are and how one comes to know this reality, if at all. The narrator/biographer self-consciously presents the struggle that any biographer faces in his/her attempt to present the complete “truth” of another person’s life, recalling the metaphor of granite and rainbow:

Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them in to a case, often of the most incongruous, [. . .] nature, who has so much to answer for besides the perhaps unwieldy length of this sentence, has further complicated her task and added to our confusion by providing not only a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us [. . .] but has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. (77-78)

Throughout Orlando, the narrator/biographer toils with trying to suture the “reality” of Orlando’s life with the “rag-bag” chaos of his/her personality using “a single thread” in order to produce the illusion of a “seamless whole.” Complicating the matter is the fact that this “single thread” of language is in no way “single.”

Woolf envisions the simultaneity of fact and fiction that can be achieved in biographical writing as one way of fusing truth and personality. In commenting on Nicolson’s Some People, Woolf admires that he “has devised a method of writing about people and about himself as though they were at once real and imaginary” (“New Biography” 149). This merger can be accomplished via the biographer’s precarious balance of stylistic elements from fiction writing and factual elements of the person’s life:

Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible; yet he is now more than ever urged to combine them. For it would seem that the life which is
increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act. [...] Thus, the biographer’s imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life. Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact. (“New Biography” 155) 

Biography should more than simply chart a person’s life; rather, the genre should strive to animate that person’s life, and Woolf proposes that imparting the “truth of fact” with a fictional flair is one way to achieve this affect. Otherwise, the biographical subject, instead of possessing all of the features of humanness, becomes “only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin,” as described by Woolf in the “The Art of Biography” (Collected Essays 4: 222). 

As Pamela Caughie argues, much of Woolf’s writing was concerned with revealing that literature’s apparent reflection of reality was actually a parody of reality: “For Woolf, [...] the mimetic function of art is closely related to mime, an exaggerated, parodic imitation and re-creation [...] affirm[ing] art as dramatizing the pageant of life, not as representing some stable reality distinct from the narrative and dramatic structures that enclose it” (“Double Discourse” 84). This summation of how Woolf perceived art’s relationship to reality echoes how Butler perceives the relationship between drag and the gender categories it parodies. Butler states in Gender Trouble, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (emphasis in original, 137). In the parodic biography of Orlando, Woolf simultaneously shows that language, rather than represent an original object, actually imitates or re-creates it because there is no
recourse to an original in addition to showing that gender is also an imitation or recreation. In "Virginia Woolf's Double Discourse," Caughie draws a connection between Woolf's vision of individual subjectivity and her constant urge to draw attention to narrative's artifice: "Just as her [Woolf's] conception of self makes disguise, imitation, and performance indispensable rather than irresponsible, so does her conception of the novel make highlighting the narrative surface essential rather than frivolous" (84). Orlando constantly performs his/her female identity once s/he enters English society sexed as a female, not to mention the cross-dressing disguises s/he puts on in order to converse with prostitutes; there is also the Archduke/duchess's cross-dressing disguise as s/he performs the heterosexual paradigm to realize his/her desire for Orlando. The "rag-bag" quality of the self is reflected by the "rag-tag" style of Orlando. In the midst of The Well of Loneliness's obscenity trial, Woolf pondered in her diary, "What is the difference between the subject & the treatment?" (3: 207). Rather than actually wanting to tease apart this difference, Woolf's question is more rhetorical than literal because Woolf believed that there was no difference between what one wrote about and how one wrote about it, and this sentiment is illustrated by the direct connection between Orlando's amorphous sense of self and the constantly shifting rhetoric of the text, rendering Orlando a trans-genre text just as Orlando is a transgender subject.

The narrator/biographer of Orlando features prominently in Woolf's parody of the biographical genre. The narrator/biographer of Orlando's life is not an objective reporter but, rather, provides subjective commentary not only on Orlando's personage but also on the appropriate subject and form of biographical writing, constantly pointing out the artificiality of narrative, and on the necessity of illusion, among other topics that happen to peak his/her interest. This characterization of the
narrator/biographer reflects Woolf’s comments about the shift that occurred after the end of the nineteenth-century in the author’s relationship to his/her subject. As she remarks in “The New Biography,” “He [the author] is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal” (152). In recounting a conversation between Shel and Orlando, the narrator/biographer digresses, “[T]hey knew each other so well that they could say anything they liked, which is tantamount to saying nothing, or saying such stupid, prosy things, as how to cook an omelette or where to buy the best boots in London” (253) and so on. In another example, the narrator/biographer describes the celebration that occurred when all the lawsuits against Orlando were settled but places this description in brackets. Following, s/he explains, “—all of which is properly enclosed in square brackets, as above, for the good reason that a parenthesis it was without any importance in Orlando’s life” (256). Instead of remaining a detached transmitter of the events of his/her subject’s life, the narrator/biographer is as much a character in Woolf’s novel as Orlando him/herself.

Significantly, the narrator/biographer takes a moment to comment upon what is important to a life worth documenting, either in a novel or biography, revealing significant generalizations about how women and men’s lives are differentiated. In the following passage, one can sense Woolf’s tongue firmly implanted in her cheek as her narrator/biographer expounds on his/her opinions:

But what can the biographer do [besides recite the months of the year] when his subject has put him in the predicament in which Orlando has now put us? Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have
decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking.

(267)

As the narrator/biographer later reveals, the only life worth documenting is one that is filled with adventures if one is male (biography) and filled with love affairs if one is female (novel). The narrator/biographer laments that his/her subject does not do the things that such a subject is supposed to do. First of all, because Orlando is sexed female in the second-half of the book, his/her biography cannot now chart him/her as s/he moves “from deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office” (15), a task that the narrator/biographer looks forward to as the book commences. As a female, Orlando cannot spend his/her time acting out heroic deeds, and the narrator/biographer concedes that “when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead” (268). Accordingly, s/he expects Orlando “to think, at least of a gamekeeper (and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking)” (268). Here, Woolf takes a moment to satirize novelistic conventions and their prescription—rather than description—of women’s behavior. The narrator/biographer states, “But love—as the male novelists define it—and who, after all, speak with greater authority?—has nothing whatever to do with kindness, fidelity, generosity, or poetry. Love is slipping off one’s petticoat and—but we all know what love is” (269). Yet, Orlando does not think of a gamekeeper nor does s/he wish to fall in love, and so the narrator/biographer is left with nothing to write about because Orlando’s activities fall outside the boundaries of convention: “If then, the subject of one’s biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her” (269). Orlando “will neither love nor kill” because s/he is neither male nor female but is simultaneously both, and in this
way, s/he is a corpse in that neither his/her life nor his/her identity is recognized or acknowledged, much less validated, by the public.

As chapter two begins, the narrator/biographer remarks that the duty of the biographer is to report the facts and “so let the reader make of them what he may” (65). However, within the first pages of chapter one, the narrator/biographer confesses that, “Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore” (15). The narrator/biographer is caught in another lie as chapter two proceeds: “Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando’s life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth” (65). Regardless of the biographer’s claim that documents have provided the truth of Orlando’s life in the book’s first chapters, these chapters have not been at all concerned with documents or empirical facts; rather, the reader has witnessed Orlando’s creative process and first love. Empirical data is scant, at best, throughout Orlando, and this is due, in part to its emptiness and deadening effect. The narrator/biographer goes so far as to remark that “moralities belong, and should be left to the historians, since they are as dull as ditch water” (149). A similar comment occurs just after Orlando’s transformation: “Let biologists and psychologists determine [Orlando’s sex]. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can” (139). Even when there should be a plethora of documents available to recreate Orlando’s business dealings as an ambassador to Constantinople, “we have the least information to go upon” and the narrator/biographer confesses that “it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and
even to make use of the imagination” in order to compose Orlando’s biography (119).

Despite giving ample lip-service to the necessity of relying on and reporting the truth in biography, the majority of Orlando is full of imaginative events, passages, and characters because it is the imagination that enables the “truth” of fact to survive history. As she asserts in “The Art of Biography,” “The artist’s imagination at its most intense fires out what is perishable in fact; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, imbed it in the very fabric of the work. Much will perish; little will live” (Collected Essays 4: 227). The narrator/biographer, posing as an arbiter of morality and wanting to spare the reader the shock of Orlando’s transformation, wishes to end the biography and state that his subject has died, but s/he, as a biographer, is bound by his/her duty to truth: “Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! [. . .] they demand in one blast, Truth!” (134). Answering this call, Purity, Chastity and Modesty attempt to hide the reality of Orlando’s change but are quickly exiled by the narrator/biographer’s insistent call to “Truth!” Woolf, banishing the feigned moral turpitude of her Victorian biographer, forces him/her to reveal the “naked” truth of Orlando’s female form. The irony of this scene, however, and of the entire book, is that this “truth”—and all ideas of truth and reality—is undermined by its very content. The “truth” of Orlando’s sex change is anything but true. What is unveiled, through Orlando’s body, is that truth, gender, and sex have no essence. Any basis for “truth” or “reality” has been drained along with the patriarchal project of commodifying the knowledge of a person’s life through a linear telling of its events. Woolf mocks and critiques the notion that an essential truth or reality can be found because it does not even exist; even in the charting of the events of a person’s life through biography, truth and reality have no meaning. They prove to be as empty
and unstable as the linguistic categories of male and female.

Orlando him/herself calls on truth as s/he struggles to write about love. Finding that his/her thoughts are plagued with an abundance of metaphors, s/he grows frustrated and exclaims,

“Why not say simply in so many words”—and then he would try to think for half an hour—or was it two years and a half?—how to say simply in so many words what love is. [. . .] “And if literature is not the Bride and Bedfellow of Truth, what is she? Confound it all [. . .] why say Bedfellow when one’s already said Bride? Why not simply say what one means and leave it?” (101)

Orlando begins to realize that words, what are supposed to convey truth, are the very things that prevent its expression. Words get in the way of Orlando saying just what s/he means rather than helping him/her convey his/her thoughts because they prove to be as unstable as his/her gender identity. As Orlando struggles to write his/her poem and find the exact way to phrase his/her perceptions, s/he runs into the same obstacle as his/her biographer:

So then he tried saying the grass is green and the sky is blue so to propitiate the austere spirit of poetry whom still, though at a great distance, he could not help reverencing. [. . .] Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing the embraces of hairy satyrs from enchanted woods. “Upon my word,” he said [. . .], “I don’t see that one’s more true than another. Both are utterly false.” (101-102)

Both the narrator/biographer and his/her subject come to and struggle with the realization that direct statements, just as much as metaphoric descriptions, are inaccurate and imprecise. Truth cannot be described or transmitted by language, and
one's sexed identity cannot be conveyed and transmitted by one's clothing. As the narrative progresses through the ages and Orlando's life nears the end of the Victorian period, the narrator/biographer reveals his/her recognition of and frustration with language's lack of stability: "For it has come about, [...] that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down" (253). Woolf's use of poetic and lyrical language throughout Orlando and the narrator/biographer's emphasis on it not only reflects the difficulty in relying on language to convey reality but also functions in the text to further disrupt generic conventions of biographical and fictional writing as well as conventional notions of gender identity. Armstrong, noting Winterson's indebtedness to Woolf's poetic language, remarks that "[i]t suspends meaning for a moment, troubling the line between signifier and signified, conscious and unconscious, subjectivity and culture" (277). The lyrical language of Orlando's biography emphasizes and reveals the inevitable mobility between the ends of these and other various binaries, particularly the gender binary.

At the conclusion of "The New Biography," although Woolf admires Nicolson's attempt to re-vision biography, she ultimately sees it as incomplete and laments, "Nor can we name the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow. His method still remains to be discovered" (155). Orlando can and should be read as a particularly trans-figurative attempt to articulate "that queer amalgamation of dream and reality," as it features a subject who embodies a "queer amalgamation" of male and female while also challenging too-easily accepted notions of truth and language.
“The queer element of the human spirit”: Trans-mitting a Transgender Moment of Being

A signature element of conveying the reality of an individual’s life for Woolf is the moment of being, mentioned explicitly in her memoir-like essay “A Sketch of the Past” yet featured throughout her fiction, and significantly, the presentation of Orlando’s moment of being that occurs at the conclusion of Orlando is decidedly transgender. Orlando’s sudden consciousness of the present moment’s varied and shifting texture becomes fused with his/her realization of his/her similarly varied and shifting manifestations of a gendered self. The simultaneous realizations about time and self that occur at the book’s conclusion compliment Orlando’s understanding of gender’s endless ambiguity, broadening this frame of reference to considerations of time and self, presenting trans versions of both and illustrating “the triumph of imagination over the historical process” (Naremore 45).

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf sets out to write her memoirs at the prompting of her sister Vanessa Bell as she worked on her biography of Roger Fry and the novel Between the Acts. These various portraits of Woolf’s past feature her earliest memories and traces the differences between those moments in which one is most conscious—moments of being—and those in which one is detached from the experiences of life. Her earliest memory was one such moment, when as a child she lay on the floor of the nursery of the family home at St. Ives and listened to the waves crash “half awake and half asleep, drawing in such ecstasy as I cannot describe” (7). The simple memory of such moments can overwhelm and “be more real than the present moment” as well as make one more conscious of the memory’s sensations than of one’s self (78). Further, the import of such moments of being lies not in their external significance; the most mundane of experiences, like napping on a nursery
floor or viewing the garden, can bring about “a sudden violent shock” that heightens one’s consciousness of the present moment and pierces the “cotton wool of daily life” (11-12), and it is what is behind this “cotton wool” that compels Woolf’s writing: “[I]t is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words” (12). Woolf suspects that “behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art,” and the individual loses his/her significance as an isolated entity in such moments because “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (13). This communal sense of humanity’s participation in the world as art is echoed in Woolf’s theories of the reader’s active and necessary participation in the composition of a text, a point emphasized throughout Orlando and explored in more depth in the next section. Capturing this exquisite awareness of the moment in precise language is central to Woolf’s fiction as well as part of the conundrum facing those writing biographies and memoirs—to capture the person who is the subject of the writing rather than simply recounting the events of that person’s life—and in Orlando, this moment is captured in the context of Orlando’s ambiguous gender identity. 18 As Winterson succinctly states in Art Objects, “Orlando is metaphor, is transformation, is art” (66).

Immediately following Orlando’s “sudden violent shock” that “[i]t was the present moment” (298), s/he is immersed in the onslaught of sensations offered by the modern department store, and just prior to Orlando’s realization of his/her innumerable selves, s/he finds him/herself in a department store and begins to think about how his/her experience of the sexes has shifted through the years:

Women were not nearly as roundabout in their ways, she thought, powdering
herself with the greatest unconcern, as they had been when she herself first
turned woman on the deck of the Enamoured Lady. [. . .] Honestly, though
she was not thirty-six, she scarcely looked a day older. She looked just as
pouting, as sulky, as handsome, as rosy (like a million-candled Christmas tree,
Sasha had said) as she had done that day on the ice. (302)

Here, Woolf reiterates Orlando’s transgenderism while also highlighting his/her
deliberant construction of his/her female identity for public view, observing his/her
female gender from a distance and confirming the continuity of his/her transgender
subjectivity through the ages. Orlando remarks that “she” looks as good as “she” did
when first meeting Sasha, but “she” was supposedly a “he” then; by referring to
his/her previous self as female rather than male, Orlando elides the radical
transformation that took place overnight and indicates that it was, in fact, no great
change at all. As Orlando continues to wait, s/he registers “a whiff of scent, waxen,
tinted as if from pink candles” (302-303), and this scent layers a past moment of
gender ambiguity on top of Orlando’s current reflection on his/her own
transgenderism: “[T]he scent curved like a shell round a figure—was it a boy’s or
was it a girl’s—furred, pearled, in Russian trousers” (303). This scene’s re-emphasis
of Orlando’s transgenderism in addition to his/her recollection of Sasha’s initially
ambiguous gender identity sets up and contextualizes Woolf’s depiction of the
multifarious nature of subjectivity and the associative character of the present
moment. Woolf merges Orlando’s transgender body with his/her presentation and
performance of de-centered subjectivity, presenting a polyvalent, transgendered
moment of being. An instant later, Orlando wonders, “Nothing is any longer one
thing” (305), reflecting not only the indeterminacy that is characteristic of modernist
thought but specifically emphasizing how the transgender subject comes to embody
that statement of indeterminacy.

Orlando comes face-to-face with what the narrator/biographer has described as the “rag-bag” nature of his/her inner life only when s/he is fully conscious of the present moment, and it is no coincidence that this endless multiplicity of selves inherent in every individual finds itself illustrated and embodied by a subject who identifies with an endless multiplicity of genders:

For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgement at one time or another in the human spirit? [. . .] these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter’s hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains [. . .] and so on. (308)

This passage presents the self is polyvalent and associative and as continuously and relentlessly connected to the present moment, a simultaneous composite of past and future.¹⁹ In addition, because the self is multifarious, to say the least, it can and should be assumed that gender is just as numerously varied. The narrator/biographer surmises that “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (309); therefore, every biography written is incomplete.²⁰ Related, the narrator/biography even goes so far as to acknowledge that, although Orlando’s is not the typical life of biography, it does in fact represent a life lived better than most because of his/her embodiment of the present moment. The narrator/biographer states,

And indeed, it cannot be denied that the most successful practitioners of the
art of life, often unknown people by the way, somehow contrive to
synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in
every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in
unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten
in the past. (305)

Like Woolf’s description of the androgynous mind in *A Room of One’s Own* and
moments of being in “A Sketch of the Past,” this description of how one ideally
relates not only to time’s passage but also to the inevitable multiplicity of selves
emphasizes communion and the “undivided” relationship between artificially
separated entities.21

The image of the wild goose featured at the end of the book has come to
represent Woolf’s opinion that any attempt, in biography or otherwise, to capture the
self in its entirety is inevitably a “wild goose chase.” As Orlando drives home from
the department store, s/he recalls how s/he had been haunted by the vision of a wild
goose since childhood:

“There flies the wild goose. [. . .] But the goose flies too fast. I’ve seen it,
here—there—England, Persia, Italy. Always it flies fast out to sea and always
I fling after it words like nets (here she flung her hand out) which shrivel as
I’ve seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them. And
sometimes there’s an inch of silver—six words—in the bottom of the net. But
never the great fish who lives in the coral groves.” (313)

The image of the wild goose appears in the book’s concluding lines; as Orlando
watches Shel leap out of an airplane upon returning from a sea voyage, s/he saw that
“there sprang up over his head a single wild bird,” and Orlando shouted, “‘It is the
goose! . . . The wild goose. . . .’” (329). Also at that moment, the clock stuck midnight,
ushering in the 12th day of October 1928. This emphasis on the book’s concluding date, October 12, 1928—the actual date on which Orlando was published—highlights the unavoidable transience of all biographies, particularly when its subject remains alive at the book’s conclusion. Once Orlando recognizes that the only constant about individual selfhood is that it is ceaselessly shifting and multifarious and notes its unique association with the present moment, s/he notes, “Nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish” (307), reflecting the inevitable incompleteness of any work attempting to capture an individual’s subjectivity because both the individual and the work are shifting and amorphous.

Yet, although Woolf indicates that it is impossible to contain and transmit textually the entirety of an individual’s life, the “inch of silver” that one is able to capture through the exquisite consciousness of a moment of being is enough to continue writing. Winterson, describing how Woolf’s writing pierces the wooly curtain of everyday existence, recalls the metaphor of the fish inadvertently nabbed in Orlando’s attempt to catch the wild goose: “She [Woolf] knows how to draw the world out, breaking the air with colour and the beat of life, and before we can truly admire it at our feet, the line is out on the water again, catch after catch, drawn from the under-depths” (Art Objects 64). Although transient, ambiguous and fleeting, these moments of being are central to understanding how Woolf conceives of the inescapable relationship between art and life and the connection that this relationship fosters between all individuals. Additionally, the emphasis on endless transformation characteristic of these moments paired with Orlando’s own endless transformation between gender identities characteristic of contemporary transgenderism renders the moments of being presented in Orlando decidedly transgendered.

This description of consciousness’s elusiveness also applies to the postmodern
understanding of the transitory present—"In place of the living present comes the recognition of presence as a lost object, grasped only in its passing" (Elam 66)—and recalls Prosser’s definition of “transgender” that highlights the mutability at the core of queer inquiry and its emphasis on ceaseless transitioning as an identity in and of itself. Orlando’s understanding of his/her self also exemplifies the inescapability of an endless transition and the inherent mixture of contraries that typifies one’s life. Orlando realizes that “everything was partly something else, and each gained an odd moving power from this union of itself and something not itself so that [. . .] lights and shadows changed, and one thing became another” (323). This realization, deriving from his/her extended moment of being featured in the text’s concluding pages, succinctly describes Woolf’s conception of the androgynous mind, wherein the male and female aspects are “undivided,” and is embodied by Orlando’s transgendered subjectivity, which constantly wavers within this melding of genders and serves to call attention to the arbitrary divisions of all binary categories, including past/future, reality/illusion and fact/fiction.

“A reader’s part”: Carving Out a Trans-Reading Identity

In the course of “revolutionizing” biography in order to open it up to the play of language’s transience and the instability of a transgender subjectivity, Woolf shifts the reader’s relationship to the trans-genre text and transgender subject of Orlando, undermining another binary—author/reader—and encouraging the reader to carve out a trans-reading identity, a reading identity that illustrates Woolf’s vision of the androgynous mind as “resonant and porous [. . .] naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.” Woolf was concerned with the reader’s relationship to the text throughout her writing, as illustrated by the titles of the two collections of essays published before her death—The Common Reader and The Second Common
More significantly, prior to Woolf’s death, she began recording notes for a critical work specifically examining the act of reading to be tentatively titled *Reading at Random* or *Turning the Page*. At the beginning of “The Reader,” a piece to be included in this unfinished collection of essays, Woolf asks the question “At what point is the reader born?” (425). Barthes would, of course, answer this question years later with the response, “[T]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author,” a statement from which Barthes derives the title of his famous essay (118).

Woolf’s answer to her own question about the birth of the reader anticipates Barthes’s comments on the reader in “Death of the Author” and implicates the reader’s birth in the midst of as well as outside of the text, postulating that once the reader is engaged in the creation of the text, s/he gains a broader understanding of both the text and the world that s/he inhabits: “Now the reader is completely in being. He can pause; he can ponder, he can compare; [. . .] He can gratify many different moods. He can read directly what is on the page, or, drawing aside, can read what is not written” (“The Reader” 429). Further, Woolf’s emphasis on language throughout her oeuvre prefigures Barthes’s understanding that “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write, is [. . .] to reach that point, where only language acts, ‘performs’ and not ‘me’” (“Death” 115). Orlando comes to this realization of language’s primacy over authorship when s/he buries the manuscript of “The Oak Tree” at the base of the tree that inspired it—“a return to the land of what the land has given me”—and realizes “Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?” (324-25). Since this realization comes just after Orlando is confronted with the inevitable fragmentation and ceaseless fluidity of his/her being, it is impossible for his/her “voice” to be the source of or ultimate authority on the answer s/he gives.
to the other voice; rather, once s/he has made that answer, the reader (or listener) becomes the site at which the "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes, "Death" 116).

Woolf's conception of and focus on the reader makes a nod to "abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, [..] by joining them in a single signifying practice" (Barthes, "From Work to Text" 170). Anticipating Barthes's comments, Woolf delineates how the writer and reader are both imparted with the care of communication's process and thereby "[e]verybody shared in the emotions of Anons [sic] song, and supplied the story" ("Anon" 382), emphasizing the "creative character" of reading ("Reading" 169). Woolf's previously published essay titled "How Should One Read a Book?" also urges the reader to accept his/her participation in a text's authorship, to read so as to "refresh and exercise [their] own creative powers" and "to make use of all that the novelist—the great artist—gives [them]" (238, 243). Orlando's meditations on the nature of writing characterizes it as a communal exchange: "Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? [..] What could have been more secret, she thought, more slow, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods[?]" (325). However, Orlando's response to this "song of the woods" is not simply an exchange between two entities but, rather, a collaboration between subject, writer, and reader for his/her manuscript of "The Oak Tree" calls out to Orlando that "[i]t wanted to be read. It must be read. It would die in her bosom if it were not read" (272). In "The Reader," Woolf again asserts that the reader's importance "can be gauged by the fact that when his attention is distracted, in times of public crisis, the writer exclaims: I can write no more" (428). Revealing this collective creation of any piece of writing by its author, reader and
culture is crucial, according to Woolf, because it is in this way that individuals begin to view "the whole world as a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" ("Sketch" 13).

Further, more so than in any other of Woolf’s novels, Orlando is explicitly concerned with the reader’s relationship to the text. As Benzel notes, James M. Haule’s and Philip R. Smith, Jr.’s A Concordance to the Novels of Virginia Woolf points out that the term “reader” shows up in Orlando a total of eighteen times in comparison to the twenty-one times that it appears in the rest of Woolf’s novels combined. This emphasis on the reader is most directly conveyed by the book’s narrator/biographer and his/her constant reference to the reader’s interaction with the text. Although this mediation of the reader’s relationship to both Orlando the character and Orlando the text by the narrator/biographer allows Woolf to examine how a text is constructed through a complicated interaction between author, reader, and narrator, it also distances the reader from Orlando and prevents him/her from fully identifying with the biography’s subject. As Sproles describes, “By creating a self-conscious narrator—one who, for example, presents the rules of biography even as he breaks them—Woolf introduces a third term into the narrative that prevents the all too attractive collapse into identification allowed by a binary narrative structure” (191). Accordingly, Orlando’s readers are prevented from connecting with him/her through identification and therefore assume, at least for passing moments, a trans-reading identity through different means, most notably via the constant transformations taking place in the novel, i.e. Orlando’s physical transformation from male to female, the transformation of Orlando’s gendered subjectivity from male to female and back again and back again, etc., the transformation of Orlando’s biographer into the novel’s narrator and back again, etc. and the language of the novel
transforming from realism to fantasy to poetical, etc., among other transformations that ceaselessly occur throughout Orlando. As Winterson describes, “These transformations are deliberate. They are saucy. They tease at the reader’s hidden doubts and delight in a language that offers the outrageous as perfectly natural if a little surprising” (Art Objects 67), unsettling the reader and placing him/her in the midst of these myriad transformations.

Through the course of Orlando’s narrative, Woolf emphasizes a collaborative and dynamic aesthetic wherein the reader is included in the active construction both of Orlando’s character and Orlando’s narrative, taking part in the trans-cription of the various transformations of the text, and in this way, the reader gains furtive and periodic access to a trans-reading identity. Peppered all through Orlando are the narrator/biographer’s remarks directed towards the reader. For example, the narrator/biographer is conscientious regarding the reader’s engagement when s/he must relay the passage of time and lists the succeeding months, remarking “This method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare, perhaps, and the reader, if we go on with it, may complain” (266), and again, “And as she drove, we may seize the opportunity, since the landscape was of a simple English kind which needs no description, to draw the reader’s attention more particularly than we could at the moment to one or two remarks which have slipped in here and there in the course of the narrative” (186-87). At their basis, these interjections serve to prod the very method of textual communication, which was of obvious critical interest to Woolf. As Jakobson states, “There are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works, [ . . . ] to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention” (“Linguistics” 92), and these continual interjections by the narrator/biographer represent such
“messages.” Not only does the narrator/biographer of Orlando constantly refer to the reader and his/her reaction to Orlando’s story throughout the book, but his/her repeated emphasis on the text’s construction makes the reader aware of the gap between reality and representation inherent in all texts. As Caughie describes, this emphasis on the act of representation in Woolf’s “narrative does not just represent a world; it represents as well a mode of producing and a way of valuing that world” (“Double Discourse” 84), and Woolf presents the production of this world as a collaborative effort and asserts that this world should be recognized as transient, indeterminate and unstable rather than codified within artificially imposed binaries.

In a later comment by the narrator/biographer, the reader’s participation in the construction of Orlando’s narrative is explicitly referenced. As the narrator/biographer searches for the meaning and definition of life in both man and nature, s/he asserts, “Having asked then of man and of bird and the insects, [...] having asked them all and grown no wiser, but only older and colder [...] back we must go and say straight out to the reader who waits a tiptoe to hear what life is—Alas, we don’t know” (271). This admission by the narrator/biographer that s/he cannot convey to the reader the meaning of life, in addition to his/her already revealed inability to identify Orlando’s sex or provide other basic facts of his/her subject’s life, forces the reader to reflect on his/her expectations and perceptions of narrative. As Susan Stanford Friedman notes in commenting on Woolf’s The Voyage Out and The Common Reader, each text “teaches its reader to interpret. The appeal each text makes, therefore, is to a thoroughly active reader who becomes its second author through the act of reading” (105). This self-reflexivity, then, caused by the narrator/biographer’s inability to fulfill his/her conventional role as the text’s authority engages the reader in filling in the gaps left by the narrator/biographer and
to author the very text that s/he is reading.

At one point, the narrator/biographer explicitly and directly points to how the process of reading denotes an active participation in the creation of Orlando's biography. After Orlando has opened a book and begins reading, the narrator/biographer comments,

For though these are not matters on which a biographer can profitably enlarge it is plain enough to those who have done a reader’s part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person; can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like, and know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought and felt and it is for readers such as these alone that we write. (73)

Woolf presents this sentiment previously in *The Common Reader* when she describes how the book “expands in the reader’s mind” as s/he supplies “what is not there” (142). Rather than the narrator/biographer outline the narrative of a person’s life for the reader to consume, the creation of Orlando’s biography and specifically Orlando’s character also rest in the reader’s hands because the narrator/biographer cannot convey the entirety of his/her subject’s life or identity. Any text, because language is unstable, requires the reader to take part in what Iser calls “gap-filling” wherein the reader necessarily supplies a provisional and subjective meaning to the text rather than passively receive meaning from the text (“Interaction between Text and Reader” 111). Just as Woolf prescribes any biographer to articulate a marriage between non-fiction and imagination, so too should the reader create a marriage between his/her reception of the text and his/her active participation in that text’s creation. As Benzel notes, “By concentrating our attentions both on the character of Orlando and on the
construction of *Orlando*’s character, Woolf creates a double-visioned reader, a reader who realizes the plurality in the text through his/her own multilevel reading” (173). Notably, the plurality of Orlando’s text is complimented by the plurality of Orlando’s gender, resulting in the condition that one cannot be discussed to the exclusion of the other and that the reader’s reading identity becomes similarly plural. In addition, this dynamic allies the reader with the narrator/biographer, thus offering one way through which to assume a transgender reading identity since the narrator/biographer can also be read as transgender. Bowlby reads *Orlando*’s narrator/biographer as similarly transgendered, “as something like a woman posing as a man posing as a woman to investigate the identity of a man who becomes a woman and poses as a man” (60), due to the shifting tone and rhetoric that the narrator/biographer exhibits throughout, and the narrator/biographer claims to “enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever” (220).

Woolf asserts that “[e]ach [reader] has read differently, with the insight and the blindness of his own generation” (*The Second Common Reader* 32), but “good” texts require a reading that reveals the values and principles that govern how one reads in order that they may be changed. Orlando, as the focal point of the novel, “becomes a place in the text where we will test our reading of biography, fiction, and gender codes” (Benzel 178), and in the narrator/biographer’s struggle to label Orlando’s gender identity and vacillation within the confines of the gender binary, Woolf shows the texture of the male and female gazes. In addition, Orlando’s romance with Sasha, wooing by the Archduke/duchess Harry/Harriet and eventual marriage to Shel all disable compulsory heterosexuality and its reliance on the stability of the gender binary.25 The communal creation of *Orlando*/Orlando involving the narrator/biographer, the reader, and the author as well as Orlando’s
recognition of the associative and relational quality of time and self at the book’s conclusion point toward “a vision of community, possibility, and redemption through collaboration” (*Queer Time* 96) that Halberstam sees in the most productive uses of the transgender gaze in recent films. It also highlights the significance of Woolf’s subtitling *Orlando* as a biography: “[T]here is an immediate challenge to conventional genre-boxing but there is too, an invitation to believe. To accept what will follow as truth and as the kind of truth only possible between people who know each other well” (Winterson, *Art Objects* 71). Whether the two people involved in this exchange is the narrator/biographer and the reader, Woolf and the reader, or Orlando and the reader is left in a perpetual state of flux; just as Orlando’s subjectivity is represented as “a multiplicity of discontinuous subjects” (Armstrong 270), so too is the reader’s reading identity characterized by such polyvalence. This multiplicity, aggravated by and embedded in Orlando’s transgender identity, initiates a trans-reading identity for the reader that is permeable and creative, unsteady and undivided, aware of and enmeshed with the instability of language, gender, identity, reality, truth, etc. As Woolf remarks, when writers highlight the relational and associative nature of all meaning, “we see the whole world in perpetual transformation” (“New Biography” 149), and Carter and Winterson pick up this idea of the world’s “perpetual transformation” and create transgender narratives wherein the transgender subject narrates his/her story, without the mediation of a narrator or biographer, thus enabling the possibility that the reader will identify with the transgender subject, and more directly challenges the stability of the reader’s own gendered identity, thereby enhancing his/her assumption of a trans-reading identity.
Endnotes

1 Woolf noted in her diary the confusion the book's title caused to booksellers and the negative effect it may have on sales, which of course did not occur: “No one wants biography. But it is a novel, says Miss Ritchie. But it is called a biography on the title page, they say. It will have to go to the Biography shelf. I doubt therefore that we shall do more than cover expenses—a high price to pay for the fun of calling it a biography” (3: 198). As discussed by numerous critics, Woolf called Orlando a biography for more reasons than simply to have “fun.”

2 Marder states that Orlando is “a kind of hymn to androgyny” (111).

3 The narrative arch of both texts is also similar, as Orlando traces the challenges of the four-hundred year life of a writer who is identified as female for most of the book and A Room of One's Own contains an historical overview of British female writers (or the lack thereof) and the negative effect of material circumstances on women's creativity. For those critics who further discuss the connection between Orlando and A Room of One's Own, see Kari Elise Lokke's “Orlando and Incandescence: Virginia Woolf's Comic Sublime,” Herbert Marder's Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf, and Sandra M. Gilbert's “Woman's Sentence, Man's Sentencing: Linguistic Fantasies in Woolf and Joyce.”

4 For an excellent summation of how androgyny has been defined and how Woolf's discussion of it in A Room of One's Own shapes current thoughts on the term, see Marilyn R. Farwell's article “Virginia Woolf and Androgyny.”

5 The term “androgyny,” regardless of whether one interprets it as a fusion or balance of the male and female, automatically calls up the two identities in its very name. The word “androgyny” actually derives from the Greek roots of “andros,”
meaning man, and "gyne," meaning woman.

6 On the other hand, Jay Prosser asserts in Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality that Orlando represents an impossible fantasy because, "[a]s h/er narrative propels h/er through four centuries of history, Orlando is free to move beyond h/er body—quite queerly, to break through the limits of the flesh" (168). However, Orlando does not move beyond the restrictions of his/her flesh; rather, his/her fantastically long lifespan indicates that s/he "break[s] through the limits" of time. Orlando is very much aware of the limits placed upon his/her female flesh, as evidenced by his/her lament that the conventions of female dress restrict his/her physical activities and in the pressure s/he feels to get married during the Victorian age (246-47).

7 This project reads Orlando as transgendered, and its use of split pronouns reflects this. Quotes taken from Orlando reflect the pronouns as they appear in the text.

8 Because Woolf consciously mixes novelistic and biographical elements in Orlando, the transmitter of the narrative will be referred to as "narrator/biographer" for the remainder of the chapter, thus acknowledging this mix.

9 In addition, the narrator/biographer indicates that Orlando's memory was not altered by his/her change of sex either—"[H]er memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle" (138)—and Woolf conceives of memory as anything but stable and secure.

10 This list of male and female characteristics is echoed by critics who read Winterson's Written on the Body and compile a litany of features that would decide the narrator's sex as definitively male or female. Yet, just as Orlando's biographer and his/her associates cannot make a firm decision on his/her sex, neither can the
readers of Winterson’s novel determine the narrator’s sexed identity within the binary of male or female.

11 This wavering back-and-forth is echoed in Orlando’s new found delight at how men treat him/her, when sexed female. S/he thinks, “‘For nothing [. . .] is more heavenly than to resist and to yield; to yield and to resist’” (155).

12 Johnson, Pope, and Swift all make brief appearances in Orlando.


14 Published just months before The Well of Loneliness trial, Orlando did not receive the condemnation afforded Radclyffe Hall’s book, although they examined similar subjects. As Prosser notes, “Indeed, Orlando is not about the sexed body at all but the cultural vicissitudes of gender” (168). The project argues that Orlando is about how these “cultural vicissitudes” affect and shape the sexed body. These books have also enjoyed similarly varied receptions throughout the years due in part to how Woolf weds her subject with the book’s form: “[B]ecause it is ultimately the queerer text, it is Orlando that makes the better transition to contemporary configurations of gender fluidity” (Prosser 168).

15 One of the most amusing passages of parody in Orlando occurs with the narrator/biographer describes in minute detail the passage of time and then concludes that this same information could have been relayed “more quickly by the simply statement that ‘‘Time passed’ (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened” (91), poking fun at Woolf’s own “Time passed” section in To the Lighthouse.

16 It must be noted, however, that Orlando’s proclivity to think and write from the beginning, when sexed male, frustrates the narrator/biographer’s task too.

17 The narrator/biographer continues to complain about having to write a
woman's life, bemoaning that "when we write of a woman, everything is out of place—culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man" (312). Although the nature of his/her complaint is despicable, it reveals that the gender of a book's subject is indeed a point of consideration in the composition process.

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* each feature distinctive representations of moments of being. Mrs. Dalloway intensely experiences the moment in which she enters the flower shop to buy flowers for her party (13), and Septimus becomes aware of the connectivity of life as he sits on the park bench with his wife (22). In *To the Lighthouse*, as her dinner party concludes, Mrs. Ramsey reflects on the event and thinks, "Of such moments [. . .] the thing is made that endures" (105). The conclusion of *Between the Acts* features a moment of being for Lucy's character that is very similar to that experienced by Orlando. Watching a fish in the lily pond, Lucy thinks, "'Ourselves' [. . .] And retrieving some glint of faith from the grey waters, hopefully, without much help from reason, she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves" (205).

A similar portrait of the self's "rag-bag" is described by Bernard in *The Waves*, albeit with a more negative slant: "There is always deep below it, even when we arrive punctually at the appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights" (255).

The inability to articulate the totality of the self is echoed by Lois in *The Waves* when she remarks that all efforts "to say, 'I am this, I am that,' . . . are false" (137). Neville too mourns this inability to write a life and asserts that "among the tortures and devastations of life is this then—our friends are not able to finish their
stories” (39).

21 Here, Woolf also takes a shot at the biographical project that her father worked on for many years: “The true length of a person’s life, whatever the Dictionary of National Biography may say, is always a matter of dispute. Indeed, it is a difficult business—this time-keeping; nothing more quickly disorders it than contact with any of the arts” (305-6).

22 For an excellent discussion of what Woolf meant by the term “common reader,” see Caughie’s chapter “Woolf as Critic” in Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism.

23 To put it another way, Armstrong states, “The pressure of desire in Woolf’s work arises because hers is a narrative where everything is vanishing or about to vanish” (emphasis in original, 261), tying the constant transformations in Orlando to the ephemeral nature of the moment of being.

24 Stone advocates that transsexuals write their histories in order for the transsexual body to become visible by being read, and it appears that Orlando’s body is being read constantly by those around her. The text is Orlando because it is his/her biography; the book is Orlando and Orlando is the book, as the title so obviously points out. Yet, the fact that Orlando is not writing his/her own history and that, rather, it is being constructed and presented by his/her narrator/biographer negates a reading of Orlando as a posttranssexual manifesto, according to Stone’s rubric.

25 Halberstam’s description of how the film Boys Don’t Cry enacts the transgender gaze applies readily to how the narrator/biographer influences and shapes the reader’s adoption of a transgender reading identity in Orlando: “The transgender look in this film reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes, and it disarms, temporarily, the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre” (Queer
Time 86).
CHAPTER III

ANGELA CARTER’S TRANS-FORMATIVE MYTH

Angela Carter’s immense amount of writing, including children’s books, poetry, radio plays, film and television scripts, novels, short fiction, and essays on countless subjects did not gain significant notice until after her early death in 1992. Carter’s re-vision of popular and well-known folk tales and fairytales collected in The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories (1979) has garnered a significant amount of this critical attention, along with her numerous novels, particularly Nights at the Circus (1984). Carter’s work can be maddening to read—and write about—due to its endless layering of characters and plots, constant referencing and citing of other texts, and blurring of genre’s boundaries, which accounts for the difficulty most critics encounter in trying to classify it. An additional source of frustration when encountering Carter’s work is the fact that Carter does not set out to provide answers to the questions her work asks but, rather, to persist in asking question upon question in order to reveal the falseness of myth, the inadequacy and inaccuracy of symbols including language, the hollowness of what is deemed “reality” or “truth,” and the short-sightedness of prescriptive identity categories, particularly gender. The Passion of New Eve, first published in 1977, has not received the amount of critical attention that Carter’s fairytales and other novels, like Nights at the Circus, have received, yet more critics are returning to it in light of queer theory’s growth and the increased visibility of transgenderism in literature and popular culture. Like her other works, this novel is difficult to classify because it merges features of science fiction writing, follows the narrative arch of a conventional picaresque novel, quotes from dozens of
extra-textual sources, including the Bible, Blake, movies, and Greek mythology, and previews postmodernist concerns about the unquestioned acceptance of the truth and objectivity of science, history, and myth. Yet, the very reasons that some find this novel difficult are the very ones that make it rich for study.

*The Passion of New Eve* incorporates elements from many disparate texts so as to implicate a variety of cultural institutions in the creation, maintenance and transmission of false myths. As Carter remarks in “Notes from the Front Line,” she envisioned *The Passion of New Eve* as her “one anti-mythic novel” (71), and most pointedly, Carter focuses on those myths surrounding gender, particularly the Christian origin myth that describes woman—Eve—as a creation made from Adam’s rib and that has been used to concretize the gender binary. As Stone summarizes, “Under the binary phallocratic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorized, only one body per gendered subject is ‘right.’ All other bodies are wrong” (13). In Carter’s version, Adam is physically transformed into the “new” Eve and suffers woman’s fate as subjugated other; specifically, this revised version of the first woman is presented as Eve/lyn, a man named Evelyn who has been surgically transformed against his will into a woman named Eve. The title of Carter’s book also indicates that Eve/lyn’s story mirrors Christ’s suffering between the Last Supper and his eventual crucifixion, figuring “new Eve” as a Christ-like figure whose experiences in America’s desert will result in the birth of a new phase of humanness, to a child who “will have two fathers and two mothers” (187).

Carter transmits her deconstruction of the Christian origin myth and how it has been used to perpetuate the myth of gender difference via the various adventures and exploits of the transgender hero/ine Eve/lyn. At the conclusion of the second chapter, Evelyn—a man from English who has moved to New York City to assume a
teaching position at a university—leaves the chaotic and deteriorating city and sets off, in true picaro fashion, on a journey to find himself: "[T]here, in the ocean of sand, among the bleached rocks of the untenanted part of the world, I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself" (38). Following the genre, Evelyn's journey out West is reflected in his emotional journey towards maturation and greater understanding as well as the paradigm shift that he undergoes subsequent to his capture by Mother and enforced sex reassignment surgery in the city of Beulah. Reflecting upon and relating his/her journey after the fact, Eve/lyn comes to understand gender as an inessential category and as a complex combination of culture and nature, remarking how several characters s/he encounters on his/her journey each embody a distinct myth of femininity. Mother, as her name suggests, represents the ideal of woman as Earth Mother and goddess. Leilah, the African-American woman Evelyn has a sado-masochistic affair with in the ghettos of New York City, represents the myth of the succubus or woman as insatiable whore featured in pornography. Most significantly, Eve/lyn encounters Tristessa, a film icon who embodies chaste virginity and feminine weakness, who also simultaneously symbolizes the alluring femme fatale constructed by Hollywood, yet this ultimate emblem of Woman is revealed to be imposed on a male body.

The transsexual body serves as the focal point in The Passion of New Eve, although Mother, Leilah and Tristessa challenge the validity and solidity of gender myths intended to universalize and delimit female identity. The gendered myth at the center of the novel is the myth of the hermaphrodite, and Eve/lyn comes to embody Carter's re-vision of this myth.² Rather than hold up the myth of the hermaphrodite as a positive reconciliation of the artificially imposed separation of sexes, Carter re-conceptualizes this myth in more postmodern terms, featuring the fluidity and
perpetual ambiguity of the contemporary transgender body. Although Eve/lyn's body may be transsexual, his/her subjectivity is very much transgendered and characterized by the continual confusion and combination of conventional masculine and feminine traits. Despite having had his physical sex changed, Evelyn's maleness is not automatically erased in Eve/lyn. Upon looking at his/her new body in the mirror, Eve/lyn notes, “[T]he cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself” (75). At this point, it becomes clear that changing one's physical appearance does not automatically alter one's identity or sense of self. Consequently, losing the penis does not erase a masculine essence, just as it would not automatically endow one with a female essence, whatever that may be.

In addition, when Eve/lyn is dressed as the groom in his/her mock wedding ceremony to Tristessa, s/he understands that both his/her male costume and his/her female skin are masquerades, thus making his/her performance as Tristessa's groom a "double drag" and emphasizing gender's mutability:

This young buck, this Baudelairean dandy so elegant and trim in his evening clothes—it seemed, at first glance, I had become my old self again in the inverted world of the mirrors. But this masquerade was more than skin deep. Under the mask of maleness I wore another mask of femaleness but a mask that now I never would be able to remove, no matter how hard I tried, although I was a boy disguised as a girl and now disguised as a boy again.

(132)

The mirrors reflect Eve/lyn as male, revealing the mirror's inability to represent and reflect accurately an individual's gender identity because, although Eve/lyn once again looks male, s/he characterizes this "look" as a disguise. Yet, at the same time, Eve/lyn admits that s/he is also "disguised as a girl" and asserts that this disguise, or
mask, cannot now be removed, so this permanent female disguise is simultaneous with his/her continued identification as male. This layering of gendered masks onto a transsexual body indicates that Eve/lyn’s identity is most accurately described as transgender, just as it is more accurate to conceive of Orlando’s identity as transgender as well.

Even after his/her physical transformation into the ideal blonde bombshell, Eve/ lyn realizes that s/he has to act like a woman, not simply look like one, in order to pass and that females born as such must also complete this performance. S/he understands that “although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations” (101), contradicting the essentialist portrait of womanhood celebrated by Mother. To illustrate, Eve/lyn’s confused gender identity is further aggravated by her/his rape by Zero. Although s/he remarks at one point that her/his imprisonment and repeated rape by Zero made a “real” woman of her/her—“It was as savage an apprenticeship in womanhood as could have been devised [. . .] I had become almost the thing I was. The mediation of Zero turned me into a woman”—, as Zero is raping him/her, s/he thinks, “And more than my body, some other yet equally essential part of my being was ravaged by him for [. . .] I felt myself to be, not myself but he; and the experience [. . .] forced me to know myself as a former violator at the moment of my own violation” (101-102). In addition, when Eve/lyn decides to toss his/her male genitals, which are given back to him/her by Lilith, into the ocean, this action does not indicate his/her all-out rejection of masculinity and unequivocal embrace of femininity and motherhood. Rather, disposing of his/her genitals symbolizes his/her rejection of the “fleshly manifestation” of gender identity, and further, by leaving the United States for parts unknown, Eve/lyn opts to embrace uncertainty and indeterminacy rather
than to remain in a United States deteriorating due to its reliance on false myths.

Eve/lyn’s physical transformation into “the technological Eve in person” (146), in combination with his/her exemplification of gender’s variability, renders him/her an example of Donna Haraway’s cyborg, a figure that can be read as a more radically postmodern incarnation of the hermaphrodite. In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980’s,” Haraway preliminarily defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction [. . .] who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (7-8).5 Accordingly, Eve/lyn’s transsexual body explicitly holds profound potentialities for re-thinking the relationship between definitions of “natural” humanness and bodily configurations that are the result of various kinds of mechanization, whether technological, medical, or otherwise. Related to gender, Eve/lyn embodies the revelation that, because the cyborg reworks the dichotomy of nature and culture, s/he “might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all” (Haraway, “Manifesto” 38). Existing outside of the confines of compulsory heterosexuality and therefore outside of conventional frameworks of gender and sex, Eve/lyn functions as a transgender cyborg, a more postmodern version of gender mixture than that presented by the figure of the hermaphrodite.

To further contextualize this reading of Eve/lyn as a cyborg, Eve/lyn’s encounters with an outrageous cast of characters take place in a post-apocalyptic United States, wherein New York City and California are embroiled in their own respective civil wars and the desert in between is inhabited by individuals intent on building their own civilizations along whatever logic they like, such as Beulah and
Tristessa’s glass house. This embedding of the transgendered figure within various post-apocalyptic settings reflects Carter’s critique of American culture, focusing on its parasitic capitalism that relies on the domination of subjugated groups and the ways in which the heterosexual matrix shores up the power structures enacted by a market economy wherein sex is a major commodity. Accordingly, Eve/lyn’s trials in a futuristic, chaotic United States graphically enact the simultaneous demise of androcentric values and the deterioration of a culture built upon the backs of others, indicating in its concluding scene—as Eve/lyn sets off in a rowboat for lands unknown—the as-yet unrealized emergence of a distinctly divergent origin myth via a refigured and postmodern hermaphrodite.

Additionally, Eve/lyn’s journey across the country and across gender borders is related to the reader reflectively, after the conclusion of Eve/lyn’s time in the United States and presumably after s/he has reached another destination. Eve/lyn’s recollection of his/her bodily transformation in the heart of Beulah and its aftermath constitute a kind of reverse transsexual narrative. His/her dismay at the disconnect s/he feels from his/her newly shaped body runs counter to those sentiments expressed in many transsexual narratives wherein the individual feels that having his/her body transformed physically will confirm his/her internally felt sense of self and finally align the two. As such, The Passion of New Eve can be read as a significant variant of what Sandy Stone calls a posttranssexual manifesto in her essay “The ‘Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” published in 1988. Actually, Stone’s summary of the state of gender affairs near the end of the twentieth century provides an uncannily accurate synopsis of Carter’s novel and how the figure of Eve/lyn relates to and reflects contemporaneous concerns:

Here on the gender borders at the close of the twentieth century, with the
faltering of phallocratic hegemony and the bumpitous appearance of heterglossic origin accounts, we find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body: a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal type. Representation at its most magical, the transsexual body is perfected memory, inscribed with the ‘true’ story of Adam and Eve as the ontological account of irreducible difference. (10-11)\(^6\)

Stone points out that the transsexual body’s refusal of mixture and alliance to one sex to the absolute exclusion of the other ironically reenacts the strict difference between the sexes initially established by the origin myth of Adam and Eve, rather than blur this difference, as traditionally thought. Consequently, the transsexual actually becomes a lightening rod for those groups with an interest in the continued maintenance of this binary. In *The Passion of New Eve*, these groups are aligned with Zero, who violently upholds similar values to those that undergird phallocentric bases of knowledge, and Mother, who embodies extreme versions of feminist essentialist thought.

Yet, the reader is aware that Eve/lyn’s body is transsexual and that his/her subjectivity remains ambiguously transgendered. Rather than feeling his/her body matched to his/her gendered sense of self, thus alleviating the dissonance conventionally expressed by pre-op transsexuals, Eve/lyn’s operation actually creates this dissonance. Therefore, at least for the reader, Eve/lyn’s body does not slide into invisibility by passing as one sex or the other, and therefore, *The Passion of New Eve* can be read as an alternative version of a posttranssexual counter-discourse advocated by Stone. Stone asserts that this counter-discourse requires transsexuals “to forego
passing" as their newly constructed sex, to embrace their erased history as the "other" sex, and to identify themselves as posttranssexuals (14) because invisibility, although granting them acceptance, also works to erase the substantial power transsexuals possess to disrupt the binaries of sex and gender and to reconfigure these categories towards a boundless multiplicity. As Stone describes, "For a transsexual, as a transsexual, to generate a true, effective and representational counter-discourse is to speak from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible" (11). To do this, the transsexual must make his/her gendered history known.

The ambiguity of Eve/lyn's narrative voice, along with other elements of Carter's text, renders *The Passion of New Eve* a decidedly postmodern posttranssexual manifesto. Because Eve/lyn narrates his/her story retrospectively and the reader is not made aware of Eve/lyn's sexual transformation until chapter five, the narrative voice of the first four chapters is indeterminable, leaving the reader to wonder: Is the voice Eve's as she looks back on her previous life as Evelyn or is it Evelyn's voice speaking through his newly fashioned female body? Or, could it be a constantly wavering combination of the two, i.e. Eve/lyn's voice? In this uncertain voice, Eve/lyn simultaneously "reads" him/herself and allows him/herself to be "read" by the text's reader. Rather than universalizing the transgender look, which Winterson more readily succeeds in doing in *Written on the Body*, *The Passion of New Eve* makes a point of transgender identity by placing Eve/lyn's indeterminately gendered body at the text's center and constantly mulling over the productive paradox that his/her body and subjectivity represent. Yet, Carter's use of retrospective narration and the effect this has on the stability of the narrative voice in the first four
chapters establish the framework for Winterson’s more sustained transgender vision. It is through this uncertain narrative voice that Carter details the deconstruction of numerous myths of gender, the disintegration of a culture that relies on such myths, and the reconceptualization of gender mixture in the volatile figure of the transgender cyborg who comes to embody a de-essentialized model of identity as impermanent and open to the play of difference.

“Flesh uncreates the world”: Gender Myths and the Re-Vision of the Hermaphrodite

An element of *The Passion of New Eve’s* “anti-mythic” gender agenda is scrutinizing the accuracy of symbols, showing that symbols, whether myths, words, images, etc., are not universal nor monolithic. As the novel opens, Eve/lyn remarks, “Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them?” (6). The heavy irony of this statement should not go unnoticed because the novel’s focus broadly rests on how virtually all “external symbols” are inaccurate and inadequate. The narrator concludes that “A critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives” (6), and the book commences to do just that—critique the symbols, like myths of ideal femininity and gender difference, that prescribe and restrict people’s gender and sexual lives. Accordingly, as a cyborg, Eve/lyn introduces a “cyborg politics [that] is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism” (Haraway, “Manifesto” 34). Carter uses Eve/lyn to exploit the fact that words and myths, as just two examples of pervasive and foundational symbols, are imprecise and that there is always a gap between any symbol’s meaning and its representation, and it is within this gap that Carter’s transgender cyborg falls, revealing and embracing gender’s cultural and technological construction and
undermining the essentialist framework at the basis of most myths.

Consequently, *The Passion of New Eve* troubles a plethora of destructive and inaccurate binaries and is most precisely focused on the cultural myths that construct gender as a binary category and their basis in the Christian origin myth. Set in the midst of competing configurations of reality, Carter focuses *The Passion of New Eve* on deconstructing the myth of sexual difference, based upon the story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib, and achieves this by not only showing gender identities that are a mixture of male/female—Eve/lyn and Tristessa—but also by parodying myths of womanhood. In referring to *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter asserts that she “conceived it as a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity” (“Notes” 71) and goes on to critique the idea of natural sexual difference through Mother, Leilah and Tristessa’s excessive subscription to and exaggeration of supposedly “natural” configurations of female gender, specifically the myths of the Earth Mother goddess, the whore, and the femme fatale masquerading as virgin, respectively. As Carter states in *The Sadeian Woman*:

> All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsense; and the consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth anyway [. . .] If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place. (5)

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Mother and Tristessa are explicitly implicated in the short-sighted prescription to myths of woman constructed and propagated by men, and Carter uses Mother, Leilah and Tristessa as extreme embodiments of specific gender myths, satirizing their supposed naturalness and inherent division from the
male sex as well as mocking the ridiculousness of a strict allegiance to any gender identity presented as essential and universal.

Further, this deconstruction of myths of Woman sets up Carter’s most subversive critique and the novel’s queerest figure: Eve/lyn and his/her simultaneous deconstruction of the hermaphrodite myth. In Eve/lyn, Carter re-creates a more postmodern configuration of gender uncertainty as a transgender cyborg via the concurrence of his/her transsexual body and transgender narrative voice. Eve/lyn’s technological construction, in addition to rendering him/her representative of the cyborg, illustrates that “dismemberment dismantles the idols and myths that shape our identity” (Simon 136). Rather than exemplifying satirical excess, Eve/lyn represents re-constructive mutability and perpetual fluidity, allowing for the additional troubling of other binaries, in particular the division between self/other.

Three Myths of Womanhood: Mother, The Whore and Virgin

Carter satirizes the transformation of the Earth Mother myth into a goddess through the character of Mother and the religion of Woman she creates in her desert city of Beulah. Carter, rather than celebrating this portrait of the Earth Mother as a return to that which makes women sacred—the ability to reproduce—, presents the revival of the Earth Mother as a recall to a false religion, a worshipping of a false deity, and Carter mocks this idealization of motherhood and reproduction as a subscription to false universals and essential identity constructed by patriarchy itself. As she bluntly asserts, “Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods” (The Sadeian Woman 5). Going by the name of “Great Parricide” and “Grand Emasculator,” Mother positions herself as the female demigod to all women as she sets them to the task of destroying men and their values. Eve/lyn characterizes Mother as such: “Mother has made herself into an incarnated deity; she has quite
transformed her flesh, she has undergone a painful metamorphosis of the entire body and become the abstraction of a natural principle” (49) and later, “Mother has made symbolism a concrete fact” (58).

Ironically, in the midst of constructing and positioning herself as the personification of fertility, Mother has made herself into “a sacred monster” and infused this portrait of fertility with the grotesque through its excessive devotion to matriarchal ideals—ideals constructed by men in order to define and control women’s sexuality so as to appropriate it for reproductive purposes. If motherhood is as natural as its proponents and worshippers claim it is, then there would be no need to enhance this “natural” state. As Eve/lyn proclaims, after having set eyes on Mother for the first time, “And she had made herself! Yes, made herself! She was her own mythological artifact; she had reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles, into a transcendental form as an emblem, as an example” (60). In her misguided attempt to elevate the myth of the mother to a religion and thus elevate women above subjugation by men, Mother has simply revealed the ideal of motherhood as a myth, a construction that is not inherently natural. As Carter argues in *The Sadeian Woman*, “If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission” (5).

Therefore, as Eve/lyn matures throughout his/her journey, s/he comes to understand Mother’s transformation into the embodiment of female fertility as an act of self-hatred, rather than a tribute to a symbol of female power because it subscribes to an identity assigned to her rather than signify a “true” self-construction. S/he thinks, “What rage, what desperation could have forced her to mimic in her own body
the refugent form of many-breasted Artemis, another sterile goddess of fertility?"

(77). Near the novel’s conclusion, the power of the myth of Mother has been thoroughly undermined, and as Eve/lyn ventures into the cave/womb in California where Mother how resides, s/he reflects, “I’m not scared as once I would have been, to go worming my way through the warm meat of the insides of the earth for I know, now, that Mother is a figure of speech and has retired to a cave beyond consciousness” (184). Like all symbols, figures of speech, as well as myths, are always unstable, uncertain and often empty of meaning and significance because there is no solid, permanent origin.

Leilah represents the myth of succubus, a female demon purported to have sexual intercourse with men as they sleep, and the insatiable whore, the double of the virgin represented by Tristessa. Eve/lyn recounts, “Sometimes when I was exhausted and she was not, still riven by her carnal curiousity, she would clamber on top of me in the middle of the night [. . .] and thrust my limp cock inside herself [. . .] I would [. . .] remember the myth of the succubus, the devils in female form who come by night to seduce the saints” (27). Carter’s characterization of Leilah comments on the depiction of women and their role in pornography, and as such, “it debunks the myth of the insatiable women by making the social and economic context of sexuality visible” (Simon 115), revealing how sexuality and gender have become commodified in America’s capitalist society. Leilah’s hyper-sexuality is not the result of some natural tendency but, rather, is a construction, an identity that she performs that was constructed by the patriarchal market and that gives her with money in exchange for enacting this fantasy of rampant female sexuality. Leilah’s striptease through the city, luring Evelyn into “the sickness of the ghetto and the slow delirious sickness of femininity” (37), explicitly places female sexuality within a
context that highlights how it is constructed by monetary and social values.

Leilah consciously performs her role of hyper-sexed female, and unlike Mother and Tristessa who subscribe blindly to patriarchal-constructed myths of womanhood and feel that these identities endow them with power, Carter finds the female sex worker to be well aware of her position as perpetual Other. In her awareness, Leilah does not hold any delusions about her body’s function within the market economy, and Carter reveals that the body of the mother and virgin hold the exact same position. Carter remarks that “the girl who sells herself with her eyes open is not a hypocrite and, in a world with a cash-sale ideology, that is a positive, even a heroic virtue” (*The Sadeian Woman* 58). Eve/lyn remarks, when first seeing Leilah in a convenience store, “She must have known I was staring at her, a woman always knows” (19), and her appearance was orchestrated to invite this kind of staring: “the black mesh stockings she wore designated their [her legs’] length and slenderness as specifically erotic, she would not use them to run away with” (19). Aware of Eve/lyn’s gaze, Leilah returns it: “Her white, rolling eyes caught mine and stared at me for an endless second with all manner of mocking invitations in their opaque regard” (20). She also invites this gaze again as she is dressing to leave for her various jobs as an exotic dancer, nude model, and actress. This invitation to the male gaze is carefully orchestrated for a specific effect—to transform herself into a creation of “all the delights of the flesh” (29) and, more graphically, “dressed meat” (31).

Tristessa, as Leilah’s double, embodies woman’s association with sacrificial suffering and identity as lack, a myth Carter sees circulated in popular culture, specifically films. In an interview with John Haffenden, Carter describes her formulation of Tristessa’s character: “I created this person in order to say something
quite specific about the cultural production of femininity [. . .] of femininity as commodity, of Hollywood producing illusions as tangible commodities” (85). The femininity that Carter sees Hollywood packaging and selling is one based on melancholic suffering and masochism, the source of which can be found in the character of Justine in Sade’s *La Nouvelle Justine ou les Malheurs de la Vertu* (1797), and Carter spends much of *The Sadeian Woman* dissecting this connection.

Carter sees Justine’s “self-regarding female masochism” (5) and “visible capacity for suffering” (65) mimicked by such film stars as Marilyn Monroe, making Justine and her performance as helpless victim the “patroness of the screen heroine” (60). Tristessa, as an icon of stage and screen, plays a central role in perpetuating and disseminating the myth of Woman as erotic suffering, playing the lead in film translations of *Wuthering Heights*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and *Emma Bovary*, among others. Significantly, as a central component of her psycho-surgery, Eve/lyn is forced to view countless films, and “old Hollywood provided [him] with a new set of nursery rhymes” (71), and fittingly, Tristessa’s films are a cornerstone of this oeuvre: “Certainly the films that spun out a thread of illusory reality before my dazed eyes showed me all the pain of womanhood. [. . .] you [Tristessa] came to me in seven veils of celluloid and demonstrated, in your incomparable tears, every kitsch excess of the mode of femininity” (71).13 Tristessa literalizes Butler’s comment that “the inner truth of gender is a fabrication [. . .] a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies” (*Gender Trouble* 51), and Carter emphasizes that film is central to the maintenance of this male-authored “fantasy.”14

Ironically, this icon of femininity is imposed on a male body. Significantly, Tristessa is not a drag queen or a transvestite. Rather, she actively sought out sex reassignment surgery but was denied. When Lilith15 tells Eve/lyn why her mother did

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not perform a sex-change operation on Tristessa,\textsuperscript{16} Lilith remarks, "[H]e was too much of a woman, already, for the good of the sex; and, besides, when she [Lilith's mother] subjected him to the first tests, she was struck by what seemed to her the awfully ineradicable quality of his maleness" (173). Therefore, Tristessa is a transsexual whose desire for a "new" body has not been realized and who only has recourse to performance through which to attain an idealized female identity; in this case, Tristessa fashions her body on the myth of woman as asexual, virginal, suffering and submissive. She tells Eve/lyn, ""Passivity. [. . .] Inaction. That time should not act upon me, that I should not die. So I was seduced by the notion of a woman's being, which is negativity. Passivity, the absence of being. To be everything and nothing. To be a pane the sun shines through"" (137).\textsuperscript{17} Tristessa was ""seduced"" by Hollywood's depiction of female identity as lack or deficiency and goes on to embody and replicate this depiction over and over again herself, until she has become fossilized and her, as well as all women's, subjectivity is eliminated by it: ""She had no ontological existence, only an iconographic one"" (129).

Tristessa's subscription to the myth of woman as negativity has been propagated by psychoanalytic thought that figures woman as eternal lack or absence and as a castrated male, which is also satirized by Eve/lyn's literal castration. This myth of woman as lack is due in part to the association of subjectivity with maleness and by extension with that most male of parts: the penis. As Stone states, "Maleness is in the you-know-whats. For that matter, so is the ontology of the subject; and therefore Hoyer [the author of \textit{Man Into Woman}] can demonstrate in the coarsest way that femaleness is lack" (7).\textsuperscript{18} Following, Carter indicates that only a man could perform this ideal of Woman. Eve/lyn realizes

That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself
the shrine of his own desires, had made himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world. (128-29) 19

Like Evelyn’s view of Leilah as only a reflection of his own sadistic desires, so too does Tristessa fashion his/her female identity as a reflection of his own masochistic desires. Carter asserts that, since men are the ones who construct this ideal Woman, then it follows that only they would be the ones capable of fulfilling the demands of such a performance, yet Tristessa’s performance, although imposed upon a male body, does not significantly disrupt the gender binary. Rather, Stone notes that, like all of the narratives of male-to-female transsexuals that she has reviewed, “‘woman’ [is enacted] as male fetish, as replicating a socially enforced role, or as constituted by performative gender” and that such performances “reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification,” with no acknowledgement or tolerance of identities that are in-between (5). 20 Tristessa identifies exclusively as a woman, as the ideal woman, and therefore her character refuses to enact the fluidity and uncertainty that is at the heart of Eve/lyn’s depiction. 21

Just as Mother’s the embodiment of the Earth Mother myth and Leilah’s character encapsulates the myth of woman as succubus, Tristessa’s character presents the myth of woman as vestal virgin and femme fatale as well as psychoanalysis’s ideal of woman as lack, and all three are shown to be fabrications of the male imagination. Accordingly, Carter depicts the destruction of all three characters/myths—Leilah is left sterile after a botched abortion, Mother suffers a nervous breakdown and is left babbling on the California shore, and Tristessa is shot when she tries to continue her femme fatale performance by kissing the young, male
general who captures her/him and Eve/lyn. As Simon notes, "Announcing a transformation, a crack in the mirror, the novel suggests the possibility of a new, uncontrollable body that reaches beyond the Hollywood script of gender" (107). Carter leaves Eve/lyn to form a subjectivity beyond myths of stable and certain gender, as embodying this "new possibility."

Eve/lyn as a Transgender Cyborg: A Postmodern Version of the Hermaphrodite

Eve/lyn’s character, as distinct from Tristessa’s, is decidedly transgendered; although his/her body is successfully transsexual, in that s/he is able to pass undetected as a member of the female sex—in fact, Mother insures that Eve/lyn is the ideal specimen of the sex—his/her subjectivity continues to straddle gender boundaries and does so throughout the text. As previously discussed, the contemporary transgender does not simply juxtapose aspects of male and female but rather, represents a subject-in-process wherein gender is constantly at play and conventional markers of male/female are free-floating. On the other hand, hermaphrodites are characterized by their dual-sexuality, echoing conventional definitions of the androgyne. There are several versions of the hermaphrodite myth, three of the most well-known which can be found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Plato’s *Symposium*, and in numerous stories featuring Tiresias. Ovid recounts the story of Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who became the obsession of Salmacis, a nymph. In a frenzy of passion, Salmacis embraced Hermaphroditus, surrounding him with her whole body, and the gods granted her prayer that they never be separated, thus creating a being composed of both sexes. Plato’s *Symposium* contains Aristophanes’s discourse on love, which details the origins of the sexes and (hetero)sexuality. In this instance, the original and pure form of mankind was the hermaphrodite that was later divided into two sexes by Zeus, yet these two sexes did
nothing but search for their other half in order to recreate their initial wholeness. Like the Christian origin myth of Adam and Eve, Aristophanes's speech on love claims the existence of only two distinct sexes and asserts the supposed inevitability of heterosexuality as the "normal" expression of human sexuality.

Distinct from Hermaphroditus's story and Aristophanes's tale of humankind's original hermaphroditic form, both of which feature a character that simultaneously features characteristics of both sexes, the innumerable narratives that feature Tiresias throughout the Greek literary tradition depict him as transitioning *between* the two sexes. A blind prophet who figures prominently in the Oedipus dramas, Tiresias was reportedly turned into a female after seeing two snakes copulating and striking them with his staff; seven years later, she stumbled upon two snakes copulating in the same spot and again, after hitting them with her staff again, was transformed back into a male. Although Eve/lyn is more closely aligned with Tiresias's version of the hermaphrodite, Tiresias's relationship to the two gender categories can be described as "go-between" whereas Eve/lyn is more accurately described as "in-between," and it is this difference that marks Eve/lyn's departure from the traditional myth of the hermaphrodite and Carter's postmodern re-vision of it.

The idea of alchemy, represented by the character of Baroslav, typifies how Carter presents the relationship between male/female in Eve/lyn's subjectivity because, rather than simply juxtaposing two elements, like the depiction of the hermaphrodite in various myths and images, alchemy creates an entirely new entity through the transformative combination of the original elements. Baroslav is a Czech alchemist and Evelyn's only friend in New York City who tells Evelyn, "Chaos, the earliest state of disorganized creation, blindly impelled towards the creation of a new order of phenomena of hidden meanings. The fructifying chaos of anteriority, the
state before the beginning of the beginning”’ (14). Chaos is the original state, rather than some solid certainty, and gives the lie to the supposedly natural order inherent in the world. Further, and most significantly, “Chaos embraces all opposing forms in a state of undifferentiated dissolution”’(14), and it is this “undifferentiated dissolution” of the categories of male and female contained within Eve/lyn’s character that most succinctly summarizes his/her ambiguously gendered subjectivity.23 The chaos that alchemy, rather than the hermaphrodite, poses to the order of nature and, by extension, to the order of binary gender, most accurately describes the fluidity exhibited by Eve/lyn’s transgendered state. Notably, after arriving in the desert upon leaving New York City, Evelyn stumbles upon a symbol of alchemy, foreshadowing his impending transformation. Evelyn tripped over an object and “saw what it was at once—the Bird of Hermes, the bleeding bird of the iconography of the alchemists” (44). As A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery notes, “The birth of the philosopher’s stone from the union of male and female substances at the chemical wedding is frequently compared to the birth of a bird,” specifically the Bird of Hermes (25). Significantly, this creation of the philosopher’s stone is the ultimate phase in the transformation of matter, and as the novel progresses, the bird comes to represent Eve/lyn and his/her status as the “ultimate phase” in the transformation of the sexual dichotomy. As the novel concludes, Carter presents an image of another feathered creature that represents not only a merging of binaries but also their radical destruction. During his/her journey through the cave at the novel’s conclusion, Eve/lyn comes upon a fossilized imprint of a feather, prompting this musing:

At this time, there was a bird called ‘archaeopteryx’ [. . .] bird and lizard both at once, a being composed of the contradictory elements of air and earth. [. . .] One of those miraculous, seminal, intermediate beings brushed against a
pendant tear of rosin in the odorous and primeval amber forests and left being a feather. A miraculous, seminal, intermediate being whose nature I grasped in the desert. (185)

The identity of this “being” that Eve/lyn came to know in the desert is ambiguous and could be read to represent either him/herself or Tristessa, since s/he literally “grasped” Tristessa in the desert. Yet, Carter’s tone indicates that Eve/lyn is referring to him/herself and celebrating his/her “miraculous” state.

Eve/lyn’s character, as a re-vision of the hermaphrodite myth, represents an alchemical transformation of the gender, showing that the myth of the hermaphrodite, rather than dissolve the gender binary, actually retains it by simply juxtaposing the two elements onto one body without radically re-visioning them. Eve/lyn’s association with the properties of alchemy as well as his/her fantastic technological transformation aligns him/her with the figure of the cyborg, an entity combining human and robotic characteristics. As a cyborg, Eve/lyn has “an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction,” (Haraway, “Manifesto” 38) and fuses the tenets of nature/culture, flesh/performance, male/female, and heterosexual/homosexual, among others, in true cyborg fashion. His/her transformation is forced upon him/her by Mother, who wishes to enact revenge on men by transforming a cruel misogynist into a woman who will repopulate the world with children born from his/her own sperm, but Carter uses Eve/lyn to represent a serious consideration of the possibilities inherent in an embrace of transformative mixture. In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Haraway summarizes the deconstructive power of the cyborg body:

These are the couplings [fusions of animal and machine] which make Man and
Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of ‘Western’ identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind. (34)

Eve/lyn, as a cyborg, personifies the mixture and merging of numerous binaries, and The Passion of New Eve represents his/her struggle to come to terms with a full understanding of these various binaries’ falseness and his/her place in the midst of their destruction. As Haraway asserts, the cyborg can “suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (“Manifesto” 39), and one of the most obvious binaries that Eve/lyn deconstructs is that of male/female.

Because Eve/lyn’s existence revises the relationship between substance and technology, Eve/lyn’s character illustrates how “the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense [and] would not recognize the Garden of Eden” (9). This new “Eve,” rather than engendering sexual difference, undermines it by illustrating the additionally arbitrary division between nature/technology and showing that their division is no division at all. Reflecting on his/her surgically constructed body, Eve/lyn addresses the reader, “For I am not natural, you know—even though, if you cut me, I will bleed” (50), explicitly calling into question what is considered natural and what is not. Yet, Eve/lyn recognizes that it is not his/her surgically constructed sex that renders him/her unnatural but, rather, it is the surgery’s perfect execution and results. Eve/lyn thinks, “[F]or Mother had made me unnatural only in that I was perfect. Venus herself had risen from the surgery” (107). If every individual’s gendered identity is shown to be a construction, then no one’s gender is natural, and the novel reveals over and over again that everyone’s gender identity is constructed,
implying the question: who, then, is natural? Cannot everyone be considered a cyborg then, due to all modes and varieties of technological interference with the human body, from immunization shots to organ transplants, to artificial limbs to respirators? Haraway goes on to extend this figure of the cyborg to everyone: “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (8).

Carter presents her re-vision of the hermaphrodite myth in the climactic sexual union of Eve/lyn and Tristessa in the desert, as this scene explodes the binaries of gender as well as sexuality, depicting the communion of two individuals that defies description. As distinguished from their forced copulation following their “wedding,” this instance of sexual intercourse is entered into willingly, as both discover physical enjoyment in their disruptive bodies, yet this union between Eve/lyn and Tristessa is in no way heterosexual. Rather, this union between Tristessa and Eve/lyn is contextualized as a defeat against loneliness and sterility and characterizes the fleshly touch shared by ambiguously gendered lovers as the only means to escape the inevitable march of patriarchal conception of time and the only way to undermine the dichotomies dividing self and other, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual:

[W]e peopled this immemorial loneliness with all we had been, or might be, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were—every modulation of the selves we now projected upon each other’s flesh, selves—aspects of being, ideas—that seemed, during our embraces, to be the very essence of our selves; the concentrated essence of being, as if, out of these fathomless kisses and our interpenetrating, undifferentiated sex, we had made the great Platonic hermaphrodite together, the whole and perfect being to which he, with an
absurd and touching heroism, had, in his own single self, aspired; we brought into being the being who stops time in the self-created eternity of lovers. (148)

Notably, sexual identity is depicted as doubly piercing in this moment, rather than isolated and contained within an individual body. Eve/lyn claims that their lovemaking created “the great Platonic hermaphrodite” and that Tristessa’s lifelong masquerade of femininity was an attempt to achieve the wholeness symbolized by that mythic creature. Just a few moments prior to this moment, Eve/lyn asserts that “we are Tiresias” (146). However, characterizing this scene as hermaphroditic or referring to them as another version of Tiresias only reinscribes the gender binary, whereas their union does the exact opposite.

Their erotic touching negates the arbitrary division between male and female, self and other as well as explodes the heterosexual/homosexual binary because words do not exist that could label this erotic union between an unwilling transsexual whose subjectivity remains transgendered and a pre-op transsexual who has fashioned him/herself as an icon of femininity, despite the presence of a penis and vagina.25 Gamble notes that their lovemaking “is portrayed as an act which so confounds customary ways of conceptualizing gender that the system founders in confusion” (53).26 Labeling Eve/lyn’s sexual relationship with Tristessa as heterosexual is problematic, to say the least, and calls to mind Butler’s theorization of butch/femme identities: “The idea that butch and femme are in some sense ‘replicas’ or ‘copies’ of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which by which they are enabled” (Gender Trouble 123). Although by all physical appearances, this is a heterosexual union, the reader as well as both Eve/lyn
and Tristessa know that it actually destabilizes heterosexuality and the binary gender schema on which it is based. Further, as Stone states:

The disruptions of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the transsexual body imply produce not an irreducible alterity but a myriad of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions hold what Haraway has called the promises of monsters—physicalities constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation. (13)

This scene of Eve/lyn and Tristessa's intercourse does more than simply deconstruct the categories of male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality; rather, it is reconstructs an endless plethora of bodily and sexual configurations. Eve/lyn's transgendered cyborg body already indicates such a variety of ambiguous identities, but once paired with another body, it realizes the promises of monsters indicated by Haraway and introduces an endless multiplicity and array of physical manifestations.

Significantly, this moment also teaches Eve/lyn that "Flesh is a function of enchantment. It uncreates the world" (148) because it frees his/her body of mythology. After s/he makes love to Tristessa, s/he thinks, "Neither as man nor woman had I understood before the unique consolation of the flesh" (150); ironically, only as an individual between man and woman is s/he capable of understanding how the body is capable of providing comfort. It is in this way that Eve/lyn comes—or cumsto understand exactly how "flesh uncreates the world" and how the body is a "process that resists the inscription of fixed meaning" (Simon 143). Like in Written on the Body, the erotic contact between two people, at least one of whom inhabits the fluid transition between genders as an identity, is capable of exploding phallo- and androcentric values of reproduction and heterosexuality. As s/he reaches orgasm, Eve/lyn realizes that this bodily contact with a lover is part "of those fleshly
impressions that require another language, not speech, a notation far less imprecise than speech, to log them” (149) and that language cannot express this experience of a de-essentialized and embodied pleasure. Eve/lyn struggles, like Winterson’s narrator, to find a way to describe this communion with another person, this distinctly queer permeation between two bodies, between boundaries of self and other, between hetero/homo and male/female. The act of fleshly touching serves as a way to reveal the fluidity of this artificial barrier separating the self from others as well as depicts the body as a constant becoming, and in these instances, the possibility of trans and its engagement with postmodernism is most clearly articulated, and in light of Carter’s deconstruction of the myths of femininity, she echoes Haraway’s sentiment, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (“Manifesto” 39).

“A place where contrarieties are equally true:” The Transgender Subject and Speculative Environments

The Passion of New Eve, like many works of science fiction, speculates on what the future may bring based on troublesome contemporary issues as well as on technology’s effects on society and individuals. In addition, science fiction has been central in questioning myths of gender and looking forward to alternate manifestations of gender and sex beyond the established binary. As Haraway summarizes, “Cyborg monsters in feminist science fiction define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman” (“Manifesto” 37), while noting Joanna Russ, Samuel Delany, James Tiptree, Jr., and Octavia Butler as writers who take advantage of science fiction’s possibilities. Yet, given the extensive use of satire, a more accurate description of The Passion of New Eve, rather than a “straight” work of science fiction, would be to read it as a satirical novel with a fantastic, post-apocalyptic setting. Beginning his
sojourn in the United States in a New York City where female snipers execute men who stop to glance at a poster outside a porn theatre and where rats are large enough to eat a German Shepard in just seconds, Evelyn encounters an underground city modeled after a woman’s uterus, a ghost-town where a one-eyed and one-legged maniac flies across the desert in his helicopter in search of a movie star, and a glass mansion that spins to the sound of a carnival. Oftentimes, such apocalyptic settings reflect problems in the current social and political world and give a preview of what could occur if the inequities and problems that are pointed out continue, functioning as critique rather than revision, which explains the overall didactic tone of Carter’s novel.

Specifically, The Passion of New Eve’s coda establishes the narrative as scrutinizing the myth of American nationhood and “the land of free enterprise,” by quoting John Locke: “In the beginning all the world was America.” Carter establishes her critique of America and its values by contrasting two opposing types of environments: those that have their sense of reality imposed upon them by external factors and those that abide by their own self-affirming logic. Reflecting on the course of his/her American journey and eventual arrival in California, Eve/lyn thinks,

Ever since the interrupted continuum I refer to as myself had left Manhattan [. . .] it had lived in systems which operated within a self-perpetuating reality; a series of enormous solipsisms, a tribute to the existential freedom of the land of free enterprise. But now I felt myself on the edge of a system of reality that might be perpetuated by factors entirely external to itself. (167)

The systems in which Eve/lyn had lived while in the desert are Mother’s underground city of Beulah, Zero’s compound set up in a ghost town, and Tristessa’s spiral glass house. The “self-perpetuating” realities on which Beulah, Zero’s compound, and
Tristessa home are based are the myths of motherhood, masculinity and the heterosexual paradigm, and woman as lack, respectively, and the novel proceeds to reveal each of these myths as false and the logic on which they are founded as faulty, to say the least. At the same time, the realities Eve/lyn encounters in New York City and California are not any more promising than those Eve/lyn encounters in the desert; here, s/he finds him/herself surrounded by rampant and apparently senseless violence and destruction. Carter does not favor one environment over the other; the tone of opening and concluding scenes is more scornful of missed opportunities or possibilities while she outright mocks the three settings featured in the center of the novel.

New York City, in the apocalyptic chaos that Evelyn encounters on his move from London, can be read as a reflection of the cultural chaos Stone sees in manifestations of gender in the late twentieth-century; it is “an alchemical city. It was chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night” (16). Simon asserts, “Anarchy and decay are symptoms of the inner disintegration of the capitalist system that thrives on the suppression of marginalized groups, who now take their revenge” (118). Here, those groups are blacks and women. The narrator reflects that, ironically, because of the ordered, grid and number layout of the city and its adherence to “the dictates of a doctrine of reason,” it was rendered more susceptible to the chaos that this order attempted to negate: “And this city, built to a specification that precluded the notion of the Old Adam, had hence become uniquely vulnerable to that which the streamlined spires conspired to ignore, for the darkness had lain, unacknowledged, within the builders” (16). However, America failed to acknowledge that “Old Adam’s happiness is necessarily dysfunctional” (16). Just before Evelyn leaves the city and a sterilized Leilah, he describes the state of the city: “Manhattan was an
almost medieval city, for the gutters had become open sewers [. . .] There were no lights in the street at night except those of burning buildings. Strikes reduced utilities to nil. The National Guard patrolled the banks; urban guerillas of many denominations added their bullets to the random bullets of the street” (32-33). The tone of the novel in its description of New York City’s deterioration seems to lament missed opportunities to embrace difference, represented by subjugated and marginalized groups; the chaos of the city could portend endless variety and multiplicity, like Eve/lyn’s alchemically transgendered self, if only allowed to do so. As Vallorani describes, Carter’s urban space is “an alchemical space mapping out human nature, both male and female, [. . .] projected towards a possible future, either utopian or dystopian” (367).

Additionally, the novel is book-ended by another apocalyptic environment: California. After leaving one chaotic, lawless land and crossing the continent, Eve/lyn finds him/herself at another chaotic, lawless land being fought over by numerous and various violent factions. As Eve/lyn realizes his/her current predicament, s/he exclaims, “My welcome back to historicity! [. . .] chaos is come again. Who’d welcomed chaos, why—my former neighbor in New York, the Czech alchemist. [. . .] Welcome to anteriority, Eve; now I know we are at the beginning of the beginning” (166). As Mother pronounced, Eve/lyn has apparently returned to the beginning, to the source, of his journey across America as well as his journey towards maturity and self-understanding, yet this source is not the womb Mother believes it to be. Rather, Carter’s text illustrates that there is no such thing as a source, nor a beginning or ending, past or future. There is no “natural” order but rather simply chaos and endless ambiguity.

When Eve/lyn travels to a California beach, s/he journeys, once again, into the
earth to return to the source, as Mother mandated. However, this source is not the
mother or a return to the womb; rather, it is within Eve/lyn him/herself. As Eve/lyn
remarks at the conclusion of her journey into the cave, “I have come home. The
destination of all journeys is their beginning. I have not come home” (186).
Embedded in the conclusion of Eve/lyn’s trek into the cave is the beginning of
another journey, illustrated by Eve/lyn’s setting sail in the book’s concluding scene.
The first sentence of the final chapter reiterates this point: “We start from our
conclusions” (191). Eve/lyn’s experience in the United States is characterized by
endless paradox as Carter reveals the impossibility of imposing order on those entities
that refuse such order, whether the body or humankind, in general, and oftentimes
this appearance of order is achieved via the suppression and subjugation of those
groups deemed marginal and inferior.

Although the three environments that Eve/lyn encounters in the desert order
themselves on an internally conceived logic, they too are inevitably headed towards
destruction and are no more tolerant of those figures who fall outside of the norm
than those places that follow an externally imposed logic. Eve/lyn reflects on what
s/he saw when s/he arrived in the desert: “I reached the desert, the abode of enforced
sterility, the dehydrated sea of infertility, the post-menopausal part of the earth” (40).
Ironically, it is in the desert that Eve is born in the city of Beulah, a city constructed
as a spiral burrowing down into the desert. Echoing William Blake and the repeated
assertion in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Eve/lyn remarks that Beulah “is a
place where contrarieties are equally true” and “where contrarieties exist together”
(48), but this is how Eve/lyn comes to understand Beulah after his/her transformation
and the conclusion of his/her time in the United States—a place where paradox reigns
but that tries to erase these unavoidable contradictions. Mother did not build Beulah
with the intention of showcasing contrarieties alongside one another, just as she did not build Eve to exhibit aspects of both genders simultaneously. Rather, Mother envisioned Beulah as a utopian oasis where the rule of women dominated and where women would sew the seeds of the total domination or elimination of man, but Carter satirizes such a matriarchal utopia and mocks the essentialist portrait of womanhood on which it was founded.

Within Beulah, Mother constructs a room like a womb, and it is in this room where Evelyn begins his transformation; after being kidnapped and taken to Beulah, it dawns on Evelyn that “the warm, red place in which I lay was a simulacrum of the womb” (52). Having not been “born” yet and thus still housed in this womb-like environment, Evelyn begins to feel suffocated, and Carter links this overwhelming suffocation with the myth of nationhood on which America is propped up: “I felt upon me the whole heaviness of that entire continent with its cities and its coinage, its mines, its foundaries, its wars and its mythologies imposing itself in all its immensity, like the night-mare, upon my breast” (52). Yet neither this womb-like room nor the series of caves that Eve/lyn travels through in a failed attempt to return to Mother at the novel’s conclusion signify a rebirth because, as a cyborg, Eve/lyn “require[s] regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender” (38-39). In this way, Eve/lyn undermines the logic and myth on which Mother has constructed her city and its civilization.

Mother constructs the city of Beulah in order to counter what she perceives as the masculine measurement of time and reflects feminist conceptions of time with space in its concentric, underground layers. As part of Evelyn’s indoctrination before his operation, messages are piped through a loudspeaker into his womb-room, one of
the first being about how the linear understanding of time as a trajectory into the future is destructively masculine. The voice over the loudspeaker tells how Oedipus, although he wanted “to live backwards,” fell into complicity with the masculine emphasis on the future and that “Man lives in historicity; his phallic projectory takes him onwards and upwards—but to where? Where but to the barren sea of infertility, the craters of the moon!” The voice concludes, “Journey back, journey backwards to the source!” (53). As part of this return to the source, Mother sets out to reverse the dichotomy of male/female so that the feminine and its powers of reproduction are valued and elevated as the privileged term: “Woman has been the antithesis in the dialectic of creation quite long enough [. . .] I’m about to make a start on the feminization of Father Time” (67). By transforming Evelyn into the ideal Eve and then impregnating her with his own sperm, Mother and her followers believe that they will bring forth a new messiah, one who will reverse or revise the linear measurement of time and its emphasis on forward momentum. As Sophia tells him, his transsexual transformation will be “a triumph over phallocentricity, the generator of a mortality, and how the authentic Messiah would be born of a man” (69). Mother believes that, in creating Eve, she has created a creature who defies mortality because Eve (or any woman) can reproduce without the necessity of sexual intercourse with a man, sperm banks providing the needed sperm. Mother positions women as outside of this linear measurement of time because they can reproduce on their own, whereas men (and, by extension, their conception of how time moves in a relentless forward motion) require the mediation of women in order to perpetuate themselves. As Mother tells Eve/lyn, “When you were a man, you suffered mortality because you could only perpetuate yourself by proxy, through the mediation of a woman and that was often a forced mediation and hence no mediation at all. But now, first of all
beings in the world, you can seed yourself and fruit yourself” (76). Mother positions women as the center of rebirth and renewal, yet as depicted later in the novel, her Beulah is no more fertile than Zero’s compound, Tristessa’s glass castle or the desert in which she has built her utopia.

Mother’s effort seeks to articulate a conception of time apart from the dominant one that emphasizes the future without valuing the past or present; however, it only shifts conceptions of time from one end of the spectrum (male) to the other (female), without articulating a sense of time beyond the binary, thus denying the mixture inherent in Eve/lyn’s trans-formed body. Eve/lyn, as a cyborg, simultaneously subverts the phallocentric conception of linear time as well as the feminist conception of circular time; as Haraway describes, “The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history. Nor does the cyborg mark time on an Oedipal calendar, attempting to heal the terrible cleavages of gender in an oral-symbiotic utopia or post-oedipal apocalypse” (“Manifesto” 8). Again, Eve/lyn undermines Mother’s emphasis on maternal time and her attempt to construct an Eve who would embody its logic. After Eve/lyn has reunited with Leilah/Lilith, Leilah/Lilith explains to Eve/lyn what prompted her mother, who turns out to be the Mother of Beulah, to construct herself as the embodiment of fertility. As Leilah/Lilith states, “History overtook myth [. . .] And rendered it obsolete. Mother tried to take history into her own hands but it was too slippery for her to hold. Time has a way of running away with itself, though she set all the symbols to work; she constructed a perfect archetype” (172-73). As a result of Mother’s failure, she has lost her mind and lives, destitute, on a beach.

Also in the desert, Zero can be read as a version of “Old Adam,” mentioned in relation to the construction of New York City, who anoints himself “king of a rainy country, powerful, yet impotent” (102). Eve/lyn describes Zero as “Masculinity
incarnate.” Zero “adored the desert because he hated humanity” (85), setting up his compound in a Western ghost town and exaggerating the masculine stereotype of seeking out and destroying all enemies. Here, Zero institutes an environment ruled by patriarchal dogmatism wherein he appoints himself master not only over his harem but over womanhood in general. He has somehow acquired seven women who constitute his harem and has brainwashed them into believing that his sperm is what keeps them alive and healthy. He forbids them to speak in English, and they therefore communicate in grunts and gibberish; as Eve/lyn describes, “Yet Zero’s rhetoric transformed this world. The ranch house was Solomon’s temple; the ghost town was the New Jerusalem” (100). He treats his pigs better than he does the women and places their filthiness and animal drives at the centerpiece of the ranch’s presiding logic: “In the ruins of an old chapel, under a sagging roof of corrugated iron, Zero kept his pigs” (95).

Further, his ranch reflects the decay of patriarchy, along with its accompanying manipulations of time, identity, and every other resource available for use in (re)production:

Historicity in America goes more quickly, jigs to a more ragged rhythm than the elegiac measures of the old world and so the ruins of this miners’ town, though it had been built no longer ago than my own great grandmother’s lifetime, looked, in the analytic light of the desert, far older than the rock on which it had been built. (93)

Here, Carter reveals the result of emphasizing futurity without regard to the past or present, showing how the phallocratic conception of time, as well as its maternal measurement embodied by Mother, both inevitably result in barrenness and deterioration.
A similar thought occurs to Eve/lyn as she recounts how s/he and Tristessa escape from Tristessa’s glass house and watch it as it spins itself into destruction. S/he thinks, “The quick time of this continent would subdue the waterlogged wreck of the house with the spiral staircase and turn it, before our child quickened in my belly, into a ruin with the air of pre-history about it” (142). This similarity exists because both environments are complicit in the complementary construction of the myths of masculinity and femininity; as Eve/lyn observes,

While Zero ingeniously tortured you [Tristessa] in your gallery of glass, you must have been in absolute complicity with him. You must have thought that Zero, with his guns and knives and whips and attendant chorus of cringing slaves, was a man worth the gift of that female appearance which was your symbolic autobiography. (129)

Zero and Tristessa rely upon one another for each of their existences, establishing the paired relationship of domination and submission, sadist and masochistic; this dynamic is also expressed in Zero’s relationship to his harem; Eve/lyn remarks, “Their obedience ruled him. They loved Zero for his air of authority but only their submission had created that. By himself he would have been nothing” (99-100). The presence of Eve/lyn’s transsexual body and transgendered subjectivity within each habitation radically undermines these binaries on which gender identity is conventionally constructed, bringing about their inherent destruction and looking forward to a time and place wherein the subject- and object-role are so interchangeable so as to erase the distinction between the two.29

Tristessa’s home is also related to Beulah’s project of creating a woman’s world built upon the myth of the mother goddess because, as a literal reflection of Beulah—Tristessa’s home is a spirally glass tower piercing the sky—it embodies the
myth of woman as absent fragility. Upon first seeing Tristessa’s home, Eve/lyn observes, “The ghost of her moonlit house trembled in the water, tier upon round tapering tier of glass and steel diminishing upwards to a point we could not see. She lived in her own wedding cake, had burrowed deeply into its interior. She lived in her own mausoleum” (112). Just as Mother builds her home to mimic the myth of woman as quintessential Mother, so too does Tristessa, in her subscription to the myth of woman as absence, build her home to mimic a symbol of woman’s presence, and subsequent erasure, within the heterosexual matrix. As Simon describes, “Tristessa’s home . . . epitomizes the economy of sameness that produces femininity as a reflection of male desire” (137). This reflection is literalized in the countless mirrors decorating the house as well as in Tristessa’s continual creation of glass tears, which she makes by dumping molten glass into the house’s swimming pool, that “reflect” Tristessa’s performance of woman as self-annihilating masochist.

Carter never advocates one system over the other; her goal in this novel is not to prescribe a “new world” but, rather, to point out that both systems are faulted. The order and logic of Beulah, Zero’s ranch, and Tristessa’s home are not preferred over the chaos and violence of New York and California. Both types of environments rely on the binary and restrictive logic for their continued existence, and because The Passion of New Eve, through Eve/lyn’s character and Carter’s bitingly satirical tone, illustrates the destruction of both masculinity and femininity incarnate. Accordingly, the cyborg does not belong in either system, and Haraway’s cyborg manifesto formulates the cyborg “to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy” (9). As Eve/lyn’s journey across the country concludes and s/he becomes more fully aware not only of his/her identity and history but also his/her situation, s/he notes, “My return to the world only
confirms my permanent exile” (180). After his/her sojourn in the desert and return to a central point of civilization, Eve/lyn recognizes his/her outsider status: “I am an inconvenient relic of the Cities of the Plain. I’ll petrify here” (180). Although Carter seems to see promise in the chaos of New York City and California, the impetus for this chaos is the drive “to name the Enemy” and eliminate it, prompting Eve/lyn’s escape from both types of environments s/he encounters in the United States. Further, because s/he escapes, Eve/lyn’s capacity actually to “subvert” the destructive drive that Haraway identifies is undermined, and the novel concludes with Eve/lyn’s potentiality to re-vision or re-construct a new society unrealized. Eve/lyn thinks, as s/he drives across the desert after having escaped from the army of boy-soldiers, “I might have been the only human left alive in all the world, Eve and Adam both, on a mission to repopulate this entire, devastated continent” (165). Yet, as Eve/lyn discovers, s/he is not the last person alive in America, and s/he also comes to recognize that America is a place of desolation and dissolution and that s/he has witnessed the inevitable “self destruction of this culture which annihilates difference” (Simon 147), a place that is unable to embrace a child born of two mothers and two fathers and is therefore unable to embrace a hybridism that explodes the sanctity of the myths and binaries on which it was founded.

Transgender Visibility: “Reading” One’s Self as a Posttranssexual

_The Passion of New Eve_ can be read as a preliminary answer to Stone’s questions, posed in her essay “A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” “How, then, can the transsexual speak? If the transsexual were to speak, what would s/he say?” (11), and as such, becomes a unique example of Stone’s call to create a posttranssexual manifesto. While transsexual autobiographies do not appear to be a source for _The Passion of New Eve_, Eve/lyn’s story is very much a fictional, science-fiction-laced
version of a transsexual autobiography; speaking in the first-person—as s/he does for the majority of the novel—Eve/lyn graphically depicts his/her history, owning his/her formerly sexed male body and clearly describing the construction of his/her newly sexed female body. However, Eve/lyn’s ambivalence and confusion about the relationship between the body and identity resulting from his/her surgery is an ironic upending of a central convention in transsexual autobiography: the transsexual subject’s sense of being in the “wrong” body. As Gamble notes, “Carter’s [novel] evokes a subject who in the wake of surgery is left struggling with the very sense of bodily estrangement the transsexual has left behind” (51). Eve/lyn poses the question: “[D]oes a change in the coloration of the rind alter the taste of the fruit?” (68). Although Sophia, Eve/lyn’s caretaker during his/her transsexual surgery and gender training, replies that “A change in the appearance will restructure the essence” (68), Eve/lyn uses the novel to answer this question for him/herself and presents a more ambiguous and uncertain response because, although Eve/lyn recognizes that his/her body refuses to naturalize this “essence” based on his/her body’s appearance, it also does not represent a pure product of technology and culture.

Stone’s method of achieving visibility for trans individuals contrasts with Halberstam’s admiration of those texts that universalize the transgender look as expressed in In a Queer Time and Place. Yet, Stone finds a “destabilizing power [in] being ‘read’” (13) because in order to be read, one must be seen and thus refuses to pass, thereby becoming visible. Therefore, when a transsexual body is seen and read, it is able to “reappropriat[e] difference and reclaim the power of the refigured and reinscribed body” (Stone 13). As an example of a posttranssexual manifesto, The Passion of New Eve presents Eve/lyn as a transsexual figure to be “read,” rather than presenting a sustained universalization of a transgender point of view, although the
first five chapters of the novel do hint at the possibility of universalizing this look.

When Stone urges transsexuals to create their own counter-discourse that requires them “to forego passing” as their newly constructed sex, they must embrace their erased history as the “other” sex, and to identify themselves as posttranssexuals (14). As Stone describes,

For a transsexual, as a transsexual, to generate a true, effective and representational counterdiscourse is to speak from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible. (11)

Eve/lyn’s union with Tristessa is a touchstone moment in his/her physical journey across the desert and his/her psychological journey towards a better understanding of self, allowing him/her to embrace him/herself as eternally ambiguously gendered and enabling Eve/lyn to come to a more postmodern, i.e. fluid and transitory, conception of how the categories of male and female relate to one another:

Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that—the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa’s so long neglected apparatus or my own factory incision and engine-turned breasts, that I do not know. Though I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer to these questions. Still they bewilder me. (150)

Here, the narrator is obviously tentative and bewildered about the character of masculine/feminine, an uncertainty that points to a postmodern relativism. Eve/lyn’s comments on the nature of masculine and feminine mirror Stone’s comments on what can be learned when conceiving of the transsexual body as text: “[W]e may find the
potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourses 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” (12). As a figure inhabiting such a transsexual body and gaining a significant understanding through his/her time with not only Tristessa but also with Zero of how it disorders narratives of gender identity, Eve/lyn literalizes Stone’s call to examine the significant potentialities to be realized by reading the transsexual body as a text, representing a transgender subjectivity typified as a postmodern hybrid, and further renders this text an example of a posttranssexual manifesto.

Additionally, Stone points out transsexuals’ collusion in the silencing of their own voices, allowing radical feminists and the patriarchal-led medical community to speak for them, because they have refused to claim their histories and construct a powerful counter-narrative. For that reason, Stone sees invisibility as erasing the substantial power transsexuals possess to disrupt the gender binary and to rewrite the story of sexual transformation and identity because “the transsexual’s erased history [is] a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender” (11). Eve/lyn’s retrospective narration features his/her reorientation towards his/her past. As Eve/lyn’s transformation progresses, s/he often refers to his/herself in the third-person, as though s/he is neither Evelyn nor Eve. At one point, s/he describes his/her trans sensibility in the third-person:

All of New Eve’s experience came through two channels of sensation, her own fleshly ones and his mental ones. But at length the sense of having been Evelyn began, in spite of himself, to fade, although Eve was a creature without memory; she was an amnesiac, a stranger in the world as she was in her own body—but it wasn’t that she’d forgotten everything, no. Rather, she
had nothing to remember. (78)

This apparent lack of a past is echoed at the beginning of chapter seven, once Eve/lyn has escaped from Beulah. However, this passage is narrated in the present tense and refers to Eve in the third person, thereby further unsettling the narrative voice and calling into question the completion of Eve/lyn’s transformation as well as the apparent blankness of Eve’s memory. Eve/lyn thinks, “I know nothing. I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman’s shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman” (83). These repeated assertions that Eve (or Eve/lyn) has no past are ironic, however, because Eve/lyn has been narrating a past and conveying that past to not only the novel’s readers but also in his/her direct address to Tristessa. Eve/lyn does, in fact, have a past as Evelyn, and his/her consistently fluctuating gender identity retains Evelyn’s history and merges it with Eve’s forever developing self. By claiming this past and “reading” him/herself as a subject-in-process to the reading audience, Eve/lyn actualizes a posttranssexual counter-narrative whose intertextuality literally and pointedly embeds Eve/lyn’s story and body within discourses that have constructed him/her, undermining and revising these same discourses in the process.

Significantly, because Eve/lyn places him/herself more in a position to be “read” literally by the book’s readers, not by other characters in the book like Zero or the army of boy soldiers, Eve/lyn’s power to be read as a posttranssexual resides in his/her narration and relationship to the novel’s reader, illustrating a second significant dynamic of Stone’s call to transsexuals to be “read”: the active move of “reading” oneself aloud. Stone asserts, “[T]o read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself into the discourses by which one has been written—in effect, then, to become a [. . .] posttranssexual” (14).
Eve/lyn does just this within the text of *The Passion of New Eve*; s/he “reads” him/herself aloud through the narration of his/her story and transgender subjectivity. Notably, the reader is able to read Eve/lyn’s body as transsexual and read his/her subjectivity as transgendered only because Eve/lyn narrates his/her self as such. In this way, Eve/lyn’s narration renders his/her body visible to the reader and “reclaim[s] the power of the refigured and reinscribed body,” at least within the dynamic relationship between the reader and text.

The reader is privy to this “reading” of Eve/lyn as transgendered after the revelation of his/her sex reassignment surgery in chapter five. However, prior to that point, the reader assumes that the novel’s narrator is the male Evelyn. After the reader learns of Eve/lyn’s transsexual transformation, the first five chapters of the book, in which Evelyn is supposedly narrating the story, have to be reevaluated to determine the gender of the narrative voice. This revelation of the narrator’s transgendered identity is an example of what Halberstam calls “rewind” in relation to transgender visibility in film. Halberstam describes rewind as such:

> [T]he transgender character is presented at first as ‘properly’ gendered, as passing in other words, [. . .] her exposure as transgender constitutes the film’s climax [. . .] the viewer literally has to rewind the film after the character’s exposure in order to reorganize the narrative logic in terms of the pass. *(Queer Time* 78)

Once the reader becomes aware of the narrator’s transsexual transformation, s/he can see that the narrator drops a plethora of hints about his/her sexual transformation as s/he begins recounting his/her story, such as commenting on the fact that Mother had never instructed him/her in the use of contraception—“the black lady never advised me on those techniques when she fitted me up with a uterus of my own”(9)—and
noting his/her fascination with an image of the hermaphrodite and internally commenting, "Coming events?" (13). After realizing Evelyn’s sexual transformation at the hands of Mother in chapter five, the reader must review the previous chapters in order to determine who, in fact, is narrating the novel: Evelyn, Eve or a more fluid composite of the two. As Halberstam notes, “The exposure of a trans character whom the audience has already accepted as male or female, causes the audience to reorient themselves in relation to the film’s past in order to read the film’s present and prepare themselves for the film’s future” (Queer Time 77-78). In The Passion of New Eve or any other text wherein the narrator is revealed as transgendered after the action commences, the reader must not only reorient him/herself to the temporality of the narrative but also to the novel’s narrative voice.

The reader may read the first five chapters of The Passion of New Eve as the Evelyn portion of Eve/lyn recollecting these events in his life, rather than a reflection on and condemnation of his past behavior from a more mediated perspective. Or, due to the heavily ironic tone of the novel, the reader may read the first chapters as Eve sardonically recalling how her formerly male self mistreated women. However, a more productive reading of the novel’s narrative voice recognizes its ambiguity and interprets it as, in fact, Eve/lyn’s reflection on his/her past behavior and attitudes towards women as a man from a decidedly unstable gendered identity still very much in process, and the constantly shifting verb tenses used throughout the novel maintain the uncertainty of the novel’s narrative voice. For instance, at the conclusion of chapter three, the verb tense is past—“I reached the desert” (40), but on the very next page, chapter four commences and remains in present tense—“I am lost, quite lost in the middle of the desert” (41). Obviously, the end of chapter three is Eve/lyn recounting his/her arrival in the desert as Evelyn; yet, how is chapter four to be read?
Is the narrating voice Evelyn? Yet, this is impossible (or is it?) since Evelyn has been transformed into Eve/lyn. Or, is it Eve or Eve/lyn who is actually narrating the entire novel from another desert environment after having left the United States? Pages later, as Evelyn has been captured and led to Beulah, the narrator remarks, “It will become the place where I was born” (47). This mixture of future and past tense further confuses the identity of the narrative voice but is significant to Eve/lyn’s reading him/herself aloud because it reflects how the transgender figure troubles a narrative’s temporality. Although Eve/lyn’s comments outside of the gender binary and his/her reorientation towards his/her past gendered self make The Passion of New Eve a fictional example of Stone’s idea of a posttranssexual manifesto, the ambiguity of the narrative voice through the book’s first five chapters is the most explicit expression and example of a trans subjectivity in the novel because this ambiguity is impossible to resolve and embeds the reader in a transgender way of looking without him/her being aware of it.  

The reader of Carter’s novel, like the reader of Winterson’s Written on the Body, struggles to determine if the narrating subject is male or female, yet the text refuses to resolve this conundrum and, rather, presents a narrative voice characterized by multiplicity and gender indeterminacy. This ambiguous look is illustrated as the narrator recounts Evelyn’s observation of Leilah’s nightly ritual. As Eve/lyn narrates, “[A]s she watched me [Evelyn] watching the assemblage of all the paraphernalia that only emphasized the black plush flanks and crimson slit beneath it, so she, too, seemed to abandon her self in the mirror” (30). In this instance, the reader’s gaze is fractured between Evelyn’s, Eve/lyn’s and Leilah’s, not the Leilah standing in front of the mirror but, rather, the Leilah looking back at the reader from the glass. In addition, the reader is looking at Evelyn looking at Leilah but also
Evelyn looking at himself, as he too is reflected in Leilah’s mirror. This gaze is further layered because this scene is narrated retrospectively by Eve/lyn. The reader is looking at Evelyn from Eve/lyn’s point of view. Within this myriad of gazes, neither the male nor the female gaze takes precedence; rather, a gaze that mixes the two without being one or the other seems to dictate the perspective of the reader because Eve/lyn’s narration allows for a fluid orientation to both the male and female look. Thus, this scene depicts a transgender gaze. In this moment, Eve/lyn recognizes not only how s/he looked at woman as a man but also recognizes how Leilah manipulates the male-authored look and has access to her own gaze; only a transgender subjectivity could have access to both gazes.

Ironically, although narrated by a transgender protagonist who readily displays fluidity and ambiguity, the transgender point of view is not fully embedded within or sustained throughout the course of the narrative and is therefore never universalized. The transgender point of view can be interpreted as embedded in the first five chapters; however, once the reader becomes aware of Evelyn’s sex reassignment surgery, this point of view is made explicit and held up to be examined. Therefore, the pointed examination of trans subjectivity prevents the actualization of a plethora of moments in which the reader looks with the narrator, and most of the novel is spent by the reader looking at Eve/lyn rather than with him/her. Subsequently, Carter’s novel, unlike Winterson’s, does not hold up transgender subjectivity as a sustainable identity, but her deconstruction of gendered myths in The Passion of New Eve and her assertion that myths of masculinity and femininity are “extraordinary lies designed to make us unfree” (“Notes from the Front Line” 71), previewing what Winterson more fully and queerly accomplishes in Written on the Body. The Passion of New Eve is more didactic than visionary, despite being set in a
futuristic America, and Carter’s pervasive satirical tone requires the reader to be somewhat distanced from the world and characters presented to him/her. Winterson’s *Written on the Body* is more farsighted in its vision of fluid and endlessly ambiguous identities. Rather, Carter’s primary purpose is to use Eve/lyn, along with the characters of Mother, Leilah, Tristessa and Zero, to give the lie to masculine and feminine myths, without necessarily prescribing a more freeing alternative to them, and the novel’s aim is to critique and deconstruct the apparent naturalness and essential quality of binary gender.

Yet, there are critical moments when the possibilities and potentialities of trans are revealed, most notably through Eve/lyn. Reflecting in a later interview about the power of the cyborg to enact change, Haraway notes that, “as an oppositional figure the cyborg […] is a critique in the deep sense that things might be otherwise” (“Cyborgs” 326), and it is in this sense that Carter positions Eve/lyn because his/her character indicates that “things might be otherwise,” that things do not have to align with the myriad of binaries that structure everyday lives and existences. However, the conclusion of the novel in which the reader witnesses Eve/lyn setting sail is ambiguous and uncertain, echoing the ambiguity of *Orlando*’s closing image and foreshadowing the fantastic ending of *Written on the Body*. Eve/lyn is unable to prescribe what this “otherwise” might be.
Endnotes

1 This chapter will use Eve/lyn to indicate this character’s transitory identity and ambiguous gender and refers to the novel’s narrator as Eve/lyn because the novel is a recollection of past events in Eve/lyn’s life. Evelyn is used to indicate those moments and times when Eve/lyn was sexed male. Eve is similarly used to indicate Eve/lyn’s when s/he was sexed female.

2 Hermaphroditic characters also feature in Carter’s novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* as well as in the short stories “Reflections” and “Overture and Incidental Music.”

3 Similarly, just moments before the commencement of his physical transformation, Eve/lyn—having been dressed like the women in Beulah—compares his appearance to that of his female caretaker: “I was slender and delicately made; now I was dressed like this girl, I looked like this girl’s sister, except that I was far prettier than she” (55).

4 Eve/lyn insinuates at the novel’s conclusion that s/he is pregnant with Tristessa’s child.

5 In the interview titled “Cyborgs, Coyotes, and Dogs: A Kinship of Feminist Figurations,” Haraway clarifies her idea that the cyborg is figured as female; however, Haraway’s understanding of what constitutes a female identity does not subscribe to either end of the nature/culture binary and is far more complex than popular notions of femaleness. In addition, her description of the cyborg as female in no way disqualifies the application of the term “cyborg” to the transsexual body. See page 321 of this interview for further details.

6 Years later, Halberstam will make a similar argument about how postmodern
conceptions of time and space converge on the transgender body in *In a Queer Time and Place*.

7 This remark is echoed at the beginning of *Written on the Body* when that book's narrator comments that “A precise emotion seeks a precise expression” (10).

8 As described in *The Passion of New Eve*

Her head [...] was as big and as black as Marx’ head in Highgate Cemetery [...], and she wore a false beard of crisp, black curls like the false beard Queen Hatshepsut of the Two Kingdoms had worn. She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; she was breasted like a sow—she possessed two tiers of nipples [...]. And how gigantic her limbs were! Her ponderous feet were heavy enough to serve as illustrations of gravity, her hands, the shape of fig leaves, lay at rest on the bolsters of her knees. Her skin, wrinkled like the skin of a black olive, rucked like a Greek peasant’s goatskin bottle, looked as rich as though it might contain within itself the source of a marvelous, dark, revivifying river. (59)

This portrait is infused with irony and is painted so as to highlight its very constructedness through its excessive “naturalness.” It also figures Mother as related to another myth of womanhood: the “monstrous castratrix” (126), as described by Simon.

9 At the opposite end of the gender binary is a figure of excess that satirizes the notion of a natural masculinity: Zero. Despite his outrageous treatment and control over his harem, Zero’s body reveals weaknesses in his excessive masculine posturing. He only has one eye and one leg and is embarrassed by his lost appendage; while the girls are giving him a bath, he requires them to look at a photo of Tristessa while he cleans himself. Zero, displaying a hyper-masculine concern for
his virility, lays the blame for his inability to impregnate the members of his harem on Tristessa and believes that she cursed him as he watched one of her films. He informs Eve/lyn on his/her arrival to his compound, "She eats souls. She’s magicked the genius out of my jissom, that evil bitch! And it won’t come back until I stick my merciless finger into this ultimate dyke” (91).

In this way, Leilah can also be said to represent Eve, the archetypal seductress.

Eve/lyn describes,

The finicking care she used to give the creation of this edifice! Applying the rouge to her nether lips and the purple or peony or scarlet grease to her mouth and nipples; powders and unguents all the colours of the rainbow went on to the skin in the sockets of her eyes; with the manual dexterity of an assembler of precision instruments, she glued on the fringe of false eyelashes . . . Then she sprayed herself with dark perfumes that enhanced rather than concealed the lingering odour of sexuality that was her own perfume. (29)

Because Tristessa fashions herself as an icon of femininity, this project will refer to her using feminine pronouns to distinguish her from Eve/lyn and his/her transgenderism.

Mother shows three sequences of videotapes to Eve/lyn as part of his/her conditioning, each presenting different components of idealized motherhood intended to exalt mothering, implant the maternal instinct, and align the feminine with the worship of nature. The first videotape contains images of "every single Virgin and Child that had ever been painted in the entire history of Western European art," complete with a soundtrack of "the gurgling of babies and the murmuring of contented mothers” (72). The second features numerous animals frolicking with and
caring for their young. Finally, the third tape, more abstract than the previous two, depicts images from nature that have conventionally aligned with women’s sexuality; included among them were “sea-anemones opening and closing” and “roses, opening to admit a bea” (72). Mother simply perpetuates the patriarchal violence she professes to want to eradicate; she violently rapes Evelyn, forcefully shapes his body, and brainwashes him with various representations of motherhood.

14 In *Nothing Sacred*, Carter describes film as “an imaginary brothel” selling myths of femininity (182). Although dressed up a bit more, Tristessa’s occupation as a film star invites the same male erotic gaze as Leilah’s job as an exotic dancer, and both invite this gaze in order to constitute themselves as subjects. As Simon details, “Hollywood produces the virtuous, asexual woman who prostitutes herself in a symbolic way when she turns herself into a commodity on the screen” (117). This relationship between the two characters is explicitly drawn as Leilah stops in front of a theatre playing a revival of Tristessa’s appearance in *Emma Bovary* and “against the face of Tristessa, a face as tall as she was, she halted, as if suddenly purposeful” (23).

15 Lilith is revealed to be a re-named Leilah, who has traveled to California to take part in that state’s revolutionary war.

16 Lilith’s mother used to be a plastic surgeon before becoming Mother and the ruler of Beulah.

17 Tristessa graphically embodies this perpetual annihilation not only through her performance and abhorrence of her genitals but also through her relentless construction of glass tears and enshrinement of Hollywood’s dead in her own mausoleum. Tristessa creates this state literally in “The Hall of the Immortals” in which she keeps wax figures of deceased movie stars laid out in coffins in her house. As Eve/lyn describes, “[I]t was his [Tristessa’s] flesh itself that seemed made of light,
flesh so insubstantial only the phenomenon of persistence of vision could account for this presence here. The habit of being a visual fallacy was too strong for him to break” (147).

18 How Stone characterizes the tone of Jan Morris’ transsexual autobiography *Conundrum* as “the male must be annihilated or at least denied, but the female is that which exists to be continually annihilated” also readily applies to Tristessa (6).

19 In Carter’s discussion of Rita Hayworth’s title character in the movie *Gilda,* she remarks, “Only a man could dream up a woman like that, and as far as Tristessa is concerned, only a man could be that perfect woman” (Watts 165). For another interesting male figure who comes to embody a female identity of his own creation see Heinrich von Mannheim in Carter’s short story “The Merchant of Shadows.” In this story, a film student comes to a glass mansion in order to interview a former Hollywood star who is the widow of Mannheim. In the interview, the star is accompanied by her masculine-looking sister. Only after the student completes his interview does he realize that the widow was actually Mannheim in drag and that the sister was the star in drag. As the narrator remarks, “[H]aving made her, he [Mannheim] then became her, became a better she than she herself had ever been” (emphasis in original, 375).

20 Accordingly, as Gamble argues, “The Passion of New Eve can be read as a satire upon transsexuality [. . .] that transsexualism perpetuates a male conception of what femininity is” (52).

21 Although this project focuses on Tristessa’s relationship to and enactment of the myth of Woman, her characterization is rather complex and full of paradox, deserving of more consideration than that offered by this study. As Simon summarizes, “On the one hand s/he transgresses gender boundaries in a subversive
way. Her travesty enacts a parodistic repetition of gender stereotypes in Butler’s sense. On the other hand, Tristessa’s attempt to turn himself into his object of desire is a potent image of male auto-eroticism” (129). Further, Tristessa’s cross-dressing can just as easily be read as not parodic because she succeeds in not only passing as female but figuring herself as the ideal woman. As Butler notes in *Bodies That Matter*, “[D]rag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (125). This project sees Tristessa as not subversive and reads her instead as another version, like Mother and Leilah, of female myths, directly illustrating that men construct such myths of womanhood.

22 Carter forecasts Tristessa’s death in *The Sadeian Woman*: “To be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case—that is, to be killed” (emphasis in original, 76-77).

23 Baroslav possesses a print featuring a hermaphrodite that fascinates Evelyn: “There was a seventeenth-century print, tinted by hand, of a hermaphrodite carrying a golden egg that exercised a curious fascination upon me, the dual form with its breasts and its cock, its calm, comprehensive face” (13). Evelyn’s fascination with the hermaphrodite print could reflect Eve/lyn’s desire for Tristessa or foreshadow his feelings about his impending sex reassignment surgery.

24 Carter does not mock this “self-created eternity of lovers,” as she does the “self-created” worlds of Zero, Mother and Tristessa.

25 Eve/lyn understands that their similarly troubled relationship to their own sense of self and the damage done to it by the interference of myths in some way destines them to their coupling: “You and I, who inhabited false shapes, who appeared to one another doubly masked, like an ultimate mystification, were
unknown even to ourselves. Circumstances had forced us both out of the selves into which we had been born and now we were no longer human—the false universals of myth transformed us” (136).

26 This acceptance of his/her ambiguous gender through sexual communion with Tristessa counters a conventional element of transsexual autobiography: the transsexual’s validation of his/her “new” sex via a successful sexual encounter with his/her newly constructed genitals. Stone notes, “Full membership in the assigned gender was conferred by orgasm, real or faked, accomplished through heterosexual union” (9).

27 Following this observation about erotic time, Eve/lyn narrates, “Eat me. Consume me, annihilate me” (148); these commands find their echo throughout the text of Written on the Body and that novel’s narrator’s wishes to be consumed by his/her lover Louise.

28 A similar description of the urban landscape occurs in Nights at the Circus—“a city built of hybris, imagination and desire, as we are ourselves, as we ought to be” (12).

29 Carter explicitly outlines this reciprocal notion of desire in The Sadeian Woman: “Such a partner acts on us as we act on it; both partners are changed by the exchange and, if submission is mutual, then aggression is mutual” (146).

30 Tristessa never desires herself to be read as transsexual or transgendered by the novel’s readers, unlike Eve/lyn, and never willingly reads herself aloud as such. Therefore, Tristessa fails to function as a posttranssexual.

31 Some have interpreted the ambiguity of the narrative voice as characteristic of a split consciousness conventionally expressed in actual transsexual autobiographies. Prosser describes this “split consciousness” as “the split between the
‘I’ of the *bios* and the ‘I’ of the *graph*, the past self written and the present self writing” (102). Yet, Eve/lyn’s narrative consciousness actually seems to be trying to merge the past and present selves together rather than erase or distance him/herself from his/her past male self.

*32* Contributing to the overall ambiguity of the narrative voice, *The Passion of New Eve* features numerous narratees who are not always clearly distinguished. The novel begins with a direct address to Tristessa, as the narrator reflects on his/her last night in London before moving to the United States: “The last night I spent in London, I took some girl or other to the movies and, through her mediation, I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa” (5). Just two paragraphs later, the identity of the narratee is confused, as the reader is not certain if the narrator is still addressing Tristessa or directing his/her question to the reader. Reflecting on Tristessa’s beauty, the narrator comments, “But oh, how beautiful she had been and was, Tristessa de St Ange, billed (do you remember?) as ‘The most beautiful woman in the world’” (5). Is the narrator asking Tristessa if she remembers being billed as such or is the narrator asking the reader if s/he can recall Tristessa’s fame? The narratee refers to the reader, to Tristessa, and even to Eve/lyn him/herself at various times throughout the narrative. In addition, Eve/lyn refers to him/herself in the third-person as well as the second-person. This constant shift in narrative voice and narratee unsettles the reader’s relationship to the text and narrator, alternately distancing the reader and bringing him/her into Eve/lyn’s world.

*33* Gamble observes, “Such an inconclusive conclusion is indicative, it could be argued, of the difficulties involved in challenging dominant ideologies of gender, which shape our patterns of thought at the deepest level” (53). Reading this scene in a more positive light, Simon states, “The blank space of the sea epitomizes the silence
that precedes the emergence of another language reading beyond the narrow confines of old gender identities" (148).
When Jeannette Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body* appeared in 1992, it caused an immediate stir. Winterson had created an unnamed and apparently ungendered first-person narrator who sustained his/her story of lost love for almost two-hundred pages without definitively revealing his/her gendered identity. Critics and reviewers alike became detectives as they sifted through the text, looking for any and every clue to the narrator’s “real” gender and plucking those clues from the text to support their own presumption of the narrator’s “true” identity. This guessing game became the main appeal of the book, and article after article and review after review were written in the service of disclosing this crucial piece of the narrative puzzle, with most critics identifying the narrator as a lesbian, in part not only because of their interpretation of the “clues” uncovered in the book but also because of Winterson’s own self-acknowledged and well-documented identity as a lesbian\(^1\); in fact, *Written on the Body* actually won the 1994 *Lambda Book Report* Prize for best lesbian novel of the year.\(^2\) Aligning herself with females, the narrator identifies with Alice in Wonderland—“I shall call myself Alice” (10)—and Lauren Bacall—“I stared at it [the phone] the way Lauren Bacall does in those films” (41). Further, when Jacqueline, an ex-girlfriend, trashes the narrator’s apartment and steals the toilet seat, the narrator, rather than using the toilet as a man is able to do, finds a coffee pot in which to urinate (70). Also, the narrator is conscientious of Louise’s menstrual cycle as she places a towel under Louise when she’s lying on the carpet (13). More revealingly, the narrator sympathizes and identifies with women in more
profound ways than she ever does with men, such as when describing Elgin's mother Sarah—"[she] felt the curse [of Eve] and lost herself a little more" (35)—and when sitting in the public health clinic—"Women with eyes full of pain and fear" as opposed to "Shifty Jack-the-lads, fat business in suits to hide the bulge" (46).³

However, despite the majority of articles that label the narrator a lesbian, this assertion is troubled by a few critics who have identified him as male and the relationship at the heart of the novel as heterosexual, citing the speaker’s identification with male figures such as “playing the Lothario” (20) and “an unhappy Socrates” (13). In his review of the book, Walter Kendrick claims that, because the narrator “broadcasts his current affairs without hesitation, even to near-strangers [. . .] it’s difficult to imagine that such a love is not heterosexual” (131). At one point, the narrator recounts a dream in which an ex-girlfriend worked in paper-mache and hidden a paper-mache snake in the mailbox and the narrator was afraid to go near it for fear of his genitals (41). More than likely, a female would not be concerned about her genitals being eaten by a snake, fake or not, coming out of a mailbox and this dream calls on the stereotype that characterizes men as inordinately concerned with the well-being of their genitals. In addition, the narrator adopts a familiar masculine stance when referring to his sports car: “I’ve always had a sports car, but you can’t rev your way out of life. That home girl gonna get you in the end” (21).⁴ The narrator also displays a key male stereotype: fascination with breasts. Explaining why he stayed with a difficult girlfriend, he remarks, “I had idolized them [her breasts] simply and unequivocally” (24). Further, he draws no attention from the men lined up at urinals when he enters a male bathroom (22-23).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, others have read Winterson’s attempt in Written on the Body to construct a character that is not definitively gendered as a nod

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to a utopian future free of gender, a future where gender as a restrictive binary identity category does not exist and where individuals are free to adopt and enact whatever gender identity suits them without being ostracized as abnormal and without fear of punishment. At the beginning of her argument, Ute Kauer reads the narrator as “attempt[ing] to erase all gender specifics by denying us the information about his or her gender, by wearing the mask of a gender-free persona” (41).5 Like Kauer, Brian Finney sees Winterson’s narrator as a “device [that] allows Winterson to escape from the binary determinations of a heterosexual representation of human behavior, to examine sexuality in an ungendered fictional universe” (4). Although Finney is accurate in describing how the indeterminately gendered narrator negates heterosexuality, as well as homosexuality, as the only descriptors of human sexual behavior, the narrator is not ungendered nor is the universe of the novel wholly fictional, being set in modern-day London. Andrew Gibson asserts that Winterson engages in a “utopian writing of gender” (193) and that, in particular, “Written on the Body is deconstructive rather than reconstructive, and as such, it is utopian” (emphasis in original, 194).6 Written on the Body is without doubt deconstructive, but this project argues that it is also reconstructive, or perhaps more precisely, re­visionary, as it not only deconstructs conventional notions of gender, sexuality, and language, among other overarching categories that delimit reality, but also re­visions how these categories might (or should) be constituted outside of binary strictures to more adequately account for lived experience and the postmodern condition. Further, although the narrator’s gender identity is consistently ambiguous throughout the novel, s/he is not, in fact, ungendered. When asked about the narrator’s identity in an interview, Winterson responded, “[T]he gender of the character is both, throughout the book, and changes; sometimes it’s female, sometimes it’s male” (Stewart 74).
Just as the narrator cannot be unequivocally aligned with one gender in exclusion of the other, the narrator does not escape both genders simply by occupying each end of the spectrum. Instead of being ungendered, the narrator is un-stably gendered.7

However, as with most binaries, bouncing between seeing Written on the Body's narrator as gendered either male or female or, conversely, as figured toward a gender-free future ignores the complexity of Winterson's novel and the possibility of the narrator existing between these two dominant interpretations.8 For all of the articles that have been written about the narrator's identity, for all of the words that have been passed in support of one gender over the other or in support of no gender at all, not a single critic has conducted a prolonged reading of the narrator as transgendered when this reading seems to be the most applicable and appropriate.9 After all, the narrator exhibits physical and behavioral characteristics of both male and female genders, as evidenced by the plethora of evidence that has been used to support either argument, yet does not definitively align him/herself with either end of the gender binary. Further, simply reading the narrator as androgynous maintains the solidity of the binary and the normative prescriptions of behavior, sexual activity, and physical appearance that sustain it, all of which Winterson's novel—like Woolf's Orlando and Carter's The Passion of New Eve—actively critiques and revises.10

The narrator of Written on the Body, like Orlando and Eve/lyn, assumes and subsequently disposes of various masks of gendered behavior or attitudes to convey the idea that masculine and feminine are anti-essentialist categories, proving the refrain “It’s the clichés that cause the trouble” (10). Following in the footsteps of Woolf and Carter, Winterson forces her readers to conceive of gender beyond the categories of male/female and also implicating the social, political and cultural use of language to construct and disseminate conventional gender identities.11 Fittingly,
Winterson explicitly positions her work in relation to Woolf's, citing *Orlando* and *The Waves* in her essays “A Gift of Wings” and “A Veil of Words” respectively, and remarking, “When I read Virginia Woolf she is to my spirit, waterfall and wine” (65). Specifically, Winterson is inspired by Woolf’s careful and meditative use of language that resulted in the transformation of her fiction into poetic works of art, and the results of this inspiration are evident in any reading of Winterson’s fiction. Yet, Lyn Pykett asserts that, by focusing exclusively on Woolf, Winterson ignores the significance of the literary history that took place between her time and Woolf’s, in particular the work of Angela Carter:

[I]t is in the later work of Angela Carter (especially *Nights at the Circus*, 1984) that we see one of the most energetic responses to and engagement with the challenge of Woolf. Surely it is Carter’s new way with words, her tightrope-walking risk-taking, her boldness, her energetic ransacking and remaking of all manner of literary traditions, her demythologizing and remythologizing, that provide the models for many of the brilliant devices [. . .] which have been such important elements in Winterson’s success. (59-60)

In particular, Carter’s focus on fairy tales and history informs Winterson’s work, as evidenced in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*. Accordingly, Winterson’s particular brand of postmodernism is grounded in modernism. As Finney notes, “One might call Winterson a neomodernist rather than a postmodernist” (10), and Winterson herself notes that, in modernism, “what returns is play, pose and experiment” (*Art Objects* 30), three predominate features of her own writing. Yet, perhaps Winterson’s most significant alignment with modernism, besides her proclivity to feature alienation and revolution in her writing, comes from her belief that “[a]rt is conscious and its effect on its audience is to stimulate consciousness”
(Art Objects 26), a sentiment shared and subversively expressed by all three writers.

Nevertheless, Winterson troubles the gender binary through explicitly postmodern elements, making Written on the Body's presentation of gender, identity, and language more re-visionary than the other two. Both Woolf and particularly Carter emphasize critique over re-vision and present oppositional evaluations of gender categories, while Winterson extends this critique and re-visions gender's relationship to subjectivity and language. Therefore, Written on the Body more comprehensively articulates and universalizes a trans point of view and its ceaseless transitioning than either Orlando or The Passion of New Eve, although Winterson's sensibility is more closely aligned to Woolf's. Further, Winterson's use of transgender is more abstract and diffuse than Woolf's and Carter's, as she most explicitly presents a refusal to align with either end of the binary, and actively engages in what Butler terms "the more insidious and effective strategy" of enacting "a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest 'sex,' but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of 'identity' in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic" (Gender Trouble 128). Because the narrator of Written on the Body problematizes the link between sex and identity, s/he forces the creation of new rubrics delimiting what constitutes being human that reflect not only fluid manifestations of gender but the pervasive and infinite fluidity of subjectivity itself.

Consequently, Written on the Body's narrator not only fulfills the conventional definition of transgender, one who displays characteristics of both genders without aligning with one or the other, but s/he also falls into more recent conceptions of transgender that engage with postmodernism. Keeping in mind
Prosser's definition of transgender—"It is this difference of ambivalence, a wavering around transition—or rather a transformation of transition into a new identity—that characterizes contemporary transgender" (169)—Winterson's narrator readily lends him/herself to a transgendered reading because his/her entire identity, not just gender, is in a ceaseless state of transition and therefore embodies the idea of postmodernism's emphasis on subjectivity's inevitable de-centeredness and continual fluidity. This definition also echoes Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston's definition of posthuman, which also explains the narrator's relationship to the gender categories and stereotypes s/he "borrows" from:

Unlike the human subject-to-be (Lacan's 'l'hommelette'), who sees his own mirror image and fixed gender identity discrete and sovereign before him in a way that will forever exceed him, the posthuman becoming-subject vibrates across and among an assemblage of semi-autonomous collectivities it knows it can never either be coextensive with nor altogether separate from. (14)

In Winterson's novels, transgender identities are postmodernly posthuman, in that they embody subjectivity's inevitable fluidity and transience and also re-vision normative definitions of what it means to be human, and thus are an extension of Carter's engagement with Haraway's vision of the cyborg. Louise, the narrator's lover, refers to the narrator's appearance a smattering of times—once to say "'You were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen'" and, just moments later, "'You are a pool of clear water where the light plays'" (84-85). Both declarations characterize the narrator's physical existence as a provisional state—the narrator is an unspecified and vague "creature" first and then presented as a puddle that shifts appearance and texture with the sunlight. Most notably, the narrator refers to him/herself as "unreconstructed" (97). The narrator's process of reconstruction (or
self-construction) is never complete or finished, and Winterson’s narrator therefore exhibits a decidedly postmodern and posthuman trans subjectivity, in the sense of being transgender but also transitional, as s/he fluctuates within the borders of the gender binary in an effort to exist beyond them or, more precisely, in spite of them.

If this is the case—that Winterson’s presentation of the narrator in Written on the Body lends itself to a transgender reading—why then has such a conception of the narrator’s identity not been seriously explored? Further, what does this level of fascination with an endlessly ambiguously gendered body reveal about readers’ relationship to and comfort with such a presumably “unknowable” narrator? Rubinson, although incorrectly describing the narrator as androgynous, notes that even “an androgynous reading is apparently beyond the bounds of the socially gendered reader” and that “the expression of gender-bias is often linked to a heterosexually normative view of the world” (2). This failure or refusal—whichever it may be—to acknowledge transgender as a possible descriptor of Written on the Body’s narrator reveals how much Western society views gender’s significance to the construction of a recognizably human identity. It also reveals an urgent need to stabilize and compartmentalize gendered characteristics, both physical and behavioral, within a stable binary schema and to place that label firmly and unequivocally upon every-body, regardless of whether that body actually adheres to each and every trait sanctioned by that category.12

Further, such an omission of the possibility that the narrator may be transgendered reveals a significant blind spot in the cultural and political construction of “who counts as human” (Butler, Undoing Gender 28). A central reason why transgender has not been entertained as an option for the narrator’s identity is because it so often fails to register as a viable and acknowledged identity, and although the
majority of critics have judged Winterson’s narrator to be a clever trick and dismiss it as a poorly veiled portrait of a butch lesbian, interpreting the narrator as transgender forces readers to see that a representation of “gender ambiguity [in a text] is not a trap or a device but part of the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment” (Halberstam, Queer Time 96). Therefore, reading the narrator as postmodernly transgendered is perhaps the most productive approach to interpreting Written on the Body’s narrator not only because the narrator “fits” so well within this necessarily boundless category but because reading his/her body as transgendered reveals how Winterson’s novel engages with postmodern conceptions of not only subjectivity, but also time and space, placing gender as a central element in a consideration of these categories.

Of course, Winterson weds this polyvalent deconstruction of gender, subjectivity, time, and space, which she grounds in the transgender body, with a parallel deconstruction of how language and discourse participate in their construction, calling upon the idea of grafting to convey this merger. In an earlier novel Sexing the Cherry, grafting becomes a central metaphor for the advantages and variety to be found in the fusion of objects: the process “whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind, without seed or parent” (84). Interestingly, grafting is also a central trope in Derrida’s theory of textual inscription: “To write means to graft. It’s the same word. The saying of the thing is restored to its being-grafted. The graft is not something that happens to the properness of the thing. There is no more any thing than there is any original text” (Dissemination 389). Winterson uses grafting to explore the potentialities of undermining the rigidity of borders and fusing disparate objects, one onto the other, to the benefit of both.13
Further, by explicitly pointing out and describing the process of grafting, Winterson highlights where instances of such synthesis have already occurred, such as Jordan’s cross-dressing and feminine mannerisms in *Sexing the Cherry* and the obvious boundary-crossing embodied by *Written on the Body*’s narrator. Similarly, Derrida’s theory of grafting, rather than drain texts of their meaning, actually multiplies their meanings and loosens texts from the fantasy of stability, opening them up to the play of intertextuality and opening up signs to the infinite play of signification. Derrida asserts that “within the graft [. . .] the two texts are transformed, deform each other, contaminate each other’s content, tend at times to reject each other, or pass elliptically into the other and become regenerated in the repetition, along the edges of an overcast seam” (*Dissemination* 389-90). Both Winterson’s reading of gender and Derrida’s reading of textual production reverse and displace conventional conceptual orders, such as the boundaries dividing male/female, inside/outside, author/reader and self/other, and it is therefore perhaps no coincidence that Winterson uses the trope of grafting in *Sexing the Cherry* and extends it in *Written on the Body* because all of her texts foreground the “seams” of their inherent intertextuality and embrace the play offered by Derrida’s deconstruction of writing and language.

Winterson contextualizes this disruption of gender and language within an extended rumination on the nature of love, presenting a portrait of love’s complicated and conflicted relationship to the postmodern era. Making no apologies for her preoccupation with love, Winterson strongly asserts its power and believes in its ability to undermine divisions and barriers:

I mean, for me a love story is a love story. I don’t care what the genders are if it’s powerful enough. And I don’t think that love should be a gender-bound operation. It’s probably one of the few things in life that rises above all those
kinds of oppositions—black and white, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual. When people fall in love they experience the same kind of tremors, fears, a rush of blood to the head, [. . .] And fiction recognizes this. (Marvel 165)

Her latest novel *Lighthousekeeping* illustrates this continued emphasis on love’s overwhelming influence: “The world is nothing. Love formed it. The world vanishes without trace. What is left is love” (182). However, because the discourse of love is an example of a “master narrative” or metanarrative, Winterson’s insistence on featuring it in her novels seems incongruous. Since metanarratives are systems that attempt to explain cultural phenomena in terms of a single, unifying principle or truth so as to impose an order in human experience, a central aspect of postmodernist thought is, according to Lyotard, its “incredulity toward metanarratives” (72). Additionally, Henry Giroux states that "postmodernism rejects [. . .] [g]eneral abstractions that deny the specificity and particularity of everyday life, that generalize out of existence the particular and the local, that smother difference under the banner of universalizing categories" (463), love being a prominent example of one such “general abstraction.” As Roland Barthes asserts in *A Lover’s Discourse*, “I-love-you is without nuance. It suppresses explanations, adjustments, degrees, scruples” (emphasis in original, 148).

Winterson acknowledges love’s classification as a metanarrative and critiques how it has been used to ratify heterosexuality as “natural” as well as to order sexed identities in a rigid binary. Significantly, *Written on the Body*’s narrator echoes Barthes’s sentiment about the phrase “I love you”: “Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? ‘I love you’ is always a quotation” (*Lover’s Discourse* 9). Yet, Winterson refuses to abandon love
altogether and, instead, presents her narrator’s struggles to come to a more postmodern understanding of it. From the outset of his/her story, Written on the Body’s narrator asserts, “It [love] will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no” (9), and as Catherine Belsey defines “postmodern love,” it is “at once endlessly pursued and ceaselessly suspected. […] It cannot speak, and yet it seems that it never ceases to speak in late twentieth-century Western culture” (685). This conflicted wavering between a continuous desire for love and a critical suspicion of it haunts the narrator, adding to the constant play of variables featured throughout Written on the Body and finding a potently queer expression through the narrator’s transgendered body.

Paradoxically placing love at the center of a disjointed postmodern world, the latter purportedly negating the former, Winterson highlights the transformative power she sees in love and accordingly presents new figurations and manifestations of romantic love beyond those prescribed by heterosexual and androcentric parameters that place a premium on reproduction and norms of respectability. Additionally, Winterson figures love as central to the formation of one’s subjectivity; in The Passion, Henri asserts, “I know too that without love we grope the tunnels of our lives and never see the sun. When I fell in love it was as though I looked into a mirror for the first time and saw myself” (154). Winterson uses the inherent diffuseness of love and desire to enhance the inherent ambiguity of gender and identity, in general, giving the lie to compulsory heterosexuality and the binary gender schema it creates and maintains. Accordingly, Winterson constructs narratives of love that account for de-centered subjects and the play of language in a postmodern context. In light of the inadequacies of current discourses on love that fail to depict love’s multivalent boundary-crossing nature, Winterson sets out to
revive, or re-vision, the language of love by contributing her own version of the romance to the genre. Despite the countless love stories that have already been told, Jeanette, the narrator of *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, asserts that although “diluted into paperback form,” romantic love can be found “in the original, written on tablets of stone” (170) and much of Winterson’s work can be read as an attempt to find this “original” story. Throughout Winterson’s work, she honors stories as “a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained [. . .] of keeping it alive, not boxing it into time” (*Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* 93). To enhance the productive possibilities of the ambiguity inherent in stories, Winterson weds the act of storytelling to the body, specifically to the touching of bodies and the transformative energy that such contact creates, thus adding the body’s variability to the already established fluidity of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, language and love.

As for *Written on the Body*, reading the narrator as transgender enables a more complex understanding of the language surrounding the expression and description of love and the narrator’s attempt to construct a narrative around his/her experiences with his/her lover Louise outside of heterosexist norms and romantic clichés but, rather, within a postmodern context, after all of the conventional narratives of love and identity have been shown to be unstable, uncertain, and unreliable. In addition, because the transgender, or ambiguously gendered, body figures so prominently in the telling of many of Winterson’s love stories, queer conceptions of space and time emerge that accommodate this queer body rather than expel it. Transgender characters figure centrally in Winterson’s re-vision of the romance, revising the language of love as a kind of textual touching as well as revising the space and time in which they appear as queer, and it is within this re-visionary language of romance that a transgender gaze emerges. Additionally, adopting a transgender approach to
the reading of Winterson’s novels provides an interpretive model through which to understand the novels’ unconventional styles that erase the separation between reader and narrator and enables the reader to identify with the narrator and his/her longings, thereby universalizing the transgender point of view and placing the reader in a position to occupy a transgender reading position. Although there are moments in which the transgender gaze pops up in several of Winterson’s novels, such as The Passion, The PowerBook, Lighthousekeeping, and Sexing the Cherry, this gaze is most solidly established and maintained in Written on the Body, and ultimately, the reader is embedded in the transgender gaze at the conclusion of Written on the Body.

“And so the word was made flesh”: A Postmodern Language of Love

Although each of her novels is an attempt to re-present love more faithfully, Written on the Body is Winterson’s most extended and concentrated critique of the language surrounding romantic love, and it is therefore within this novel that she directly attacks conventional narrative formulations of love and the language used to establish parameters around it. Winterson highlights the play of language and condemns those discourses that define and regulate love, seeing their motivation as restrictive and prescriptive. Just as Written on the Body’s narrator’s gender and body is more subversive when understood as transient and fluid, so too is language, and Winterson’s narrator uses language’s instability to undermine narratives that define romantic desire as heterosexual and delimit gender as binary. Halberstam and Livingston see this proliferation of romance narratives and emphasis on marriage as decidedly linked to heterosexuality and the myths of monogamy and restraint that are threaded through it. This constant generation of romances “registers the pathos of normative heterosexuality locked into a sad groove, constantly generating narratives of sentiment and romance to cover over the obvious confusion and lack of faith that
plagues all attempts to mate for life” (Halberstam and Livingston 7-8). Just as heteronormativity is incapable of envisioning sexuality beyond those behaviors shared between men and women in the service of reproduction, it is also unable to stifle desire’s unruly nature despite its best efforts, like the institution of marriage and circulation of romantic narratives that are intended to make this institution appealing and bearable, and ultimately sets up relationships for failure and disappointment.

As part of the narrator’s struggle to communicate his/her love for Louise, s/he disassembles the conventional romance narrative by revealing the lies surrounding the very character of romantic love. The narrator initiates his/her rumination on love by questioning the very term itself: “A precise emotion seeks a precise expression. If what I feel is not precise then should I call it love? […] I want the diluted version, the sloppy language, the insignificant gestures” (10). The dominant portrait of love is that it is a clear-cut emotion expressed by such symbols as red hearts, marriage ceremonies, love letters, flowers, etc. and the incessantly repeated phrase “I love you.” This portrait of a tidy love is crafted so as to place parameters around a slippery emotion that drifts across borders of gender, sexuality, and established norms of propriety, yet the narrator recognizes time and again that this portrait is false, and a primary concern of Written on the Body is how language is used to construct a false sense of reality, along with false images of gender and sexuality, clichés being a particularly rich target for the narrator. As Winterson asserts in Art Objects, “What have I said in Written on the Body? That it is possible to have done with the bricks and mortar of conventional narrative, not as monkey-business or magic, but by building a structure that is bonded by language” (189-90). Therefore, the brunt of the narrator’s critique falls on clichés because they only offer categorization, generalizations, and prescription and rob language of its vitality. Specifically, the
narrator attacks the greatest romantic cliché of all: the phrase “I love you.” The narrator wonders, “Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? ‘I love you’ is always a quotation” (9). This sentiment is also echoed in *Art and Lies* when Sappho states, “You see, I have to be aware of shallowness, a cliché of response, not mine but everyone else’s, is this how I really feel? How shall I know that these lines are my own, and not a borrowed text? [. . .] It will not be enough to say I love you. I know you have heard it before” (139).

Both Sappho and the narrator of *Written on the Body* struggle with how to express their feelings in light of the clichéd expression “I love you” because it is mandated as the ultimate expression of love when in fact it is simply a quotation uttered by others and not unique to their respective relationship. As previously noted, Barthes fingers “I love you” as ignoring specificity, illustrating the fact that “[l]overs speak, and yet in doing so they are spoken by a language that precedes them, that is not at their disposal, under their control; this language is at the same time dispersed among banalities, poetry, the sacred, tragedy” (Belsey 693). Accordingly, Winterson uses the inherent play of language to not just simply disrupt dominant discourses that prescribe desire and identity but to reinvigorate language, thus freeing gender and sexuality from their anchor in language. After s/he confesses his/her affair with Louise to Jacqueline, Jacqueline trashes their apartment and writes the word “SHIT” on the bathroom wall in feces. Seeing this destruction, the narrator ponders:

The wise old hands who advocate a sensible route, not too much passion, not too much sex, plenty of greens and an early night, don’t recognize this as a possible ending. In their world good manners and good sense prevail. [. . .] It’s not in their rule book even though it happens again and again. Settle down, feet under the table. She’s a nice girl, he’s a nice boy. It’s the clichés
that cause the trouble. (71)
In the narrator’s relationship with Jacqueline, s/he tries to follow the “rule book” accompanying love that prescribes a good boy and girl to settle down in a domestic setting, but the reality of desire interferes, revealing the impossibility of ever regulating such an emotion much less the people affected by such a transformative feeling. In addition, the cliche recited above reaffirms heterosexuality as the desired norm.

Winterson’s characters resist the imperative to speak the phrase “I love you,” which is at the heart of romantic love and thus reserved for those relationships identified as heterosexual, and work to manipulate and use language so that it more accurately conveys the uniqueness of their experience. For example, in *Written on the Body*, as the narrator ponders his/her past cavalier use of the phrase, s/he is automatically reminded of marriage vows and thinks, “Will I cherish you [Louise], adore you, make way for you, make myself better for you, look at you and always see you, tell you the truth? And if love is not those things then what things?” (11-12). Simultaneously reciting and rewriting traditional marriage vows, the narrator progresses from quoting the traditional vows to inserting nontraditional proclamations and questions why the later vows are not part of the marriage ceremony, since they seem to describe more precisely the texture of lifelong love. This concurrent deconstruction and revision of conventional marriage vows is just one attempt by the narrator to open up language to its inherent ambiguity and to characterize his/her relationship with Louise beyond marriage, which too has become a cliche of bored housewives and cold husbands and that, like popular narratives of love, has been devised and sanctioned by societal, cultural and government institutions in order to control desire and passion. After the previous disparagement

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of the institutionalize love in the form of marriage, the narrator envisions an alternate wedding with Louise:

We must have walked wrapped around each other to a café that was a church and eaten a Greek salad that tasted like a wedding feast. We met a cat who agreed to be best man and our bouquets were Ragged Robin from the side of the canal. We had about two thousand guests, mostly midges and we felt we were old enough to give ourselves away. (19)

Again, this is the narrator’s endeavor to free love of the narratives that surround it and to create an account that is unique to his/her experience with Louise, complete with cats as best men and no fathers to give them away to other men in marriage.

Also related to the narrator’s revelation of conventional marriage’s ultimate meaninglessness, s/he recognizes that, at marriage’s inception, that which in the end undermines it was necessarily born: adultery. The narrator ponders this issue in light of the numerous affair in which s/he has taken part:

The most reliable Securicor, church sanctioned and state approved, is marriage. Swear you’ll cleave only unto him or her and magically that’s what will happen. Adultery is as much about disillusionment as it is about sex. The charm didn’t work. You paid all that money, ate the cake and it didn’t work. It’s not your fault is it? Marriage is the flimsiest weapon against desire. (78)

Marriage is meant as a “charm” against the unruliness of desire, but just as the previously mentioned “rule book” could not possibly dictate and account for all of the manifestations of this emotion, neither can the “charm” of marriage. Ironically, though, the inevitable affair that follows marriage also becomes clichéd, and the narrator also finds that the romance portrayed in popular culture full of adventure,
grand gestures, and excitement is as much a cliché as the boring, domesticated marriage and its all-to-often accompanying affair: “I had done to death the candle and champagne, the roses, the dawn breakfasts, the transatlantic telephone calls and the impulsive plane rides. […] I suppose I couldn’t admit that I was trapped in a cliché every bit as redundant as my parents’ roses round the door” (21). Like his/her attempt to settle down with Jacqueline and any other couple’s attempt to regulate desire through marriage, the narrator has followed these clichés of romance in previous relationships but to no avail. Yet, even in his/her relationship with Louise, the narrator continues to follow them unknowingly. After leaving Louise and moving to a remote cabin, the narrator meets Gail Right—her last name indicating her predilection to speak the truth—who accuses the narrator of inhabiting the very clichés s/he despises: “The trouble with you […] is that you want to live in a novel” (160). Gail asserts that the narrator left Louise in order to purposely cause trouble in an already good relationship and create drama, and Gail turns out to be “right” because, by doing so, the narrator has created “the perfect romance” (187), one that contained indescribable love but did not have the chance to fail or to stagnate. This conception of “the perfect romance” is fabricated, like marriage, in order to establish an unreachable ideal.

Romance and marriage are all shown to be creations of culture and society intended to organize people into heterosexual relationships, hence the concomitant creation of only two, discrete genders. Drawing a significant distinction between love and romance, Handel—a character in Art and Lies—laments that love has been killed by that which is purportedly meant to keep it alive: the very same narratives of romance that the narrator of Written on the Body disparages. Handel, who is also ambiguously gendered, muses that “Love is dead […] Of course we have romance.
Everyone can see how useful romance is. Even the newspapers like romance. They should; they have helped to create it” (13). Rather, because romance is so scripted, it suffocates the vibrancy of love and establishes standards which are impossible to emulate in lived experience. Although the heroics of the narrator’s self-selected sacrifice placed his/her relationship with Louise in the category of “the perfect romance,” his/her heroics did not honor their love, just as the rituals of marriage cannot stave off the insistent call of desire.

Later, the narrator applies the language of science to love in order to find a better, or more precise, way to describe what s/he has experienced with Louise, yet the narrator finds that this language too is prescriptive and artificially fixed. After learning of Louise’s cancer and leaving her so that Elgin will treat her, the narrator attempts to maintain their connection through his/her reading of medical texts and claims, “Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise” (111). Extracts from these texts are juxtaposed against the narrator’s description of his/her feelings for Louise in the middle chapters of the novel titled “The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body,” “The Skin,” “The Skeleton,” and “The Special Senses.” However, in the course of writing this love poem, the narrator realizes the deficiency of these medical texts and their “dispassionate” language to encapsulate the narrator’s passion for Louise and his/her experience of Louise’s body: “Womb, gut, brain, neatly labeled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?” (120). Rubinson states, “When the body is anatomized for the purpose of scientific definitions, the anatomy tells a particular story of the body: one that privileges form over substance, parts over wholes, processes over gestalt, and mechanism over person” (6). The “story of the body” that the narrator confronts in medical texts is
ultimately no more precise than the language of love proffered by romance novels and the tales of marriage churned out by churches and government. Within the novel’s postmodern world of fragmentation and uncertainty, the narrator finds that the fixed language of science, which is directly implicated in the creation and prescription of binary gender, ends up being just as vague as the over-determined language of love, marriage, and romance, giving the lie to science’s purported market on truth and objectivity. As Grosz notes, “The way in which bodies, men’s and women’s bodies, are understood by the natural sciences is, however, no more accurate than the ways the social sciences and humanities understand them” (x), despite the accepted notion that science has cornered the market on knowledge of the body.22

In deconstructing the discourses of love, marriage, romance, and even science through an emphasis on language’s ambiguity, the narrator questions how the body has been previously articulated and conceptualized, in the process revealing the heteronormative values underlying these discourses. As Rubinson describes, “The mix of genres used by Winterson’s narrator encourages us to become conscious of how bodies are constructions informed by a diversity of ideologies conveyed through the language genres used to describe them” (5). The humanist body as complete, discrete, and contained crumbles as an inevitable result of its revelation as a cultural and scientific construction, just as the idea of only two genders similarly crumbles. Thus, the novel’s narrator re-visions stories of the body, resurrecting the body from passivity and reclaiming some agency for it, particularly for its role in realizing love. As such, Winterson’s reclamation of the body speaks to Halberstam and Livingston’s conception of the “posthuman” body: “Posthuman bodies are not slaves to masterdiscourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and
discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context” (2). Accordingly, Winterson’s novels, not just Written on the Body, become counter-narratives of love that feature the transgender body materializing through the cracks of these master-discourses and revealing the unavoidable variability beyond the binary divisions that they enact.

Winterson uses the body to re-vision the postmodern romance in many of her novels because she sees love as “the recognition of another person that is deeper than consciousness, lodged in the body more than held in the mind” (Written 82) and therefore disruptive of artificial divisions of self/other and inside/outside. As Henri elaborates and reinforces this point:

To love someone else enough to forget about yourself even for one moment is to be free. The mystics and the churchman talk about throwing off this body and its desires, being no longer slave to the flesh. They don’t say that through the flesh we are set free. That our desire for another will lift us out of ourselves more cleanly than anything divine. (154)

Rather than the body restricting the individual and causing him/her to live a life of sin and lust, Henri asserts that the body is actually the source of freedom and liberation because it provides one access to a lover. In Winterson’s latest novel Lighthousekeeping, the narrator Silver claims that all pertinent knowledge is discovered through the body and that “the important things are learned in faces, in gestures, not in our locked tongues. The true things are too big or too small, or in any case always the wrong size to fit the template called language” (135). Language again comes under fire as unable to convey the truth of the matter, in this case, the literal matter of the body, yet rather than condemn language’s inadequacy, Winterson
infuses it with life, like Woolf, and shows that rather than the body being “the wrong size,” Winterson shows that language, as it is currently conceived, is “the wrong size” for the body. After growing up and falling in love, Silver merges this idea about the body as the seat of knowledge with what she has learned about love and states, “And yet, the human body is still the measure of all things. […] We know the world by and through our bodies” (171).

To re-vision the language of love, Winterson merges it with the body, and the narrator of Written on the Body constantly refers to his/her body as well as Louise’s as different kinds of texts, examining how one can know the body not through various texts but as various texts. During the affair, Louise’s body is a map—“Louise, in this single bed, between these garish sheets, I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt” (20)—a scroll—“Be patient and go with nimble feet dropping your body like a scroll” (178)—and a book—“When I try to read it’s you I’m reading” (15). In turn, the narrator’s body is also conceived of textually, as s/he and Louise interact with one another: “I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn’t know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book” (89) and “Your hand prints are all over my body. Your flesh is my flesh. You deciphered me and now I am plain to read” (106). This metaphor comparing the body with various texts is found in other works by Winterson, such as in Winterson’s short story “The Poetics of Sex,” when Sappho states, “Let me leaf through you before I read you out loud” (44). Sappho, appearing later in Art and Lies, describes sex with her lover, “She take a word, straps it on, penetrates me hard. The word inside me I become it” (74). Borch asserts that this merging of text and body is most outstanding in Art and Lies, where “body is not only text, but text is also body, known as body and through it” (51).
as Winterson revives the overused language of love, she also revives conventional discourses of the body by merging the body with language. Burns succinctly summarizes Winterson's engagement with the body and text: "Winterson tries to reclaim both the flattened word and the desensitized body" (294), featuring the transgender body, Winterson gives the word a body and the body variety and dimension.

It is crucial to note that the narrator's transgender body, like any text, is presented as in the process of becoming, as an unfinished text that is still being written, enhancing the narrator's trans-itional nature and the process of his/her "self-construction" in Written on the Body. This process of becoming exemplified by the narrator's transgender body is central to the transformative narrative that Winterson presents. Butler notes a connection between revising reality and new conceptions of embodiment as becoming:

These practices of instituting new modes of reality [butch, femme, transgender transsexual, etc.] take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.

(Undoing Gender 29)

Rather than being negative, this unfinished mode of subjectivity is offered as a positive mode of being. In this way, Winterson relies on the transformative power of love to realize the touch between lovers and to maintain the significance of bodily matter in light of postmodernity's negation of it. Summarzing Delueze and Guatarri's conception of the body as constantly flowing, Grosz states,
Their notion of the body as a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations, may be of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind-body, nature-culture, subject-object and interior-exterior oppositions. (164)

The body is never certain or reliable, not a discrete container, and Winterson’s idea of the body as text highlights not only its incompleteness but also its constant wavering between artificially imposed binaries and categories. Skin is fluid and not a container of stable subjectivity, just as genitals do not secure a stable gender.

This language shared between lovers’ bodies is not solely a language of textual words and letters, although the body is metaphorized as such, but a language physically realized through the fingers: “Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark” (89). Winterson figures the body as a text of sensation rather than a text of language. The body becomes a locus of love’s expression for the narrator but the body is only realized when engaged in a lover’s touch. “The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body” (89). Grosz sees touch as a new and possibly productive way to conceive of the body, since it is a sense that is often not completely represented: “Touch is regarded as a contact sense. […] it provides contiguous access to an abiding object; the surface of the toucher and the touched must partially coincide” (98). As Written on the Body’s narrator ruminates, “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the

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accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille” (89). This simile comparing the text of this code written on the matter of the body to the raised letters of Braille text is significant because Braille is not only a language that requires touching in order to impart meaning but it also does not contain linguistic gender markers. In the course of using Written on the Body in her argument for including gender and sex in narratological inquiry, Susan S. Lanser notes, “American Sign Language would allow even the represented character a gender-neutral identity since it does not use gendered pronouns at all” (“Sexing the Narrative” 91). Through the touching shared by Louise and the narrator, the narrator’s unknown gender becomes unremarkable because they share a language in which gender does not exist.

Further, through the sensation of touch, the division between subject-object can be dissolved, unlike the other senses, thus undermining another key binary in the conventional construction of identity. Grosz explains,

My left [or right] hand has the double sensation of being both the object and the subject of the touch. [. . .] each hand is in the ambiguous position of being capable of taking up the positions of either the toucher or the touched. If the double sensation makes it clear that at least in the case of tactile perception, the subject is implicated in its objects and its objects are at least partially constitutive of the subject. (100-101)

Additionally, as Andrea Harris remarks, in relation to how skin is depicted in Written on the Body, “[T]he flesh, typically considered the marker of the boundary between self and other, becomes the gateway to immersion in the other’s being” (129). This bodily language of love embraces the permeability of the boundaries between two lovers through a form of textual touching: “Let’s hurry and invent our own phrases.
So that everywhere and always we can continue to embrace [. . .] We shall pass imperceptibly through every barrier, unharmed, to find each other” (215). The trope of textual touching encapsulates Winterson’s re-vision of language in light of its connection to the constantly transitioning transgender body but also eradicates barriers erected between self/other and male/female by pointing out their construction through recourse to a supposedly stable language.

Transgender Body and Queer Time and Place

The alternative language of love featured in Winterson’s novels compliments the postmodern manifestations of time and place emphasized by the novels, specifically those that exist outside of locales and time periods dictated by heterosexual and androcentric values, reflecting how the presence of the transgender body impacts these times and places. This convergence of queer time, place and the transgender body creates distinctively queer moments that highlight a perpetual present and “a queer temporality that is at once indefinite and virtual but also forceful, resilient and undeniable” (Barber and Clark, qtd. in Halberstam, *Queer Time* 11), the most notable occurring at the conclusion of *Written on the Body*. Further, Winterson embeds her queer reformulations of time and space within a general and overall re-visioning of linear measurements of time and formulations of domestic space and creates “an aesthetic of turbulence that inscribes abrupt shifts in time and space directly onto the gender-ambiguous body, and then offers that body to the gaze as a site of critical reinvention” (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 107). For example, the preface of *Sexing the Cherry* begins by questioning time and reality as it recounts unconventional conceptions of each concept. In relation to time, the preface begins, “The Hopi, an Indian tribe, have a language as sophisticated as ours, but no tenses for past, present and future. The division does not exist. What does this say
about time?” *Sexing the Cherry*, like the majority of Winterson’s novels, emphasizes the permeability of artificially constructed barriers between what constitutes the past, present and future, just as the narrator’s contact with Louise in *Written on the Body* asserts the permeability of the flesh and his/her transgender body illustrates the permeability of gender categories. Through the course of his journeys, recounted in *Sexing the Cherry*, Jordan learns that “Time has no meaning, space and place have no meaning” and time is “always back and forth, denying the calendar” (80).

Winterson’s emphasis on the power of the present breaks with heteronormative conceptions of time that privilege the maintenance of the nuclear family and is therefore a queer version of time. As Halberstam describes, “Queer time [. . .] exploits the potential of what Charles-Pierre Baudelaire called in relation to modernism ‘The transient, the fleeting, the contingent’ [. . .] [but] it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (*Queer Time* 2). Just as the body is most potently subversive when it is realized as fluid and unstable, so too is time, and central to any understanding of how Winterson’s novel’s present time and place is how they also break from heteronormative values via the transgender body. Winterson, throughout her fiction, attempts “to reorganize space and subjectivity around gender ambiguity” (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 107). For example, Venice, the main setting for *The Passion*, is an entirely queer time and place, as it embodies postmodern ideas of mutability and is home to countless manifestations of non-normative bodies. Villanelle further states, “The city I come from is a changeable city. It is not always the same size. Streets appear and disappear overnight, new waterways force themselves over dry land” (97).

Further, in *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson provides a clear description of a
queer conception of time:

Thinking about time is to acknowledge two contradictory certainties: that our outward lives are governed by the seasons and the clock; that our inward lives are governed by something much less regular—an imaginative impulse cutting through the dictates of daily time, and leaving us free to ignore the boundaries of here and now and pass like lightning along the coil of pure time, that is, the circle of the universe and whatever it does or does not contain. (99)

Villanelle describes a similarly queer conception of time beyond the linear in *The Passion*: “The future is foretold from the past and the future is only possible because of the past. Without past and future, the present is partial. All time is eternally present and so all time is ours. There is no sense in forgetting and every sense in dreaming. Thus the present is made rich. Thus the present is made whole” (62).27 This emphasis on the present and its containment of the past and future, rather than its separation from them, is central to Winterson’s re-vision of time’s measurement and reflects Woolf’s featuring of the polyvalent present moment at *Orlando*’s conclusion. As Doan and Waters summarize, “Winterson [. . .] locates in the present a temporal space with the most potential for the transformation of material conditions” (22). The present features so prominently in Winterson’s postmodern romances, as well as Woolf’s own transgender text, due to its transformative potential and its inescapable formlessness. Because the present is always an absence, it cannot be measured or delimited and thus perpetually represents the possibilities of transience and contingency.

In *Written on the Body*, the narrator’s love life, before his/her relationship with Louise, was dictated, in part, by the conventions of family and marriage, despite his/her queer body. While having an affair with Bathsheba, the narrator laments,
“Unfortunately I could only take possession between five and seven, weekdays, and the odd weekend when he was away playing football” (47); s/he has to work around the heterosexual time schedule dictated by marriage and the values of the family in order to have access to love. With Louise, a decidedly queer time emerges that is more wholly transformative because it refuses to accommodate heterosexual values, realizing the “potentiality” of such a lived life as described by Halberstam. When their love first found fruition after Louise has left her husband, they envision an alternate measurement and experience of time:

The time we had we used. Those brief days and briefer hours were small offerings to a god who would not be appeased by burning flesh. We consumed each other and went hungry again. There were patches of relief, moments of tranquility as still as an artificial lake, but always behind us the roaring tide. (20)

The urgency of the time spent between the narrator and Louise again emphasize the power of the present and directly relates to how Halberstam sees the relationship between AIDS and ideas of time. In describing the impact of the AIDS epidemic and its contribution to the surfacing of queer time, Halberstam states, “The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here [..] and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment” (Queer Time 2). Because Louise and the narrator’s time as lovers was fleeting, they had to discover new conceptions for its passage, much as the AIDS epidemic has forced many in the queer community to do, and placed a greater emphasis on the transformative potentialities of the present.

In addition to the fleeting nature of their time together, the relationship between Louise and the narrator bucked the heteronormative requirement that their
love take part in the necessity to reproduce. After the narrator has left Louise, s/he ponders the nature of living things and realizes that s/he does not entirely belong to this category because s/he feels no need to reproduce, a purportedly central compulsion for all organisms:

I have no desire to reproduce but I still seek out love. Reproduction. Over-polished Queen Anne style dining-room suite reduced to clear. Genuine wood. Is that what I want? The model family, two plus two in an easy home assembly kit. I don’t want a model, I want the full-scale original. I don’t want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new. (108)

This entirely new “thing” is an expression and experience of love beyond normative conceptions of time and place dictated by heteronormative imperatives to maintain order and propriety, to reproduce and to establish domestic practices, and this “thing” only finds expression in queer locales and temporalities. The narrator sees reproduction as ceaseless repetition of the same, as endless imitation of the original, much like the constant repetitions of clichés that ultimately evacuates them of meaning. This refusal to contribute to the human reproduction also recalls Halberstam and Livingston’s concept of the “posthuman” body.

The first scene that the reader encounters with the narrator and Louise together takes place in a park and illustrates how their presence within this domestic space necessitates that the space be re-visioned. In addition, it illustrates the “aesthetic of turbulence” that Halberstam sees mapped onto the ambiguously gendered body in postmodern works:

On either side of the river the proper green of the grass had given way to a psychedelic splash-painting of virulent Lycra cycling shorts and Hawaiian shirts made in Taiwan. They were grouped the way families like to group;
dad with the paper propped on his overhang, mum sagging over the thermos. Kids thin as seaside rock sticks and seaside rock pink. Mum saw you go in and heaved herself off the stripey fold-out camping stool. "You should be ashamed of yourself. There's families out here." (10-11)

This scene is full of paradox because the properness of the grass is seemingly disturbed by the families that have gathered, with references to drugs ("psychedelic") and potent sexuality ("virulent"), rather than the queer couple of Louise and the narrator. However, these were colors that disturbed the other color of green, not the significance of the family unit itself, and the impact of this disruption is negated by the organization of the colors in regular intervals as the families are grouped properly and in an orderly fashion, each unit isolated from the others. Later in the same scene, as the narrator embraces Louise and Louise tells him/her that they are the only ones in the park, the narrator "looked up and the banks were empty" (11). The merger of the narrator's transgender body and Louise's naked female body (she is skinny-dipping in the river) inserts futurity into this scene of domesticity and looks forward to the novel's concluding scene.

Further, their first lovemaking takes place in a decidedly queer place: a room at the top of the stairs, above and away from conventional place of the home:

We climbed one behind the other past the landing on the first floor, the studio on the second, up where the stairs narrowed and the rooms were smaller. It seemed that the house would not end, that the stairs in their twisting shape took us higher and out of the house altogether in to an attic in a tower where birds beat against the windows and the sky was an offering. [. . .] The walls, bumpy and distempered, were breathing. I could feel them moving under my touch. [. . .] We were magnified in this high wild room. You and I could
reach the ceiling and the floor and every side of our loving cell. (51)

When a return to conventional time occurs as the speaker hears the children passing outside, s/he tries to place this love in a normative package by saying “I love you,” that most tired of clichéd expressions. Louise counters, “That’s a territory you know, isn’t it? That’s romance and courtship and whirlwind” (53). Louise pushes the narrator to use an alternative language of love, and it is she who is the one that forces the narrator to love outside of the practiced narrative of clichés that s/he knows so well. Louise tells the narrator at one point, “I want you to come to me without a past. Those lines you’ve learned, forget them. Forget that you’ve been here before in other bedrooms in other places. Come to me new” (54). But, just as the narrator has not been able to re-vision love until Louise comes into his/her life, Louise has not been able to love beyond these borders until the narrator comes along. The narrator enables Louise to move beyond the confines of domesticity and now Louise shares this lesson with the narrator: “You [Louise] took me out beyond the house, over the roofs, way past commonsense and good behaviour” (187), describing how Louise ushered the narrator into queer times and places marked by futurity.

Written on the Body’s concluding scene, previewed by the scene in the park and their first lovemaking, is the purest conception of the possibilities latent in queer time and space, as it challenges the logic of reality and merges the local and global space. This real or imagined physical contact with Louise ushers in a boundless celebration for the narrator:

This is where the story starts, in this threadbare room. The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this
room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be.
We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm.
Hurry now, it’s getting late. I don’t know if this is a happy ending but here
we are let loose in open fields. (190)
This is where the truly postmodern love story begins, not in the novel’s opening
pages, and this novel’s concluding scene is not an ending at all—happy or not. Time,
space, identity, and reality are each presented as limitless and boundless, as
permeating each other’s boundaries in a ceaseless transitioning. The narrator finds
the global within the local, finds the universe in his/her shabby room, and the present
is shown to be just as formless as the space in which s/he finds him/herself. As the
narrator makes physical contact with Louise, s/he realizes a place and time outside of
constraints, even those of reality. Again, the novel revisits the uncertainty of flesh,
but rather than causing anxiety, this uncertainty provides the narrator with hope and
the possibility of a happy ending: “From the kitchen door Louise’s face. Paler,
thinner, but her hair still mane-wide and the colour of blood. I put out my hand and
felt her fingers [. . .] The scar under the lip burned me. Am I stark mad? She’s
warm” (190). In this instance, Louise and the narrator are both presented as between
embodiment and place, between time and reality. This scene highlights the trans­
formative effect of love, where time and space are merged into one queer moment,
where the artificially imposed boundaries necessarily implode. 

*Gut Symmetries*
provides another example of a similarly queer moment at its conclusion:

The universe hangs here, in this narrow strait, infinity and compression caught
in the hour. Space and time cannot be separated. History and futurity are
now. [. . .] Whatever it is that pulls the pin, that hurls you past the boundaries
of your own life into a brief and total beauty, even for a moment, it is enough.
As in *Written on the Body*'s conclusion, the presence of the moment is emphasized and valued as it contains the past and future, rather than being separated from them, just as the transgender body contains male/female and his/her union with Louise evades the entirety of the hetero/homosexual binary. Each passage illustrates the persistent present, as both history and future are evacuated of their conventional meanings, as well as depicts the continual ebb and flow between the local and global, as the local is released of its situatedness and the global is rendered somewhat concrete. Yet, the scene from *Written on the Body* is more far-reaching in its depiction of a queer moment, as the narrator's transgender body indicates the possibility of an alternative subjectivity that exists not only between genders but also between embodiment.

"Your flesh is my flesh": Universalizing and Maintaining a Trans-Reading Identity

The reader is invited into these queer times and places with the narrator to envision an alternate conception of time and space, one that is embedded in the transgender body and that valorizes the multifarious present. As summarized by Doan, Winterson's novels are rife with postmodernist stylistic techniques, "such as intertextuality, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, the rewriting of history, and frame breaks" as they convey postmodern principles, like "questioning 'grand narratives,' problematizing closure, valorizing instability, suspecting coherence," all of which work to deconstruct heteronormative and androcentric discourses in order to re-vision such discourses so that they "facilitate a forceful and positive radical oppositional critique" (138). Yet, as previously mentioned, Winterson extends this "oppositional critique" into something more productive, mounting a re-vision of not only gender categories and conceptualizations of identity
but also a reader’s reading identity, and therefore enlists the reader as an active agent in this re-visioning process. The postmodern features of Winterson’s texts have the same effect on the reader as Djuna Barnes’s experimentation in her modernist novel Nightwood; as noted by Wittig, the reader of Nightwood experiences “an out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye perception” in which his/her conventional reading identity is “fractured” by Barnes’s “universalizing” of the novel’s queer world. Winterson’s text similarly ruptures the reader’s perception by universalizing the queer world of Written on the Body, and the resulting sideways glance results in the reader’s subsequent adoption of the narrator’s trans look.

The reader not only serves as witness to the ambiguously gendered body and to sexualities that exist beyond the short-sighted categories of hetero/homosexuality, but s/he is also situated so as to look with these alternative perspectives through the novels’ concurrent deconstruction of gender identities, language, bodily discourses and conventional conceptions of reality, time and space. In Art Objects, Winterson writes, “What I am seeking to do in my work is to make a form that answers to twenty-first-century needs” (191), and a central “need” she identifies is the necessity to account for the relationship between language’s instability and ambiguity and the existence of those gender identities that refuse to stabilize and settle into one gender or the other. Further, the “form” that Winterson selects to respond to “twenty-first-century-needs,” like the forms chosen by Woolf and Carter before her, involves the active engagement of the reader. One can say that these “forms” and “their narrative ambiguity produce [...] a nonidentical reader who may take up multiple reading positions” (Allen 17). While Orlando enlists the reader as an active partner in the creation of Orlando’s life-story and The Passion of New Eve calls on the reader to “read” Eve/lyn’s body and story as posttranssexual manifestos, both of which place
the reader in an unconventional reading identity, *Written on the Body* invites the reader to fracture his/her reading identity so as to adopt the polyvalence and multiplicity of the transgender look. By embedding the reader in a queer world and collapsing the distinction between reader and narrator, *Written on the Body* universalizes the transgender point of view, enables the reader to have access to a decidedly queer perspective.

Winterson universalizes the trans perspective by conveying the entirety of *Written on the Body* through such a perspective and by also creating a queer world populated with a predominance of queer characters. By transmitting *Written on the Body*'s narrative through a narrator who, on first reading, apparently has no discernible gender identity, Winterson forces the reader to question the efficacy of the gender binary, once s/he realizes that his/her attempt to fill in the gap of the narrator's "real" gender identity will forever be thwarted. However, more significantly, the narrator’s ambiguous gender identity, in conjunction with language’s constant slipping, facilitates the reader’s identification with him/her, thus universalizing the transgender point of view. Halberstam hails the film *By Hook or By Crook* as a work that establishes and maintains a transgender gaze by universalizing it. The two main characters, Shy and Valentine, are ambiguously gendered and yet they “are utterly unremarkable for their queerness [...] [because] no one reacts specifically to their butchness. This narrative strategy effectively *universalizes queerness* within this specific cinematic space” (emphasis in original, *Queer Time* 94). *Written on the Body*'s narrator is similarly unremarkable in the world of the novel because neither the narrator nor the other characters acknowledge the narrator’s transgender state. The only characters who act in a shocked manner towards the narrator are Louise’s mother and grandmother and Elgin’s new fiancée;
however, their remarks are directed towards the narrator’s disheveled and dirty appearance, which is a result of letting him/herself go after losing Louise, rather than his/her ambiguous gender. Louise’s grandmother asserts that the narrator had “the look of a thing from the Disinfectant Department” (165) and Elgin’s fiancée, after the narrator has vomited, screams, “God you’re disgusting” (171). Harris postulates that “what she [Winterson] attains through de-gendering the narrative voice is a universal subject position” (146); because the entirety of the novel is broadcast through this trans subject position, it becomes the point of identification and contextualizes how the reader situates him/herself in relation to the text.

Additionally, numerous individuals with non-normative sexualities and gender identities populate the novel, including Elgin and his masochistic predilections, enhancing Winterson’s presentation of a queer world in Written on the Body. As he and Louise are having sex during the early part of their relationship, Elgin “lay on his single bed, legs apart, and begged her to scaffold his penis with bulldog clips” (34). In addition, the narrator has a former boyfriend named Crazy Frank whose adoptive parents were midgets whom he carried everywhere with him on his shoulders and who wore “great gold hoops through his nipples” that “he had joined together with a chain of heavy gold links,” creating the appearance of “the handle of a Chanel shopping bag” (93). There is also Carlo, who shaved off all of his body hair and convinced the narrator to do the same (143), and an ex-girlfriend “who could only achieve orgasm between the hours of two and five o-clock” (75). Villanelle and Dog Woman, from The Passion and Sexing the Cherry respectively, are two of the most notable non-normative characters in Winterson’s repertoire not only because of their incredible bodily configurations but because of their casual attitude towards their outstanding characteristics. Writing in reference to Winterson’s
treatment of minority points of view, specifically in *Sexing the Cherry*, Lisa Moore states, “[A]n understanding of the malleability of gender and sexual boundaries characteristic of the point of view of a marginalized sexuality is represented not as a minority position, but as the unproblematic possession of the novel’s most admirable characters” (116). Through populating her novels with ambiguously gendered characters who often also display queer sexualities, Winterson embeds the reader in this non-normative world by privileging these characters and their behaviors rather than placing them in the minority position from which they would exercise little power to transform the reader’s way of seeing. However, since they are situated as the majority, the fluidity of gender and sexualities is presented as a given and not as an oddity worthy of attention and judgment, which invites the reader to look *with* these characters rather than look *at* them.

In addition to embedding the transgender point of view by transmitting the narrative through a trans perspective and by populating the narrative world with numerous queer subjectivities, Winterson also universalizes it by dissolving the relationship between the narrator and reader. The reader is immediately forced into the text by the narrator’s ambiguously gendered state. As Kauer explains, “One important ‘Leerstelle’ (a void in the text which has to be filled in by the reader) to use Wolfgang Iser’s term, is the undeclared gender because it forces the reader into the text to coordinate the different masks and perspectives the narrator offers” (42). As part of the reader’s management of the “masks and perspectives” presented by the narrator, the reader comes to realize the emptiness of the gendered fronts put on, and subsequently disposed of, by the narrator and is therefore left to assume the final perspective implicitly offered by the narrator: transgender. Because a ceaselessly fluid transgender point of view is the only sustained perspective offered by the
narrator, the reader's reading identity becomes shaped by it, and rather than be anchored by the transgender perspective, one's reading identity becomes similarly de-centered and polyvalent.

An additional method of achieving this fusion between the reader and narrator is through the narrator's self-avowed unreliability. As a first-person narrator, s/he is the reader's only venue to the "truth" of his/her story, yet s/he pointedly undermines his/her reliability from the beginning, like Orlando's narrator/biographer and his/her constant undermining of his/her assigned authority. In *Written on the Body*, after describing a memory in which s/he feeds plums to Louise, the narrator reveals, "There are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? [. . .] I don't know" (17). If the narrator does not know the circumstances of his/her past with Louise, then how are his/her readers supposed to know and trust what s/he is about to relate? From the novel's beginning, Winterson establishes this story of love and loss on the uncertain terms that all existence rests upon—unknowability and inevitable, constant flux. Combining the unreliability of language and memory, the narrator directly addresses the reader about the narrator's status as a believable teller of his/her own story: "I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator" (24). His/her story is contingent, contextual, subjective; if the reader wishes to continue with this story, s/he must suspend his/her own conception of what constitutes reality and how that reality should be transmitted. Alice, the theoretical physicist narrator of *Gut Symmetries*, recognizes and struggles with the inherent uncertainty in all forms of knowledge. Early in the novel, as she addresses the reader, she states, "I cannot tell you who I am unless I tell you why I am. I cannot help you to take a measurement until we both know where we stand. [. . .] What was the true nature of the world? What was the true nature of myself in it?" (11-12). The
measurement she mentions, however, is not an exact measurement that will provide certainty and stability. On the first page of the novel, she asserts, “There is no such thing as measurement absolute, there is only measurement relative” (9), and accordingly, Alice’s story as well as her explanation of herself is relative and contingent and is never reliable, as such. Just as no measurement is ever “absolute,” neither is language or meaning ever fixed, a point reiterated over and over by Winterson’s characters (and Orlando’s narrator) and tied to those characters’ ambiguous bodies.

Related to the narrator’s admitted unreliability is his/her realization of memory’s faulty nature. Rather than rely on personal memory as the essence of identity like Woolf, Winterson depicts memory as just as faulty and in some ways unknowable as the ideas of “truth” and “reality.” The narrator also questions the relationship between memory and reality: “[T]he power of memory is such that it can lift reality for a time. Or is memory the more real place?” (61). This questioning of his/her own reliability as a narrator as well as the relationship between truth, reality, and memory works to deconstruct the trust in the medium of narration and actually dismantles the binary between reader and text and reader and narrator, thus resulting in the reader’s more dynamic involvement in the development of novel’s narrative. These distinctions are of no matter because it is the telling of the story that is important, just as it is the touching between lovers that matters—the dynamic exchange of narrative and substance rather than the artificial separation of the two factors taking part in the exchange.

Further, the shifting signification of “you” dramatically affects the readers’ relationship to the narrator and involvement in the story s/he is telling. There are three possible narratees in this novel: the narrator him/herself as the associative style
mimics diary-like self-reflections, Louise, and the implied reader. "You" refers to the reader at times, at other times to Louise, and still, at others, to the narrator; only the context of the statement clarifies who is being referenced. On the novel’s first page, the narrator remembers, “You said, ‘I love you’” (9). Clearly, this “you” does not refer to the reader; however, at this point in the novel, the reader is uncertain of who the narrator is talking about and only learns that “you” refers to Louise on page twenty. When the narratee is the reader, “The kind of statements directed to this narratee [the reader] suggest an emotional distance. In contrast, the passages directed to Louise lay bare the narrator’s pain, confusion, passion, and self-hatred” (Kearns 182-83), but the constant confusion between these two narratee brings them together and simultaneously creates and erases any evident emotional distance experienced by the reader. Both versions of the narratee draw the reader into the text but not always for a positive experience: “Finding myself [Kearns] suddenly addressed either as ‘you’ or ‘Louise’ causes me to feel engaged with, but also at times emotionally assaulted by, the narrating voice” (183). In addition, the previously cited admittances of the narrator’s own unreliability can create a distance between the narrator and narratee but “the distance between narrator and narratee invited by such passages is shattered by the addresses to Louise, which plunge me [Kearns] into the story world” (183). Through the shifting signification of the various narratees, the reader is actually drawn in to the world of the novel rather than be repelled by it. Additionally, the narrator not only directly addresses the reader but specifically asks for a response from him/her, enhancing the relationship between them but also, and more importantly, placing the reader in a position to identify with the narrator. At the beginning of his/her story, the narrator asks, “You think I’m trying to wriggle out of my responsibilities?” (16), when talking about his/her role in having affairs with
married women. The narrator, as the novel winds towards its conclusion, even asks the reader for reassurance about his/her feelings towards assaulting Elgin: “Not sorry but ashamed, does that sound strange?” (174). In addition, the narrator asks, “Is it odd to say that your lover reminds you of a tree?” (29), recognizing that this is not the normative way to describe a lover but asking for the reader’s support in his/her experience of Louise.

The narrator is simultaneously asking the reader for verification of his/her tale as well as calling attention, again, to his/her own predilection to be unreliable. After the narrator tells Inge, an ex-girlfriend, that when Renoir died, “they found nothing between his balls but an old brush,” Inge asserts that the narrator is concocting this statement, and s/he responds, “Am I?” (22), but this response is not in quotes and so is therefore not part of the recounted conversation. This is repeated later in the novel with another girlfriend as they are discussing Henry Miller (60). Such narrative devices let the readers in on the construction of the story and develops a distinct relationship between the narrator and reader while deconstructing the barrier between fiction and reality and significantly unsettling the reader’s previously held ideas about love, narratives, and gender. In Gut Symmetries, Winterson illustrates the reader’s interaction with narratives by foregrounding the relative nature of this relationship. Alice remarks, “if I were not telling this story to you but to someone else, would it be the same story? [. . .] It is just as likely that as I invent what I want to say, you will invent what you want to hear?” (24-25). Winterson, throughout her novels, brings up the following questions: Is the reader the producer or consumer of the text? Is the narrator the author or effect of his/her story? These are the same questions that Woolf asked throughout her fiction as well as her essays, particularly those left unfinished after her suicide, “Anon” and “The Reader.” Reiterating Barthes’s
comments on the primacy of the reader in relation to the text, "[T]here is one place where this multiplicity [of the text] is focused and that place is the reader [...] The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost" ("The Death of the Author" 148). The conclusion of The PowerBook illustrates Barthes's point, pointing out how the ambiguity surrounding a text's various narratees implies who truly "authors" the story: "You can change the story. You are the story" (288). The reader is unable to determine definitively if Ali is referring to herself or to the reader, because just moments before she talks to herself, but this self-reflexive thought is placed in quotes, whereas the previously cited quotation is not, indicating that it is, in fact, directed towards the reader.

The most complete identification between the reader and transgender narrator occurs in the final scene of Written on the Body, when the narrator and reader exist in tandem at one precise moment and the reader joins the narrator's search for love and comfort, enhancing the reader's experience of the text as well as of the world created by Winterson. Barthes notes that "the pleasure of the Text is achieved [...] whenever another writing succeeds in writing fragments of our own daily lives, in short, whenever a co-existence occurs" (emphasis in original, Sade/Fourier/Loyola 7). As the narrator walks home alone after leaving London without having found Louise, s/he describes the walk about to the house as though s/he were accompanied by someone else and were advising him/her of what to expect: "Your shoes will have charcoal patches and flakes of white ash but it's better than mud on a rainy night" (184). More remarkably, s/he directly addresses the reader and cautions him/her as to where to walk, "Be careful to keep on the right, there's a ditch" (184), as though the reader were walking alongside the narrator, seeing the landscape and making the
journey with him/her. In *Gut Symmetries*, a similar moment occurs as Alice struggles to articulate her story: “Walk with me. Hand in hand through the nightmare of narrative, the neat sentences secret-nailed over meaning” (24). Although at the conclusion of this section the “we” is revealed to refer to Alice’s lover Stella (“the story of how we met”), the command issued at the beginning of the above quote can apply to both Stella and the reader, as the reader begins this journey with Alice and accompanies her for the duration of her struggle to articulate meaning in spite of narrative’s ultimate constriction of it. Rather than directly address the reader, as Woolf’s narrator/biographer does in Orlando, in order to involve him/her in the world of the text, Winterson’s novel simply assumes the reader to be there already.

In *Written on the Body*, Winterson most successfully achieves a transgender reading identity for her audience, “a mode of seeing and being seen that is not simply at odds with binary gender but that is part of a reorientation of the body in space and time” (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 107). The reader, through his/her placement in the queer worlds of Winterson’s fictions and the need to fill in the gaps of information left empty by the narrator, carves out a trans reading identity that witness the absurdity and inadequacy of the binary gender system. In describing how the film *Boys Don’t Cry* achieves a transgender gaze, Halberstam states, “The transgender look in this film reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes, and it disarms, temporarily, the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre” (*Queer Time* 86). The transgender gaze that Winterson establishes periodically in most of her novels and continuously in *Written on the Body* achieves similar results. By wavering in the midst of the gender binary, assuming and displacing various stereotypes of gender identity, the transgender narrator of *Written on the Body* displays for the reader the political, social, and cultural values underpinning their
creation and maintenance. In the process, the reader must relinquish his/her expectations of love stories, i.e. boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, get married, etc., and resituate his/her reading identity so as to “see” love as the narrator both sees and lives it—beyond the limits of heterosexuality.

Through the narrator’s critique of gendered stereotypes, clichés of romantic love, and prescriptive discourses of the body, *Written on the Body* exposes the heterosexist values inherent in the maintenance of the gender binary and re-visions a world wherein ceaseless transitioning between divisions of male/female and self/other characterize individual identity and free language of its supposed stability, thereby breathing life and vitality into it after the deadening effect of clichés. For Winterson, love has served as the context for this deconstruction and re-vision of gender and language because love may be the most ephemeral, yet powerful, aspect of humanity: “No-one can legislate love; it cannot be given orders or cajoled into service. Love belongs to itself, deaf to pleading and unmoved by violence. Love is not something you can negotiate. Love is the one thing stronger than desire and the only proper reason to resist temptation” (*Written on the Body* 77-78). Love, like reading, is a transformative experience, one that Winterson characterizes as able to transcend boundaries of gender as well as of time and place.
Endnotes

1 Ironically, Winterson explicitly condemns this tendency to align the author with his/her work. In her essay “Writer, Reader, Words” in *Art Objects*, she remarks, “It seems to me that the intersection between a writer’s life and a writer’s work is irrelevant to the reader. The reader is not being offered a chunk of the writer or a direct insight into the writer’s mind, the reader is being offered a separate reality” (27).

2 Winterson is conventionally read as a spokesperson for lesbian empowerment and representation, due in part to *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* being her first published novel—a semiautobiographical work that details the coming out process for a character named Jeanette—and its subsequent translation into a television movie for BBC.

3 See Ute Kauer’s “Narration and Gender: The Role of the First-Person Narrator in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*” and Cath Stowers’s “The Erupting Lesbian Body: Reading *Written on the Body* as a Lesbian Text” for two particularly thorough interpretations that adopt this point of view. Andrea Harris’s chapter “A Feminist Ethics of Love” in her book *Other Sexes: Rewriting Difference from Woolf to Winterson* even goes so far as to state that Winterson’s indeterminately gendered narrator that is heavily hinted to be female “claims universality for a feminine and lesbian subject position” (130). Yet, towards the end of the chapter, Harris begins to doubt this emphasis on the feminine, admitting that “I am tempted to say that, like Bernard, the narrator moves from the masculine to the feminine end of the gender spectrum. Yet, when the other characters analyzed here [in my book] [. . .] are also considered, the very fluidity of their sex/gender identifications throws into
question the metaphor of a ‘gender spectrum.’ A linear metaphor does not begin to suggest the complexity of ‘other sexes.’” (147).

4 Not only is the fact of owning a sports car a cliché of masculinity, the narrator’s performance of dialect highlights this stereotypical pose.

5 As Kauer progresses through her article, she concludes that the narrator is, in fact, female and that Winterson’s novel is “a new way of female writing questioning gender roles by using the mask of gender ambiguity” (50).

6 Although not identifying the novel as utopian, Jane Moore stringently asserts that it is based in fantasy: “Meanwhile, by avoiding the demands of realism to ‘know’ the truth of the narrator’s sex, the fiction declares itself as a fiction, a fantastic illusion” (79).

7 In her “Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway uses the term “post-gender,” which some have latched onto and read as her call for a world free of gender. However, in the interview “Cyborgs, Coyotes, and Dogs: A Kinship of Feminist Figurations,” she clarifies what she meant by post-gender, which relates to the fact that similar assumptions have been made about Winterson’s ambiguously gendered narrator and a more accurate reading of what this novel accomplishes: “[I]n this particular sense that puts focus on a critical relationship to gender along the lines of critical theory’s ‘things need not be this way’—in this sense of blasting gender I approve of the term ‘post-gender.’ But this is not ‘post-gender’ in a utopian, beyond-masculine-and-feminine sense” (329).

8 Winterson directly addresses the destructive force of binaries that obscure the relationship between the two terms. In Gut Symmetries, the text lists several binaries and describes how these binaries are implicated in humanity’s obsession with the quest, specifically, “Male and Female: The uniting mystery of one flesh,” and
how the artificial separation of genders constantly looks for reconciliation. Moments later, the text meditates, “It may be that here in our provisional world of dualities and oppositional pairs [...] we compulsively act our the drama of our beginning, when what was whole, halved, and seeks again its wholeness” (6).

9 Kauer at one point remarks, “So the conclusion might be that the novel has a female first-person narrator cross-dressing as a man” (46). Yet, Kauer uses the remainder of her article to “prove” that the narrator is female, as mentioned above, and that Winterson is simply using the apparently ungendered narrator to show gender as a series of masks or clichés that one can choose to don or not, rather than exploring the possibility and significance of a transgendered narrator. Stowers makes a nod as well to a possible transgender reading of the novel, working from the angle of bisexuality: “[I]t could be salient to question whether Winterson is experimenting with bisexuality as a possible subject position and narrative tactic to escape from heterosexual gendering.” However, in the very next sentence, she re-focuses this discussion on lesbian concerns, “Yet this bisexuality is used, I suggest, with specifically lesbian aims” (99).

10 Additional types of ambiguously gendered characters feature prominently in Winterson’s other novels. Villanelle of The Passion is perhaps most accurately described as intersexed because although she is sexed female, she was born with webbed feet, a physical feature of only male Venetian boaters. Yet, when the midwife attempts to slice the webs between her toes, “her knife sprang from the skin leaving no mark” (52), so not only is Villanelle’s body ambiguously gendered, it is also fantastically protected against those who would mutilate her body so as to make it unambiguously gendered. Another non-normative body, this time in Sexing the Cherry, is Dog Woman who is outstanding due to her unbelievable size—she is able
to toss an elephant into the air—and her grotesque appearance—she allows her adopted son Jordan to “pick the fleas out of my scars” (21).

11 As Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston so colorfully describe gender’s constructed nature, “changing how you walk and talk and dress and who and how you fuck changes your gender as well as surgery” (17).

12 Each time I have taught this novel to an undergraduate class, the discussion focuses unfailingly upon “figuring out” the narrator’s sex. Students have a remarkably difficult time moving beyond this aspect of the narrator’s identity, asserting that they cannot “get into” the book without knowing who the narrator “really” is and arguing that not knowing the narrator’s sex was irritating or “unrealistic.” What is always interesting about teaching this book is the number of readers who automatically assume that the narrator is male simply because most of the books they have read in the past have been directly narrated by men or assumed to be men, in the case of third-person narration.

13 Jordon, a male character in Sexing the Cherry, wishes “to have some of Tradescant [a famous male explorer whom he travels with] grafted on to [him] so that [he] could be a hero like him” (85).

14 According to Jonathan Culler, “Meaning is [actually] produced by a process of grafting” (134) rather than diluted by it.

15 Jordan says about grafting that “There are many in the Church who condemn this practice as unnatural, holding that the Lord who made the world made its flora as he wished and no other way,” and his mother incredulously asks, “Of what sex is that monster you are making?” (85). This description of grafting and the reaction it provokes serves as a fitting metaphor for how transgendered—or ambiguously gendered—characters create a plurality of gender identities through the
simultaneous merger and deconstruction of male and female characteristics.

16 Art and imagination are also two universals that Winterson celebrates in her novels.

17 Yet, noting the comparisons that are often drawn between Woolf’s *Orlando* and this novel, Kauer claims, “Virginia Woolf’s fictive biographer says about Orlando: ‘The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity.’ And here we find the significant difference to the first-person narrator of *Written on the Body*, because it has become clear that gender forms and alters the identity” (50). However, rather than gender forming and altering the narrator’s identity, Winterson clearly fingers love as the transformative element in the narrator’s life.

18 Winterson actually began this goal of re-visioning romance in 1986 when she edited a little known collection of short stories titled *Passion Fruit: Romantic Fiction with a Twist*.

19 This is perhaps most clearly articulated in Winterson’s novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. As Palmer summarizes, “Jeanette [the novel’s narrator], rather than uncovering a single static identity, constructs for herself a series of shifting, fluid selves by means of the acts of storytelling in which she engages” (190).

20 Belsey notes, “In place of redemption, postmodern love stories pose a question about the strange im-personality of desire” (692). However, Winterson’s postmodern love stories do seem to offer redemption, or at least a certain faith in love’s power and reality, and question not the “strange impersonality of desire” but rather the strangely impersonal ways in which this desire is linguistically expressed in the phrase “I love you.”

21 Similarly, just as categories of gender were established in order to contain
and secure what is invariably a variable element of identity, those genders that would
transgress established gender categories were also necessarily born.

22 Not only does science compartmentalize and label the human body, but
scientific and technological advances in the midst of an overwhelming
postmodernism that virtualizes the real threaten to render the material body irrelevant.
Baudrillard observes in “The Ecstasy of Communication” that, as a result of virtual
reality, the body becomes a “terminal of multiple networks” and thus turns out to be
“deserted and condemned” (129). After critiquing the emergence of internet dating
and virtual worlds that may eventually lead to virtual lovemaking through what s/he
refers to as “teledildonics,” the narrator ruminates, “I’d rather travel across the world
to have you with me than lie at home dialing your telepresence” (97). Although
fighting to articulate a narrative of love that accounts for the postmodern condition,
Winterson’s narrator maintains a faith in the necessity of the flesh in order for love to
be expressed.

23 The body also figures centrally in Winterson’s depiction of individual
subjectivity. Shiffer describes Winterson’s theory of subjectivity as one “that both
resides in the body and exceeds it” (46).

24 Another notable aspect of Winterson’s conceptualization of the body is the
lovers’ compulsion to consume each other: “Scoop me in your hands for I am good
soil. Eat of me and let me be sweet” (20). This idea of consuming the flesh is
endowed with a spiritual element in Art and Lies: “The Word terrifies. The seducing
word, the insinuating word. [. . .] I cannot eat my words but I do. I eat the substance
and word, daily communion, blessed” (54-55). In this novel, the consumption of the
lover’s body is likened to transubstantiation and becomes part of the lover’s worship
of the beloved’s body.
In their discussion of David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, Halberstam and Livingston describe his writing and recounting of his struggle with AIDS as “a technology that extends the body beyond death and beyond the disintegration of the body” (16). The narrator’s motivation in telling his/her story partially lies in this same impetus to preserve Louise from her cancer.

The statement on matter and reality in *Sexing the Cherry* was previously quoted.

Interestingly, Winterson’s two historical novels *Sexing the Cherry* and *The Passion* focus most directly and extensively on the issue of time, critiquing conventional notions of historicity, memory, and truth.

Louise, even when married to Elgin, attempted to exist outside of heterosexual norms that dictated reproduction; after miscarrying Elgin’s child once, she refused to try again and was adamant about not having children (92).

The use of the term “queer” here to describe Louise and the narrator does not indicate a reading of them as a lesbian couple.

Like the bedroom scene in *Boys Don’t Cry*, this couple is isolated despite placement in family space and is able to see a future beyond where they are currently located. As Lana volunteers to examine Brandon and verify his gender in her bedroom, away from John and Tom, she assures Brandon that she does not need to see his genitalia in order to know he’s a “guy” and looks out of the window at the night sky, “a utopian vision of an elsewhere into which she and Brandon long to escape” (Halberstam 87).

This statement moors *Written on the Body* in postmodernism: “This play on fiction and reality, or on the different layers of reality, is of course a typical postmodern phenomenon. The insistence on the importance of the act of remembering,
be it real or fictitious, over what ‘really’ happened, denies the power of facts” (Kauer 43).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: ARTICULATING A TRANS-READING IDENTITY

This project has attempted to articulate the nature of a trans-reading identity and argued how certain texts invite the reader to assume such a reading position. Up until this point, however, the description of this trans-reading identity has been somewhat associative rather than substantive in nature as the project has discussed this reading position in relation to the specific texts of *Orlando*, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Written on the Body* themselves, and this conclusion attempts to supplement this description with a more direct and generalized articulation of a trans-reading identity.

First of all, a trans-reading identity is proposed as an interpretive framework that seeks to illuminate a perspective that is often ignored—a perspective that features transgender as a lens through which to approach texts but that also simultaneously merges this transgender lens with an emphasis on deconstructing a myriad of other binaries (in addition to gender) such as the distinctions drawn between author/reader, word/meaning, fact/fiction and reality/fantasy. Importantly, a trans-reading identity does not describe readers who engage in transgender reading practices, which would attempt to “speak” or, more precisely, read for transgender individuals, refusing to define or prescribe how transgender individuals read a text. Rather, a trans-reading identity is a critical construct or—in Culler’s terms—an “hypothesis of a reader” (67), wherein the reader acknowledges and assumes his/her actively creative role in the generation of the text; is made aware of and critically reads the ideological assumptions s/he has about gender, sex and sexuality; and enters into a dynamic and
polyvalent exchange with the text, narrator and author as well as the cultural and political discourses in which s/he and the text are embedded so as to re-vision the supposed stability, naturalness and "truth" of such discourses that prescribe the absolute separation of male/female, fact/fiction, and text/reader. Benzel notes that "[t]he blurring of boundaries between subject and object, narrator and audience, recognizes the incalculable consequences of language" (Benzel 132), and this particular blurring of boundaries is paired with the blurring of gender boundaries to provide a gendered context for the reader's search for a reading position within these texts, and a trans-reading identity seeks to fuse the gender ambiguity of the text's protagonist with the destabilization of the reading subject and indeterminacy of the text.

This project, like Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*, emphasizes universalizing the trans look as central to achieving a complete realization of a trans-reading identity; yet, at the same time, this articulation of a trans-reading identity must not ignore the specificity and significance of the transgender subject in its refusal to "read for" this subject by, on the other hand, presenting an undifferentiated or unproblematic universalization of this point of view. Halberstam asserts the subversive potentialities of universalizing the transgender look in reference to how this look can be realized in film: "This narrative strategy [of embedding] effectively *universalizes queerness* within this specific cinematic space" (emphasis in original, 94). Universalizing the queer concept of a postmodernist transgenderism calls upon readers to abandon prescriptive and restrictive gender identities that are constructed and disseminated so as to shore up the supposed "naturalness" of heterosexuality and to embrace instead the instability and fluidity of all gender identities. However, it is crucial to recognize and note not only the possibilities but also the dangers of this
approach so as to avoid an idealistic and utopian presentation of transgenderism as a
life lived freely without gender boundaries, thereby erasing the too-often dangerous
and violent reality of such lived experience. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*,
Audre Lorde counters her white lesbian lover’s claim that “we were all outsiders and
all equal in our outsiderhood” (203):

*Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls
together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not
enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were
different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were
different.* Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different
alliances. (emphasis in original, 226)

Just as Lorde emphasizes that all members of a subculture are not identical in their
minority status, so too must this project (or any other like it) recognize the necessary
differences and variations of the transgender subject. Therefore, critics and readers
alike cannot and must not presume a unified transgender subject that is a member of a
homogenous transgender category with clear-cut boundaries; also they must also
acknowledge that transgenderism is not a utopic ideal of transcending gender but a
lived fact of many people’s lives that puts them at greater risk for violence,
condemnation and discrimination. Accordingly, the interpretative model proposed by
this project, in addition to excavating the transgender characters and themes of
Woolf, Carter, and Winterson’s texts, also recognizes the significant and crucial
relationship between reading, cultural and political practice. As Schweickart and
Flynn note,

*The concern to develop reading strategies that attend to the otherness of the
text is of a piece with the concern to attend to other people with different*
experiences and perspectives, to resist totalizing interpretive frameworks, and to recognize multiple systems of social and cultural domination. (18)

Effectively, a trans-reading identity is one wherein the reader embeds him/herself simultaneously in the instability, ambiguity and ceaseless transformation of language and gender, embracing the complex interaction between the two, so as not only to re-orient him/herself to the text but also to re-orient him/herself critically to the culture and society in which s/he finds him/herself.

Consequently, a trans-reading identity presumes reading to be an inherently shared activity, a dynamic trans-action between author, narrator, reader, text, and a myriad of discourses in which each is embedded, and trans texts highlight the reader's role as a performer in the creation of a text's meaning, rather than a passive recipient of it. In his essay "Interaction between Text and Reader," Iser locates the reader's engagement with the text in his/her task to fill-in a series of gaps that inevitably occur within the text, remarking that "the blanks leave open the connection between textual perspectives and patterns—in other words, they induce the reader to perform basic operations within the text" (112). Trans texts, by featuring an ambiguously gendered character, automatically present the reader with one obvious blank, but this blank is merged with other blanks that foreground the reader's involvement in producing the text's meaning and that emphasize as well the reader's involvement in the actual act of gendering and sexing individuals. As Kearns summarizes, "[A]lthough a text usually contains gender markers, gendering and sexing are functions of the interaction between text and audience, functions that highlight the Western need for attaching a social, cultural, and biological identity to every voice we encounter" (emphasis in original, 140). By leaving the definitive answer to a character's gender identity blank, these trans texts force the reader to
confront his/her role in gendering and sexing other individuals and critically examine the necessity and drive to categorize people according to cultural, social and political dictates. Significantly, because trans texts simultaneously presume the reader’s active engagement with the production of meaning in the text, highlight the reader’s participation in the gendering of individuals, and deconstruct various binaries that regulate and prescribe gender identities as well as textual meaning, they “nullify the assumption that language imparts cultural ‘truths,’ thwart the process of critical interpretation, breaking the complicity between reader and writer” (Friedman and Fuchs 27) and instead emphasize the collusion between reader and text. Woolf too describes literature as a “common product” that is “written by one hand, but so moulded in transition that the author [has] no sense of property in it” (“Anon” 395, emphasis added). Significantly, Woolf notes the process of reading as a dynamic process occurring between the text and reader, not the text and author, and her use of the term “transition” accentuates the change that occurs to both the reader and text and introduces the possibility that this transition is never complete but is an always ongoing process.

In practice then, when a reader, regardless of sex or gender, encounters an ambiguously gendered character in any text, s/he becomes preoccupied with determining, i.e. categorizing and labeling, the definitive gender of that character in order to orient him/herself in relation to that character and to create a stable reading world in which to enter. However, in those particular texts that merge the reader’s preoccupation with filling in the gap of the character’s gender identity with filling in the gaps of other elements of the text like plot, point of view, and setting that are also indefinite—what this project describes as trans texts—the reader’s position within the text becomes unsettled in a way that disrupts not only his/her relation to the text but
also his/her relation to gender categories. Iser details how the particular nature of the gaps within a certain text modulate the reader’s experience within the text: “We may infer already from this change in position that the blank exercises significant control over all the operations that occur within the referential field of the wandering viewpoint” (114). The particular trans texts at the center of this project illustrate Iser’s idea of how the absences within a text dictate the reader’s positioning and orientation towards the text; the most obvious blank featured in trans texts is a character’s gender identity, but other blanks include the narrator’s reliability, the source of a text’s narrative voice, the sequence and location of events, and the “truth” or “reality” of certain occurrences. These blanks, or gaps, accumulate within the narrative so as to unsettle the reader’s orientation to the text and to force him/her beyond his/her conventional assumptions about gender, identity, reality, and language. As Kauer describes, “[O]nly if the reader is shifted out of his/her own range of experience can something happen with the reading subject” (50), and this “something” that happens in these trans texts is that the reading subject becomes perpetually unstable. Accordingly, the reader finds him/herself assuming various and contradictory roles and must become adaptive and accommodating of ceaselessly changing situations, navigating a variety of “holes” or absences in these trans texts and coming to occupy a trans-reading identity that is ceaselessly transforming and that parallels the transgender characters’ own identity as an endlessly unsettled transformation.

Although this project has focused on Orlando, The Passion of New Eve and Written on the Body because they most obviously feature, in Halberstam’s words, “a transgender gaze capable of seeing through the present to a future elsewhere” (77), thereby critically constructing a trans-reading identity as an interpretive framework
through which to approach these texts, other texts also invite just such a reading position, depending on the nature of the gaps present within them. Woolf reminds readers to broaden the scope of their reading, both in who and what is read but also in how it is read, asserting that all texts whether deemed classics or not are capable of working upon readers and inducing them into a perpetual transformation of self:

For we are apt to forget, reading, as we tend to do, only the masterpieces of a bygone age how great a power the body of literature possesses to impose itself: how it will not suffer itself to be read passively, but takes us and reads us; flouts our preconceptions; questions principles which we had got into the habit of taking for granted, and, in fact, splits us into two parts as we read, making us, even as we enjoy, yield our ground or stick to our guns. (Common Reader 49)

Winterson echoes Woolf’s sentiment about the power of texts to alter readers’ perceptions not only of themselves and others but of the world that they inhabit: “The book does not reproduce me, it re-defines me, pushes at my boundaries, shatters the palings that guard my heart. Strong texts work along the borders of our minds and alter what already exists” (Art Objects 26). Yet, this power does not reside in the book alone but grows out of the ever-changing relationship between the text and its reader, giving rise to a reader who is challenged by the text but who, in turn, challenges the text itself; a trans text unsettles a myriad of dichotomous categorizations that reside in texts as well as readers and that seek to determine identity, value and meaning. Accordingly, a trans-reading identity characterizes reading as a trans-formative exchange between the text and reader, wherein both work upon each other in a dynamic and complex revaluation of literary, cultural and political discourses that foregrounds the transgender subject.
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