

THERE IS NO I IN TRANS\*: COMMUNITY CONCIIOUSNESS  
IN TRANS\* AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
AND MEMOIR

by

Luke Andrew Schmidt, B.A.

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Committee Members:

Geneva Gano, Chair

James Reeves

Ruben Zecena

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
Cis	Cisgender
Het/Hetero	Heterosexual
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Plus

## I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout my college career, I have found myself interested in queer memoir and autobiographies as a means of interacting with queer experiences other than my own. These memoirs often provide the author a space to reflect on their own queer identity and work to reconcile personal, political, and social issues within their life story. This has led me to engage with a number of trans\*<sup>1</sup> memoirs as an attempt to better understand the lives and writing of trans\* communities whom I knew less about. In reading their memoirs, I found myself drawn to the strong sense of community that I saw in many of their works. While memoir and the autobiographical genre are often critiqued on the basis of the author's portrayal of self, I am more interested with how memoirs centering around trans\* lives incorporate a community presence within their own narratives. How does the "I" of the author connect to a "we" in their own journey? Much of trans\* upbringing and journey through transition integrally involves mentors, guides, and chosen family. Television shows, movies, and documentaries like *Pose* (2018-2021), *Legendary* (2020-present) and *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020) all present trans\* experience not just a discovery of self, but as a finding of community. In "'Bear Witness' and 'Build Legacies': Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Trans\* Autobiography," Sarah Rondot elucidates this facet of trans\* memoir as a response to Margo V Perkins's understanding of black writing, stating "I understand trans\*

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<sup>1</sup> Within my thesis, I will use the term *trans\** over other forms of the phrase. My reasoning is similar to that of Rondot, as she states, "The asterisk suggests that there are many ways to understand the term, and that the term itself is historically and culturally situated in the twenty-first century U.S. Based on the fast-paced nature of the field, the asterisk points to these potential ambivalences and limitations" (530). The language of queer identity, based around gender and sexuality, fluctuates consistently as nuances of labels better describe individuals and their experiences. Even in my own research, and in the included text, there exists a wide diversity of identification that is better expressed in an open-ended term like "trans\*."



autobiography within contemporary trans\* movements as ‘tied to impending struggle’ in ways that ‘bear witness’ to historical realities and ‘build legacies’ for future generations” (529). Essentially, trans\* autobiography, in its current and urgent form, extends to the dynamic social movements that are happening outside of the static space of their narratives and contributes to a growing community. Though this is part of the catalyst for Rondot’s argument, she shifts back to focusing on the power of the individual and their authority to manipulate society. I want to take this idea further by exploring how communities are built in trans\* memoir. I am interested in how the authors of trans\* memoirs recognize or dismiss community within their own narratives. Though the inclusion of community into the memoir can be done in a manner that reshapes society and the pockets of microculture that these minority groups hold, I am concerned with their inclusion as a means for the author to either expand or limit the scope of their narrative. The more these memoirists recognize other individuals and struggles within the trans\* community and include anecdotes from people who have different experiences from their own, the wider the scope of trans\* experience they can represent.

Often autobiography requires a holistic “I” to sustain its purpose, which requires stability within the self that is not present within the trans\* self. The trans\* self is fluid and dynamic in its experiences and journey. Due to the instability of the trans\* self, and the fact that trans\* memoir often deals with present and urgent issues, trans\* autobiographical voices often produce a multiplicity of self that then leans a communal effort for support and to remain radical in its purpose. As political and civil rights attacks on trans\* individuals continue to rise, the pressure on trans\* voices to remain radical and political increases as well. In a society that constantly pushes back against trans\* identity,

simply existing as trans\* becomes a political act. When it comes to telling one's journey, the trans\* autobiographical voice cannot simultaneously hold a radical position, in the face of politicization, and maintain a stable self that the autobiographical genre has traditionally constructed itself on. To produce a stable self that is often found in the tradition of the autobiographical genre, the memoirist would need to deradicalize their own identity to better fit hetero- or cis-normative ideals, often producing what would be considered a narrative that is both cohesive and culturally intelligible. Though I focus on the author's unstable "I" in relation to the larger trans\* community and how it gives way to a communal "we" (or denies it in some cases), I also recognize that this unstable "I" can be produced in the multiplicity of the of the individual. A multiplicity of the individual can be seen through gender transitions and a disconnection from their identities pre-transition. In the case of non-binary, genderfluid, or others similar to them, the multiplicity continues to exist within the individual self. In the texts I've examined in this project, the stability of the self is deeply influenced by the level of communal consciousness the author chooses to include within their memoir.

When a trans\* author includes the wider trans\* community, the range of trans\* experience opens up and diversifies the conversation present in the memoir. The queer self, in this case the trans\* self, is often built within and on top of a community of individuals. Often they find mentors and inspiration to be themselves when they see others living their truths out in the open. Mock's memoir, for instance, constructs an environment where trans\* individuals can thrive as a community, better themselves, and lift each other up. Even when Mock writes about overcoming great odds, she finds ways envelop herself within her community. Though she recognizes that this is a privilege, her

memoir conveys a sense of optimism and radical community.

When community support is missing, as in Wark's case in *Reverse Cowgirl* (2020), a distinct disconnect and feeling of loss becomes prevalent within the narrative. When this happens, the trans\* individual loses ties back to the trans\* community and struggle to fully conceptualize their identity. Because gender is a relational construct, when the memoirist does not see their identity practices represented, the avenues of expression become limited. I chose to bring Wark's piece into this project because it speaks to a much different experience than Mock's does. Due to the time period in which she was transitioning, in the 1960s through 80s, Wark's relationship to the trans\* community was very limited and constricted.

While often the use of the trans\* community is positively deployed within LGBTQ memoirs, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2016) presents the reality of the trans\* identity being stripped from a sense of community and reduced in its complexity to serve another individual. Though it is not a common occurrence among LGBTQ memoirs, reduction and manipulation of trans\* identity present within *The Argonauts* brings attention to the fact that not all trans\* visibility is positive. In this case of community being pulled away from trans\* identity, the memoir nullifies the relational nature of trans\* existence. In this case, Nelson's partner Harry's trans\* identity is separated from a sense of trans\* community, which effectively eliminates the multiplicity of self, quite ironically in fact, as Harry is genderfluid. All three memoirs explored here consider the effect of community on the stability of the self in different manners, creating a deeper importance on communal purpose.

I would like to also note my own stakes in this thesis and my own positionality to

transness. As a white cisgender man, whose place within LGBTQ communities emerges through my sexuality, I cannot personally speak to trans\* experience or the specific struggles trans\* individuals have to go through in their daily lives. Due to this, I have done my best to read and include sources in my bibliography that go past the scope of this thesis, and the discipline of English and Literature, in an attempt to further educate myself about trans\* experiences. In addition, my intent in this thesis is to analyze the author's inclusion of the trans\* community in their writing.

### **Genealogy of Queer Life Writing**

Queer life writing serves as a vehicle for radical discursive resistance to cis-heteronormativity and a vessel for queer history that has often been lost to oppression and violence. Memoirs such as Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Sean Strub's *Body Counts: A Memoir of Activism, Sex, and Survival* (2014), and Christina Crosby's *A Body, Undone* (2016), just to name a few, all center around the overcoming of life-threatening oppression and trauma in order to bring the queer narrative to life. In her discussion of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) as an example of queer archival practices, Valerie Rohy meditates on queer literature as a whole, writing, "What does it mean to be historical? The question is particularly charged in queer communities, where the remedy for repression is an ad hoc ethic of full disclosure. Perhaps as a legacy of the closet, queer literature is dominated by autobiography and rooted in personal testimony" (343). In addition, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001) state, "Coming-out and queer narratives make

visible formerly invisible subjects. Gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgendered subjects inscribe stories of the cost of passing as heteronormative and the liberatory possibilities of being validated in their chosen sexual identities” (152). Queer memoir is a space to make previously silent voices heard. Queer memoir allows a celebration to be had about being out and proud that has the possibility of inspiring others. Seeing openly queer people in literature, and in media in general, shows the possibility of queer lives and existence that has a long history of being silenced and oppressed.

Queer autobiography disrupts the conventions of the autobiographical genre, which is heavily centered around cis-hetero-normative, white ideals. For one, queer identity is unstable. According to Brian Loftus, “The notion of a queer autobiography is a contradiction of terms. If the genre of autobiography demands the stability of both an ‘I’ and its genealogy to inhabit a coherent narrative, ‘queer’ disallows the neat articulation or possibility of either” (31). The main topics of sexuality and gender in queer life writing function as fluid identities: in other words, they are definitively unstable and often seem incoherent, even to the autobiographical author. In addition, as Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) argues, queer lives often break from the heteronormative timeline of marriage, reproduction, and death. For these reasons among others, queer life writing radically challenges traditional forms of narratology within the autobiographical genre as they attempt to disrupt, rather than uphold, the narratives of heteronormative tropes traditionally found in autobiography.

As a subgenre of queer memoir, trans\* memoir comes from its own definitive history within the genre. It may fall under the same community in terms of LGBTQIA+ or under the queer community umbrella, but the trans\* memoirist’s struggles with society

are significantly different. Though queer studies emerges in relation to feminist theory, the gender goals of feminist theory and of trans\* theory are quite different. Evan Vipond points out the distinct differences in queer versus trans\* narratives, stating, “Classifying trans life writing along with the LGBTQ coming-out narratives, for example, subsumes gender variance and trans identity under queer (i.e. nonheterosexual) sexualities. However, trans narratives are distinct from sexual narratives because they assume different subjects of inquiry: gender identity versus sexual orientation” (13). In addition, Vipond expresses great concern about equating trans\* memoirs and the transitions one might make to those of the traditional gay or lesbian coming out story, pushing against the conflation of gender and sexualities together. The critique made by Vipond is that LGBTQ narratives place sexuality at their forefront, where trans\* narratives place gender at the forefront of their own. Both, often, deal with navigating gender and sexuality, but where the importance is placed highlights different social and political struggles. The experiences of coming out in regards to sexuality and coming out in regards of gender may have some overlap, but different political and social realities that create distinct differences exist between the two. Vipond pushes back against the idea of equating these forms of narrative, especially Jonathan Ames’ notion that “trans autobiographies and memoirs share a similar structural model with the Bildungsroman—the coming-of-age novel—in which the author experiences a gender-dysphoric childhood, moves away from home, and undergoes a ‘transformation’ (10-11). Vipond’s response hints at the fact that the comparison is reductive to the diversity of trans\* experiences, “This reading is an oversimplification of the process of self-determination that trans persons go through and reduces transitioning to three definitive stages or ‘acts’: pre-transition, GCS [Genital

Confirmation Surgery] and post-transition. However, transitioning is not always a linear process, nor does it look the same for everyone” (11). This is not to say that coming out and coming-of-age narratives are not messy or come with their own challenges, but their complications need to be separated generically.

Overall, it is important to understand the nuances that trans\* memoirs might hold in their relation to the larger queer canon. Observing and analyzing where gender and sexuality show up and where the author places emphasis on their place within the memoirs can give insight into how the author wishes to present their trans\* identity. Mock places her gender at the forefront of her memoir, but the moments where sexuality come up are often important to the intimate perceptions others have of her. In contrast, Wark deviates from these conventions where sexuality and gender have very similar emphasis, almost to the point that they are indistinguishable from each other due to how closely she intertwines them in her experience.

### **Historiography of Trans\* Narratology**

The history of trans\* life narratives stems from medical origins that center around medical legitimization. This history catalyzes many of the trans\* narrative tropes that still pervade modern trans\* storytelling. Early trans\* narrative theorist Jay Prosser lays down a great deal of groundwork for critiquing the genre of trans\* memoir and autobiography in his book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), more specifically his chapter “Mirror Images.” Within this chapter he writes about applying Lacan’s mirror stage to trans\* lives and narratives and maps out key historical concepts

within the trans\* autobiographical genre. As he demonstrates, the history of trans\* life writing and narrative construction comes largely from a clinical background, linking back to when trans\* individuals who wanted gender affirming surgery would have to prove their case as to why they have always felt the gender they identify with over the gender they were assigned at birth. Prosser tracks this, writing:

The autobiographical act for the transsexual begins even before the published autobiography—namely, in the clinician’s office where, in order to be diagnosed as transsexual, s/he must recount a transsexual autobiography. The story of a strong, early, and persistent transgendered identification is required by the clinical authorities, the psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists who traditionally function as the gatekeepers to the means of transsexual ‘conversion.’ Whether s/he publishes an autobiography or not, then, every transsexual, as a transsexual, is originally an autobiographer, Narrative is also a kind of second skin: the story the transsexual must weave around the body in order that this body may be ‘read.’ (101)

Prosser explains how trans\* life narratives have always been about archiving the body, pinning down the points in which the external was not aligned with the internal. These narratives were constructed under the necessity of personal survival and to prove oneself to others. They often required narrative cohesion and legibility to be taken as serious accounts of a trans\* individual’s life and trans\* identity. As Prosser points out, this requires a very specific set of events to play out in order to fit an artificial narrative that must take place. He explains, “Reproduced in autobiography, transsexuality emerges as an archetypal story structured around shared tropes and fulfilling a particular narrative organization of consecutive stages: suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally the arrival ‘home’—reassignment” (Prosser 101). Prosser also explicitly touches on the aspect of gender dysphoria becoming integral, stating, “Gender dysphoria (acute gender discomfort) constitutes a medical narrative’s overriding theme, and assertions of being



‘trapped in the wrong body,’ as we have seen, its most famous rhetorical trope” (104). As this becomes a medical formula that then turns into a narrative formula, it creates an artificial “right way” to discover one’s trans\* self and then forces others to force their story into this mold in order to receive the care they need. It has become the mainstream arc of a legible (cis-normatively understood) narrative in the memoir and autobiographical market. With the changing of society and progressive understandings of gender and the trans\* identity, these tropes and this narrative arc have diminished in their roles as harsh requirements for the genre.

As society and culture shift to more open ideas of gender and a spectrum understanding of transness, conventions of the transsexual autobiography shift as well. Speaking to the narrative tropes Prosser discusses, Rondot’s article, “‘Bear Witness’ and ‘Build Legacies’: Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Trans\* Autobiography,” theorizes a twentieth century memoirs’ push against the traditional “wrong body” by narrative by presenting stories that “narrate continuous subjects rather than subjects split between pre- and post- transition” (527). She specifically examines Alex Drummond’s *Grrl Alex: A Personal Journey to a Transgender Identity* and Jennifer Finney Boylan’s *I’m Looking Through You: Growing Up Haunted: A Memoir* as they “put forth a new way to understand and narrate trans\* identity by exploring rather than justifying trans\* experience” (527). She views trans\* autobiography as radical forms of literature “which have the capacity to alter the shape of oppressive systems in which people exist” (Rondot 529). The prevalence of the “wrong body” makes its way into contemporary work due to the fact that it was “so widespread, [so] contemporary trans\* authors continue to reference it, whether or not they believe it to be personally relevant” (Rondot 532). The

historical significance of trans\* life writing mentioned by Prosser pervades present literature. To deviate from earlier trans\* autobiographers, Rondot observes that many contemporary trans\* life writers reclaim agency by identifying in ways that depathologize trans\* identity. Many defy medical legitimization discourse both in narrative and in practice. Others submit to the medical model's normalizing paradigm yet subvert it back onto itself, illuminating the contradictions within an institution that relies on fixing trans\* bodies that are not biologically disordered. Through these simple yet profound tactics, contemporary trans\* autobiographers create a new epistemology of trans\* identity (Rondot 535). In other words, Rondot recognizes that traditional tropes of trans\* narratives are still prevalent in contemporary trans\* autobiography, but that the tropes are redeployed as a means of subverting their own historical significance. For Rondot there is a possibility to use what already exists within the canon and manipulate it into the radical. Lauren Berlant, in a 2010 conversation with Jay Prosser, poses a similar comment in regards to normalization and conventionality in autobiography, stating "But only sometimes is the taking up of generic form the taking up of normative norm... Sometimes conventionality is a defense against norms too, a way to induce proximity without assimilation... and sometimes it's a way of creating another, counterconventional space" (181). With this though, there is still a cohesion to a narrative of cis-normative legibility that Rondot is speaking towards as being present within twentieth century trans\* autobiography.

Where Rondot examines traditional tropes and their subversions in contemporary trans\* autobiography, Evan Vipond, in "Becoming Culturally (Un)intelligible: Exploring the Terrain of Trans Life Writing," calls for a more radical approach to the analysis of

autobiographical writing that does away with Judith Butler's concept of cultural intelligibility. Vipond understands the persistence of legibility of trans\* life-writing as a defense mechanism, noting "the desire and need for trans life writers to make their story legible is not simply a matter of identification or belonging; it may mean the difference between life and death. It is therefore understandable that trans persons may (re)construct narrative tropes while sharing their life stories in order to make themselves legible to their readers" (2). The more legible that a trans\* narrative is to the mainstream (cisgender) reader, the less threatening it becomes to the reader and the gender binary itself. Similar to visible legibility in the way of "passing," trans\* authors may be pressured to simplify or manipulate their narratives to already established tropes that general audiences may more easily recognize. With that, though, a lot is lost in the complexity of trans\* experience. This legibility and intelligibility risks diminishing intersectional voices, as Vipond critiques:

Intelligibility, however, is contingent on one's proximity to whiteness and being able to articulate one's gender according to white norms and standards of beauty. In repeating the same narrative tropes over and over, mainstream trans narratives are largely confined to a singular normative *white* narrative, preventing the proliferation of gender identities and trans subjectivities. (3)

Vipond's implication here, especially as it relates to Rondot's theory and its connection to the clinical history, is that the effort to be legible to the general public, even if appearing to be subversive in its approach. Vipond believes that forcing a continuity in narrative is harmful to the author's own journey, writing, "Constructing a coherent narrative, however, may mean erasing or obscuring part of one's identity and experiences" (5). To create a continuous narrative that expresses a single gender in hopes of maintaining cultural (aligned with cisgender-heterosexual) legibility may erase key

points of gender confusions and denies theories of queer temporality.

Some of the traditional tropes discussed by Prosser and Rondot come with their own set of challenges too, such as the “wrong body” narrative. Vipond pushes against the “wrong body” trope as a dangerous standard to reinforce, writing:

I’m not suggesting that trans persons do not, or should not, identify with the wrong-body discourse. Rather, I argue that this discourse is ultimately constraining because it re-essentializes gender as inherently biological, shifting the site of gendered truth from genitals to the brain. Although the metaphor offers trans authors a sympathetic and culturally intelligible narrative with which *some* identify, it constitutes a closed rather than open normativity that does not allow for the flourishing of *other* trans subjectivities and experiences. (15)

While the spectrum of trans\* identity becomes broader and more identities fall under the non-binary and agender umbrellas, prevailing narratives confine or overtake their own lived experiences. Even the notion of the “wrong body” has changed, as the original context, as explained in Prosser’s work, was very much clinically driven. As trans\* subjectivities expand, so do the ways in which trans\* narratives are told. Again, Vipond is not demonizing the “wrong body” narrative, but rather asking the reader and critics of trans\* narratives to not pigeonhole trans\* narratives into this specific trope.

A similar sentiment to Vipond’s is echoed a conversation between Che Gossett and Julianna Huxtable in the collection of essays and conversations titled *Trap Doors* (2016). Their overarching theme is that some forms of trans\* visibility become trap doors for the rest of the community. Visibility chances tokenization, and therefore, the story of some, especially those that fit into the narratives Vipond mentions, run the risk of being upheld as “right” ways of being trans\* by a cisnormative society. This has the possibility of raising the risk of violence and forced adherence to artificial “passing” standards placed on those that stray from the binary. As Huxtable comments, “That’s the anxiety

that I've gotten from the whole situation, because I think that the policing and the violence against trans people have a direct relationship to that increase in visibility. The people who gain visibility—those whom the media deem to be relatively 'passable' in one sense or another—end up being used as examples to police trans people generally” (42). When narratives concern themselves with such conventions, and legibility becomes the only validating attribute, it leaves those who find themselves outside of the binary in a precarious position in public and in literature. Situations in which a trans\* individual is “passing” can create arbitrary standards that those who do not pass or have no framework of “passing” as it simply does not exist for their gender identity. Conversations such as this have occurred regarding non-binary identity and conversations of pressured androgyny. In both instances of public and literature, using the notion of “passing” as a standard often forces a reductive manipulation of self and reduce the trans\* individual's complexity.

Vipond's conclusion to the problem is to encourage readers to widen their prospective readings of these trans\* narratives, arguing “Trans life writing must be approached through an open understanding of trans identities—one that allows for multiple and even contradictory narratives, which may or may not be legible to (cisgender) readers” (18). Vipond expresses the risk that “Embracing unintelligibility however may mean relinquishing one's humanness [linked to social cisnormative acceptance]—the cost of which can be dire, if not deadly” (18). Vipond recognizes the fluidity of gender and trans\* identity and that the process of existing and transitioning can be messy. To force a narrative into continuity, and in turn intelligibility, is to eliminate the natural messiness that often exists within these identities.

Understanding the historical pressures and constructions of trans\* memoirs can provide insight into how certain narratives are produced and which audiences may be consuming them. Especially in Vipond's call to action on the reader's role in trans\* narrative construction, mainstream audiences are going to have a different set of expectations of the author than someone writing for a more academic audience. The mainstream audience that Mock is writing for differs greatly from the more theoretical and academic audience that Nelson and Wark are addressing, so how each one is constructing their life writing falls under different pressures described by these theorists.

### **Historiography of Trans\* Autobiographical Voice and the "I"**

Jay Prosser describes the narrative form of what would now be referred to as trans\* autobiography or memoir as such: "In transsexual autobiography the trajectories of transsexuality and autobiography are entwined in complex ways, narrative and bodily forms conducting each other. To begin with, the narrative transitions of autobiography allow the somatic transitions of transsexuality in an immediate and material sense" (101). The body, as to be expected, plays a major role in the narrative arc in any trans\* narrative. The body serves as the basis for identification and change. It is where the discovery happens and where the author often highlights their journey. Prosser also takes interest in the autobiographical "I" and how it relates to the mirror stages of Lacan, splitting and then coming back together through the process of autobiographical reproduction. He explains:

Autobiography, like the transsexual's first look in the mirror, breaks apart the subject into the self reflected upon and the self that reflects; autobiography, like

transsexuality, instantiates (or reveals) a difference in the subject. In transsexual autobiography the split between the ‘I’ of the *bios* and the ‘I’ of the *graph*, the past self written and the present self writing is heightened by the story of sex change. Autobiography brings into relief the split of transsexual life; transsexual history brings into gendered relief the difference present in all autobiography between the subject of the enunciation and the subject enunciating. I was a woman, I write as a man. (Prosser 102)

In trans\* memoir, there is always a distinct diegetic gap: the once was and the now that is. Though identifications do not need to be determinate, the core of trans\* story telling is the transformation of the “I,” where the author comes to understand themselves in a new light, especially in regards to their gender. Prosser’s implications are that of a complete journey in his sentence “I was a woman, I write as a man,” as he is dealing specifically with transsexual autobiography, but the idea of the “I” that is *bios* and the “I” that is *graph* still rings through the expanding spectrum of trans\* experience. The completion of the journey has become less of a concern as labels and definitions shift, creating even less linearity in lives lived, but the difference still occurs in the written text as it would for all autobiographical work.

In addition to these theories of trans\* autobiography and memoir, a great deal of trans\* theory adds to the available pool of ways to look at trans\* lives. Jack Halberstam deals with trans\* identity specifically in his part-memoir part-theory book, *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2018), theorizing about the shifts in pronouns and understanding of gender in recent years. Halberstam meditates on the multiplicity of the trans\* self. In relation the use of the pronoun *they*, he writes, “The use of the plural for the singular, the referencing of the many over the individual, contains within it... a small step toward utopia, a conjuring of collectivity in the place of individualism and recognition. We might add that genders only emerge in relation to

other bodies and within multiply oriented and complex populations” (12). It is mostly the second part that I have found myself most interested in. To understand one’s gender is not often an isolated journey, where the individual fully conceptualizes their identity by just looking inward, but where they come to an understanding of self through trans\* visibility and community. This sometimes presents itself as the individual seeing a trans\* person in public and seeing their identity reflected back to them. They find themselves inspired by mentors or other trans\* individuals around them. Gender is a collective construct that is shaped by community. In relation to autobiography specifically, Rondot speaks to this idea, stating, “Only after internal narratives shift can ze work to change society. At the same time, because gender is always relational, there is no way to secure personal agency without simultaneously altering society. As a genre and practice, autobiography offers trans\* people a social and political platform from which to resist and dominate discourse and encourage collective knowledge” (547). Due to the fact that gender functions in a relational manner, trans\* autobiographies that manipulate gender challenge preconceived notions, allowing them to make political and social statements in their writing, highlighting their radical nature.

## **Chapter Summaries**

In Chapter 1, I analyze Janet Mock’s use of communal awareness to construct a “we” in her memoir *Redefining Realness*. Within the memoir, Mock recognizes her own privilege to survive in the world due to her beauty and feminine appearance, causing survivor’s guilt. This survivor’s guilt drives her to write with the community in mind.



With this motivation, Mock writes trans\* struggles and lives into her own narrative. To represent the wide range of trans\* issues that the community is faced with, she includes several statistics and stereotypes about trans\* individuals that are included within her own narrative. Often these issues relate to Mock's own struggles within the memoir but expand the reach of her own story. In addition to the more fact-based information that Mock includes, she also writes the lives of other trans\* individuals that influenced her at key moments in her own journey. Though there are many trans\* people who influence Mock and whom she includes to help create community within her memoir, the two I focus most on are Kumu from Mock's childhood and Genie from Mock's later surgical transition. Within these anecdotes of other trans\* individuals, Mock often focuses on parts of their lives that differ from her own or that emphasize the social impact they had for the trans\* community. In addition, Mock includes the range of trans\* voices in her own writing as a means of pushing against the risks of being tokenized as a "right" way to be trans\* and highlight the multitude of trans\* experience.

In Chapter 2, I critique Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. I examine Nelson's rejection of a wider trans\* community while at the same time she situates her trans\* partner Harry Dodge as a central figure in her memoir. In contrast to Mock, Nelson creates an individual approach to queer identity and distances herself from anyone besides Harry. Within her narrative, Nelson constructs a queer identity solely off of her relation to Harry and his gender fluidity, mostly prominently through her alignment of her pregnancy, centered on the body's transformation with childbearing, and Harry's transition through hormone replacement therapy and top surgery. Through her intimate alignment with Harry's own transition and identity, she pushes against heteronormative

labels and impressions that are placed on her by family members, friends, and outsiders and denies their pressures. Her efforts to push away all heteronormativity result in a denial of trans\* involvement or fulfilling representation within her narrative, even though Harry is a key figure. Her memoir verges on damaging as Harry's trans\* identity can be seen only as a tool to give her access to a queer identity and nothing more. By reducing the purpose of trans\* visibility within her own memoir to simply supporting her own, queer identity, Nelson denies a trans\* community "we" to have a space. This effectively deradicalizes the trans\* identity in her narrative.

In Chapter 3, I examine McKenzie Wark's *Reverse Cowgirl* and how the lack of community accessibility affects trans\* life writing. Wark's memoir centers around her inability to properly articulate the feeling of transness within her body and to have the language to fully express her identity, as she was already having to deal with homophobic slurs and was not part of the underground trans\* scene of the 1960s. This lack of language leads Wark to associate the differences in her gender and biological sex as descriptors of sexual positioning, translating a male/female binary into a penetrator/penetrated binary. By reconstructing the binary from gender to sexual positioning, to understand the sensations she feels within her body, Wark is led to a non-traditional gender expression that rejects traditional forms of gender dysphoria for gender euphoria through sexual acts with her partners. While sexual partners such as Glen and Leslie lay the groundwork for Wark to construct her gender euphoric identity, Edward becomes the focus for sexual partnership, as his manipulative nature over Wark's fragile identity construction causes her to be dependent on his validation, through sex, to feel fulfilled in her own identity. As a piece of reflection written at a time in which trans\*

language is significantly more available than at the time of Wark's experience, the diegetic gap she creates and how she highlights her own sense of confusion pushes the importance of community and the language that comes about from it in one's ability to understand their identity.

## II. WRITING WITH COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS: JANET MOCK'S

### *REDEFINING REALNESS*

Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (2014) follows Mock's life from childhood to adulthood, focusing on her transition and identity as a trans\* woman. She recounts early signs of femininity and the susceptibility that placed on her later in life when she experienced consistent sexual assault in her teen years. As she continued to grow, she saw her trans\* identity reflected in the community she found in Hawaii, which influenced her experience of coming out. From there, she faced economic struggles that coerced her into sex work so that she could pay for her gender reassignment surgery that she eventually travels to Thailand for. In addition to her own life story, Mock closely aligns her writing with the trans\* community and both celebrates them and highlights their struggles in society. As she writes her community's story alongside her own, Mock constructs a generative "we" by providing didactic moments, such as including terms and statistics, as well as anecdotes of other trans\* individuals, spliced between scenes of her own narrative. Mock constructs the generative "we" around the necessity for more representation of the trans\* community as a whole. In addition to supplying more representation, she also attempts to push back against risks of tokenization as a "right way to be trans\*" by presenting a spectrum of trans\* individuals and lived-experiences of transness. Ultimately Mock constructs a memoir that combines personal narrative with a strong sense of community consciousness that broadens its scope past the author and attempts to bring attention to the wider trans\* community.

Mock's *Redefining Realness* centers itself on the very topic of trans\* visibility

and the lack trans\* representation expressed by Huxtable in her conversation with Gossett in the introduction. Mock begins by explaining her trans\* identity in relation to what she saw in the media, “Growing up, I learned that being trans was something you did not take pride in; therefore, I yearned to separate myself from the dehumanizing depictions of trans women that I saw in popular culture,” listing figures such as Venus Xtravaganza, Lois Einhorn, and “‘tranny hooker’ credits seen everywhere from *Sex and the City* to every *Law and Order* and *CSI* franchise” (xv). She interprets these representations to mean that “trans women were subject to pain and punch lines. Instead of proclaiming that I was not a plot device to be laughed at, I spent my younger years internalizing and fighting those stereotypes” (Mock xv). For Mock, these negative representations of trans\* women overwhelmed her and forced her to suppress her trans\* identity as a means of safety. The representative trans\* individuals she lists were often killed or humiliated by cisgender men. Media representation and reality split though for Mock, “As I remained silent, though, I became aware of the fact that behind these limited media images and society’s skewed perceptions, there were *real* girls out there. I knew these girls. I’d grown up with them... These girls and women were not given the same opportunities and concessions with which I’d been blessed with” (xv). Much like Gossett and Huxtable’s conversation on increased visibility and the policing of trans\* bodies, Mock witnesses a skewed perception of trans\* individuals by the media. Even when media representation is positive, it often highlights trans\* identities who have fully transitioned across the binary and “pass” within the male and female models set by society. Often, they exclude those who are mid-transition, those who choose to not have gender-affirming surgery or hormones, or those who do not conform to the binaries, such as agender, non-binary, and

gender fluid. Mainstream representation also often simplifies the complexity of trans\* individuals and identity or, as Mock describes, trans\* persons are often silenced, sometimes through murder, forcibly stopping them from telling their story or living their life.

Mock's recognition of the difference between the representation she saw in the media and the reality of trans\* women existing in her day-to-day life sparks her writing style and purpose to write with advocacy in mind. In light of her own privilege of writing her memoir and being able to survive long enough to have a story to tell, Mock understands the need for her voice to be heard and her ability to bring others into the narrative with her. Kaila Adia Story highlights the importance of seeing black queer representation, writing, "It legitimized the idea that when one's personal experiences are analyzed through wider cultural, political, and social prisms, it engenders new theoretical, methodological, and lived possibilities for any and all that seek racial, sexual, and/or gendered empowerment" (36). Mock's writing does just that by including a wide range of trans\* individuals from different backgrounds and journeys through transitions. To do so, she presents her readers with new modes of being that have struggled to become prevalent in the realm of mainstream literature. With her potential audience in mind, Mock recognizes the impact she could have on the trans\* community, both positive and negative. She pushes to mitigate any dangers she can and to use her privilege to uplift the community in as many ways she can. The first approach I will analyze is Mock's use of strict information, related to but also divorced from the text in tone, as a mean of giving those outside of the community access to it in a legible and easy to understand way.

One of the ways that Mock includes the larger trans\* community is by splicing

informational portions into her memoir. Here, she breaks down definitions and misconceptions as a means of educating others and minimizing ignorance. This begins early on in the memoir, after she has established her story within the narrative genre. The first instance occurs during her explanation of a childhood event in which she wore a dress she stole from her grandmother's clothesline. After Mock completes the story, her tone in writing shifts from the narrative form to a didactic one. With this shift in tone, Mock also shifts from the personal to the larger social context, allowing her to address community more directly. Mock ends the story with her mom explaining that she was not being reprimanded for stealing something, but rather that boys should not wear dresses. From there Mock deals briefly with her mother specifically, "In her learning, what I did by openly expressing my femininity as her son was wrong and, in effect, from Cori's cackle to Grandma's smack, taught me that my girlhood desires were inappropriate" (21). Mock expands from here to address the women in her family, and effectively the women of her culture. She writes, "These women believed they were raising a boy child, and boys don't wear dresses, according to the rules of Western culture's gender binary system, which is rigidly fixed between two poles (boy and girl; male and female; man and woman; masculine and feminine) for all people depending on assigned sex" (Mock 21). Here Mock observes that the issue she faced in her childhood was bigger than just her family, but rather the dominant cultural and social norms related to gender and how it is perceived. A reader who is non-queer may not have been forced to confront their own constructions of gender and reckon with how these concepts become cemented in their daily lives. By slowly expanding from a personal level into the wider cultural forces that were pressuring her to conform, Mock provides her readers with a step-by-step method of

how they can challenge their own presumptions about gender. It gives the reader a model to follow with their own life and experiences. Mock brings the message back to her family again, addressing their beliefs in “this religious system” and her own experience within the binary, before constructing her more explicit lesson.

After explaining the gender construction at play in her own life, Mock moves into a more explicitly didactic tone that pulls the larger trans\* community into the story. She starts off aligning her own experience with a more general sense of trans\* individuals’ experiences, writing, “These stories of my early expressions of femininity echo people’s lived experiences with exploring, experimenting, and expressing gender” (Mock 23). Here, Mock constructs a “we” by aligning her experience as a trans\* youth with that of others. Her story does not stand alone in the larger trans\* history. She continues by stating, “I’ve read and heard stories of trans people from all walks of life who remember playfully exhibiting their preferred gender behaviors and roles at age three or four without anyone’s prompting. Some were given freedom to explore their inclinations; the majority were discouraged from experimenting outside the prescribed gender roles and behaviors” (Mock 23). With Mock’s shift in focus to the larger community and the commonality of her own experience with others, she attempts to create a sense of normalcy across a diverse and misunderstood group of individuals. Her use of a common thread gives non-queer readers an anchor for understanding. Finally, she lays out terms and definitions, writing:

Children who behave in line with their prescribed gender roles are *cisgender* or *cissexual* (throughout I will use the prefix *cis* which means ‘on the same side of,’ while *trans* means ‘across’ or ‘on the opposite side of’), a term used for people who are not trans and more likely to identify with the gender that correlates with the sex they were assigned at birth. (Mock 23)



Mock's use of an implicit "we," along with a very dictionary definition approach to "trans" and "cis," aligned with her own experience, attempts to bridge the gap in understanding between trans\* and non-trans\* individuals. She mixes the objective and subjective, giving the lived experience of trans\* individuals another layer, while also making the identity itself more legible for those unfamiliar with the community. Melding these two forms of writing together, Mock accounts for a range of readers of her narrative, supplying a long list of take-aways for even those that have little knowledge of the terminology or social pressures on the trans\* community.

Another major instance of Mock's explanation of queer identities to, presumably, non-queer audiences is her explanation of gender, sex, and sexuality being separate forms of identity, and dispelling the common belief that trauma causes queer identity. This change in tone comes after her explanation of the repeated sexual assault Mock endured during her adolescence by Derek, and her brother Chad mentioning how he saw signs that she was being abused, but never did anything about it. She states her own apprehensions about adding in the sexual assault that she endured, stating:

I was apprehensive about writing about being molested because I feared others would make the same link Chad made, pointing to the abuse as the cause of my being trans— as if my identity as a woman is linked to some perversion, wrongdoing, or deviance. What must be made clear is that my gender expression and identity as a girl predated Derek, and my expression as a child made me vulnerable and isolated, an easier target for Derek. (Mock 50)

Mock recognizes that she was queer before the trauma, and that it was her queer identity that made her susceptible to being targeted by Derek, not that Derek assaulting her caused her trans\* identity. Trauma has become a trope in queer narratives of all forms: television, fiction and non-fiction literature, and movies. Often the queerness is implied to be a response to the trauma. As Teresa Caprioglio states in regards to portrayals of

trauma of queer characters in television, “If television provides role models and representations that may affect or attempt to reflect the identification and social expectation of its viewers, the implication here for queer viewers may be that queer identity itself is predicated on experiencing trauma— that if one identifies as queer and has not already been traumatized, expect to survive some trauma in the future” (462). Mock’s recognition of this trope provides an opportunity for her to break down some of the stereotypes of queer and trans\* identities and dismantle their assumed link to trauma. She feels an obligation, when she decides to include this part of her life, to not reinforce this trope and to do her best to dispel it. To address this specifically within her platform works to break down some of those connections that could be artificially made from how her narrative progresses.

Dismantling the trope of a queer identity linked to a traumatic experience serves Mock as a gateway to breaking down other misconceptions or assumptions about trans\* identity in general. She writes:

Gender and gender identity, sex and sexuality, are spheres of self-discovery that overlap and relate but are not one and the same. Each and every one of us has a sexual orientation and a gender identity. Simply put, our sexual orientation has to do with whom we get into bed *with*, and our gender identity has to do with whom we get into bed *as*. A trans person can be straight, gay, bisexual, etc.; a cis gay, lesbian, or heterosexual person can conform to expected gender norms or not; and a woman can have a penis and a man can have a vagina. (Mock 50)

She pulls away from her narrative at a pivotal point in her development, after making very personal reflections on who she is and her identity, to break down her readers’ misconceptions. In so doing, she gives non-queer readers access to queer ideas in an easily legible manner. She opens up the community in a way where others can meet her within her own narrative to learn something larger than who Mock is as a trans-woman.

She provides her reader with stepping stones and anticipates where gaps in knowledge may be at points in time where it could be dangerous for assumptions to be made or where already preconceived notions or stereotypes could be reinforced in her writing. It furthers her platform as a queer storyteller and what she is able to accomplish with her own privilege and voice.

Connected to the didactic aspects of breaking down terms and ideas is Mock's use of statistics, where they are still informational to the reader but are set in place more to bring attention to the dangers society has placed on trans\* individuals for existing. One of the earlier examples of statistics within the narrative centers around the visibility and presence of trans\* individuals in the US. This comes directly after her addressing the issue of trans\* women being confused for drag queens and commenting, "Trans womanhood is not a performance or costume" (Mock 113). Mock uses the loss of trans\* visibility among drag queens to pivot to the more general visibility among trans\* people, "Unfortunately, the data on the transgender population is scarce. The U.S. Census Bureau doesn't ask about gender identity, how trans people self-identify varies, and many (if asked) may not disclose that they're trans" (Mock 113). The lack of statistics or recognition of the number of trans\* people existing in the US can create a greater sense of isolation as there are not concrete numbers for someone separated from the community to connect to. Mock continues, "The National Center for Transgender Equality has estimated that nearly 1 percent of the U.S. population is transgender, while the Williams Institute has stated that 0.3 percent of adults in the United States (nearly seven hundred thousand) identify as transgender with a majority having taken steps to medically transition" (Mock 113). Even with these numbers, Mock implies that they are likely still

low for the numbers of trans\* individuals actually existing in society. For the trans\* community at large, this shows evidence of underrepresentation. She ends this section by stating, “This number does not take into account the number of transgender children or individuals who have expressed an incongruity between their assigned sex and gender identity or gender expression” (Mock 113). By including these statistics directly after critiquing how society blurs the lines between drag queens and trans\* individuals, Mock hopes to bring attention to the fact that, just as it is for many minority groups, trans\* visibility is often much lower than the number that actually exists. Often, trans\* individuals are hidden by lack of statistical recognition, social dangers, or being mislabeled. Taking into account this statistic and the anecdotes I will later examine, Mock attempts to recreate a sense of community she feels is lacking in the world around her.

Another statistic that Mock uses to spark conversation within her work is the prevalence of sex work within the trans\* community. In regards to sex work, Mock previously mentioned the necessity by many trans\* individuals to engage with it in order to pay for their gender reassignment surgeries and hormone treatment. Mock talks about how she easily was coerced into sex work, stating, “Selling sex seemed like a small price to pay in order to get what I needed. I did it for ‘free’ my whole life, I thought, with Derek and Junior and the men I blew and fucked in my adolescence” (Mock 212). Mock then moves into statistics as a means of substantiating her own situation and to bring in a larger narrative around her own experience. She notes, “I later learned that sexual abuse is a common pathway for many women in sex trade and work, with an estimated 66 to 90 percent of teen and adult women reporting that they were abused prior to engaging in sex

work, according to anthropologist Dorothy H. Bracey, who spent years profiling youth and women engaged in sex work” (Mock 213). These statistics help Mock feel less alone in the work and world she had engaged in earlier in her life. They also bring attention to the prevalence of the issue outside of her own narrative.

The tonal shift from narrator to informer, similar to her role as an educator, shifts attention away from her as an individual dealing with these problems to that of a member of a larger community that shares these concerns. It provides Mock with evidence of community and shared experience that she can then convey to the reader. She ties the statistic to the larger trans\* community, stating:

Trans youth, especially those of color, represent a large portion of young people engaging in survival sex work, yet they are often erased from narratives of organizations serving youth sex workers. The greatest push factor for trans girls engaged in sex trade is poverty, stemming from homelessness (often brought on by parents/guardians refusing to accept their gender identity) or growing up in already struggling low-income communities where resources are scarce. (Mock 213)

Though Mock has had to deal with low income struggles and the coercion into sex work, her inclusion of trans\* individuals, and more specifically trans\* girls, helps give voices to those who were left behind by these organizations. Dedicating an entire paragraph to the pressures of survival sex work on trans\* youth and their exclusion from the conversation is Mock’s attempt to include them back into the conversation. Though not fixing the problem, supplying such a statistic and then bringing attention to an under-resourced community helps create conversation on the matter and brings more attention the issue.

In addition to Mock’s use of didactic moments and statistics within her memoir to allow outsiders access to the trans\* community, she also includes the experiences of a number of key trans\* figures that impacted her life at key points in her transition. Though

Mock's informational asides offer a lot to the non-queer or non-trans\* reader in giving them the information needed to interact with the community, the education alone lacks the depth and richness of lived experience beyond her own narrative. To give her message depth beyond her own experience, she includes the lives of many other trans\* women she interacts with during her own transition to add range to the trans\* experience she is presenting within her memoir. Thomas Lyle points out, in relation to Mock including such compassionate depictions of other trans\* women within her memoir, that "Rather than perpetuate the narrative habit of representing only trans oppression, Mock opts to pay homage to the *revolutionary love* that proliferates among trans women" (225). One of the most overarching figures of this "*revolutionary love*" that Lyle explains within his essay is Mock's childhood friend Wendi, who helps provide Mock with the language and support she needs as they grow up together and through Mock's transition. Though Wendi plays a major role in Mock's story and serves to highlight the importance of queer friendship during times of self-discovery, I want to focus on some of the smaller, but still pivotal figures Mock includes within her story. She uses these figures within her narrative to both broaden the representations of trans\* experience and to celebrate the need for and importance of trans\* community. Lyle highlights the break from conventional representation of trans\* individuals within Mock's memoir, stating:

Even though memoirs by or about trans folk often fall victim to the cisgender gaze that has plagued representations of trans lives since at least the 1950s—only offering details that entertain and satiate the curiosity of cis readers, like genitalia, hormones, disclosure, familiar narratives about 'being born in the wrong body'—Mock disrupts conventions by redirecting the focus of her narrative by reshaping the cultural script, and by avoiding sensationalizing trans folks. (226)

The trans\* women included in Mock's narrative are celebrated in stories that highlight what they had to overcome and the impact they have on others in the trans\* community,

typically through the filter of Mock's own experience with them. Though there are many trans\* individuals included within Mock's narrative, the two I wish to focus on are Kumu from Mock's childhood and Genie from Mock's later surgical transition.

Kumu plays a key role in Mock understanding her trans\* identity as a representation of a trans\* person who could survive within society and live their true identity in front of others. Kumu's presence in the narrative comes directly after Mock introduces Wendi and explores the concept of a *mahu*: "to be *mahu* was to occupy space between the poles of male and female in precolonial Hawaii, where it translated to 'hermaphrodite' used to refer to feminine boys or masculine girls" (103). Kumu represents pride for Mock and her narrative, as she recounts, "The first person I met who took pride in being *mahu* was my hula instructor at school. Kumu Kaua'i was one of those *mahu* who reclaimed her place in society— specifically, being celebrated in the world of hula, where presence and talent of *mahu* was valuable" (Mock 103). Mock recognizes her position of visibility and the representation she is going to be bringing into the world with her own story. By including Kumu's story, Mock is writing more trans\* or gender non-conforming individuals into the history of trans\* existence. Where Mock will inspire others, it is important to her to include those that inspired her. Mock further explains the impact Kumu, and those like her, had on the Hawaiian queer community and culture, writing, "Some trans women, who actively engaged in restoring native Hawaiian culture, reclaimed *mahu* at the time, choosing to call themselves *mahuwahine*... just as some people in marginalized communities reclaimed formerly derogatory words... It was theirs to claim, use, and uplift" (103). Mock expands Kumu's reach to be just beyond Mock's personal inspiration, but as part of a larger movement and community within

Hawaii that was attempting to change cultural perceptions of gender variance and to reclaim cultural language.

Mock also presents Kumu as an example of the importance of trans\* visibility within day to day life. As Mock reflects, “Kumu bewildered me initially because I had been raised within the strict confines of male and female... I was shaken by the dissonance of bright floral dresses and long hair on the form of a male-bodied person, someone who expressed her femininity proudly and visibly” (Mock 104). Mock, through her personal experience, understands the risks that ignorance can bring with not understanding trans\* individuals and the spectrum of gender, and uses her experience with Kumu as a means of leveling with those who were also raised in a strict gender binary culture. Though Mock comes away from her interactions with Kumu with a different reaction than a non-queer or trans\* person might, her story still represents the importance of challenging gender beliefs in order to understand others. For Mock, Kumu gives her the physical representation of identity that she needs to understand herself. Mock reflects, “I now realize that my fascination with Kumu wasn’t that she puzzled me; I was in awe. She resonated with me at age twelve as I yearned to explore and reveal who I was. With time, I accepted Kumu’s own determination of gender and learned to evolve past my ironic need to confine her to the two boxes I had been raised to live within” (Mock 104). Kumu helps Mock understand her own identity as trans\* and the avenues *mahu* could open up for her. Though Kumu does not explicitly play the role of a queer mentor or guide, her mere presence impacted Mock as a mirror so that she could see herself in ways that were unavailable to her previously. Kumu’s story ultimately represents the importance of queer individuals openly existing with pride and visibility,



which in itself is a privilege, but also opens doors for others. Mock's memoir is about expanding representation and the importance of seeing and understanding others that are unlike ourselves. The message and impact Mock pushes towards in her own story is summed up and engrained in Kumu's presence within the narrative, while also expanding and furthering Mock's own goals of including as much of the different aspects of trans\* being and existence as she can.

Genie becomes another strong figure in Mock's journey. She serves as a stand-in for trans\* adulthood and the possible social loss that comes with transitioning, having had transitional surgery five days prior to Mock. For Mock, coming out disrupted her social relations slightly, but she kept ties with most of her family. However, Genie presents a much more damaging disruption to life. Mock recounts, "After deciding to transition three years before, [Genie] swiftly lost all the things she loved: her career, her home, her wife, and her son, who she said was figuring things out. 'People say that I'm being selfish, that I haven't thought about what I'm doing to my son,' Genie said" (234). Mock's form in this section becomes more in line with journalism, in which she mixes matter-of-fact events with snippets of Genie's own words to emphasize Genie's emotions. By creating a new space through a shift in form, Mock gives Genie her own section within the narrative. In turn, Genie becomes a gateway to talk about trans\* issues that Mock was not immediately affected by. Mock continues to use Genie's story as way to expand her impact, stating:

The social cost of transitioning can be astounding. Genie had been working as an accomplished engineer, but when she announced that she was trans, she was asked to step down from a job she loved... Because of the stigma and discrimination, it can be difficult to get a new job, which impacts the ability to pay for health care, food, shelter, and other necessities. Luckily, Genie had other savings that she could rely on, but this didn't compensate for the rejection closest

to her. (Mock 235)

Here Mock begins to bring in the larger trans\* community into Genie's narrative and indicates how she was able to survive where others might be silenced or overwhelmed by the system. Genie, like Mock, is portrayed as one of the lucky ones, able to survive her situation under a great deal of danger and loss. Mock presents Genie's story with a larger implication that the problems Genie faced were ones that were common among members of the community, implying that they need to be addressed as such.

In contrast to the impact that economics had on Mock transition, Genie provides a different narrative positioned through a greater deal of social hardships, further heightening the necessity of community for survival. As Mock continues Genie's story, she writes, "Genie met new friends in trans support groups in Sydney, which was where she met her girlfriend, another trans woman... I'm still struck by how trans and queer people around the world are flung out of their homes, ostracized by intolerant families, and go on to reconstruct the idea of family by creating a network of kinship" (235). Genie represents a different trans\* experience than Mock's own and allows a more "found family"-centric approach to appear within Mock's own memoir. Genie, though she had economic stability due to wealth, she lost the support of her family and her job but was able to find support in other trans\* individuals. Mock, on the other hand, who struggled with money from a young age, was well supported by her mother in the long run, regardless of the problems they had at the beginning of her transition. Mock brings forth her own differences in life outright, stating:

I was a young person who grew up poor, brown, and trans. I didn't calculate loss because I had no job or money to lose. Luckily, my family, despite their messiness, was an asset. They embraced me in a way that Genie's family did not. This lack of social capital instilled an 'I have nothing to lose' blind determination

that made it easier for me to be true to myself at an early age. (236)

By including Genie's story along with her own, in the manner that she presented it, Genie helps broaden the diverse trans\* experience represented within the memoir. Mock can place her and Genie's journeys side by side to effectively highlight their differences in struggles, but not diminish the importance of either. Genie comes out later in life than Mock did, but as Mock references, that had a lot to do with the risks of coming out. By the time Genie was ready to come out, she had already established an adult life with a stable job and a family, all lost in her transition. Where Mock did not suffer a dramatic loss of social capital in her lived experience, she is able to tell Genie's story in order to talk about that risk.

The contrasting, but still at times similar, nature of Genie and Mock's journeys through transition help open up conversations about different forms of trans\* mobility. In their book *Mobile Subjects*, about trans\* individuals' access to gender reassignment surgery and the factors in play for their social and physical mobility, Aren Z Aizura writes:

The smoothness or arduousness of mobility— the amount of effort expended to move— is conditioned by race, nationality, language, gender and sexuality. Indeed, the unmarked capacity of whiteness and economic or social privilege to be mobile contribute to epistemological assumptions that mobility itself *should* progress smoothly and easily, without difficulty. (68)

Mock's own story pushes against the barriers of whiteness placed on transitions and deals with overcoming economic obstacles brought up by Aizura. To continue to expand her reach, Mock aligns her story with Genie in ways they highlight their different lived experiences. Where Genie lost her social support, Mock kept her family and friends. Where Mock struggled financially to transition, Genie was well off to make her trip to

Thailand. Mock makes note of it, commenting, “I was admittedly bitter about Genie’s economic stability, about the fact that the monetary costs of a trip to Bangkok would not affect her bank account. I was broke: not a cent in my account until my scholarship checks were deposited in the New Year” (236). Mock’s inclusion of Genie serves to show that the trans\* experience is not a single story, but rather a personal experience that can manifest itself around a number of different factors. As Lyle writes, “Even though Genie and Mock have wildly different life experiences and transition narratives, the two of them still manage to create connections across generations, geographical, cultural, and even racial boundaries as they bond together in their recovery rooms” (238). Mock emphasizes in her writing that there is no one way to be trans\*, but that you can find community through despite these differences. The diversity of their experiences brings them together just as much as the shared ones. Lyle further highlights that “The type of intergenerational love that Mock forms during her brief but vital moments with Genie, to some degree, anticipate the kind of intergenerational connection that she will form with her inspirational trans foremothers of color who resisted, mobilized, and loved themselves and their communities against all odds” (238). Genie further cements the necessity to find connections to other trans\* women, and trans\* individuals in general, as a way to find comfort in the self. With so much being pushed against trans\* individuals in their daily lives, Mock wants to highlight the support that is out there and which is possible for one to acquire in community.

Lastly Genie is used to open a conversation about “passing,” a privilege Mock has commented on about herself, and a key reason she finds herself able to tell her own story. Genie, understanding Mock’s money troubles, comments on how well she passes as with

the intention of validating her surgery and perceived “success” as a trans\* woman. Genie makes these comments in a loving manner, and not with malintent, but it still points to a larger issue at hand. In response to Genie’s comments on Mock’s passing and beauty, Mock writes:

Genie’s persistent reference to my appearance reflects many people’s romanticized notions about trans women who transition at a young age... The misconception of equating ease of life with ‘passing’ must be dismantled in our culture. The work begins by each of us recognizing that cis people are not more valuable or legitimate and that trans people who blend as cis are not more valuable or legitimate. (Mock 236-237)

Legitimizing or validating passing trans\* individuals, and setting that as the standard of success, is damaging to those who do pass, forcing them to keep up a certain image.

Though this is true and affects Mock in a serious manner, Genie’s comments represent a much larger perception inside and outside of the community. “Pretty,” or fitting into certain parts of the binary comes with its own privileges and, often, legitimization from society. Regardless, this is a key issue throughout Mock’s memoir, and Genie is a positive avenue into the discussion of the matter. Genie serves as a multi-functional avenue for Mock in helping to mitigate possible tokenism as well as to express community.

Mock employs a number of methods to include the trans\* community within her own writing as a means to use her position of privilege to better the community. She understands the risk to the community she presents by telling her narrative and the possibility of it becoming tokenized as the “right way” to be trans\*, an action that could be damaging to a large portion of the trans\* community. By using her narrative as a starting point for education, attention, and the ability to write other trans\* individuals’ stories into her own, Mock anticipates issues of tokenization and being considered the

“right way” to be trans\*. Her memoir works to serve those inside and outside of the queer and trans\* community by constructing the generative “we,” centered around a community approach. By no means is Mock’s memoir a complete guide to the multitude of trans\* identities that exist in reality. However, Mock’s informational asides, narrative simplification for legibility, and conscious inclusions of others lays a groundwork of knowledge for those unfamiliar with the community and to celebrate trans\* existence. The tonal shifts away from the narrative create gateways for the trans\* community to be addressed. Through these techniques, Mock effectively pulls her community into the narrative alongside her, where she can mix social change with personal growth.

### III. “YOU PASS AS A GUY; I, AS PREGNANT:” MAGGIE NELSON’S *THE ARGONAUTS*, QUEER INDIVIDUALISM, AND THE DERADICALIZATION OF TRANS\* IDENTITY

Unlike the communal approach to life-writing that Mock employs in her memoir, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015) takes an individualized approach to queerness and relationship-building between herself and her trans\* partner Harry Dodge. *The Argonauts* is an experimental work of autotheory where Nelson recounts her relationship with Harry, her journey through pregnancy, and the birth of her child Iggy. Within the telling of her story, she imbeds queer, feminist, psychological, and other theories, which serve as jumping off points for her meditations on her own lived experience and the purpose of theory in the everyday. Nelson, in telling her story, attempts to queer the world around her despite the fact that she goes through heteronormative experiences: a socially “straight” appearing relationship, pregnancy, and family-building. Though society makes a lot of assumptions about her identity, placing labels of heterosexuality onto her on multiple occasions, she grasps for queerness by closely aligning her identity to Harry’s identities. Often she focuses on his<sup>2</sup> transness (trans\* masculine, genderfluid) as a means of maintaining that she is in a queer relationship. In addition, she also aligns her own body’s fluctuation through pregnancy with Harry’s transition, as they occur over the same time period. Nelson attempts to accomplish this queering through formal means, carefully writing similar concepts next to each other, constructing sometimes implicit equivalences as a way to make their stories one. In order to do so, Nelson also places a

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<sup>2</sup> For continuity with Nelson’s memoir, I will use the pronoun “he” when referring to Harry in the third person. Though this is not a definite answer within reality, as I was unable to find a statement by Harry on which pronouns he identifies with, it is what Nelson settles on

strong emphasis on individualism as the means for queer futurity, one that is not afforded to many. As stated in the blurb on the back of the book, “an insistence on radical individual freedom and the value of caretaking becomes the rallying cry for this thoughtful, unabashed, uncompromising book.” As Heather Love points out, “*The Argonauts* responds to the mixed conditions of queer life in the present, when new opportunities for representation and acceptance exist alongside ongoing exclusion and violence” (261). What both of these statements fail to recognize is the fact that such an ardent focus on individuality makes community non-existent within the memoir and deradicalizes the often inherently radical, trans\* identity in order to substantiate Nelson’s own desire for queer identification. Harry’s identity within the memoir, justified by Nelson as part of his private nature, becomes a one-dimensional tool for Nelson’s own appropriation of trans\* identity and culture, which she shows no evidence of having been a part of. Overall, Nelson’s memoir shows the danger of stripping transness from the larger trans\* community and vice versa.

To begin, I want to explore the limits of Harry’s inclusion within the memoir as justified by Nelson early on in its construction. One of the concerns about Harry’s inclusion is Harry’s hesitance to be included in the narrative at all. Nelson explains Harry as “a very private person, who has told me more than once that being married to me is like an epileptic with a pacemaker being married to a strobe light artist” (46). Nelson writes consistently about heavy subjects in her own life and has no fears exploring events that have affected her life. In contrast, Harry wishes to keep his life personal. Backing up this claim is Harry’s own writing from his memoir *My Meteorite: Or Without the Random There Can Be No New* (2020), where he writes, “I’m a very private person,



skittish, almost hermitic. I'm good-natured, gruffly friendly, kind—I suppose—but caught in a double bind of fundamentally conflicting desires: visibility and invisibility,” (Dodge 38). Harry attributes this private nature to “a fear of being rejected” (Dodge 38). Nelson uses Harry’s private nature as a means of justifying what parts of him are included and excluded from the text. She details a lunch with Harry in which they review the manuscript of her memoir, recounting, “We go through the draft page by page, mechanical pencils in hand, with him suggesting ways I might facet my representation of him, of us. I try to listen, try to focus on his generosity in letting me write about him at all” (Nelson 46). This becomes a point of compromise between the two, but more so than that, it also provides Nelson a means of justifying her closed-off representation of Harry, and herself, when she comes too close to the boundaries of the individual. For whatever is missing from her narrative, she can refer to this section and simply state “Harry did not approve it,” regardless of validity.

In regard to representation itself, Nelson places a great deal of importance on trans\* voices in general within her narrative by questioning what is radical and what is cisnormative. When discussing Chaz Bono’s interview with David Letterman, she writes about how he talks “about how T has made him kind of an asshole to his girlfriend, who still annoyingly wants him to ‘process’ for hours in that dreaded womanly way” (Nelson 73). Nelson’s language shows disapproval of Bono’s presentation of himself in a stereotypical and traditionally masculine manner. Nelson continues, “I respect Chaz for many things, not the least of which is his willingness to speak his truth to an audience ready to revile him. But his eager (if strategic) identification with some of the worst stereotypes of straight men and lesbians is disappointing” (73). By using the word

“disappointing,” Nelson articulates her own set of expectations of what a trans\* individual should do with any sort of public image, primarily to avoid dequeering the self as a means of fitting into a heteronormative role. This recalls Vipond’s critiques of trans\* intelligibility and its “[contingency] on one’s proximity to whiteness and being able to articulate one’s gender according to white norms” (3). Chaz Bono, as described by Nelson, exemplifies an adherence to very “straight white male” norms that are not progressive by any means. Her comment indicates that she places a great amount of importance on expanding the boundaries of cis-hetero-normativity within trans\* or queer identities. Nelson furthers this notion by writing about minority individuals in general:

*People are different from each other.* Unfortunately, the dynamic of becoming a spokesperson almost always threatens to bury this fact. You may keep saying that you only speak for yourself, but your very presence in the public sphere begins to congeal difference into a single figure, and pressure begins to bear down hard upon it. (Nelson 74)

By placing her meditation on representation and her perception of Chaz Bono next to each other, Nelson sets up a perception that queer representation needs to advocate for queer topics. By criticizing Chaz for conforming to stereotypically straight white male behavior and speaking about the idea that a personal identity becomes communal within the public eye, Nelson places Chaz at risk of becoming a representative of the larger trans\* masculine community and implies his position to be dangerous. Nelson’s own ideas of trans\* individuals in public at risk of being placed as sole representations is echoed by Juliana Huxtable in an interview with Che Gossett, “The people who gain visibility—those whom the media deem to be relatively ‘passable’ in one sense or another—end up being used as examples to police trans people generally” (42). Much like Nelson, Huxtable sees trans\* representation in media as a “trap door” in which those

in the public eye become acceptable visible presentations of transness. Through her criticism and importance placed on the individual in the public eye, Nelson implies Chaz has an obligation to do better for his community.

Nelson's notion of representational responsibility becomes intriguing, considering communal responsibility and advocacy is what Nelson is attempting to push against for herself and for Harry. She does a great deal in her power as a writer and as a queer individual to remain just that: a queer individual. Because she is in a relationship with Harry, a trans\* masculine individual who often passes as male, others perceive Nelson as a straight woman. Harry and her genderqueer relationship are more complex than that, but nonetheless, the possibility of lost queerness rattles Nelson. Near the beginning of the book, she writes about going to a party and being confronted by another party guest about her relationship with Harry, and implicitly, Nelson's own queerness. She recounts, a "woman who'd known Harry for some time turned to me and said 'So, have you been with other women, before Harry?' I was taken aback. Undeterred, she went on: 'Straight ladies have always been hot for Harry'" (8). Prior to this moment, Nelson only saw herself as a lesbian, and saw Harry's gender queerness as something that did not change or disturb her own sexuality but added complexity to their relationship. The party guest's assumption of Nelson's identity as a "straight woman" sends her to a flurry of questions. Nelson writes:

Was Harry a woman? Was I a straight lady? What did past relationships with 'other women' have in common with this one? Why did I have to think about other 'straight ladies' who were hot for my Harry? Was his sexual power, which I already felt to be immense, a kind of spell I'd fallen under, from which I would emerge abandoned, as he moved on to seduce others? Why was this woman, whom I barely knew, talking to me like this? When would Harry come back from the bathroom? (9)

Within this flurry of questions Nelson begins to develop the limited “we.” She starts to thread the ties between her own queer identity and Harry’s transness, as is already evident on a public level. Blocks of questions such as this one frequently appear within the text to push against perceptions of heteronormativity. Yasmina Jaksic comments on the use of questions within the memoir by stating that:

*The Argonauts* has been associated with the ‘lyric essay’ coined by Deborah Tall and John D’Agata as a ‘deliberately oxymoronic’ form in ‘pursuit of answers without any expectation of finding them’ (Moran 1278). This is indeed the ethos of *The Argonauts*- to ask questions without promising definitive digestible answers. (142)

These questions, and others like them, do not become answered at any point in time, but often express Nelson’s meditations on pushing past the norms placed by society.

Typically, Nelson states them and then immediately moves on, closing the door on the subject and jumping onto another idea or concept, leaving the questions in the past. When she asks these sets of questions, though, she is questioning her personal perceptions of queerness against the perceptions the public has of her identity. In this specific experience with the party-goer, the questions stem from fear: fear of identity and fear of abandonment. The first three questions complicate Nelson’s own perception of her relational identity to Harry. Harry’s gender, explicitly defined neither as male nor female in a social setting, becomes the fulcrum of Nelson’s own apparent sexual identity. His masculine appearance and a trend of “straight ladies” falling for Harry seems to ascribe to Nelson the identity of a straight woman.

The risk of the heteronormative being projected onto her lifestyle is continued by the inclusion of a discussion of a family mug that was gifted to them. Nelson recounts the experience as:

Not long ago, a friend came over to our house and pulled down a mug for coffee, a mug that was a gift from my mother. It's one of those mugs you can purchase online from Snapfish, with the photo of your choice emblazoned on it... *Wow*, my friend said, filling it up. *I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life.* (13)

She continues to describe the picture on the mug of them as a family photo: Nelson pregnant, participating in the family tradition of seeing “the *Nutcracker* at Christmastime” (13). The image of a happy family becomes marred by the idea that it might present itself as heteronormative with Nelson playing the role of the mother, Harry's masculine presentation as the stand-in for the father, and the (future) children indicated by the pregnant belly. The public perception of their family dynamic, as pointed out by the friend, again aligns itself outside of the queer realm.

Once again, Nelson is faced with the risk of her queer identity being erased by perceptions of her relationship dynamic. The possibility of a heteronormative perception creates another flurry of questions from Nelson:

But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity? That my mother made a mug on a boojie service like Snapfish? That we're clearly participating, or acquiescing into participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicated that she recognizes and accepts my tribe as family? (13)

This part of the sequence of questions deals mostly with the image on the mug and the notion that its gifting implies a sense of heteronormativity that Nelson does not associate with. The notion of heteronormativity, in accordance to Nelson's questioning, much like the mug, is a concept given to her, rather than one she brings upon herself. Nelson wants to hold onto tradition, and in this case, familial acceptance with the mug as a token without risking a diminished-seeming queerness in the process. She places a great deal of emphasis on her mother as a means of distancing herself from the possibility as a whole.

Moving deeper into the implications of the mug, Nelson's pregnancy comes into question, as it furthers Nelson's need to distance herself from heteronormativity and the risk of dequeering the self. The questions continue, "What about my pregnancy—is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of some ontological truth? As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? Will you miss it?" (13) Though Nelson recognizes perceptions of her family-building fall in line with heteronormative values and expectations, she implies that she is radical to have children within a genderqueer relationship. She does not see herself and Harry as mother and father, but rather parents of their children, cemented by yet another flurry of questions.

In Tyler Carson's essay "Engendering the Anti-Social Thesis: The Queerness of Pregnancy in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*," Carson frames Nelson's pushback against the heteronormativity of pregnancy as a move towards a life-centric focus in queer theory that strays from the traditional death drive perception. He writes, "The question of what kind of life as well as of what kind of queers have access to this 'better' future remains an important one for queer theory, as well as for queer politics more generally, but what is ingenious about Nelson's (2015) framing is how she unsettles the assumption that pregnancy is itself inherently heteronormative" (Carson 43). Carson's critique attempts to look positively at Nelson's conception of queer future, one in which pregnancy may neither be considered heteronormative nor queer, and praise it for its "ingenuity." What Carson and many other scholars writing about *The Argonauts* fail to consider are the lengths Nelson has to take in order to do so. In order to decontextualize

pregnancy from its long social history, she has to deradicalize Harry's trans\* identity and reduce it to a one-dimensional tool for her own cause.

To further break down the heteronormativity of family building, Nelson queers the concept of pregnancy, moving her closer to the entangling of Harry's trans\* identity and her own bodily experience. She begins to write:

Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)? What about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female? (14)

Nelson's interrogation of pregnancy as possibly framed as a queer experience distinctly hinges on Harry's trans\* identity and his transition that she recounts. She attempts to connect the hormonal transformation and change within her own biologically female body to Harry's transformation. Ann Vickery writes in relation to Nelson's construction of family making, "The memoir becomes a means by which Nelson can reflect on her own acts of family-making that then open to a more expansive filiation. For her, queerness is not oppositional to normativity but rather reconstitutes it through rethinking and rebuilding relationality from day to day" (4-5). With family making being a traditionally heteronormative idea, Nelson attempts to rethink pregnancy as queer to further align herself with Harry's own transition; maintaining a limited "we" within her relationship allows her access to queer identity. She bases her own identity as queer on the fact that there is an "alienation" within herself as another human begins to take up space within her body but pulls Harry's genderless self into the mix. This is what Nelson is attempting to tap into so that she can remain queer in a situation that is otherwise a

very heteronormative-facing situation. As a feminine-presenting biological female, Nelson's pregnancy within a relationship with a masculine presenting individual does not present in the queer fashion that Nelson so ardently attempts to preserve.

Structurally, Nelson's pregnancy and Harry's transition with his starting of testosterone and top surgery coincide with one another. The overlapping nature of Nelson's pregnancy with Harry's transition becomes a point where Nelson attempts to access the trans\* experience and queer her own body in an act that would be considered heteronormative. On Nelson's construction of queer pregnancy, Katie Collins writes, "For Nelson, pregnancy provides an embodied mode of experimentation that resists predetermined positions—of life/death, queer/straight, normative/transgressive—and invites the vulnerability that stems from the resulting contingency" (326). Nelson does a lot to expand the heteronormative and traditionally life-creating nature of pregnancy, but many scholars do not take note of the weight Nelson places on Harry to help queer her pregnancy. Through direct comparisons and by positioning specific events next to each other, Nelson's pregnancy functions textually as a means to understand the changes of her own body and of Harry's. Though most of her equivalencies are implicit through certain sections of text being arranged next to each other, she does make an explicit connection between her and Harry by stating, "You pass as a guy; I, as pregnant" (83). She continues the idea, stating, "On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more 'male,' mine, more and more 'female'" (Nelson 83). There are some similarities in their transformations, such as the shifting levels of hormones and physical transformation in each person's body, but overall, the equivalence is a false one that lessens the radical nature of Harry's inclusion in the text. For starters, public



perception and response to each of these identities is drastically different, let alone the fact that Harry's identity is semi-permanent<sup>3</sup> and Nelson's identity as a pregnant woman is temporary by nature. The comparisons, though, serve mostly as a means of queering Nelson's rather heteronormative experience in the public eye.

Pregnancy and transitioning are inherently very different experiences in terms of social and societal acceptance between a woman's pregnancy and someone undergoing a gender transition. Women are traditionally praised, celebrated, and overall, given positive attention as they go through bodily changes. For the most part, they are given support and have resources made available to them when it comes to information on pregnancy and expected experiences. Trans\* individuals typically have a very different experience. Some resources are available for trans\* individuals, like websites and a handful of books, but in comparison, these are very lacking, especially for genderqueer or non-binary individuals. As for public perception of transness, Nelson gives negative perceptions of Harry's "passing" as a man being broken and the consequences that follow. She writes after recounting Harry's male-passing as giving him access to public nods from other men, but presents a risk when Harry's male-passing is disrupted:

When a guy has cause to stare at Harry's driver's license or credit card, there comes an odd moment during which their camaraderie as two dudes screeches to a halt. The friendliness can't evaporate on a dime, however, especially if there has been a longish prior interaction, as one might have over the course of a meal with a waiter. (Nelson 89)

For Harry, danger is connected to his image and ability to construct and maintain masculine presentation. As trans\* masculine, Harry often taps into male privilege and the homosocial respect often associated with that privilege. As Nelson points out, the

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<sup>3</sup> Semi-permanent to denote the fact that though Harry's gender identity may be in flux, there is not a preset time in which the identity will change.

privilege does not go away instantly in the face of the original person's perception of Harry being changed, but it still deteriorates to some degree. A danger comes along with the fragility of Harry's identity. With Nelson's description of Harry's engagement in male camaraderie, there comes with a sense of irony and a setting of double standards. She acknowledges the fragility of Harry's gender expressions and understands the consequences of it being broken, but none of the empathy she has towards Harry was provided to her reflection of Chaz Bono previously in the memoir. Where she held him to a strict standard of conduct, she sympathizes with Harry. In a manner of keeping up false equivalencies, Nelson's temporary identity as a pregnant woman does not bear the same scrutiny. If her identity as a pregnant woman is "found out," she would most likely be treated compassionately and cared for, tended to by most people.

Nelson attempts to create a parallel between the social risks of Harry's identity and her own experience as a pregnant woman as a way to keep the threads of pregnancy and transness deeply tied together. She first recalls how those around her became more dependent on others for help and how her pregnancy was perceived as a great contribution to the world. Nelson recounts, "I realized I would need to trade in my prideful self-sufficiency for a willingness to ask for help... I received this help, which I recognized as great kindness. On more than one occasion, a service member in the airport literally saluted me as I shuffled past" (89). Nelson attempts to recognize the privilege held by a pregnant woman in society, especially in the late stages of pregnancy where she is unable to care for herself easily or needs help in doing so. In relation to constructing pregnancy and transitioning as being placed directly after and paralleling Harry's public versus social identity, Tyler Bradway writes:

*The Argonauts* narrates pregnancy's queer transformations of embodiment. The text insists that gender matters to narrative forms. In this respect, it invites minoritized and nonconforming genders to stake new claims on narrative. This is why queer narrative theory and feminist narrative theory need each other. Together they challenge the centrality of male embodiment to queerness and narrative alike. (719)

Though I agree with the sentiment of Bradway's claim, Nelson's execution of it has its failings, specifically within this section and comparison. Nelson is artificially constructing feminism and queer theory—and more narrowly, trans\* theorizations—to be on equal footing, in a manner that is very forced. Nelson must qualify herself to some degree but does so in a way that still matches Harry's own experience. Where Harry receives nods of acknowledgment from men, Nelson has her bags carried. Though Harry's privilege may go further than just nods from other men, Nelson limits the privilege there. Much like her whole comparison of pregnancy to transness, it is not a direct equivalent, but it does give her enough access to Harry's own identity that she can hold onto her own queerness.

Structurally mirroring Harry and hers experiences, Nelson progresses from her own privileges as a pregnant woman to the faults and restrictions of pregnancy. Nelson counters her previous assertions about public kindness by stating:

But the pregnant body in public is obscene. It radiates a kind of smug autoeroticism: an intimate relation is going on—one that is visible to others, but that decisively excludes them. Service members may salute, strangers may offer their congratulations or their seats, but this privacy, this bond, can also irritate. It especially irritates the antiabortionists, who would prefer to pry apart the twofor earlier and earlier... the sooner you can pry the twofor apart, the sooner you can dispense with one constituent of the relationship: *the woman with rights*. (90)

In a similar fashion to how she handled Harry's identity, Nelson contrasts the public perception of the individual with their core identity. Much like how Harry's masculine privilege is stripped by the deeper identity of transness coming into focus, Nelson's

identity as a woman, in relation to her pregnancy and her bodily autonomy, becomes the core issue. In narrating Harry's experience, Nelson's memoir focuses more on the social rather than the political and legislative that Nelson addresses here. In this case, the issue of false equivalences mostly lies within the structure of who is placed first. She precedes her own struggles of society, womanhood, and autonomy with her own body with a reference to Harry's, making his trans\* identity the position that she builds off of. In doing so, she ignores the legislative issues of the time that would more accurately align the pregnant woman and trans\* experience. Amidst conversations about bathroom legislation and other trans\* rights, Nelson chooses to include none of that, which would be a more accurate alignment of the couple's political issues with bodily autonomy. Where she could align womanhood and the trans\* community as one force against legislation, she chooses to take a different route. By doing so, Nelson insinuates a distinct difference in issues between the trans\* identity and women is a matter of social versus legal change, even though both exist for both parties, cementing the idea that there is a "we" between Harry and her that excludes the larger communities.

As her pregnancy comes to an end, so do her connections with the trans\* identity as she shifts from Harry in her birthing process to the death of Harry's mother, paralleling birth with death, pulling focus from Harry's trans\* identity at a pivotal moment of the pregnancy that she has so carefully kept intertwined. Harry is placed as the role of caretaker in both the birthing and caring process of his mother. As Harry's recounting begins, "each of the volunteers told me that my job was to let my mom know it was ok to go. i believe that i was unconvincing for the first 33 hours of my time" (129). From there on through both the process of Nelson's labor and Harry's mother's passing, Harry's

familial and caring role is heightened in both instances. He helps his mother along to death and helps his son Iggy along to life with Nelson. For Nelson, this would be a completion of being, a dropping of the temporary marker of “pregnant.” The absence of trans\* conception in regards to the birthing process, whether it be a rebirth of self or a similar notion, further pushes the notion two identities are inequivalent, or that Nelson purely is cherry-picking portions of Harry’s transness to substantiate her queer identity.

Harry’s identity does not come back into play again until the naming process of their son Iggy is brought up. Firstly, Nelson wishes to name her son the Native American name Igasho, but has apprehensions about it as she and Harry are both white. Then she attempts, again, as justification to overstep these boundaries, “But I remembered when we first met, you told me you were part Cherokee. This fact buoyed me along. When I mentioned this to you in the hospital, as we were filling out Iggy’s birth certificate, you looked at me like I was crazy. *Part Cherokee?*” (135). Though she receives blessings from her Native American lactation consultant for the name of the baby, she relies on the presumption of Harry’s heritage for validation and justification. By using the word “buoyed,” Nelson connotes the connections she is making to Harry’s identity as a sense of guidance and justification for her own appropriations of queer and indigenous culture.

Through formal structuring, Nelson uses the conversation about Iggy’s name to discuss Harry’s own process of self-naming from his pre-adopted name of Wendy Malone, to Rebecca Priscilla Bard, to Harriet Dodge, and then to his name now, Harry Dodge. With the inclusion of Harry’s previous names, Nelson is making Harry’s name changes as a means to support her own desires to name her child a name that is not culturally appropriate.

In regards to having a child together, Nelson here links Harry's transness to how laws make it more difficult for trans\* individuals to be legal guardians of their children.

She writes:

Around the same time, your ex wouldn't agree to a custody deal if you checked the box on the second-parent adoption forms that said 'mother,' but you couldn't by law check the box that said "father..." I find that now I, too, am unwilling to undertake such a proceeding, vis-à-vis Iggy—I'd rather gamble on national LGBT legal momentum and the relatively progressive state of California than pay the \$10,000 in legal fees and allow a social worker into our home to interview our children, to deem us "fit." (Nelson 137)

This is one of the two, very brief times in the memoir where Nelson talks of queer legal change; the other time refers to gay marriage. Even the consideration of legal issues affecting the community, the examples Nelson provides are still framed as very personal achievements. Queer family making is a privilege that requires a great deal of resources, support, and personal comfort to even be up for consideration by most individuals. Even with the implication that laws need to be more inclusive of trans\* lives and parenthood, Nelson still finds a way to link Harry's transness to herself, seeming less about trans\* inclusionary laws, and more about the couple's comfort and privacy as parents. Despite the recognition of legal issues facing the queer community, Nelson still approaches it from a very selfish perspective. In this situation, Nelson is willing to deny Harry legal guardianship over Iggy, and a key part to being a parent, in the hopes that law will eventually catch up to Nelson's ideals of a queer future. She does not say they are unable to afford the fees, but rather that she does not want to go through the process that would make it possible for shared custody. Harry and Nelson might have had an agreement over this matter in private, but its absence from the narrative continues the idea that queerness only works for Nelson when it explicitly benefits her.

Overall, though Nelson places a trans\* individual as the central figure within her memoir, her representation of Harry is limited to the individual nuclear family unit, reevaluating the notion of “we” from a communal pronoun to a limited and relational pronoun. Due to this restriction, Nelson’s memoir does very little for the queer and trans\* community, in spite of Nelson’s own expectations of representation from other trans\* individuals within the public eye. Harry becomes a tool for Nelson to continue to hold onto queerness. She may identify however she wishes, but her construction of identity within her memoir diminishes the radical nature of trans\* identity and does not consider those who are struggling just to exist as trans\* individuals. As Lou Spence notes in their review of *The Argonauts*, in relation to the inclusion of Harry as a trans\* figure and Nelson’s shifting focuses between the trans\*self and Nelson’s own identity:

But when her focus shifts, it’s as if the possibility of trans-ness evaporates, Nelson’s relationship with trans-ness is at one remove and she is clear about not wanting the burden of ‘represent[ing] anything.’ But, without dismissing the complex work she does here, or unduly expecting Nelson to get everything right, I had moments as a trans reader, of feeling so beheld, so seen, so validated by paragraphs in *The Argonauts*, that I felt sinking disappointment at other times when I realised that Nelson had failed to include trans people in her thinking at all. (Spence)

Trans\* representation seems possible within Nelson’s memoir, but ultimately fails. She offers glimpses of radical trans\* representation, but they never come into full fruition. During the time that Nelson’s memoir came out in 2015, and when Spence’s review came out in 2016, conversations about trans\* lives were at their peak, so Spence’s disappointment feels warranted by the fact that a genderqueer/nonbinary individual is included in a memoir about queer happiness but receives little substance and depth of their own. The notion of “Nelson’s relationship with trans-ness is at one remove” dominates the image of Harry, and in turn, Harry himself becomes one part removed

from the larger trans\* community as his presentation is filtered through Nelson.



#### IV. MCKENZIE WARK'S *REVERSE COWGIRL*: FINDING IDENTITY THROUGH SEX

McKenzie Wark's *Reverse Cowgirl* primarily takes place during Wark's life in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s as she attempts to understand her sexuality and her gender identity in a time of immense homophobia. Her memoir is constructed around a series of relationships in which she conflates sexual acts and positions with gender as a means to understand her own gender dysphoria, which she feels from her teenage years into adulthood. Due to a lack of accessibility to the underground trans\* community of the time, Wark is left without the language to understand her internal feelings of femininity and turns towards the only instance in which she feels validated in her feminine desires: sex. In her many relationships she recounts within the memoir, such as those with Leslie and Edward, Wark places emphasis on her sexual interactions, most importantly her desire to be in the submissive role as that is where she feels the most feminine and validated in her internal desire to be a woman and not a gay man. Though she does present signs of gender dysphoria throughout the novel, her trans\* identity becomes most pronounced in those sex scenes where she experiences a great deal of gender euphoria. The conflict occurs when her gender and gender euphoria depend so deeply on external sources and those sources keep her at arms' reach or that she must minimize her own pleasures in order to account for their needs. At the climax of the memoir, Wark is able to take control of her own pleasure in a night club by performing sexual acts with a dildo in an exhibitionist display, embodying the position of Reverse Cowgirl through which she defines her gender. Wark's memoir presents a trans\* journey looked back upon, where a sense of community was never available to her and she must make do with what is

available in order to understand herself. Wark's autobiographical "I" within the piece is unstable, as she grapples with a unsteady gender identity that is constructed in an evolving relation to sex. Therefore, she must rely on the relationships she gets herself into in order to construct a "we" to understand her internal feelings, often described in the binary format of fucked/fucker or penetrated/penetrator.

Wark quickly establishes her need for external validation in response to the trauma of her mother's death at the age of six, and the subsequent emptiness that requires other people to make her feel real, a response that immediately unsettles her construction of an autobiographical "I." She begins the memoir with, "My father asks me to come and sit on his lap... he holds me and he tells me my mother is dead," describing the experience as "The world vibrates in a slow rhythm, waves of static alternating with waves of clear nothing... There is a subtraction, like a cut in a movie. For a moment I am not there at all" (Wark 11). Wark then reflects on the feeling of nothingness that comes with the grief, "There are moments when I don't exist. I both want and fear those moments" (11). Her only reprieve from the effects of such trauma comes from the validation she gains from the sexual partners she has later in her life and how she pleases them or how they please her. Wark speaks of being older and having a boyfriend, explaining, "I had a boyfriend once who could make [not existing] happen. 'Fuck me 'til I don't exist.' That was what I wanted from him. 'You treat me like shit,' he would say. 'It's not me, it's the not existing,' I would say in my defense. 'I want you to fuck me 'til I don't exist. I want those moments'" (11). The connection between sex and existing that Wark places so closely to the death of her mother links sex with fulfillment and coping very early on. As sex will later become linked to her fulfillment of gender for herself

through gender euphoria, Wark begins to layer her relational understanding of identity and existence through unnamed relationships before moving towards concrete individuals.

Wark begins to establish her relationship with a larger notion of “we” in her first chapter. After explaining the loss of her mother and the many boyfriends who took advantage of her, Wark meditates on the nature of humans, stating, “This is the problem with being human. We exist for each other only when we don’t exist; and we don’t exist for each other only in those moments of raw existing. We are monsters of existence, and non-existence. That is all” (13). From early on, the act of existing has a relational clause, much like gender itself. Wark does not perceive the ability for one to simply exist: it must always be in relation to another, a concept she explores through the men and women she has relationships with throughout the memoir. Her relational understanding of existing becomes dangerous and volatile to her perception of self due to her isolation from a wider trans\* community.

Part of Wark’s isolation from the trans\* community stems from the lack of accessibility to language to her in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. She comments on the lack of labels, writing, “Call me... Oh I don’t know. I don’t know names. I never knew the names. In those days there weren’t any names, or weren’t any sweet ones. I was a child of the sixties, teenager with the seventies, university in the eighties. Ways to be human were being born, but not well named” (Wark 14). Where Mock had names like *mahu* to identify herself with, and a growing concept of transsexual/transgender at a societal level, Wark feels separated from any sort of identifying language and lived in a state of simply existing. From this lack of language and identifiable community at a young age and into

Wark's formative years, she experiences a lack of community; she even lacks a solid sense of self for a great deal of her memoir. In a moment of reflection from a present to a past self, she mentions going to the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, "starting back before all the other names for various versions of us were added to the title, and before the controversy about whether *bisexual* and *transgender* were even a thing at all" (90). Wark's inclusion of this statement acknowledges a connection to some sort of queer community, but one that was not evolved enough to include her own particular queerness in its conversation.

To compound with the lack of language Wark could identify with, Wark did not have a gender identity to grasp onto at the time, forcing her to feel swallowed by the void. Fitting her already feminine body type, Wark explored dressing in more of a feminine manner, describing it as:

All through this time, I dressed like a girl: the colors, the cuts, the long hair. Strangers would sometimes insist that they had to know: are you a boy or a girl? As if the fabric of the space-time continuum hinged on be being decidedly one or the other. I laughed it off. What appeared of me, as me, in the world was some slight femme thing, transmitting and receiving rays of girlness. Except that in the seventies, everything went unisex, so nobody noticed—not even me. (Wark 20)

Wark recounts a time where she was trying to determine her own sense of gender, while the culture attempted to eliminate the notion of gender, especially in fashion. With gender being an inherently relational construct, as I mention in my introduction, and Wark's sense of existence being relational, having gender binaries collapse into unisex damages Wark's perception of existence. Even though the unisex construction of gender could be freeing to some, Wark's history with needing validation destabilizes her conception of self. If Wark's perception of gender did not exist in the world around her, she could not perceive it as part of herself. With the push of a unisex idea of fashion, and no one

noticing her appearance as a female, gender is stripped away from Wark's identity to where she feels disconnected from internal feelings of femininity.

In her chapter titled "Men," Wark starts to establish a need for sexual and physical validation from men. At first she dismisses their presence as they start to take interest in her during her teen years, but in her need for validation in her youth, she finds a sense of purpose in their attention towards her. She writes "But even this desperate attention of theirs was worth something. It was a way to appear in the world. A world in which one otherwise disappeared as something of no interest or value to anyone at all" (Wark 27). At a time when gender expression was already being subverted and Wark was just beginning to recognize her trans\* identity, the importance of others recognizing her existence in the already confused world of gender begins to find her reliant on these men. This becomes more apparent at the end of the chapter when she shifts point of view from speaking to a general audience to an unnamed "you." Wark writes, "But there was another me. The one that came into existence when certain men were watching. When you were watching. I knew what you wanted. But it wasn't what I wanted. There is never any symmetry to what wants [sic]" (28). Wark alludes to the disproportionate nature of sexual pleasure she gives in relation to what she receives in the many relationships she has. The fulfillment of their needs is simple as they just want to have sexual satisfaction. However, Wark's own needs require not only sexual satisfaction, but gender validation and euphoria.

Wark's recognition of difference and pivot from the self to the men around her shifts the narrative to the first relationship that begins the disconnected "I" from "we" that she constructs. Her infatuation with Glen begins intellectually, but quickly turns

sexual and then to controlling. Wark begins, “I felt safe with Glen. He wanted to fuck me. Made no secret of it. He didn’t insist. The prospect seemed to excite him, scare him too” (29). The tone shifts though, as she continues, “It wasn’t just that. He wanted not just to fuck me, but to have me. To make me his. He wanted it all. Not forever. Just a while... He would touch me, caress me, above all share with me a guarded smile. I became a body that someone as magnificent as Glen could want” (30). Glen’s relationship to Wark causes both a sense of control and validation, as he becomes a physical point in which the attention she craves comes from an individual. Though brief, Glen starts a series of relationships in which Wark finds validation.

Along with Glen, Wark finds an alignment with Jenny, who moves her towards understanding her trans identity while also affirming her identification with others as a means of validation. Wark writes, “I want Glen to want me, but I want to be with Jenny, even though Glen does not want Jenny, or any woman. He wants a boy like the boy I am finding I don’t want to be because of who he has to become” (31). It is within these relationships of desire that begin the true disjointed “we” that Wark constructs within the memoir. Unlike in Mock’s memoir, where her identity had already been constructed so the “we” directly connects back to the community, or in Nelson, in which the “we” is limited as a means to shut out the larger community, Wark’s “we” is an attempt to find community in the absence of social resources, such as concrete language or other out trans\* individuals that she could relate to. She relates herself to individuals like Glen and Jenny as a means of finding bits of herself in the world around her. In a world of loss and confusion, nothing is directly apparent, but through her relationships with men and women, she constructs a method of identifying her own gender through sexual

encounters. The relation of identity to others she has sex with is further cemented when Wark comments, “Maybe it would all have turned out otherwise if I had fooled around with boys or girls my own age. But the girls were confused. They did not know that I wanted to be them rather than fuck them” (31). Once again, the chapter ends with the same changing of point of view from a first-person perspective to a second person, as Wark moves away from one encounter to another, stating, “This was before I met you” (31). In this instance, the “you” refers to her future boyfriend Edward. This is the first of two major times Wark switches points of view to the second person. In both instances, she shifts perceptions of existence and personal identity. In this case, she is shifting from being lost and unstable, moving from relationship to relationship, to a point where she can stay with one man and explore her idea of gender and self.

Wark moves from Glen and Jenny and mentions Edward, who makes a brief appearance as a man Wark desires, but cannot have in the moment, only to have him come back later in the memoir as a major figure in her transition. Wark presents him with another woman, describing their encounter as, “Edward presented himself alongside a woman I had not met yet. He had her pose with him. Like I was being offered two flavors of ice cream” (32). The idea of them being presented as “two flavors of ice cream,” in relation to the themes of this memoir, imagines them as objects of sexual consumption, ironic as Wark later becomes a sexual object for Edward. Though Wark does not end up with either of them in this moment, the observation of choice catalyzes a sexual openness to explore her own desires which comes up prominently in her relationship with Leslie early on, who begins to shape Wark’s feelings of gender expression through sex.

When it comes to relationships, Leslie serves as the first engagement where

Wark's perception of gender is less associated with one's appearance, and more associated with the sexual roles they fulfill. Wark writes an aside to the narration, stating, "This is not something logical but it is just how I feel about it: when one person is bigger than the other one, the big one fucks the little one. It does not matter their gender or age or inclination to be on top or bottom, I just feel like the big human fucks the small human is the one who is fucked. There. I said it" (40). Though the language here is meant to be agender, Wark later makes statements based around sex and sexual positioning that begin to assign gendered roles. This statement serves as the precursor to those later notions. Wark places dominance as a masculine trait and submissiveness as a feminine. Linked to gender instead of gender expression, Wark's understanding of sex implicates that a male will always fuck the woman, for the man is intended to be bigger than the woman. Though very traditional and outdated ideas from a modern perspective, from cultural values of the 60s and 70s, Wark's approach to inhabit her journey from the perspective of her confused and lost self creates a narrative more true to how she would have felt in the moment, trying to determine her own identity.

Taking these perceptions into account, sex with Leslie becomes complicated because of her size in relation to Wark, Wark becomes the "one who fucks." In this position, Wark inhabits the masculine role in the sexual encounter contrary to her own feelings and pleasures. Within their sexual acts, Wark describes the female fantasy she is having as, Leslie's "skin came on my skin. And my cock became hers. She took it over. It responded to her desires. She fucked me with my own cock" (42). Wark's imagery within sex plays with the sex and gender identity to create a mix of the two in the moment. Even in the sexual position of the man Wark has implicated for herself, she still finds means to



inhabit the role of the female. She fantasizes herself as the penetrated. Wark's sensation of body dysmorphia and the penetrated becoming the stand-in for "female" becomes more prominent. Ultimately it leads to a lack of understanding her own identity. Wark, after speaking about not being offended by being called a "faggot" writes, "But with Leslie that is not quite who I felt I was. I didn't know who I was in this situation. I was not that poof. That queer. I was not taking cock in the ass. I did not feel like her faggot boy. I felt like a faggot girl. I knew no words for this. What was galling and painful was the *inaccuracy* of their insults" (43). Wark's notions of gender identity are wrapped up in her sexual understandings of the time, where domination equals masculine energy and submissive being female, regardless of the organs involved. With Leslie, compared to Wark's prior male partners, the sexual dynamics are skewed. She feels more feminine while in her own definition of a masculine experience.

Wark's alignment of gender and sex plays with the notion of gender being exclusive from sexual orientation, that they aren't directly defined by one another. For Wark, they are intimately mixed, and the only determining factors at play for Wark to determine how she feels within her body. In an interview with Juliet Jacques, Jacques comments about how the memoir is "about sex as much as it is about gender," and how the two correlated for Wark, in which Wark responds, "I wanted to write about the possibility of figuring out that you're trans through gender euphoria experienced sexually. I tried to be a gay man but it never quite worked and I think there's comedy in writing about failure, and in writing about heterosexuality when you're trying to be the person that you want to have sex with" (Jacques 62). As Wark points out, there is an explicit failure and confusion in her queer journey that she places center stage. Her

journey with sexuality and gender often come in direct conflict with each other, or muddy the other, and often don't allow for cleanliness. Through her time with Leslie, one of the early relationships Wark includes in her memoir, and subsequent sexual experiences and partners, Wark further threads together sexuality and gender with each sexual experience she has in an attempt to piece together a messy identity for herself.

Where Leslie provides insight into the beginnings of Wark's understanding of gender intertwined in one's sexual position, Edward serves to reinforce the sexual and gendered positions of male as dominant and female as submissive for Wark. During a description of sex with Edward, Wark breaks from the description and related dialogue and mediates upon the roles of human beings. She writes:

This, I felt then and still sometimes feel, is the great asymmetry of human being: There are penetrators and the penetrated. Either your body opens and encloses another; or your body extends itself out of itself into another. One can be both of course, alternately, or even at the same time. But basically there are fuckers and the fucked. I wanted to be, and became, one of the fucked. To be flesh. (Wark 49)

Here, Wark further constructs an agender binary by replacing gendered terms with sexual acts as a means to understand how she feels within her own body. In a way, the further she reconstructs these binaries of embodiment, the further she pushes herself from gender in her descriptions of sex. Where with Leslie, she explains it as being fucked or being the one doing the fucking, with Edward, it becomes the penetrator and the penetrated.

Though these are almost the same thing, the second set explicitly conjures a phallic image, where the former more generally refers to sexual pleasure between a dominant and a submissive individual. This binary that Wark has created further cements the idea that she taps into her body euphoria through sexual acts rather than through gender expression itself. Furthering this concept of the small one being the submissive, Wark

writes, “I felt that as the one who is fucked, the small one, that I must be a girl. Or rather, *the girl*, as the fuckable one impersonates a sort of abstract idealized thing. An impossible thing” (51). Wark at this point, with Edward being the longest relationship she recounts, feels gender validation in the submissive and dominant dynamic of their relationship. Edward is in control and embodies masculine energy in Wark’s eyes. With him inhabiting that “boyfriend” position so firmly, she is able to inhabit the role of the “girlfriend” more easily. This notion becomes even more clear when Wark and Edward are out shopping for skinny jeans and she expresses, “I was a girl. Girls get their boyfriends to buy them tight jeans that show off their fuckable asses. It had not even quite occurred to me that we were gay people” (52). Wark, in a submissive position to Edward, pushes the notion of sexual validation even further as she reduces her own desires to become more appealing to Edward to maintain the gender validation she requires.

Wark receives a great deal of gender validation within her relationship, but in order to maintain her relationship and continue to receive it, she reduces herself to please him more. She thinks back upon her necessity to be seen as an object of desire, recollecting:

There was one thing for which I continued to refine a rather passable talent, however. For getting Edward to want to fuck me. I refined the craft of taking cock in the ass. He had complained of my being a mere object for him to cum in. And so I warmed to the role, not just of the object to be penetrated, but the subject. I became the one who wants to be breached at the boundaries, who wants to be touched inside, that makes the other want that want. (Wark 54)

Wark finds her identity and worth within her sexual services to Edward, past the point of it being an act of love. She wants to be more than just a tool for Edwards sexual pleasure and, essentially a hole for him to penetrate, but rather to be the subject of his affection.

She wants to push the notion further than the sexual acts, into a meaningful relationship. Regardless of how Edward treats her, Wark's gender euphoria is more powerful than the emotional and psychological abuse that she endures from him. Part of this stems from the fact that she does not have a community or others to turn to. He is Wark's sole source of support. Where Mock consistently pivots from one trans\* individual to another as a source of external validation, support, and community, Wark is adamantly focused on Edward within the multiple chapters their relationship takes up within the memoir. A great deal of this loops back to the fact that Wark did not have access to trans\* language at the time she was experiencing her trans\* awakening, but that she felt validated by Edward. This connection between self and Edward continues as Wark specifically addresses the lack of community she has:

If I would not know who I was from the world touching me from the outside, prodding 'til I felt a self; then I would become one by being touched from the inside. Edward's cock would press my insides against my boundaries, pushing what would become, when pressed, against skin from the inside, a being I could call, a being I could call I. This coming into being, this inside out subjectivity, would change things between us. (55)

In this description, the identity becomes mixed into the act of sex even further. She sees the outside world as incapable of helping her develop an identity, almost viewing the outside as a nuisance as she describes it as "prodding." Up until this point, the outside world has only confused her with its unisex fashion and maimed her with slurs and insults. In Wark's metaphor, Edward's penetration of her shapes who she is and how she perceives herself. He dominates her emotionally and physically, placing her in the submissive role that she associates with femininity. He forms Wark's identity for her, determining its limits with their relationship.

It is only when Wark can separate herself from Edward does she start to gain

control of her own identity and gender. As times with Edward become more dangerous due to his drug dependency, Wark begins to slowly disconnect her identity from Edward and realize herself as an independent being. Wark describes the disconnect as, “The drug, the mood, the music, and Edward’s devouring gaze unmanned me, and I needed that. It did not really matter that he did not see my body the way I did. I saw it as a girl; he saw it as a boy. So long as I stayed skinny and fairly hairless, I would always be a jailbait fantasy in his head” (Wark 82). This description comes at a time when Wark has moved out of the same living space as Edward and has had time to explore herself and other men. Having had distance from Edward and their relationship becoming more dependent on drugs than sexual servitude, Wark begins to feel a sense of dissonance between how Edward perceives her and how she perceives herself. She cannot be who she wishes to be in the eyes of Edward. Wark observes her own body under the gaze of “female,” aligning gendered language with the sexual language that she typically associates her identity with. From here, Wark expresses a more outwardly feminized version of herself through clothing to attempt to feel more like the self she feels inside. When wearing more feminine clothes, Wark states:

I felt like a little costume drag allowed me to perform myself a bit differently. A travesty, sure, but a willed one. I could slip between genders, shimmy past masculinity for a moment, but not really launch into another gender. It was more a euphoria of lofting out of gender for a moment, composing some other body outside gender’s gravity. To not-exist in a non-existing gender, to float a femme phantasmagoria of skins and signs. (Wark 96)

Wark moves closer to crossing the gender binary, but is still lifted by the gender euphoria. She finds herself less in a state of fully realized transness and more that she is putting on a costume. This feeling of being in drag rather than a feeling of being trans\* harkens back to what Mock was critiquing in her own memoir about trans\* individuals

being lost in the crowd of drag queens and that it presents an idea that gender is a costume. In this moment, she is closer to embodying a gender expression she feels more aligned with her internal, which helps her move to independence. The clothes give her a rare sense of validation that does not come contingent with the manipulation from another person. Soon after, her relationship ends with Edward, serving as the catalyst for Wark to fully have a grasp on her own identity as she learns how to pleasure herself without another individual involved, giving her control of her identity.

Reaching the climax of the memoir, Wark gains autonomy of her body by performing exhibitionistic sexual acts, in which she is in control of the entire pleasure. The shift in understanding comes after her and Edward separate, in which Wark describes her own recognition of identity, “I would like to say that this was the moment I knew I had to transition. That I was trans all along. That my flailing attempts to be gay and to be straight, to be the man-made femme object or duplicate femme subject, had all been driven by a dysphoria I could feel but not name, but it wasn’t quite as narratively neat as that” (Wark 160). She explicitly recognizes the narrative expectation that transitioning is a clear and direct line, understood by the trans\* individual from a very young age. Wark never had that. Up until this point, she has very much avoided explicitly calling herself trans\* as a means of more accurately portraying her experience. She didn’t have the language, only the sensation. By constructing gender within the memoir as being a product of sexual positioning, Wark has denied herself control of gender, as there was always someone on the other side of it that contributed to the equation of existence. In the chapter “The Art of Circlusion,” Wark pivots again to an ambiguous “you,” different from the previous “you” that was a stand-in for Edward, that serves as both an

unidentified person, but also as a way to bring the reader into a voyeuristic position. In this chapter, the “you” is forced to “watch” her engagement with a dildo she has named “*Purple Reign*.” Wark describes the other person as, “You are all in generic tight black sex-wear, but it’s a seamless outfit that makes your body almost impenetrable, like an Emma Peel catsuit. A little of my fantasy attire splashed onto you. Over the suit is the shiny silver harness, and *Purple Reign* swinging and bobbing and attracting all kinds of attention” (Wark 163). In the fashion of the relational aspect of the prior portions of the memoir, the reader is placed as the “other member” in her sexual interaction, a participant in Wark’s exhibitionist actions within the club she is at. Though the “you” present in the chapter is in reference to a specific person, an unnamed friend from the previous chapter, implying that Wark is finding her own identity, untethered to the validation of another. When Wark finally takes full control of her sexuality in the night club, she begins to come into her identity, aligning gender expression with sexual pleasure. She becomes penetrated by *Purple Reign* but does so in a way that she has control of the situation.

Wark describes the experience with *Purple Reign* as such:

It is as if every moment of choosing to be fucked, every willed penetration, every circumsion, is a continuum with all the others. Some are smooth lightning, some are boundary-rocking shocks, the good kind of pain, some are just not all that exciting. But they are all moments together in a continuum of being. Of being the one who is fucked, the one that opens a surface folded inside to meet a surface from outside, revealing the body as nothing but folded surfaces, as having no inside and outside, no interiority for a self to hide in. (Wark 167)

Here Wark is describing a tipping point in her identity, where she is associating the experience with past sexual encounters, where she is in the role of “the fucked” but something is different. In this scenario, she plays the role of “the fucked” but as the dominant individual in the sexual encounter, Wark has control of her pleasure. She

subverts her own concepts of gender and melds them together as to signify a change in her own understanding of self and identity. The “other” is no longer as important as it once was because she now knows how to achieve sexual pleasure without them. The ambiguous “you” is still involved with the matter, but they are unimportant to Wark’s construction of identity within the scene. Wark completes the act by taking up the sexual position of reverse cowgirl and being in charge of her sexual pleasure and climax. She writes:

Reverse cowgirl: It’s what I like and– if you put a six-shooter to my head to make me decide– who I will be. What I will answer to when called: reverse cowgirl. What I would even select as a gender on Facebook if it was among the fifty odd choices: reverse cowgirl. This almost-girl who bought her first western boots before she even knew who she was. Reverse cowgirl: The Spider from Venus. This New Yorker, this almost American, come like so many do from the provinces, who like to take cock in her or his or her antipodes. (Wark 169)

In this moment, Wark has found her identity, been able to give it a name and own it. Besides the identity sharing its name with the title of the memoir, it is how she defines herself. Not only does it serve as a sexual position in which she has created her own climax but nuances it with the gendered description of “cowgirl.” Wark’s description of “This almost-girl who bought her first western boots before she even knew who she was” is reminiscent to her description of being in drag. She comes as close as she can to crossing the binary and understanding her trans\*-femme identity. Mixing the description of being an “almost-girl” and her ability to break away from the dependent constructions of gender she previously held presents a moving forward for Wark in self-constructing her identity.

Wark ends the memoir with a major jump forward in time, back to the present, becoming a meta commentary on the construction of the novel and the autobiographical



“I” that she describes as heavily artificially constructed for the reader. Much like all the memoirs within this thesis, and really any memoir for that matter, Wark describes *Reverse Cowgirl* as a carefully constructed series of events that could only lead to one conclusion, where the parts that do not fit are omitted as if they never happened. Wark writes “Who is the I in my head that thinks it’s me? Who is the me that thinks it is a recap of a series of phases, adventures, quests, events that carved it into its given form? This I, in this now, remembers all past iterations of itself that culminates in this comic-happy (or tragic-unhappy) plot-point. This I, in this now—forgets all of the other pasts that don’t fit this dramedy” (172). In addition to being a memoir about a lack of community, it is a memoir about breaking narrative traditions, as Evan Vipond describes in my introduction. Though it is constructed in a fairly linear fashion, as a memoir about sex it rejects notions of hetero or homosexuality; as a narrative about gender, it refuses to neatly place itself within the binary of male and female. It is a narrative of breaking conventions to fit the lived experience, and in turn, embracing the messiness of existing that is brought front and center in the very first chapter.

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