Rewriting the fiction of gender binary: Exploring depictions of non-binary individuals and their construction of gender identity in contemporary (2010+) British and North American fiction

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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I dedicate this thesis to two extraordinary women who have shaped the very core of who I am. To my dear Mum, Dianne Allen, and my beloved Auntie Jeanette, affectionately known as Netti, whose presence in my life, although too short, has left an everlasting mark.

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Abstract

This thesis analyses a selection of recent (2010-2021) literary texts that exemplify the increasing visibility of trans* and non-binary gender identities. This corpus of new queer fiction marks an important evolution in trans* narratives, emphasising stories that resist binary frameworks and medicalised resolutions. Through an exploration of cultural dynamics, social influences, and personal knowledge as a trans* woman, it examines the complexities of gender identity construction. The research asks: To what extent can literary representations of gender diversity advance and inform understandings of identity construction for readers who deviate from the traditional gender binary, and how does literature enable or limit such representations?

This thesis introduces the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model to explore the processes of diverse gender identity construction in new queer fiction. The SGF model contextualises non-binary and gender diverse identities within the literary, temporal, and spatial settings they inhabit, revealing how socialisation both enables and constrains trans* and non-binary expression. As a central, narrative feature of the selected texts, including as Kathleen Winter's *Annabel* (2010), Alex Reeve's *House on Half Moon Street* (2018), and Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After* (2021), protagonists chart a path towards self-realisation. However, not all fiction presents such journeys as direct or inevitable, as seen in works such as *Detransition, Baby!* (Peters, 2021). This thesis acknowledges these broader representations while focusing on texts that chart more affirming paths of identity construction.

Fiction is both a reflection of, and a catalyst for, societal understanding of gender identity. While it offers representation and platforms for self-discovery, it also risks being constrained by social norms and literary conventions, which may limit portrayals of fully realised non-binary identities. Through qualitative analysis, intersectionality, queer theory, and autoethnography, this thesis contributes to the evolving discourse on gender diversity in contemporary literature, examining both the assets and limitations of literary representation.

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Glossary of Terms

Cisgender	Describes individuals whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.
Demi-Gender	Describes individuals whose gender identity partially aligns with the gender typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. A demi-boy may identify partially as male, while a demi-girl may identify partially as female. These identities often exist within the broader non-binary spectrum.
Differences in Sex Development (DSD) / Intersex	Encompasses a range of over 40 biological conditions that affect sexual development. Intersex individuals are born with physical sex characteristics that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies, often complicating sex assignment at birth.
Gender Affirming	Pertains to actions, behaviours, or treatments that affirm and support a transgender person's gender identity, such as hormone therapy.
Gender Creative	This term refers to individuals, often children, who express their gender in ways that are creative or unconventional, not limited by behaviours, clothes, or activities associated with gendered binary expectations.
Gender Diverse	An umbrella term referring to individuals whose gender identity or expression is different from the conventional expectations based on their assigned sex at birth. It is often used in a more inclusive or neutral context, and it can describe a wide variety of gender identities (including transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and others).
Gender Dysphoria:	The psychological and emotional discomfort experienced by an individual due to a misalignment between their assigned sex at birth and their gender identity.
Gender Encoding	The process by which cultural representations shape and reinforce gender distinctions. Content designed for boys typically focuses on themes of action and heroism, whereas materials targeted at girls often prioritise traits such as empathy and attractiveness (adapted from Hines, 2018).
Gender Euphoria	The positive feelings that occur when a person's intrinsic or subconscious gender is affirmed through external validation, social interactions, or personal expression.

Gender Expression	The outward display of one's gender through aspects such as names, pronouns, clothing, speech, and behaviours.
Gender Fluid	Refers to a gender identity that changes over time, moving along the gender spectrum. These changes can occur multiple times in a day or span several years.
Gender Identity	The personal, internal sense of one's own gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. Everyone possesses a gender identity, which can fit within or outside the binary categories of male and female (Serano, 2007).
Gender Neutral / Agender	Refers to individuals who identify as having no gender or a neutral gender. This identity challenges the binary framework of male and female and often encompasses a rejection of gendered labels and expectations.
Genderqueer	An identity that falls outside the traditional categories of strictly male or female. Genderqueer individuals often see gender as fluid, rejecting the binary framework. They may not conform to societal expectations of gender roles and presentation.
Non-binary	Describes individuals whose gender identity or expression does not fit within the conventional categories of man or woman. This term includes a variety of gender identities that do not adhere to traditional gender roles and may include both male and female characteristics or fluctuate over time.
Sex	The classification assigned to a newborn based on physical characteristics, including external anatomy, hormones, chromosomes, and reproductive organs.
Sex Assigned at Birth	The initial classification of a newborn as male or female based on observed physical characteristics. Also includes abbreviations (AFAB – Assigned female at birth) and AMAB – Assigned male at birth).
Situational Gender Fluidity	Refers to the phenomenon where an individual's gender identity or expression shifts depending on the context or setting. This adaptability often reflects the interplay between personal identity and external social expectations.
Trans	A broad term describing individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Trans*	Refers to a diverse range of individuals who identify with a gender different from their assigned sex at birth, including those whose gender identities transcend traditional gender norms. This term, known as "trans asterisk," signifies that the person is not cisgender but does not necessarily identify strictly as male or female.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

What is the *fiction* of the gender binary?

The conventional view of the gender binary asserts that there are only two genders and sexes, a perspective reinforced by scholars and cultural norms alike (Lorber, 1994). This system categorises individuals strictly as male or female, overlooking the nuanced and fluid aspects of human identity (Fausto-Sterling, 2008). By examining diverse gender constructions in literature, my study seeks to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of gender diversity in both literature and society. Throughout the thesis I will emphasise how fiction can serve as a vital tool in exploring personal and complex areas of study, particularly gender diversity, drawing heavily on Louise Rosenblatt's tenets on transactional theory: 'Literary works facilitate a transaction between the reader's personal experiences and the narrative' (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269). By interrogating how these narratives portray gender identity formation and fluidity, my thesis highlights the limitations of the binary framework. Throughout this thesis, I explore how entrenched notions of binary gender and sex identities have been shaped by historical and contemporary discourse, contextualizing contemporary understandings and, in turn, enriching the broader dialogue on gender diversity (Johnson et al., 2020).

Emerging gender theories advocate for recognising gender fluidity and dismantling rigid gender norms. Scholars like Jack Halberstam, in *In a Queer Time and Place*, argue for a more inclusive understanding of gender, challenging myths and stereotypes associated with binary gender constructs (Halberstam, 2005). Unfortunately, some policymakers and public figures continue to weaponise this rigid binary model, using it to marginalise genderqueer individuals and bolster conservative agendas, promoting hatred toward those who deviate from traditional gender norms (Tudor, 2023). Public policies, such as state laws in the United States, further enforce binary definitions of gender, effectively erasing non-binary and genderqueer identities from official recognition (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). This binary framework is not only

reductive but exclusionary, failing to capture the true complexity of human identity, thus marginalising and invalidating countless lived experiences.

In alignment with these critical views, my thesis engages with the anti-medicalisation argument, following Foucault's critique of how medical discourses have historically pathologised and regulated non-normative bodies. As Owen (2014) argues, transgender experiences reveal a far more varied and intricate spectrum of bodily experiences and gender subjectivities, drawing attention to the contingent and fluid nature of identity formation, rather than fixed categories (p. 22). The literary works analysed in this thesis, particularly those published post-2014, reflect this critical shift. They move beyond reductive medicalised portrayals of trans* identities as 'defective' and present nuanced narratives that resist binary frameworks and medicalised resolutions. This movement is a crucial development within academic trans* studies, where stories increasingly emphasise gender diversity as natural, fluid, and complex.

Through its critical engagement with contemporary gender theories and recent studies on transgender representation in fiction, this thesis seeks to challenge and dismantle reductive medicalisation, instead advocating for a more inclusive and substantively rich understanding of gender diversity. Recent research, such as Smith et al.'s (2022) analysis of transgender narratives in contemporary literature, highlights the importance of portraying gender identity as fluid and multifaceted, challenging binary constructs often perpetuated by both medical and cultural discourses. Central to this exploration is the concept of the "authentic self," which reflects an individual's intrinsic identity, free from societal or institutional pressures to conform. Studies like Lee and Ramirez's (2023) work on genderqueer protagonists in speculative fiction emphasise that authenticity in genderqueer identity involves aligning external expressions with internal experiences, defying the rigid categories imposed by normative frameworks. Additionally, Taylor's (2023) investigation into the role of intersectionality in transgender fiction reveals how intersecting identities, such as race, class, and sexuality, shape narratives of authenticity,

highlighting the need for literature to reflect the complex realities of diverse lived experiences. This pursuit of authenticity underscores a holistic approach to identity, recognising gender as a dynamic and evolving element of personal and cultural narratives rather than a static trait.

By examining how protagonists within the selected texts transition from repression to authentic self-expression, this study foregrounds a humanistic understanding of identity, recognising it as a dynamic process rather than a static label. Maslow's concept of self-actualisation (1968) provides a foundation for this analysis, suggesting that authentic self-expression is a core element of individual fulfilment and psychological well-being. In a similar vein, Ricoeur's narrative identity theory (1991) proposes that identities are crafted and re-crafted through the stories people tell about themselves and others. This narrative approach is particularly relevant to genderqueer identity, as it allows for the ongoing reinterpretation of self in ways that transcend the binaries traditionally reinforced by medical and social norms.

Recent scholarship has significantly contributed to understanding trans representation in YA fiction. Articles such as Crisp's (2020) "Representations of Transgender Youth in Contemporary YA Fiction" and Driver's (2019) "Queer Storytelling and Identity Formation" highlight how these narratives offer spaces for exploring complex gender identities. Notably, Putzi's (2021) "None of this 'trapped-in-a-man's-body' bullshit: Transgender Girls and Wrong-Body Discourse in Young Adult Fiction" critiques reductive tropes, arguing for a shift toward narratives that centre self-determination and intersectionality. Similarly, Sandercock's *Youth Fiction and Trans Representation* (2022) examines the evolving portrayal of trans and genderqueer identities within the genre, highlighting the importance of authentic storytelling in countering normative narratives. These works align with the thesis's focus on narrative identity, reinforcing the importance of representation as both personal and political. Unlike previous studies that primarily critique binary gender constructs or challenge medicalised narratives, my thesis uniquely foregrounds the role of fiction as an active site of gender identity formation,

arguing that literature not only reflects but also shapes evolving understandings of gender diversity.

The YA market has seen substantial growth in LGBTQ+ titles, with trans-inclusive narratives becoming an increasingly significant segment. Publishers such as HarperTeen, Balzer + Bray, and Scholastic have been at the forefront of this movement, supporting works like Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* and Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After*. Sales data supports this trend: Nielsen BookScan (2022) reports a 34% increase in LGBTQ+ YA fiction sales from 2019 to 2022. Additionally, trade analyses, including those published in *Publisher's Weekly* (2021), suggest that the commercial success of these texts reflects a growing demand for diverse and authentic narratives. Notably, the prominence of major publishing houses in this space signals a shift away from reliance on self-publishing or specialist LGBTQ+ presses, demonstrating that trans and non-binary stories are no longer considered niche but an integral part of mainstream YA literature.

The selected texts illustrate a spectrum of narrative strategies that reflect evolving norms around gender and representation. Texts like *Felix Ever After* (Callender, 2021) and *Symptoms of Being Human* (Garvin, 2016) employ first-person narratives to immerse readers in the protagonists' psychological landscapes, aligning with YA fiction's focus on relatability and empathy. These narratives resonate with Ricoeur's theory of identity as a dynamic process, where storytelling becomes a means of self-reconciliation. In contrast, Kathleen Winter's *Annabel* adopts a third-person omniscient perspective, reflecting its categorisation as literary fiction and its broader thematic focus on systemic structures that shape gender.

Central to these narratives is the protagonists' journey toward authenticity. In *Cemetery Boys* (Thomas, 2020), Yadriel's affirmation of his gender identity through cultural and spiritual practices underscores the intersectionality of trans identities, a theme echoed in *Girl Mans Up* (Girard, 2018), which explores the tension between cultural expectations and self-expression.

These texts foreground the protagonists' struggles against societal and familial pressures, illustrating the universality of the quest for self-actualisation within the specificity of genderqueer experiences.

This thesis contributes to the growing field of trans representation in YA fiction by situating selected texts within a broader literary context. While it acknowledges the increasing commercial visibility of trans narratives, its primary focus is on their thematic, narrative, and representational significance rather than industry trends. By engaging with contemporary academic work, the study underscores the cultural impact of these texts and their role in expanding and challenging dominant gender paradigms. Central to this analysis is the understanding that gender, as depicted in YA fiction, is not merely a static characteristic but a fluid and evolving aspect of identity. Through this lens, the selected texts serve as both mirrors and windows, reflecting individual experiences while challenging societal norms, ultimately fostering a more inclusive understanding of gender diversity. Further supported by contemporary psychological theories of self-determination (Lenton & Sedikides, 2020), this study highlights the significance of autonomy and self-directed growth in achieving authentic gender expression. Literary representation serves as a powerful tool for exploring this journey, revealing how the empowerment and self-realisation of gender-diverse individuals can be represented through narrative. By centring on self-determined, authentic gender identities, my thesis advocates for a shift from a medicalised view of gender diversity towards a more empathetic understanding, one that honours the complexity of gender-queer individuals' lived experiences and their continuous pursuit of authenticity. The principal research question, therefore, asks:

To what extent can literary representations of gender diversity advance and inform understandings of identity construction for readers who deviate from the traditional gender binary narrative, and how does literature enable or limit such representations?

In selecting the novels to answer this research question, I aimed to include a diverse range of narratives, incorporating intersectionality to ensure a comprehensive exploration of gender identity across different cultural contexts. I predominantly chose literature from recent YA (young adult) fiction, as strong representations of gender diversity have developed since 2010 among protagonists within this genre. Further, YA fiction increasingly often focuses on young individuals who are in the process of developing their gender identities, making it a rich source for examining the complexities and challenges of gender identity formation. The protagonists in these narratives navigate their journeys of self-discovery, offering insights into the lived experiences of gender-diverse youth. Additionally, YA fiction frequently reflects key societal shifts, particularly in how younger generations are increasingly taking the lead in educating those around them—challenging and reshaping the established notions of gender. This shift, where younger characters guide and challenge the beliefs of older figures, illustrates a reciprocal learning dynamic that has become more prominent in recent years, further highlighting the evolving nature of gender discourse. This focus aligns with the thesis's goal of providing a deliberately inclusive and in-depth understanding of gender diversity and identity construction.

Throughout this thesis, I analyse how characters challenge codified gender norms in their respective settings, reflecting social discourse in the Anglosphere since 2010 on authentic gender expression. The prejudicial treatment of gender-diverse individuals is often tied to the complex make-up of their social setting; a reality which literature has to potential to expose (Nicholas, 2019). This thesis also examines the depiction of 'innate gender', emphasising how fiction represents the persistence of intrinsic gender identity despite external pressures, echoing McLachlan's (2010) findings on the resilience of gender identity among trans* individuals. The psychological discomfort of being misrecognised or living inauthentically underscores the importance of transitioning to one's felt sex/gender. While societal constraints pose challenges,

the pursuit of *authenticity* is vital for trans* individuals' psychological and social well-being can be seen as a common narrative arc throughout the chosen corpus.

As Varga (2013) discusses, authenticity concerns the internal identification that a person adheres to: while their potential expressions of self and the language they employ to define themselves are influenced by external factors; the essence of authenticity resides internally and cannot be reduced. According to Bialystok (2013), authenticity encompasses several key components. Firstly, the essentialist structure refers to the belief that a core personal essence or selfhood requires expression. This identity must exhibit endurance, persisting and remaining resilient over time despite external pressures. Authenticity also involves the ability to recognise and label inauthentic elements in one's life and setting, differentiating what is true to oneself from what is imposed by external forces. Furthermore, it necessitates the expression of a non-conforming authentic self, which should be proudly asserted even in the face of societal pressures. Finally, as highlighted by Guignon (2004), the normative significance of authenticity underscores the inherent value and importance of living authentically, suggesting that this state is not just personally fulfilling but also carries a moral or ethical weight. In other words, living authentically is regarded as a universally valuable or commendable way to exist, recognised by society as a meaningful and desirable state of being. This notion of authenticity plays a central role in many of the narratives I explore throughout my thesis, particularly in how they depict characters' journeys towards self-realisation and identity construction.

However, authentic gender expression is frequently constrained by cultural and social influences. Contemporary English-speaking societies validate identities that conform to dominant belief systems; as we will see during my analysis, this validation often relates directly to the quadrants of Family, Society and Setting. For those outside these norms, their identities are frequently deemed less legitimate. This societal framework forces many trans* individuals to modify their behaviour to avoid prejudice and maintain safety, adopting strategies such as

'passing' or presenting in a gender-neutral way to navigate societal scrutiny (Couch et al., 2007). Trans* individuals often face pressure to conform to binary gender norms, creating a tension between their internal sense of identity and external expectations. This incongruence can lead to considerable emotional distress and social challenges, impacting their overall well-being as Ainsworth & Spiegel (2010) found in their research in the United States looking at individuals who have accessed gender affirming intervention. The fear of prejudice and the need for acceptance make authenticity a complex and often compromised endeavour for many trans* people.

This thesis examines how such authenticity is depicted and interrogated within the realm of fiction, through analysis of the selected YA novels. In these novels, the protagonists' quests for authenticity are vividly brought to life, allowing readers to witness the challenges and emotional landscapes of trans* characters. This narrative exploration serves not only to validate the experiences of trans* people but also to foster a broader understanding among readers. This thesis underscores the significant role that literature plays in advancing our comprehension of trans* authenticity and identity construction. Thus, the investigation into fiction remains central, offering critical insights into the broader context of gender identity and authenticity.

Introducing my corpus

The above aims governed the selection criteria for the fiction to be analysed for this thesis. Each novel offers a unique perspective that deepens the understanding of the 'becoming' process of gender identity construction. Firstly, narrowing the selection down to novels from the last decade not only ensures my research is contemporary and current, but also serves to highlight trends in genre writing between 2010 and 2020. Since I began my research in 2020, there have been various new novels that would have made excellent additions to my research such as Reeve's new additions to the Leo Stanhope mysteries collection, Aiden Thomas' newest book *The Sunbearer*

Trials, and *Lakelore* by Anne-Marie Mclemore. However, it was necessary to maintain a narrow and manageable scope for my selection, to sustain a coherent and effective analytical voice throughout. Below are the rationales behind the inclusion of each novel, explaining their place within my research.

Winter's *Annabel* bridges literary fiction and the Bildungsroman[1], employing a third-person omniscient narrative to explore gender identity and the search for the "true self" against a backdrop of rural isolation. Unlike the majority of trans* YA fiction, which uses first-person narration to establish immediacy and intimacy with younger readers, *Annabel*'s narrative distance reflects its categorisation as literary fiction rather than YA. This choice allows Winter to embed Wayne/Annabel's personal journey within a broader sociopolitical critique, using the remote Labrador landscape as a metaphor for the protagonist's isolation and internal conflict. The contrast between this narrative approach and the first-person immediacy of YA texts such as *Felix Ever After* and *Cemetery Boys* highlights how literary conventions shape the depiction of identity and the pursuit of authenticity.

The *Bildungsroman* framework is evident in Wayne's progression from childhood to adulthood, as he confronts societal expectations and seeks a coherent sense of his "true self." Winter situates this journey within the harsh yet evocative landscapes of Labrador and St. Johns, using the setting as both a literal and symbolic reflection of Wayne's struggles. Similarly, the depiction of familial dynamics, particularly the father's resistance and the mother's quiet support, parallels the relational challenges explored in YA texts like *Girl Mans Up,* albeit with less direct emotional access for the reader. This narrative distance invites reflection rather than immediate identification, distinguishing *Annabel* from its YA counterparts and offering a more contemplative examination of what it means to embrace one's "true self."

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[1] Graham, S, ed. (2019). A History of the Bildungsroman. Cambridge University Press.

Reeve's *The House on Half Moon Street* adopts neo-Victorian conventions, merging historical crime fiction with the personal struggles of its transgender protagonist. Unlike *Annabel,* which maintains narrative distance, Reeve uses a first-person perspective that immerses readers in Leo Stanhope's internal world. This approach aligns with YA conventions while situating the text within a broader genre framework that appeals to adult readers. By combining introspective narration with the detective genre's focus on external mysteries, Reeve creates a dual-layered narrative that reflects both personal and societal struggles, particularly the tension between Leo's public persona and his "true self."

Leo Stanhope's navigation of secrecy and vulnerability mirrors the thematic focus on hidden truths found in *Cemetery Boys,* but the historical setting adds a layer of systemic critique unique to this text. The *Bildungsroman* elements here are intertwined with the detective plot, as Leo's investigation of external mysteries parallels his search for personal authenticity and reconciliation with his "true self." This duality highlights the varied ways the *Bildungsroman* can adapt to different genres, offering a more historically grounded yet emotionally resonant exploration of identity compared to texts like *Symptoms of Being Human,* which focus on contemporary struggles.

Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* blends magical realism with YA conventions, crafting a narrative that situates trans identity within cultural and supernatural frameworks. Unlike *Annabel* and *The House on Half Moon Street*, this novel's first-person narration creates an intimate and immediate connection with younger readers, reflecting its categorisation as YA fiction. The use of magical realist elements further distinguishes the text, as these supernatural aspects are deeply embedded within a realistic setting, reflecting cultural traditions and lived experiences. This contrasts with purely fantastical elements, which are often unmoored from the everyday. In *Cemetery Boys*, the magical realist components serve as metaphors for Yadriel's journey towards understanding and expressing his "true self" within the confines of cultural and familial expectations.

Yadriel's struggle for acceptance within his traditional Latinx family echoes the familial dynamics in *Girl Mans Up,* but the incorporation of supernatural elements elevates his narrative into a broader exploration of identity and belonging. While *Annabel* uses the natural landscape to symbolise internal conflict, *Cemetery Boys* employs spirits and rituals to bridge personal and communal narratives, illustrating how Yadriel's embrace of his "true self" also strengthens his connection to his cultural heritage. This dual exploration underscores how genre conventions influence the tools authors use to depict identity formation and authenticity.

Girard's *Girl Mans Up* employs realist YA conventions to address gender nonconformity, positioning its narrative within the context of immigrant family dynamics and cultural expectations. It follows Pen, a gender-nonconforming teenager navigating the pressures of familial duty and societal norms while asserting her identity. Like *Cemetery Boys*, it uses first-person narration to create an intimate portrayal of the protagonist's internal conflicts. However, while *Cemetery Boys* incorporates elements of fantasy, following a trans boy who proves his identity to his family with the help of supernatural forces, *Girl Mans Up* remains firmly rooted in everyday experiences, exploring themes of loyalty, autonomy and self-acceptance. This divergence reflects the flexibility of the YA genre in addressing identity and the quest for the "true self" through varied lenses, whether through realism or speculative fiction.

Through Pen's defiance against rigid familial and societal norms, Girard critiques the intersection of cultural expectations and colonial gender constructs. This focus on cultural tension aligns with the familial struggles in *I Wish You All the Best,* where rejection and allyship shape the protagonist's journey. However, Pen's narrative offers a sharper critique of immigrant cultural norms, highlighting the unique pressures faced by those navigating intersecting identities. Compared to *Annabel,* which explores similar themes through symbolic distance, *Girl Mans Up* directly engages the reader in Pen's emotional world, reinforcing the immediacy typical of YA fiction while foregrounding Pen's determination to live authentically as her "true self."

Callender's *Felix Ever After* exemplifies the first-person immediacy characteristic of YA fiction, creating a vivid portrayal of Felix's intersecting identities as Black, queer and transgender. This narrative choice fosters direct reader identification, as seen in moments where Felix addresses the reader directly, such as his candid reflections on self-worth and artistic aspirations: *"I'm not one of those people who just knows they're trans. I have to prove it to myself"* (Callender, 2020, p. 34). This contrasts with the reflective distance of *Annabel,* which employs a third-person limited perspective to explore its protagonist's identity through external observations rather than direct internal monologue. In *The House on Half Moon Street,* the narrative adopts a dual-layered introspection, blending historical fiction with the protagonist Leo's deeply internalised struggles. His journey is often mediated through his interactions with others, such as when he must conceal his true self in Victorian society while simultaneously longing for authenticity. Felix's confessional tone captures his emotional depth, situating his personal struggles within the broader complexities of urban marginalisation and systemic inequity. His journey towards embracing his "true self" unfolds within a vibrant urban landscape that mirrors his personal growth.

The *Bildungsroman* structure shapes Felix's journey towards self-acceptance, with his creative pursuits serving as a crucial avenue for self-expression and alignment with his "true self." His passion for art becomes a means of self-discovery, exemplified in moments where he channels his emotions into his paintings, such as when he reinterprets his self-portrait to reflect his evolving understanding of his identity. Compared to the symbolic use of the Labrador landscape in *Annabel,* where the vast, isolating environment mirrors the protagonist's internal struggles with gender, New York City becomes an active participant in Felix's narrative, embodying both opportunity and constraint. The city's art schools, pride marches and moments of discrimination all shape his path, reinforcing the tension between self-determination and external judgment. This urban setting aligns with the digital spaces explored in *Symptoms of*

Being Human, where the protagonist finds a sense of community through an anonymous blog, demonstrating the diverse settings in which contemporary identity formation and the search for authenticity occur.

Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* employs a dual narrative structure, juxtaposing Riley's anonymous blog with their public persona. This modern framing device reflects the evolving tools available for self-expression in contemporary YA fiction, distinguishing the text from historical narratives like *The House on Half Moon Street.* While Riley's blog creates a safe space for exploring gender fluidity and the concept of their "true self," it also exposes them to vulnerabilities, mirroring the tensions between digital connection and real-world marginalisation.

The *Bildungsroman* framework supports Riley's journey towards self-acceptance, with the blog serving as both a metaphorical and literal platform for self-expression. This duality aligns with the relational dynamics in *Sasha Masha,* where external relationships catalyse internal growth. However, the focus on digital spaces adds a distinctly modern dimension, contrasting with the symbolic landscapes of *Annabel* and the historical settings of *The House on Half Moon Street.* Through these digital spaces, Riley grapples with and ultimately affirms their "true self."

Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best* explores non-binary identity through Ben De Backer's first-person narrative, emphasising the protagonist's emotional resilience and reliance on found family. Like *Girl Mans Up* and *Cemetery Boys,* the text uses intimate narration to foster reader empathy, but its focus on mental health and allyship introduces a therapeutic dimension that distinguishes it from other YA texts.

Ben's journey is framed within a contemporary Bildungsroman, where supportive relationships counterbalance the impact of familial rejection. This relational emphasis aligns with the themes of acceptance in *Sasha Masha,* but Deaver's portrayal of mental health foregrounds the psychological toll of marginalisation. Compared to *Annabel,* where resilience emerges

through symbolic reflection, *I Wish You All the Best* positions community as a central force in the protagonist's healing and growth, enabling Ben to embrace their "true self."

Borinsky's *Sasha Masha* employs reflective YA conventions to delve into the psychological dimensions of gender exploration. Alex's introspective narrative captures the oscillation between doubt and self-acceptance, providing a layered portrayal of identity as both relational and performative. This relational focus aligns with the digital and communal dynamics in *Symptoms of Being Human,* but Borinsky's use of queer relationality adds a unique dimension to the text.

Alex's interactions with diverse gender expressions catalyse their self-discovery, paralleling the external relationships that shape Ben's journey in *I Wish You All the Best.* However, Borinsky's focus on psychological introspection distinguishes the text within the YA genre, offering a more internalised exploration of identity and the nuanced process of discovering and affirming one's "true self" compared to the action-driven narratives of *Cemetery Boys* or the external conflicts in *Girl Mans Up.*

The structural and narrative choices across these texts reveal how genre and target readership shape the depiction of trans identities, as well as the ways inclusion rationales influence their thematic scope. *Annabel's* third-person omniscient narrative reflects its alignment with literary fiction, allowing Winter to maintain a degree of narrative distance that situates Wayne's journey within broader sociocultural critiques. This approach aligns with its inclusion rationale as a text that bridges personal and systemic explorations of gender, offering a nuanced perspective on the search for the "true self" that challenges rigid binaries and colonial impositions. In contrast, the first-person immediacy found in YA texts like *Cemetery Boys, Felix Ever After* and *I Wish You All the Best* fosters direct reader engagement, reflecting the genre's emphasis on relatability and emotional resonance. These texts are included for their ability to articulate

intersectional identities in accessible ways, addressing the lived realities of younger audiences navigating similar struggles.

Texts such as *The House on Half Moon Street* and *Symptoms of Being Human* demonstrate how blending genres can expand the scope of identity exploration, integrating historical and digital dimensions into the *Bildungsroman* framework. Their inclusion highlights the versatility of trans narratives in addressing identity formation and the quest for authenticity across time periods and contexts. By threading comparative insights throughout, this analysis underscores how these narratives engage with genre conventions, readership expectations, and inclusion criteria to enrich the discourse on trans identities, representation, and the pursuit of the "true self" in contemporary literature.

The novels discussed above reflect the intricate tapestry of gender identity, acceptance, and self-discovery. Through their compelling narratives, these stories transcend the confinements of the gender binary, urging readers to embark on a journey that challenges societal expectations. By exploring the vibrant experiences of characters who defy norms, these novels contribute to an ongoing dialogue that seeks inclusivity and validation for non-binary gender identities (Hardy & Monypenny, 2019). The core novels underpinning my analysis collectively challenge societal norms, offering transformative journeys through non-binary experiences that disrupt the gender binary. Through their narratives, these novels encourage readers to question traditional gender norms and develop a compassionate understanding of diverse gender identities, portraying the struggles and resilience of those who transcend societal expectations.

By analysing these novels through an intersectional lens, this thesis contributes to a nuanced understanding of gender identity formation that transcends simplistic labels. In this context, intersectionality refers to the analytical framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) that examines how various forms of social stratification—such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and migration status—interact and overlap, influencing individuals' lived experiences,

by as Crenshaw outlines, further marginalising and means of discrimination due to belonging to two or more marginalised groups. This approach underscores the significance of recognising that gender experiences are interwoven with other aspects of identity, revealing how these intersections can shape unique challenges and privileges for individuals. By applying this perspective, the thesis highlights the complexities of gender identity formation, demonstrating that it cannot be fully understood in isolation from other social identities and systemic structures. This analytical approach aligns with ongoing scholarly discussions advocating for a holistic approach to studying gender diversity (Davis, 2008). This analysis highlights the dynamic evolution of trans* literature as it embraces narratives reflecting a diverse and inclusive reality. Multiple scholars have noted a lack of trans* and non-binary perspectives in academic discourse. Matsuno and Budge (2017) state: 'Overall, little research is focused on non-binary individuals even though non-binary people make up a significant portion of the transgender community' (p. 116). Waagen (2022) also highlights the lack of research into non-binary and genderqueer individuals, noting that existing research predominantly focuses on transgender individuals who conform to the binary system. My lived experience as a transwoman adds depth and authenticity to this analysis, providing a much-needed trans* perspective within academic research.

Finally, the selected narratives encompass various aspects of gender identity, including private expression, self-discovery, public expression, and authenticity. Other YA novels considered for inclusion were *Always the Almost* (Underhill, 2023), *Nevada* (Binnie, 2022), *Somebody Told Me* (Siegert, 2020), *Nettleback* (Reeve, 2022), and *X* (Davis, 2022). Acclaimed works like *Detransition, Baby* (Peters, 2021), *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (Lawlor, 2017), and *Little Fish* (Plett, 2018) were also considered. However, these were excluded because they predominantly engage with the public expression quadrant of a trans* individual's journey. In contrast, my selected texts offer a comprehensive journey through each significant stage or quadrant of the SGF model (see: below), ensuring a more in-depth analysis of gender identity

complexities. My personal connection and lived experience as a trans* woman influenced these choices, each book engaging with the subject matter on a deeply personal level. This autoethnographical approach provides unique insights into the relevance of narratives and characters to my experiences. By analysing the narratives, characters, and themes in my chosen works, this thesis explores the relationships between trans* identity, cultural norms, and historical legacies.

Autoethnography

Employing a partially autoethnographic approach to my methodology, I include my personal reflections with scholarly discourse, reflecting on the dynamics of my own upbringing in relation to the trans* community. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiography with ethnography, allowing the researcher to utilise personal experience to explore and interpret cultural phenomena. This approach is especially pertinent for topics that lack extensive representation within academic discourse, such as trans* experiences. As Deitering (2017) observes, autoethnography requires active reader participation in the process of meaning-making, diverging from traditional methodologies that rely on representative samples and objective analysis. Instead, it prioritises the interpretation of meaning within specific and particular contexts, inviting readers to reflect, develop their own interpretations, and engage these with their personal experiences.

As Poulos has stated, 'Autoethnography is an observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking, and evocative (showing or bringing forth strong images, memories, or feelings)' (Poulos, 2021, p. 5). Drawing upon my own memories, both from recollection and my personal journals, I aim to utilise my lived experience as a tool to portray a deeper and truer picture of trans* identity. In the case of my thesis, the use of

autoethnography is not merely a methodological choice but a necessary one. The scarcity of trans* voices in academic literature means that traditional research methods may fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of trans* individuals. Autoethnography fills this gap by providing a deeply personal and reflective account that enriches the understanding of trans* identities and the processes of gender identity construction. It offers an insider perspective that is often missing in scholarly work, allowing for a more authentic and empathetic exploration of the subject matter. Moreover, autoethnography challenges readers to engage with the material on a personal level, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of the experiences described. As Deitering (2021) points out, this method does not aim to present what is universally true but to interpret meaning in the context of specific experiences. This interpretative nature is not a limitation but a strength, as it encourages readers to critically reflect on their assumptions and broaden their perspectives.

The critique that autoethnographic evidence does not stand up to scrutiny as proof may stem from a misunderstanding of its purpose and value. Proof in the traditional sense implies objective, quantifiable data, whereas autoethnography offers subjective, qualitative insights that are equally valuable in understanding complex human experiences. The importance of these narratives lies in their ability to convey the richness and depth of individual experiences, which can be instrumental in challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusivity. However, it is crucial to recognise that autoethnographic findings are situated within specific individual experiences and may not fully capture the diversity of gender identities and experiences (Poerwandari, 2021). To address these potential limitations, I have maintained a reflexive stance throughout my analysis, critically reflecting on my own perspective and positioning within the research. Autoethnographic insights are incorporated into my analysis throughout this thesis in instances where excerpts from my selection of texts stood out as being strikingly resonant with my own experiences. Further, I

recognise when key stages in the protagonists' journeys, of their gender identity construction, are highly relevant to my own memories of self-discovery.

Moreover, the combination of autoethnography and literary analysis in my thesis underscores their complementary roles in exploring gender diversity. Autoethnography allows for an intimate exploration of lived realities and identities, offering a personal lens that enriches scholarly inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011). Similarly, literature featuring gender diverse characters provides nuanced narratives that challenge conventional understandings and offer alternative perspectives on gender identity (Halberstam, 2005). These narratives illuminate the complexities of navigating societal norms and personal authenticity, offering insights that are often overlooked in mainstream discourse (Stryker, 2006). By examining these narratives alongside autoethnographic reflections, my thesis aims to enrich scholarly discourse with multifaceted insights that contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of gender diversity.

Introducing the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model

As a central element of my research, I began developing the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model in 2019 while teaching nursing students about transgender healthcare. This initial framework was designed to outline the various factors influencing a trans* individual's identity, particularly highlighting the significant role of external influences in this process. Later in 2019, I expanded the model using Julia Serano's (2007) notions of 'intrinsic inclination', which provided a deeper understanding of the interplay between internal and external factors affecting gender identity. The model underwent further refinement during the early stages of writing my thesis, where I synthesised insights from various academic sources, including Hines (2017), which addresses the discrimination faced by transgender and non-binary individuals, and Monro (2005), who conceptualised gender identity as being expressed on a spectrum, as opposed to a binary.

Furthermore, I elaborated on the connections between gender diversity and mental health in my publication, Trainor & Hartley (2023), 'First He Was Adam Then She Was Eve: Gender Diverse Mental Health', which is currently in press in the *Journal of Medical Humanities.* This scholarly foundation underpins the SGF model, ensuring that it is both grounded in empirical research and reflective of the diverse experiences within the gender spectrum. Through this iterative development, the SGF model not only serves as a theoretical framework for understanding gender identity formation but also contributes to a broader dialogue on the importance of recognising the complex realities faced by individuals navigating their gender identities.

The Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model represents a unique and versatile framework that builds upon and advances prior theories on gender fluidity. It captures the varying zones or quadrants individuals navigate as they construct their gender identities, highlighting how these identities are highly sensitive to situational influences. Driven by a dual intention—providing insight into the landscape of gender identity formation and offering an alternative to traditional methodologies—the SGF model bridges the gap between personal experience and academic discourse. It serves to elevate trans* voices in both scholarly and practical spheres, expanding gender identity discourse and enhancing visibility of trans* and non-binary identities beyond educational and medical contexts.

The model comprises four quadrants: **subconscious gender, physical gender, gender expression**, and **gender performance**, each interconnected to reflect the complexity and fluidity of gender identity. This structure acknowledges that gender is not static; it shifts depending on internal identity and external societal expectations. The SGF model provides a structured framework for understanding how and why individuals adapt their gender expression in different situations, taking into account subconscious self-perception, innate gender, private expression, and public performance. In doing so, it not only offers a comprehensive lens for analysing gender

fluidity but also challenges the conventional binary approaches to identity, fostering broader societal understanding and promoting inclusivity.

In integrating abjection, the SGF model adds another dimension to the analysis of gender identity. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, which refers to the process of marginalising identities that defy social norms, the model highlights how fluid and hybrid gender identities challenge conventional boundaries. These *abject* identities disrupt the societal norms that classify individuals into fixed categories. For non-binary and trans* individuals, occupying this liminal, abject space becomes a form of resistance against the constraints of traditional gender roles. As Kristeva suggests, abjection exists at the margins of accepted identity, where what is considered 'normal' is constantly questioned (Kristeva, 1982). In this context, the SGF model illustrates how gender-diverse individuals negotiate their identities, adapting to external pressures and personal needs while disrupting normative gender expectations, highlighted in the model by portraying *abject* individuals crossing the outlined categories/quadrants within the model.

By applying the concept of abjection to the SGF model, the framework deepens our understanding of how gender diverse identities not only challenge but transform social boundaries. This connection underscores the dynamic and fluid nature of gender identity, illustrating how trans* individuals often occupy a space of in-betweenness that defies categorisation. The model's flexibility in recognising these abject, liminal identities makes it a valuable tool for analysing how societal norms shape, restrict, and influence gender identity construction, while also demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of those who navigate these shifting boundaries.

The notion of public and private spheres has been historically contentious, focusing on whether an element is visible to wider society or confined to an individual's private circle. Private elements may be the truest form of an individual's identity but are the least accessible for research. Fiction as a research method provides an immersive experience, allowing readers to

engage with the complexities of gender identity within context. This framework observes sex and gender as constructs, constituting cultural configurations used to inform gender performance. In literary criticism, the SGF model addresses a significant gap by offering a versatile framework for analysing trans* narratives within my selected texts. Further, it dissects gender as a performative and context-dependent construct, providing insights into how characters navigate their identities across different settings. This model helps examine subtle shifts in gender expression and identity as influenced by societal expectations and personal circumstances. Analysing literature through the lens of the SGF model facilitates a rich investigation into multifaceted and non-linear depictions of gender identity. While many characters *do* embark on journeys towards authentic self-realisation, this progression is often marked by complexities and setbacks rather than following a straightforward path from concealment to liberation (Serano, 2007). This interpretation of non-linear gender narratives, therefore, challenges stereotypes and enriches our understanding of gender diversity in literary representations, illustrating that the quest for identity can encompass a variety of experiences, including moments of doubt, exploration, and redefinition. The SGF model accommodates the non-linear nature of gender identity construction, facilitating an analysis that recognises the fluidity of movement between zones of identity formation, including moments of in-betweenness or returning to previous stages, reflecting the dynamic and iterative process of identity development.

Depending on the situation, an individual's gender identity can change strategically, despite their authentic self, to fit a social context. This concept echoes Sedgwick's (2008) *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she discussed how gender is constructed and performed in different social settings, and how cultural norms and expectations shape our understanding of gender and sexuality. Dietert & Dentice (2013) argue that gender is a fluid and unstable category, refuting the idea that gender identity must align with biological sex. This tension and fluidity lie at the heart of the SGF model: an individual might fully express their authentic gender identity

in private or with supportive groups while feeling compelled to adapt or mask it in less accepting public contexts. For instance, if their authentic expression is met with negativity by certain individuals, such as family members, they may strategically navigate these interactions by reverting to a performative assigned gender while maintaining their true expression in more affirming spaces. This nuanced negotiation, as highlighted by Davis (2009), underscores the complex interplay between self-expression and external pressures, illustrating both the challenges and the resilience inherent in gender fluidity.

This model recognises that gender identity is a dynamic construct, shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and personal factors. By adopting a situational approach, the SGF model accommodates the multifaceted nature of gender expression, offering a qualitatively rich alternative to traditional essentialist or binary frameworks (Trainor & Hartley, in press). One of the most compelling strengths of the SGF model lies in its wide-ranging applicability across various research domains, particularly healthcare education. I have successfully implemented this model while instructing nursing students and healthcare professionals at institutions including the University of Salford, Liverpool John Moores University, and King's College London, as well as in diverse healthcare settings across the North West. Feedback from participants indicates that the SGF model has significantly enhanced their understanding of trans* identity processes, equipping them with the tools to engage empathetically and effectively with gender-diverse patients.

Moreover, the SGF model is poised to play a transformative role in an initiative aimed at training non-medical emergency responders in Greater Manchester, illustrating its potential for broader societal impact. As we look to the future, the model holds promise for further exploration in various inter disciplinary contexts, from social work to education, paving the way for more inclusive practices and policies. Ultimately, the SGF model not only enriches our

comprehension of gender diversity but also catalyses transformative change in how gender identities are understood and supported across a multitude of professional landscapes.
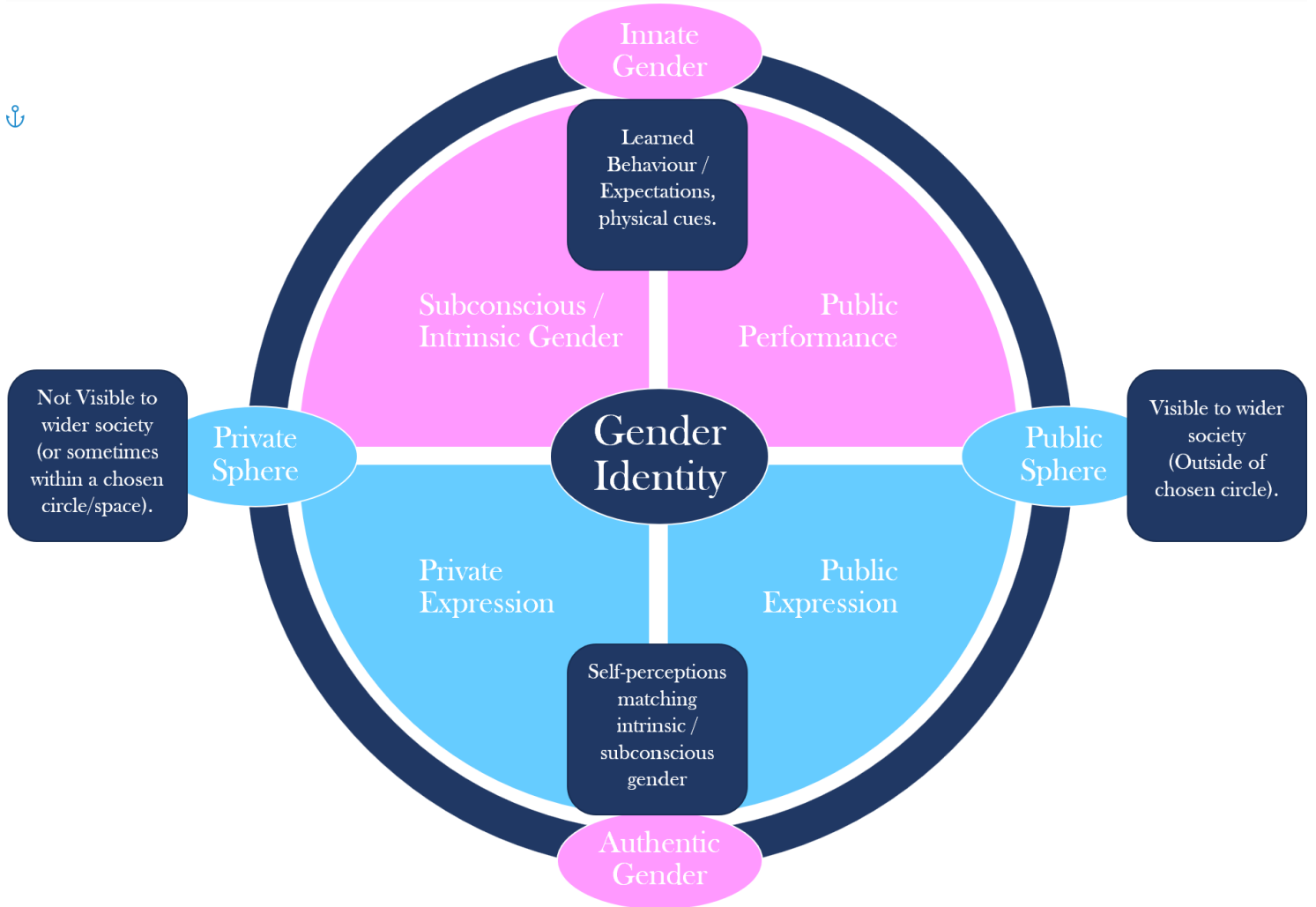
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The Situational Gender Fluidity Model

Figure 1 - Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) Model

Thesis structure

This thesis is organised as follows: Chapter 2 is entitled: 'Composing my theoretical framework: Integrating literary analysis and diverse interdisciplinary theory'. In this chapter, I present a rigorous discussion of prior theory on gender diversity, fluidity and nonconformity; variously advancing, and deviating from, these understandings in order to compose my own theoretical framework and respond to the aims of my research. Additionally, I draw upon a substantial body of prior study that advocates for the use of literature as a means of advancing understandings of complex social phenomena, including gender identity construction.

Chapters 3 and 4 establish the contextual groundwork of this thesis by examining how setting and social factors shape gender identity formation. Chapter 3 is entitled The World, The Gender Diverse, and The Identity: An Analysis of Setting and its Influence on Gender Identity. This chapter discusses the role of physical and social settings in influencing gender identity, drawing on theories of cultural intelligibility (Augé, 1995; Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991), while Chapter 4 addresses how socialisation processes enforce normative gender expectations and affect private gender expression (Jenkins & Cart, 2018; Stockard, 2006). To elaborate, chapter 3 investigates the complex interplay between influences of setting and gender identity, underscoring how external factors such as cultural intelligibility and the contextualisation of gender diversity profoundly shape the experiences and identities of gender diverse individuals.

Theoretical frameworks relating to cultural intelligibility (Hockey and James, 2017) and conceptualisations of space, place, and setting (Augé, 1995; Lefebvre, 1991; Stanek, 2011) form the backbone of our analysis, exploring how novels reflect and respond to the social setting that non-binary individuals navigate. By examining the temporal and spatial settings in literature—ranging from historical to contemporary, and from rural to urban contexts—we can better understand how these settings influence and are influenced by gender identities. The SGF model, with its emphasis on the fluidity of gender, will be pivotal in illustrating how individuals adapt to

and navigate different circumstances (Hockey & James, 2017). The use of various settings in my chosen set of novels not only underscores the changing nature of gender identity but also how factors related to setting—both physical and social—shape and are shaped by it. The SGF model will guide our understanding of how these changes are portrayed and experienced by characters in different settings.

Additionally, this chapter will explore the rise of Young Adult (YA) fiction as a significant platform for the exploration of gender diversity. YA fiction often provides a contemporary and relatable context for young readers, making the narratives of gender identity more accessible and relevant. By addressing current social issues and offering representation for marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ individuals, YA fiction plays a crucial role in the discourse on gender diversity. The SGF model will help us examine how these narratives navigate social capital and power dynamics (Halpern, 2005; Peace et al., 2006), and how they portray the struggles and triumphs of non-binary individuals in a relatable manner.

Contemporary issues such as gender recognition legislation and public discourse on gender identity will also be investigated. For instance, examples like public bathroom acts (Barnett et al., 2018) and gender reform acts (McLean, 2021) will illustrate how external factors shape the portrayal and lived experiences of non-binary individuals in contemporary fiction. The SGF model will provide a framework for understanding the broader societal impacts on gender identity and the importance of creating supportive settings for the exploration and expression of gender diversity.

Chapter 4, titled 'Socialising & Gender [de]coding: The Influence of Socialisation on Constructions of Gender Identity,' focuses on the pivotal role socialisation plays in the formation of gender identity. While this chapter is strongly interlinked with Chapter 3, which explores influences of setting on gender identity, Chapter 4 delves into a distinct but complementary dimension of the discourse. To elaborate, the factors related to setting discussed in Chapter 3

encompass the physical, temporal, and cultural contexts that shape individual experiences and societal expectations. By contrast, socialisation, the focus of Chapter 4, pertains to the processes through which individuals internalise and enact gender roles and norms within their social interactions and relationships. Separating the spheres of setting and socialisation is crucial because it allows for a more focused and nuanced examination of each domain's unique contributions to gender identity formation.

By distinguishing these spheres, we can more clearly understand how each domain operates and intersects with the other. For example, the SGF model highlights how socialisation processes, such as family upbringing, education, and peer interactions, play a predominant role in how individuals present, conceal, perform, and express their gender. This socialisation is deeply influenced by factors related to setting, yet it functions through different mechanisms and practices. This approach also allows for a more detailed exploration of the conflicts and tensions that arise when socialisation and the influences of setting clash or align in unique ways. The SGF model serves as a critical tool for unpacking the complex and dynamic interactions between socialisation and setting, providing a comprehensive framework for analysing how gender identities are constructed, challenged, and redefined in various contexts. By maintaining a strong link to the SGF model, Chapter 4 elucidates upon how socialisation processes shape and sometimes constrain gender identity, while also recognising the resilience and agency of individuals in navigating and redefining these social constructs.

Chapter 5, titled 'Reinventing the Beast: Redefining the Self through Private Gender Expression,' focuses on the private expression quadrant of the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) Model. It explores how non-binary individuals privately navigate, experiment with, and create their authentic genders, acknowledging the complexities and limitations of private gender expression. By examining the renegotiation of labels, roles, norms, values, and behaviours within the private sphere, this chapter investigates the transformative process through which non-binary

individuals recognise their authentic gender and manage the need to conceal their true selves in public. The chapter defines two stages of private expression: the secret exploration/experimentation phase, where individuals clandestinely engage with their authentic gender while performing their assigned gender, and the preparation phase for publicly expressing their authentic selves, often referred to as 'coming out'. It also examines the subversion of beastly or monstrous imagery historically associated with those deviating from societal norms, emphasizing the potential of fiction to challenge and dismantle such stereotypes.

The importance of placing this chapter after the discussions on setting and socialisation lies in the foundation they provide. Understanding the broader contextual influences on gender identity allows for a deeper comprehension of the private sphere, where individuals can engage in self-discovery and redefine their identities away from public scrutiny. The SGF Model's emphasis on situational fluidity is crucial here, as it highlights how private expression is both influenced by and distinct from public and social settings. This model has inspired the structure of the thesis, ensuring that each element of gender identity is explored in its appropriate context, yet always connected to the overarching framework.

In this chapter, we examine how non-binary individuals use private spaces to explore their identities safely. These spaces, often shielded from the public eye, provide a refuge where individuals can experiment with their gender presentation without fear of judgment or repercussion. The SGF Model highlights the significance of private exploration and preparation for public expression in the journey towards authentic self-expression, illustrating how this fluid process is shaped by both internal self-recognition and external societal pressures. This phase involves not only personal readiness but also strategic planning on how to navigate potential societal reactions. The SGF Model underscores the importance of private expression in preparing individuals to face the complexities of public and social interactions regarding their gender identity.

Lastly, this chapter challenges the historical association of non-conforming gender identities with beastly or monstrous imagery. By subverting these stereotypes, fiction can play an important role in redefining societal perceptions and offering new narratives that celebrate diversity and authenticity. This analysis aligns with the SGF Model, which promotes a fluid and situational understanding of gender. It underscores the importance of deconstructing harmful stereotypes and embracing the complex, multifaceted nature of human identity, reflecting the model's commitment to capturing the dynamic interplay between individual authenticity and societal expectations. Chapter 5 builds on the contextual groundwork laid by the discussions of setting and socialisation, providing a focused exploration of private gender expression. Through the lens of the SGF Model, it highlights the importance of private spaces in the journey toward authentic self-expression, illustrating how individuals navigate and redefine their identities away from public scrutiny. This chapter not only deepens our understanding of the private sphere but also underscores the transformative potential of fiction in challenging and reshaping societal norms.

Chapter 6, titled 'Transcending the Beast: Manifesting Authenticity through Public Expression,' delves into the public expression quadrant of the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) Model. This chapter focuses on the challenges and repercussions that non-binary individuals face when they publicly present their authentic selves. The significance of this chapter lies in its exploration of how the act of coming out and seeking public validation intersects with familial, social, and legal dimensions of gender identity. While this chapter is interconnected with previous discussions in Chapters 3 and 4—where influences of setting and socialisation were examined—it is crucial to address public expression as a distinct but complementary aspect. By separating the focus of Chapter 6, we can better understand the specific dynamics of public expression and how it operates as a distinct but interrelated element within the broader framework of the SGF Model.

Chapter 6 explores how public expression involves not only personal struggles but also external validations and rejections. The act of coming out can have profound familial and social repercussions, which can either affirm or challenge one's gender identity (Meadow, 2018). This public facet of gender identity is where the SGF Model's flexibility becomes particularly evident, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate different contexts while maintaining their authenticity. The chapter highlights the importance of validation and approval from oneself and others in the public realm. Gender euphoria, as discussed by Ashley and Ells (2018) and Beischel et al., (2021), plays a critical role in affirming one's gender identity in public settings. Additionally, Sedgwick's (2008) *Epistemology of the Closet* provides a theoretical framework for understanding the complexities of public gender expression and the pressures of conforming to or resisting societal norms.

This chapter also underscores the role and limits of legal recognition and the transformative potential of literature, particularly queer literature, in validating and authenticating gender-diverse identities. Literature offers a space to challenge societal perceptions and create new narratives that reflect the realities of non-binary individuals. By examining how fiction engages with and reshapes public understanding of gender diversity, this chapter illustrates the potential of literary works to contribute to the discourse on gender identity (Warner, 1994). The SGF Model's emphasis on situational fluidity and public expression provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyse these dynamics. The model's emphasis on the interplay between Subconscious/Intrinsic Gender, Public Performance, and public validation provides a robust framework for examining how non-binary identities are constructed and expressed within contemporary contexts. By addressing the dynamic tensions between internal identity and external validation, the model facilitates a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which non-binary individuals navigate and articulate their identities in varying social landscapes.

Chapter 2 - theoretical framework:

Integrating literary analysis and diverse interdisciplinary theory

This thesis explores how fictional characters navigate private gender expression while publicly performing their assigned gender, highlighting the challenges of this journey. It examines various definitions of gender and gender identity, addressing questions about gender identity, role, expression, and experience (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019, p. 60). Novels offer a unique perspective on gender identity by vividly portraying characters' internal struggles and external interactions, humanising the exploration of gender diversity. The texts provide intimate insights into how societal expectations, personal identity, and self-expression intersect and evolve. For example, *I Wish You All the Best* offers a glimpse into Ben's journey towards self-acceptance, a perspective uniquely accessible through literary analysis. Moreover, studying fiction extends our understanding of society, as literature often mirrors and challenges cultural norms and attitudes (Eaglestone, 2020).

Gender is a multifaceted construct that includes biological, psychological, and social components that are interconnected and interact in multifarious ways (Mazzucca et al., 2020). Berenbaum (2011) outlines some key biological aspects of gender and how they relate to, but are not limited to: brain function, hormone production, secondary and primary sexual characteristics, chromosomes, medical gender history, and their interaction (Berenbaum, 2011). Psychological aspects of gender pertain to how individuals experience their gender in terms of their sense of identity, the comfort of wearing certain clothing, while also considering mannerisms and internal thoughts about gender (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Social components of gender involve the cultural and historical norms and expectations surrounding gender roles, activities, clothing, mannerisms, and other social aspects (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019, pp. 58-59). Analysing these narratives allows us to critically engage with the ways in which literature reinforces or

challenges prevailing ideas about gender, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of gender diversity across different historical periods and cultural landscapes (Ward, 2013).

Novels possess a privileged status as research tools due to their unique capacity to both reflect and shape societal norms, particularly concerning gender identity and expression (Ragussis, 1986). Ragussis, in 'Acts of Naming: The Family Plot in Fiction', argues convincingly that traditional marriage plots in literature often reinforce rigid gender roles, perpetuating hegemonic and outdated ideas about identity. Novels following this formulaic notion, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Sense and Sensibility*, historically adhered to these plots, promoting conventional narratives of gender and marriage (Friedman, 2019).

Conversely, groundbreaking novels like *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, and *The Passion of New Eve* by Angela Carter subvert or modernise these conventional plots. They challenge normative ideas of gender by featuring protagonists who defy societal expectations and embrace diverse gender identities (Sedgwick, 2008). These novels disrupt the traditional marriage plot, queering the narrative and bringing ideas of gender diversity into the mainstream literary and social discourse (Fuss, 1989).

These literary movements are not merely exercises in artistic expression but have profound implications for social change and the recognition of queer identities. By depicting characters navigating complex gender identities and challenging binary constructs, these novels have played pivotal roles in broadening societal perspectives and advocating for greater inclusivity (Bristow, 2002). They have encouraged readers to question and critique prevailing norms, fostering empathy and understanding towards gender diversity.

In the context of my thesis, which explores contemporary representations of gender diversity in literature, the novels in my corpus serve as critical illustrations. By analysing how authors subvert or modernise traditional plots, I aim to demonstrate how literature can challenge

and reshape cultural attitudes towards gender. This analytical approach contributes to a deeper understanding of how narratives shape perceptions of gender identity and expression, ultimately advocating for greater inclusivity and empathy in society. The novel emerges as a dynamic tool for literary analysis and social critique, capable of both reflecting and reshaping cultural attitudes towards gender. Through their narrative innovations and critiques of traditional marriage plots, these novels are part of an influential literary movement, featuring rich representations of queer identity and paving the way for greater visibility and acceptance of gender diversity in literature and beyond.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Gender Identity Beyond Literature

This section of the chapter describes discrete, yet often highly interrelated, social components that reside outside of so-called biological understandings of sex, which rigidly describes the binary male/female designation assigned at birth (Halberstam, 2019). Foucault's examination of the 'origins of discourse' in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) illuminates the historical development of this binary understanding, revealing it as a product of specific societal and power dynamics. In essence, Foucault's insights remind us that the binary understanding of gender is not a timeless truth, but a constructed framework rooted in particular historical and societal conditions, urging us to challenge these norms and embrace more fluid conceptions of gender across diverse societies and times. This regulatory power is evident in how society enforces binary gender norms and positions those who deviate from these norms as objects of surveillance, discipline, and marginalisation. Such dynamics are especially prevalent in the experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals, whose gender expressions often challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. In *Girl Mans Up* (Girard, 2016), Pen's experience of gender identity is shaped by both societal power dynamics and familial expectations

that are entrenched in cultural traditions. These expectations, in turn, reflect the intersection of colonial influences on gender identity.

The coloniality of gender, as explored by Lugones (2007), has played a significant role in imposing Western gender models on other societies, particularly through colonial processes that erased or marginalised non-binary gender expressions. Sawyer et al. (2016) highlight the vulnerability of transgender and gender-diverse individuals, particularly in the workplace, where deviation from traditional gender binaries often leads to discrimination. However, understanding the intersection of gender, race, and culture is critical to understanding how gender-diverse individuals navigate these pressures. Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality demonstrates how gender and cultural identity intersect in complex ways, with multiple forms of marginalisation compounding the discrimination faced by individuals like Pen. In *Girl Mans Up*, Pen, as a second-generation Portuguese immigrant, must navigate the pressures of both conforming to traditional cultural values and asserting their gender-diverse identity within a predominantly binary gender society. The clash between these intersecting identities, shaped by both colonial legacies and contemporary gender norms, amplifies Pen's sense of isolation and the challenges they face in expressing their authentic gender identity.

Through Crenshaw's lens, Pen's journey is emblematic of the compounded marginalisation that arises when one's gender identity intersects with other aspects of identity—such as ethnicity, culture, and migration history. This intersectional approach sheds light on how gender-diverse individuals are not only resisting gender norms but also confronting broader social and historical forces, including colonial legacies. The same colonial legacies that have historically imposed binary gender systems continue to inform contemporary societal views on gender diversity. As *Cemetery Boys* (Gonzales, 2020) similarly critiques, colonial influences persist in shaping gender identity within Latinx and Indigenous communities, where traditional gender roles often conflict with evolving understandings of gender diversity. In the narrative of *Cemetery*

Boys, the Brujx community's adherence to these traditional gender norms reflects colonial impositions, and Yadriel's story challenges these structures, offering a narrative space for gender diversity that transcends colonial frameworks.

Thus, both *Girl Mans Up* and *Cemetery Boys* engage with the coloniality of gender and intersectionality in distinct yet complementary ways, exploring how gender-diverse individuals negotiate their identities within complex social and cultural contexts. By drawing on Foucault's analysis of power and Crenshaw's intersectionality, this thesis aims to reveal the ways in which colonial histories continue to shape and constrain contemporary expressions of gender, while also offering a critical exploration of how these forces can be resisted and redefined through literature.

Furthermore, in 'The future of sex and gender in psychology: Five challenges to the gender binary', Hyde et al (2019) present a comprehensive exploration of the evolving dimensions of sex and gender, wherein five pivotal challenges are identified, critically scrutinising the established norms of the gender binary. The authors present findings that challenge the notion of genetically fixed, and nonoverlapping, physiological (hormonal) systems in male/female assigned individuals; similarities between men and women are emphasised from a psychological perspective; the authors state that accounts of transgender and nonbinary identity must not be overlooked, reflecting experiences that do not necessarily align with prior understandings of gender binarity; finally, the authors contend that the meanings behind gender and sex, as aspects of binary categorisation, are culturally determined and malleable (Hyde et al, 2019, p. 405). These insights align closely with my Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model, which posits that gender identity is not only influenced by intrinsic factors but is also shaped by external societal contexts. Hyde et al.'s (2019) emphasis on the fluidity and cultural malleability of gender reinforces the SGF model's assertion that gender is a dynamic construct, rather than a fixed binary. The model allows for an exploration of how individuals navigate their gender identities

through personal experiences and social interactions, thus supporting Hyde et al.'s call for an understanding of gender that encompasses the complexities of nonbinary and transgender experiences. This intersection of psychological findings and literary representations furthers our understanding of gender identity as a multifaceted journey, affirming the significance of diverse narratives in shaping the discourse around gender fluidity.

As well as these signs of progress within academic research, a growing body of research has begun to focus on the utility of applying innovative approaches to advance understandings of gender diversity in various fields. Both Singh et al (2021) and Chen et al (2021) convey how a growing understanding of the effects of gender diversity has impacted a number of disparate areas such as medical care and education. Each of these studies emphasise the importance of conducting research on gender diversity through novel methodologies, such as the one proposed in this thesis. Research by Singh et al. (2021) revealed that non-binary individuals report higher levels of discrimination and experience mental health issues more frequently when compared to cisgender individuals. Findings from the study emphasise the need for a more inclusive understanding of gender to address the unique experiences and needs of non-binary individuals in society. The novels explored in this thesis critically examine themes of discrimination experienced by gender diverse characters, while also delving into the complexities of identity construction.

Young adult (YA) fiction serves as a pivotal medium for exploring the experiences of gender-creative youth, offering narratives that authentically depict their lived realities. This genre, exemplified in novels such as *Sasha Masha*, critically examines the complex nature of gender identity and the challenges faced by gender non-binary characters. YA fiction plays a crucial role in providing representation and visibility to individuals with diverse gender identities, portraying protagonists who navigate journeys of self-discovery amidst societal pressures and personal struggles.

Scholars emphasise the significance of YA fiction in offering relatable characters and stories that validate readers' experiences and identities. In this thesis I show that, through nuanced storytelling, many contemporary YA authors engage with themes of gender diversity, challenging traditional norms and fostering empathy and understanding among their audience (Chen et al., 2021). The genre's popularity and accessibility make it a significant tool for advocacy and education, promoting greater awareness and acceptance of gender diversity among young audiences and beyond (Nagoshi et al., 2012). In the context of this thesis, YA fiction is selected not only for its rich portrayal of gender diversity but also for its ability to explore cultural and intersectional dimensions of gender identity. Novels like *Sasha Masha* resonate deeply with contemporary discussions on gender, offering insights into how diverse cultural traditions and personal experiences influence individuals' understanding and expression of gender. By focusing on recent works within this genre and others, this study aims to illuminate the evolving landscape of gender representation in literature and its implications for understanding identity construction in diverse cultural contexts.

YA fiction provides a sanctuary where young readers can encounter reflections of their own identities, validating their experiences and fostering emotional resilience and empathy. For example, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz explores the friendship and evolving identities of two Mexican-American boys, meditating on themes of love, identity, and cultural expectations. Similarly, *They Both Die at the End* by Adam Silvera features two boys, Mateo and Rufus, who form a deep connection on the day they learn they are destined to die, emphasising the importance of living authentically and embracing one's true self. These narratives allow readers to engage deeply with the characters' struggles and triumphs, affording them a sense of community and understanding.

Research by Murray (2018) highlights how contemporary YA literature often provides validation for LGBTQ+ youth, reflecting their experiences and contributing to their emotional

well-being. Additionally, *Pet* by Akwaeke Emezi introduces a transgender character who confronts societal truths about identity and acceptance, challenging readers to question their own assumptions. Miller (2021) argues that these narratives not only empower young readers but also foster empathy and understanding among their peers, creating a more inclusive environment. Consequently, YA fiction assumes a significant role in advocacy and educational efforts, contributing substantially to the broader awareness and acceptance of gender diversity among both young audiences and the wider public. By presenting diverse characters and experiences, these novels validate the identities of young readers and encourage empathy, ultimately fostering a more inclusive society.

Essentialist perspectives, rooted in biological determinism, often reinforce rigid gender binaries that exclude non-binary and genderqueer identities (Fausto-Sterling, 2008). These views overlook the fluidity and multiplicity of gender expressions that defy simplistic categorisation based on biological sex alone. Conversely, social constructionism highlights the role of societal norms and cultural practices in shaping gender identity, yet it may overlook the lived experiences and internal realities of individuals whose gender journeys challenge societal constructs (Butler, 1990). Hence, the thesis engages with emerging transgender theories that reconceptualise the nature of gender. These theories move beyond traditional dichotomies by considering gender as intersectional, embodied, and context-dependent (Hines, 2010). They highlight the temporal and spatial dimensions of gender identity, acknowledging how time and place influence an individual's understanding and expression of their gender. This approach resonates with the experiences of trans* individuals who navigate complex social landscapes, asserting their identities amidst societal pressures and norms that often marginalise or misrepresent them (Serano, 2007).

Judith Butler's innovative work in *Gender Trouble* (1990) has significantly influenced my theoretical framework, albeit with essential modifications. Central to Butler's argument is the critique of traditional gender and sex classifications, which they view as socially constructed and

reinforced through the 'heterosexual matrix'. This matrix perpetuates the belief that gender is determined by biological sex, thereby stabilising normative gender identities within society (Butler, 1990). Butler contends that these norms are enforced through expectations rooted in masculine heteropatriarchy, compelling individuals to conform to prescribed gender roles to be deemed socially acceptable (Butler, 1990). This challenges essentialist views that tie gender to biological or natural foundations.

My Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model expands upon Butler's perspective by explicitly acknowledging the fluidity of gender identity in response to various situational contexts. Drawing on Nietzsche's notion that identity is an effect rather than a cause, Butler argues that gender identity is constituted through its expressions, rather than preceding them (Butler, 1999; Nietzsche, 1886). This concept resonates with the SGF model, which posits that gender identity is not only shaped by social constructs but also dynamically influenced by personal circumstances, relationships, and factors of setting.

Moreover, while Butler critiques the notion of a natural link between sex and gender, asserting that societal conventions such as dress and behaviour create the illusion of such a connection (Butler, 1990), the SGF model further examines how these conventions can vary dramatically across different cultures and contexts. It emphasises that the process of becoming and self-realisation is often non-linear and complex, allowing for an understanding of identity that incorporates both societal expectations and individual experiences. By integrating Butler's critique of gender norms with the SGF model's situational approach, I aim to offer a comprehensive framework that captures the complexities of gender identity formation in contemporary literature, ultimately enriching the dialogue surrounding gender diversity and authenticity.

In examining the dynamics of different settings where gender interactions unfold, individuals may not always freely express their authentic gender identity. In these contexts,

'gender performance' can exhibit deterministic traits, influenced by specific social actors who exert pressure to conform or conceal aspects of their identity. Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) posits that gender is not inherent but a repeated, stylised performance constructing the illusion of an essential identity. Butler describes how gender involves continuously adaptive, context-dependent behaviour rather than reflecting a fixed trait. However, I argue that Butler's definition of gender as exclusively performative holds true mainly in the public sphere, where social pressures variously enable and constrain expressions of authenticity. Butler's claims regarding gender performance largely being enforced through societal pressures insufficiently address the lived experiences of trans* identities (Champagne, 1995). By combining Butler's notions with my own lived experience through an autoethnographic lens and the insights afforded by fiction, this thesis culminates in a multi-perspective approach. Moreover, Serano (2007) offers a valuable perspective by introducing the concept of 'intrinsic inclination', which emphasises the importance of recognising the internal facets of gender identity that exist alongside societal expectations. This viewpoint aligns with my own lived experiences, which I explore through an autoethnographic lens, allowing for a deeper understanding of the intersection between personal identity and social dynamics. By combining Butler's insights with Serano's notions and the insights afforded by fiction, this thesis culminates in a multi-perspective approach that aims to enrich our understanding of gender identity formation.

Goffman (1963) explored how people strategically manage their public personas, conforming to or resisting social norms based on context. His analysis of social determinism includes understanding how individuals are motivated to behave for social perceptibility, expressing or concealing gender through symbols like dress and speech. This need to present or conceal is fundamental to gender fluidity, as individuals continually negotiate their gender expression in response to their social setting. Thus, an individual may feel the need to mask their true identity to 'pass' within the normative binary framework, a strategy for harmony or personal

safety, a tactic I have often employed myself. Correspondingly, gender-diverse individuals often find a truer sense of authenticity within private spheres, free from external scrutiny, except for their intimate circles. Navigating public and private spheres, deciding when to express oneself authentically or perform according to a given social context, is a personal choice and a demonstration of autonomy, exemplifying gender fluidity in practice.

Serano, in *Whipping Girl* (2007), offers a critical modification to Butler's framework by incorporating a *fourth* element: *gender expression.* While Butler defines gender identity through three key elements—anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance—Serano argues that gender is not only performed externally but also involves an intrinsic, internal component. She distinguishes between *brain sex,* or subconscious gender identity, and *genital sex,* with the former often overriding both genital sex and the influence of socialisation. This internal sense of gender provides individuals with a more autonomous understanding of their gender identity, one that may not always align with societal expectations or anatomical characteristics.

By introducing *gender expression* as a distinct concept, Serano acknowledges that gender identity is not solely constructed through external performance but also deeply rooted in internal experience. This challenges Butler's emphasis on performativity, which suggests that gender is constructed through repeated acts shaped by external pressures. Instead, Serano's theory allows for a more fluid, self-determined understanding of gender, where internal identity and external expression may not always align in a predictable or binary manner.

This development is integral to the SGF model, providing a more holistic approach to understanding the complexities of gender identity. While Butler's theory focuses on how societal norms shape gender performance, Serano's work allows for a more individualised exploration of how gender is experienced internally and expressed externally. Serano's conceptualisation of brain sex, integrated into the Innate Gender component of the SGF Model, underpins this thesis's effort to transcend the limitations of rigid gender binaries. By adopting this framework,

the study embraces a more nuanced and self-determined understanding of gender, one that aligns closely with the lived experiences of the protagonists in the analysed texts. This approach highlights the interplay between innate identity and personal expression, reflecting the fluid nature of gender as experienced and represented in the narratives.

Multinational understandings of gender

With these understandings in mind, it is crucial to consider that the imposition of gender norms, which inform gender performance, differs largely between societies, as Hines notes: '(g)endered norms, values, roles and expectations are assigned by a particular society or culture and presented as ideal characteristics' (2018, p. 75). In turn, an individual's public performance of gender will conform to the popular ideal of gender within the respective culture or society. Applying a transnational approach to literary and cultural analysis allows for comparisons and contrasts to be made, of key elements from different cultures and societies, with the understanding that '(t)he locations we study do not exist, apart from the human act of measuring, delimiting, identifying, categorising, and making boundaries and distinctions' (Prosser, 2010, p. 73). This approach, therefore, allows for an effective analysis of how authors from different nations depict or represent gender, drawing on both similarities and differences.

Whilst not necessarily discarding how a given nation may have been characterised as addressing gender, for example in perpetuations of gender binary or gender roles, 'these associations may be supplemented, complicated and challenged' (p. 73) through the transnational transfer of knowledge. Transnationalism serves both as a subject of study and an interpretive framework, challenging the predominant reliance on the nation as the sole analytical lens (Lie, 2016). This perspective aligns with the interests of scholars exploring global history, yet it is crucial to approach transnationalism critically (Seigel, 2005). Indeed, Higbee and Song (2010), advocate for a 'critical transnationalism' that comprehensively navigates the interplay between global, local, national, and transnational perspectives. The significance of applying this

nuanced approach to transnationalism becomes evident when analysing my selected novels, considering their unique cultural and geographical settings (Pence & Zimmermann, 2012). This lens reveals how cultural subtleties affect gender portrayals and the challenges individuals face negotiating societal gender roles (Vandebosch & D'haen, 2018).

. For instance, *Annabel* takes place in rural 1960s Canada, where traditional gender norms shape the community. Similarly, *Cemetery Boys* is set in a contemporary Latinx community in California, offering insights into gender and cultural identity within a specific migrant group. By adopting a transnational perspective, this thesis discusses how cultural traditions, familial expectations, and community dynamics shape gender identity within the Latinx context. Further, the inclusion of novels such as *Sasha Masha, Felix Ever After, Girl Mans Up*, and *Symptoms of Being Human* enriches the transnational analysis of gender identity construction. Each novel's unique cultural and geographical setting allows for comparison of how gender is depicted, understood, and negotiated across different societies. In sum, this transnational perspective deepens our understanding of gender identity and underscores the significance of cultural context in shaping its construction. Drawing on these theoretical understandings, my research aims to amplify voices that challenge essentialist and rigid conceptions of gender, advocating for a more inclusive understanding that embraces the diversity and fluidity of gender experiences (Wilchins, 2004). This integrated approach not only enriches theoretical discussions surrounding gender identity but also underscores the importance of acknowledging and validating the lived realities of trans* people in both academic discourse and broader societal contexts (Namaste, 1996; Stryker, 2006).

Fiction as a research tool

By engaging with literary works, this study provides insights into the nuanced portrayal of gender-diverse identities within cultural contexts. Literature uniquely critiques prevailing norms

and ideologies, offering a reflective snapshot of societal attitudes and values. Authors challenge reductive portrayals of trans* individuals, as Owen (2014) advocates for more humanising representations, fostering empathy and awareness. Longo (2015) emphasises the role of literature in communicating cultural perspectives and lived experiences, serving to disseminate information, reinforce values, and negotiate social interactions. Literature not only reflects societal contexts but can also anticipate social changes. Barthes (1975) highlights the ubiquity of narratives in communication, while Bruner (1991) notes their deep embedding in our experience of reality. Czarniawska (2004) suggests narratives as a research tool for investigating social aspects, providing valuable sociological insights.

Fiction is a dynamic and introspective resource, conferring an empathetic approach to understandings of gender diversity and the construction of gender identity. Lackey (1994) investigated how the writing of fiction may be utilised as a method to explore sociological studies, finding that this mode of research has helped develop and 'connect abstract theories [and ideas] to concrete, real-life situations.' (p. 174). While depictions of trans* identity in fiction may not always reflect the full complexity and challenges faced by trans* individuals, it is important to recognise the evolving nature of these narratives. Prior to 2010, popular culture often portrayed trans* characters in victimised and sacrificed roles, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforcing societal prejudices, as highlighted in the documentary on trans* people in film, 'Disclosure' (Feder, 2020).

However, there has been a shift in recent years towards more nuanced and authentic portrayals of trans* experiences in fiction. These more recent narratives strive to go beyond idealised glossy narratives as well as subverting typical portrayals depicting trans* people as the butts of jokes, tragic victims or villains (Feder, 2020). In so doing, they aim to offer more nuanced representations of the vulnerabilities and painful experiences that trans* individuals encounter during their journey of identity formation. By focusing on the micro processes of identity

formation, fiction provides valuable insights into the internal struggles, personal growth, and resilience of trans* individuals, offering a nuanced and intimate exploration of their experiences (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008).

Fiction may not comprehensively encapsulate the entirety of the trans* identity formation process, however it does serve as a conduit to humanise and amplify diverse narratives, contributing to a broader societal understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. In alignment with Lackey's framework (1994), fiction operates across three pivotal dimensions: the individual level, centred on characters' thoughts and emotions; the social level, encompassing their interactions with others; and the physical level, encapsulating their setting and physical engagement with it (p. 167). Throughout this thesis, I focus on the transformative power of fiction, elucidating upon these dimensions. This literary exploration uncovers the intimate struggles faced while negotiating the complex terrain of societal norms and the gender binary within personal spaces. As Reilly (2007) asserts, fiction is a vital tool that allows a wider range of individuals to access new information, ideas, and concepts by omitting specialised language and terminology to appeal to a broader audience than academic writings.

This accessibility is offered by the genre of the texts selected, which is primarily Young Adult (YA) fiction. The importance of gender diversity in YA fiction for this project is twofold. Firstly, much gender identity construction and experimentation occurs primarily in the stages of young adulthood; the texts under scrutiny represent this stage of identity formation. In recent years, the realm of YA fiction has undergone a profound transformation towards greater inclusivity of trans* identities, marking a heartening, burgeoning body of trans* inclusive YA fiction. The fiction in question portrays and educates other young adults about gender diversity, cultivating more understanding and empathy towards those around them (James, 2020). YA fiction has often been overlooked in academia and viewed as 'low brow', 'uncritical' and 'throw away' (Kendall, 2008, p., 123). YA fiction plays a pivotal role in addressing the struggles of young

people, providing a critical space for exploring and affirming diverse gender identities. This genre reflects and validates the experiences of young adults, offering visibility and understanding. Representation of diverse gender identities in YA fiction empowers trans* youth by mirroring their experiences and fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance.

However, with growing popularity, and through its offering vital representation of under discussed topics such as gender diversity, race relations and immigration, there have been calls for the development of further research into the positive influence of YA fiction (Pulimeno et al., 2020). Scholars such as Beckton (2020) claim that young adult authors and their narratives are key to cultivating acceptance of diversity, encouraging inclusivity (Pulimeno et al., 2020). Within academia, there is growing acknowledgment of the authority and influence YA fiction is having by tackling 'difficult' topics and exploring 'uncomfortable' narratives, including challenges faced by marginalised groups (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018). Sandberg (2021) explored the role of YA fiction in tackling race relations in America, focusing on police brutality in two key novels *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone. Sandberg exemplifies how fiction serves as a tool to grant 'marginalised people voices that have been historically silenced, with an opportunity to [have] their side heard and thereby show nuances of how [injustices] affect marginalised people.' (Sandberg, 2021, p. 38). YA fiction, therefore, is a crucial aspect of this project, as it provides representation and validation of non-binary gender queer identities, and serves as an educational tool to cultivate understanding and empathy towards those who identify as such. By focusing on the characters' processes and development, this thesis effectively analyses how gender queer identities are constructed and represented in the YA fiction.

Contemporary fiction has increasingly explored the diversity of gender identities, advocating for greater acceptance and understanding of non-binary individuals. A growing range of fiction, particularly in Young Adult (YA) genres, has begun to explore the experiences of gender diverse individuals and the importance of recognising and affirming their gender identity

(Katz-Wise et al., 2017). By incorporating insights gleaned from more scientific inquiry with the fiction narratives, a more holistic comprehension of gender identity construction comes into focus.

Attention to stylistic nuances, narrative techniques, and thematic resonances is crucial for appreciating the literary richness of YA fiction (Smith, 2019). These elements not only illuminate the aesthetic dimensions of the narratives but also reveal their capacity to evoke empathy, challenge normative assumptions, and create imaginative spaces for exploring complex identity issues. By foregrounding questions of style, narration, focalisation, imagery, metaphor, and genre, my thesis aims to uncover how literary strategies shape representations of gender diversity (Jones et al., 2018). This critical engagement deepens our understanding of how literature reflects and shapes perceptions of gender identity, highlighting its transformative potential in fostering inclusive societal attitudes.

While fictional characters are constructed entities, their portrayal in literature offers a controlled yet dynamic platform for examining profound themes (Murray, 2018). Through meticulous examination within narrative contexts, my research generates nuanced interpretations that contribute to broader scholarly dialogues on gender identity and representation. In summary, my thesis aims to navigate the complexities of using fictional characters as illustrations by integrating rigorous scholarly analysis with a sensitive appreciation for the literary dimensions of YA and genre fiction. This approach seeks to advance understanding of how literature reflects and shapes perceptions of gender diversity, honouring the literary artistry that imbues these narratives with transformative potential.

Within the domain of YA fiction, the influence of genre conventions on the portrayal of genderqueer and trans* individuals unfolds as a varied narrative. While this genre caters to a broad readership and ostensibly fosters visibility and representation, the core conventions of the genre pose a challenge. These challenges emerge notably through the lens of formulaic narrative

structures, which tend to gravitate towards neatly concluded, happily-ever-after resolutions. This proclivity, although appealing to certain readers, risks oversimplifying the intricate nature of genderqueer and trans* experiences, deviating from the multi-faceted nature of real-life narratives. The prevalent theme of a linear trajectory towards self-acceptance and societal affirmation, a recurring motif in young adult fiction, may unintentionally reinforce a narrow comprehension of gender identity. The nuanced ways in which individuals traverse their gender identity, including their setbacks, uncertainties, and continual self-discovery, could be overshadowed by the insistence on a neat narrative arc. This not only distorts the authenticity of genderqueer and trans* experiences but also perpetuates societal expectations that may compromise the inherent fluidity of gender identities (Halberstam, 2005).

Halberstam's work in queer theory provides a theoretical framework to dissect the inadvertent consequences of mainstreaming queer identities within established literary norms (Halberstam, 2011). Within the context of my thesis, this analysis reinforces the call for a nuanced and critical examination of how genre conventions, particularly in young adult fiction, shape and, at times, constrain the portrayal of genderqueer and trans* characters. While recognizing the positive strides in representation, this perspective advocates for a more sophisticated approach that accommodates the messy, non-linear, and authentic narratives reflective of the diverse spectrum within genderqueer and trans* experiences. Jayne (2020) points out that while these worlds may be liberating, they risk veering into escapism, potentially neglecting the real-world struggles faced by trans* individuals.

Literary genres exert significant influence over the portrayal of trans* characters in fiction, shaping how their narratives are told and understood. Realism highlights the struggles and challenges faced by trans* individuals, offering a mirror to societal norms and creating space for authentic representation rooted in lived experience. Magical realism, distinct from fantasy, embeds magical elements within a realistic framework, treating the extraordinary as an inherent

part of everyday life. Unlike fantasy, which often constructs entirely separate worlds governed by their own rules, magical realism integrates the supernatural into familiar settings, allowing for nuanced explorations of identity and culture that resonate deeply with readers.

Young Adult fiction provides a platform for empowerment, addressing a diverse readership and giving voice to trans* experiences in ways that affirm and inspire. Experimental fiction challenges traditional storytelling norms, using innovative structures and perspectives to reflect the fluidity and diversity of trans* identities. When woven into these diverse genres, the trans* narrative is shaped and reshaped, offering a spectrum of experiences that either empower or inhibit, reflecting the complexity and multiplicity of trans* identities within a range of literary frameworks.

Contextualising my approach

In the last two decades, there has been a growing interest in the intersection of fiction and sociological studies, particularly in exploring the complexities of gender identity and expression. As Lackey (1994) has argued, fiction's utility lies in its potential to connect abstract theories to real-life situations, providing a window into the micro processes of identity formation. It is important to note that, as this research is based on literary texts, the analysis, themes, and discussion are informed by the texts themselves, and although I have created a theoretical framework used to better organise and contextualise my analysis, the results are based on what was extracted from the fiction, inductively. This exemplifies how literary works may not always confirm theory, but instead deviate from or complicate it.

The subjectivity inherent to the exploration of a given topic in the novel form may create an emotional bond with the reader, as Oatley (1999) states, 'in the simulations of fiction, personal truths can be explored that allow readers to experience emotions—their own emotions—and

understand aspects of them that are obscure.' (p. 101). Furthermore, the portrayal of minority groups within literature may confer a representational role, signifying their presence in the narrative landscape, as highlighted by Ronan (2020). However, it is important to note that mere representation does not automatically ensure a comprehensive or accurate depiction. It is essential to acknowledge that literature serves multiple purposes beyond presenting diverse experiences to a non-diverse readership. Indeed, fiction does more than merely bridging a gap, fostering a sense of belonging, creating imagined communities where readers from different backgrounds can find some commonality.

While the emotional connection with characters and experiences may foster empathy and understanding, it also unites readers in shared emotions and experiences, transcending individual identities. Broadly, fiction has the potential to not only reflect diverse realities, but also construct inclusive narratives that invite readers to explore and connect with a broader human experience, thereby contributing to the formation of diverse and inclusive imagined communities. The relationship between fiction and social research is complex, and scholars have explored various modes of engagement with literature (De Cock and Land, 2006). According to De Cock and Land, these modes encompass, firstly, subjecting academic writing to literary criticism; secondly, employing literary genres as alternative modes of representation; and lastly, utilising literature as a pedagogical tool for theory explication (De Cock and Land, 2006, p. 519). Considering that the 'metaphorical seam, describes the interdisciplinary boundary where literary and social research texts converge', these distinct forms of writing influence each other and the utility therefore lies in their offering alternative perspectives, advancing knowledge about a given subject through triangulation (De Cock and Land, 2006, p. 518).

By adopting this interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon work from these two forms, diverse analyses emerge (Watson, 2011), this thesis examines, for example, key social research texts concerning gender diversity, and the underlying ideological workings of genre (Dimock,

2007). Miall and Kuiken (2002) highlight that the interplay between aesthetic and narrative emotions gives rise to metaphors of self-identification, consequently shaping the reader's self-awareness. This process of forging connections while reading enables individuals to better situate themselves within the context of the narrative. However, it has been argued that the engagement and interpretation of fiction may create issues of objectivity, potentially blurring the line between reality and fiction when addressing key societal issues (Genette, 1980). Fictional narratives aim to achieve a dramatic communicative impact by creatively presenting observed content in a make-believe form (Whiteman and Phillips, 2006, p. 6). While some researchers remain hesitant to embrace fiction in social research, prioritising empirical grounding, others have started exploring its potential, integrating fiction and nonfiction text (Lewis et al., 2008).

Accepting these advantages, one must also consider that authorial subjectivity has the potential to complicate the transfer of knowledge regarding the particular subject explored, as it cannot purport to hold the same authority in its presentation of said subject as that which may be offered by an academic text. The notion of authenticity and authorial subjectivity will be further explored in this thesis, particularly where there may be a tension between a cisgender author and a transgender character.

For instance, in *The House on Half Moon Street*, Alex Reeve, a cisgender male, writes the narrative from the standpoint of a transgender male character. This dynamic underscores the multifaceted relationship between authorship, authenticity, and representation within the context of trans* identities. Highlighting the importance of authority within such a subjective experience, especially within minoritised groups, it is crucial to acknowledge that individuals who have directly lived through these experiences may hold the most authentic insights (Galupo & Pulice-Farrow, 2020). With these understandings in mind, authors may need to justify their decision to write from a gender-diverse perspective and scrutinise whether such a work can still offer valuable insights on matters pertaining to gender diversity.

YA fiction, in particular, occupies a unique position in these discussions. Written to be accessible to a wide spectrum of young adults, YA novels often strive to balance complex themes with language, structure, and content that resonate with diverse audiences, including those who may not yet have the vocabulary or life experience to fully articulate their identities. This focus on accessibility means that YA authors must carefully navigate representation to ensure inclusivity without oversimplifying or misrepresenting the experiences of marginalised groups. This approach contrasts with works like *The House on Half Moon Street,* which, as an adult historical fiction novel, prioritises thematic depth and historical authenticity over accessibility to a younger or broader readership.

Regarding *The House on Half Moon Street,* Reeve has discussed in interviews his intention to bring visibility to transgender characters in historical fiction, a genre notably lacking in such representation. He emphasised his extensive research and consultations with transgender individuals to ensure respectful and accurate portrayals. These efforts aim to contribute to a broader understanding of gender diversity, underlining why the novel was included in this thesis: it provides a critical lens to examine how cisgender authors can navigate the complexities of writing trans* characters while contributing meaningfully to the discourse on gender identity.

Considering these reflections, it is noteworthy that portrayals of the trans* experience in fiction might lean towards romanticized and idealised representations rather than accurately reflecting lived realities (Jacques, 2017). Moreover, to grasp the multifaceted nature of gender, it is necessary to consider the interplay between biological, psychological, and social elements (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019). Explorations of gender should therefore consider gender identity, gender roles, gender expression, and gender experience, each contributing to an individual's understanding of their gender within a fictional context.

YA fiction, in particular, faces distinct challenges in navigating these complexities. Because it is written to be accessible to a wide spectrum of young adults, YA fiction often employs

more universal themes and simplified narratives to connect with readers across diverse backgrounds and levels of understanding. While this accessibility allows YA fiction to reach and resonate with younger audiences exploring their own identities, it can also risk oversimplifying or idealising the nuanced realities of trans* experiences. In contrast, adult literary works, which may target a more specific or mature audience, often prioritise thematic and theoretical depth over accessibility, leading to a broader variance in the portrayal of gender identity. This difference in focus is significant when analysing how various forms of fiction approach the complexities of trans* representation.

To further deepen the exploration of gender experience, I employed autoethnography to inform and analyse both fiction and secondary literature. Drawing on my personal experience as a trans* woman, I combined this with the works of theorists such as Butler, Goffman, Serano, and Zimmerman. This approach fosters a comprehensive understanding of the constructions and presentations of gender-diverse individuals in the selected literary texts. By integrating personal insights with established theoretical frameworks, I aim to explore the extent to which fictional portrayals of trans* characters, whether in YA literature or adult literary fiction, align with or diverge from the lived realities of gender-diverse individuals.

Chapter 3 – The World, The Gender Diverse and Identity:

On Setting and its effects on gender diverse identity construction

This chapter analyses how the protagonists from my selected works engage and interact within their respective setting, providing a close reading facilitated by my SGF model. The opening section of the chapter sets out theoretical arguments, exploring, defining, and outlining how setting plays an important role in cultural intelligibility. Further, the chapter explores how '[g]ender embodiments, stories, and experiences are highly contextualised according to the individual's [...] positionings in time and space' (Marques, 2020, p. 1288). Central to this discussion is thematic analysis and close reading of eight of my selected novels and their use of setting.

'Setting' is a term that is identified within a wide breadth of contexts, Peace et al (2006) describe how one's setting is 'both the place and space that encompass the person and affects their understanding of themselves and culture in which they live' (Peace et al., 2006), p. 8). To further explore this, I refer to Augé's (1995) and Dourish's (2006) notions of place and space to identify these differing arenas. Place may be understood as a platform or arena within which social intelligibility emerges, or as Dourish puts it 'space is an outcome of practice.' (Dourish, 2006, p. 301). The term setting may seem simplistic, *just the space around us,* and may be further broken down into eight domains: macro, micro, physical, social, psychological, public, private, and personal settings. These different elements of setting are distinct, yet intimately related; for example, wherein a personal, micro space existing within a macro setting e.g., a toilet cubicle is used privately, within a public space (Peace et al. 2006).

Setting plays a significant role in the construction of gender identity due to the reciprocal interplay between interpersonal interaction and influence upon place. My SGF model divides setting between two distinct spheres: public and private. The 'public' element within the SGF

Model encompasses external factors beyond an individual's control, including cultural influences, societal norms, and prevailing attitudes. These factors significantly impact the extent to which an individual's gender expression and identity are recognised and accepted, shaping their lived experiences and influencing their journey towards authenticity. Culture, recognised here as the shared norms and values of a society, plays a significant role in the development of identity, as Bhambra (2006) discusses. This is particularly relevant to gender identity, where the setting both shapes, and is shaped by, an individual's sense of belonging. The construction of gender identity involves the process of external elements interacting with the factors identified in the internal processes described by my *SGF model*. The temporal and geographical setting impacts upon the protagonists' abilities to construct, present and express their identities within their society. As Smethurst (2000) explores in 'The postmodern chronotype: Reading space and time in contemporary fiction', an individual's entire identity, including gender identity, is composed of several external factors that inform or label the construction of identity. Further, it is crucial to note that the construction of identity is ongoing and is not a fixed or necessarily attainable goal, but a fluid concept of self (Hockey & James 2017).

Unlike micro level settings, concerning 'the familial, domestic or intimate world' influencing an individual's identity, the macro setting influences 'the creation of self-identity through spatiality' (Peace et al., 2006, p. 8). Physical, social, and psychological settings encompass key physical and emotional factors of physical and metaphysical spaces. Emotionality and responses to space and place, and the personal responses to other actors within a space or place, contribute to the psychological settings. Physical settings relate to tangible objects, buildings, or furniture, for example, each of these elements is intertwined in an individual's construction of identity. The public, private and personal elements of setting are highly relevant to the creation of one's own margins within society, where certain behaviours are deemed acceptable or not: 'Space is all around us but the subjectivity of space into place, that makes it public, private or

personal, is found in the way in which boundaries are set around or within to determine territoriality, accessibility and usage' (Peace et al. 2006, p. 9).

A significant parallel between my SGF model and Peace et al.'s (2006) approach lies in the emphasis on the fluidity and plurality individuals exhibit across varying spaces of identity expression. The SGF model specifically delineates identity into quadrants of Subconscious/Intrinsic Gender, Public Performance, Private Expression, and Public Expression, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of how gender operates both as a deeply personal experience and as a social performance. The model foregrounds the performative aspects of sex and gender, while also recognising how these performances contribute to and evolve as integral elements of an individual's identity. As explored throughout this thesis, the SGF model facilitates an analysis of gender identity as inherently dynamic, resisting the limitations of static or linear categorisation. Instead, it embraces a fluid and "diverse" conceptualisation of identity (Carrera et al., 2012), attending to how gender is constructed, expressed, and redefined within the cultural norms and narrative frameworks of specific settings. This approach underscores the adaptability and resilience of gender identity, reflecting its responsiveness to both internal authenticity and external contextual pressures.

The next section of this chapter focuses on how differences between spatial (geographical) settings influence gender construction, as explored through depictions in the fiction texts under scrutiny. Discussions then progress to investigate some of the most significant examples of temporal setting conferring an influence over protagonists' journeys of self-discovery and acceptance within the respective novels, exploring not only how an individual's gender identity may shift, but crucially how this shift is affected by external elements.

Spatial setting and gender identity construction

The protagonists in each of my selected novels face challenges in their setting due to their gender identity not being congruent with cultural norms and values; a common experience for many who identify as trans* (Taylor et al., 2019). In *Annabel,* Winter overtly uses both the temporal setting and physical surroundings to exemplify the dichotomy of the manufactured binary. *Annabel* is set in the rural region of Labrador in the 1960s/70s. Although a real place, the isolationist settlement of Labrador may seem exotic to many readers, to the extent that it is almost otherworldly. The remote setting, harsh weather conditions, and idiosyncratic characters all contribute to creating a unique and unfamiliar atmosphere. Additionally, the historical setting of the novel adds to the sense of the world being removed from the reader's current reality. During an interview, Winter explained how she wanted to present the setting as its own character, giving it 'the power of the land and the water to exert an influence on the story, and I think it would have been impossible for me to do this had I set the work in a city' (Winter, 2013).

Annabel depicts how the residents of the small fictional town of Croydon Harbour react to somebody who is different. Rausch & Negrey (2006) discuss how vital '... small-town family life and values ... in locations such as these [communities]' are, stating how the structures in these communities are extremely rigid, unlike arguably more cosmopolitan settings, including the novel's St. John's. Considering how differences in setting, both temporal and geographical, can invoke such a difference in a gender queer individual's experience, Winter's use of setting is a literary tool, juxtaposing and metaphorising unjust elements of western/ Canadian society, as Winter herself has alluded to at interview: 'the time, late 1960s through the 1970s, acts as a kind of influence on [...] mores and constraints' (Winter, 2013). Winter's remarks encapsulate the power of setting over an individual, in terms of their identity off the page.

> For Wayne, Croydon Harbour and all that was in it had a curious division between haven
>
> and exposure. The roads were dirt and there was dust, and this felt raw. The birches, in

comparison, felt incredibly soft, their shadows a cool, sizzling green that quenched the parched burning of the roads.

(Winter, 2010. *Annabel*, p. 72)

Here, Winter portrays the separation of opposing forces: wet and dry, nature and synthetic, safety and danger, foreshadowing what Wayne is to face in their journey of self-discovery. Predominantly, the setting depicted in *Annabel* is the rural town of Croydon Harbour (within the region of Labrador). Rural settings such as this are often characterised by their unification of norms in the form of interdependent tight-knit communities, even as rural people often outwardly value independence and individualism (Campbell et al., 2006). In this climate of community interdependence, and with a lack of government and community services, establishing membership in the local community through claims to sameness is crucial for survival (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Furthermore, the setting of a harbour can be interpreted in multiple ways. The harbour can be seen as a place of safety, a protected cove from the harsh sea, or it could be seen as an enclosed place, preventing escape due to the surrounding landscape walling somebody in. In the novel, Croydon Harbour may be regarded in both lights, as a protective community, but also a confined space within which Wayne is trapped. Wayne is raised by their parents, Treadway and Jacinta, the former being a local man born and raised in the rural town, adhering to strict binary models, which he imposes on Wayne throughout the novel, 'Boys, in Labrador, Wayne, are like a wolf pack. We've got to be like members of the dog family. We've got to know what each other is doing. That's how you survive.' (Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 103).

Treadway is most concerned with imposing a masculine personality onto Wayne. When referring to the 'boys' throughout the novel, Winter utilises evocative, animalistic language, creating an impression of dominant masculinity, with hostile and dichotomous imagery of men as predatory. The predatory imagery Winter creates throughout the novel, about the characters

assigned male at birth, is further encapsulated by the hunter role adopted by many in the locality. The imposition of gender binary roles and the emphasis on masculinity by Treadway is rife throughout the novel, being not only influenced by local cultural norms but also shaped by the legacy of settler colonialism. The historical context of Labrador as a former settler colony, with its complex history of displacement and forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples, has contributed to the formation of a rigid gender binary that, as Smith (2012) claims, reinforces the patriarchal and heteronormative values of colonialism. Thus, Treadway's efforts to condition Wayne into a narrow and oppressive version of masculinity reflect the larger societal structures and power dynamics that have been entrenched in the environment by colonialism. Reading *Annabel* through a postcolonial lens, the novel engages with the enduring environmental legacies of settler colonialism, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Arguably, Treadway's entire identity is constructed around his hunter role; even his elusive, more tender and caring side is reserved solely for the dog that he accidentally shot:

> Treadway had ended the trip although it meant he would have to launch it again later, at considerable expenses in provisions and time, in order to have enough such in store for the winter. He had carried the dog a hundred miles on his sled and paid Hans Nilsson the Veterinarian a hundred dollars to get up in the middle of the night and tend to the wound.

> (Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 18)

Anthropomorphic semantics, in both language and metaphors, are used throughout fiction to create a separation between characters and groups, highlighting how binary thinking permeates the society and culture depicted in the novel. As Gutmann (2021) observes, 'gender ontology is recapitulated by male or female physiology' (p.186), emphasising how deeply entrenched binary constructs of gender remain. Winter further develops this idea of separation between Treadway and Jacinta by contrasting their backgrounds: Jacinta, coming from the small

city of St. John's, embodies a more liberal way of thinking, while Treadway is rooted in more traditional and rigid beliefs.

In the context of such divisions, YA fiction often approaches contrasting perspectives with a more direct and simplified framework, ensuring that its young readers can grasp the underlying tensions without becoming overwhelmed by overly nuanced portrayals. In contrast, adult literary fiction, such as Winter's novel, allows for a richer interplay of metaphor and cultural commentary, appealing to an audience more attuned to subtle thematic developments. This distinction highlights how the accessibility of YA fiction shapes its treatment of binary constructs, whereas adult fiction is able to delve into these complexities in a more layered and challenging manner.

Returning to Winter's exploration of Treadway and Jacinta, the narrative uses Jacinta's liberalism as a lens through which to question the rigidity of gender binaries. Broadly, Slaughter (2000) describes liberalism as a way of thinking that is less prescriptive and more open to alternative ways of being, defining and believing. Jacinta is most concerned with Wayne's safety growing up 'different' because they are intersex:

> It was the growing up part she did not want to imagine. The social part, the going to school in Labrador part, the jeering part, the what will we tell everyone part, the part that asks how will we give this child so much love it will know no harm from the cruel reactions of people who do not want to understand.

(Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 28).

The dichotomy of the rural and urban settings presented by Winter is akin to the separation of gender spheres which Elbert et al. (2014) discuss. The polarising of gender zones, men outside and women inside, is a popular model which has prolonged and propagated the gender-binary (Smyth, 2008). Separating gender zones harks back to a traditional settler

colonialist view of gender roles, with the instrumental delineating men's labour, and the expressive women's domestic work. Winter uses these separated spaces by interweaving a complex gendered identity throughout the spaces:

> It was corners and intersections and panes of glass, and every time he passed through one of its clearly defined spaces he felt he did not fit into it. His body, or the idea of his body, had grown amorphous and huge.
>
> (Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 356)

Ultimately, Winter uses the physical surroundings of a bathroom to challenge the notion of gendered spaces and socially constructed binarity. The change in Wayne's construction of identity is exemplified when Wayne migrates away from Croydon Harbour, a stifling town filled with rigid expectations, to their mother's city of origin, St. John's. Here, it can be recognised that the freedom to express gender divergence is not only era dependent, but also depends upon where an individual is situated, geographically and culturally. Gray (2009) explores how small, rural towns can inhibit the individual's construction of identity, claiming that 'rural [United States] operates as America's perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet.' (p. 4). Doan (2007) further argues that, for queer individuals, particularly gender diverse people, moving to a more cosmopolitan/urban setting may offer more opportunities for authentic expression. Winter encapsulates Doan's sentiments in the following section:

> The Battery was, like himself, part one thing and part another. It was pure city, shambling from the downtown core into the main chambers of the heart, the harbour of St John's, its houses part of the lining of the womb of the port city. ... The night on the Battery was a necklace of floating light, a world of dreams, part city and part ocean, a hybrid, like Wayne himself, between the ordinary world and that place in the margins where the mysterious and undefined breathes and lives.
>
> (Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, pp. 356-7)

Winter crafts an antithetical image of the masculine and feminine surroundings; in this context they are used as a metaphor to show Wayne's inner conflict regarding their construction of gender identity. Winter's use of 'hybrid' imagery and the word 'hybrid' itself, describes a milieu of identities, within a new collective space, reflecting Wayne's pluralistic identity.

Similar to Winter, Girard's YA novel *Girl Mans Up* (2018) explicitly uses the separate gender spheres within the setting as an important narrative element between their protagonist Pen, and their mother. Their mother is a strong believer in the dichotomy of men's and women's work, like Treadway in *Annabel.* This represents an interesting element of comparison between the different novels, considering the patriarchal control of Wayne's household, and the matriarchal counterpart in Pen's. The different focuses of control are associated with the differences in setting in the two narratives. As has been discussed, in Labrador the framework of familial roles is based on the settler colonial system, signifying a patriarchal structure. By comparison, *Girl Mans Up* revolves around a Portuguese migrant family, used to Portuguese family values which are majoritively matrifocal systems (Brøgger & Gilmore, 1997). In such a scenario, 'women dominate family life both physically and morally: they make the important conjugal decisions and represent the ultimate authority in the eyes of their children in all matters relating to family life' (Brøgger & Gilmore, 1997, p. 19). Hence, Pen's mother appears to assert her dominance over Pen's life through constant attempts to instill the notion of gendered spaces, regardless of Pen's feeling repelled by this dichotomy. Pen enjoys working with their brother outside, but their mother wants Pen to work with her inside:

"I could do it," I say.

They both look over at the sound of my voice.

"Nah, man. I gotta level the ground," Johnny says.

"You could show me how to do it."

"No, no, no" Mom says. "You want job? I give you a job to clean with you mãe. This outside is you irmão job."

I'm not sure if by that she means that it's my brother's job since he does outdoor work for a living, or if it's his job because he can grow a beard.

(Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up*, p. 20)

Girard's novel exemplifies the separation of gender spheres and also shows how their protagonists defy the encoding of these spaces. Whilst Winter predominantly uses physical descriptions of a more local setting and surroundings as symbolic separation, Girard presents more intimate and personal spaces of domesticity. Girard uses more overt connections to the separation of space by highlighting the encoding of the internal, domestic space largely associated with the feminine, and external spaces with the masculine. Much of the discussion above derives directly from the cultural sensibilities that are associated with the traditional gender roles adhered to within Pen's household; being gender diverse, Pen is depicted as having to traverse a complex, tempestuous relationship with their family. Pen's parents, being migrants from Portugal moving to Canada, still hold to their conservative views.

As Hines and Santos (2018) state, a strong cis-heteronormativity, based on the idea of the heterosexual nuclear couple with children, remains predominant in Portuguese society. For example, perhaps most explicitly, Portuguese governmental policy arguably indoctrinates a gender binary system through its implementation of gendered names, with the assertion that 'Every name must be recognised under the Onomastic Index and chosen names cannot raise doubts concerning the gender of the person (Civil Registration Code, article 103, No 2a)' (Hines, 2018, p. 11). Such compulsory gender binary in naming practices and norms exemplifies the resilience of the cis/gender and sexual normative system that often find strongest allies amongst legal and policy actors (Roseneil et al., 2017).

Compared to Canada, Portugal is arguably a more traditionalist country, with traditional gender systems. This is represented in the culture shock that occurs when Pen and their parents come to settle in Canada. Canada's debatably more progressive values, being culturally diverse and accepting towards trans* individuals, particularly young people, has been recognised in real world research. For example, Saewyc et al. (2020), observed that young LGBTQIA+ individuals benefit from the affirmative support they received in Canada, which precipitated dramatically increased mental health outcomes, when compared to other nations, including the U.S. Correspondingly, the conflict between two very different cultures and treatment towards trans* young people becomes a focal point throughout *Girl Mans Up*.

The experience of migration, particularly from a rural to an urban setting, can be recognised as a common literary trope in fiction addressing identity (Halberstam, 2005). In *Annabel* and *Girl Man's Up*, both authors use migration as a dramatic device to represent the shaping of Wayne's and Pen's respective gender identities. The idea of moving and escaping an old life, or a more restrictive set of traditional boundaries, as Croydon Harbour represents for Wayne, can be seen as both a physical and metaphorical escape.

In *Cemetery Boys*, Thomas presents similar challenges through a cultural divide. Although Yadriel is much more in touch with his cultural heritage and has a strong desire to belong to his Latinx background, he feels that this culture does not fully accept him. For younger generations of the Latinx community, who were brought up in Los Angeles like Yadriel, there is not an inherent problem of acceptance. Instead, the challenge lies with older generations, such as Yadriel's grandmother, Lita:

> She sighed heavily, clicking her tongue. "Your father is under a lot of stress right now, nena," Lita said solemnly.

> Yadriel cringed at the offensive word. Navigating pronouns was a minefield when language was based on gender. ...

Anger simmered under Yadriel's skin again.

She fixed him a stern look. "This is a job for the men, and we need to leave them to it.
Ven." ...

His deadname slipped from her mouth.

Yadriel flinched and took a step back. "¡Soy Yadriel, Lita!" he snapped, so suddenly that
both Purcasso and Lita jumped. ...

She sighed and nodded. "Sí, Yadriel," Lita agreed.

She stepped closer and gently cupped his cheeks in her soft hands. She planted a kiss on
his forehead, and hope lifted in his chest. "Pero siempre serás mijita," she told him with
a chuckle and a smile.

But you'll always be my little girl.

The hope came crashing down.

(Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys*, pp. 37-38)

Yadriel's interaction with his grandmother contrasts sharply with his memories of his
mother, who is portrayed as a clear ally in supporting his gender identity:

It took him another year, when he was fourteen, to work up the courage to come out to
his family. ... Other than Maritza, his mother, Camilla, had been the most supportive. It
took time to relearn old habits, but she'd caught on surprisingly fast. Yadriel's mom had
even taken on the task of gently correcting people so he didn't have to. It was a heavy
burden, small instances piling up but his mom helped him shoulder some of the weight.

(Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys*, p. 16)

This theme of cultural tension and generational conflict is echoed in *Girl Man's Up*,
where Girard portrays the struggles Pen faces as a Canadian-born child of Portuguese

immigrants. Pen's decision to shave her hair as a form of self-expression is seen by her mother as a betrayal of cultural and familial expectations:

> Her whole face scrunched up under the weight of her eyebrows and I know that if I don't move right now, I'll be getting a swat on the back of the head. So I back up until I'm against the wall.
>
> She shakes her head and her lips go all tight. She puts a hand against her heart and for a second, I wish I hadn't done it.
>
> "What you do? What you do, stupid girl?" She says. "Why you do that? You no like me. You no like you mãe. You break my heart. So many times, you break heart. No respeito."
>
> I don't like when my mom cries. I like it even less when it's me who made it happen. She shuffles toward the living room, her face in her hands, rambling on about me.
>
> (Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up*, pp. 36-37)

This conflict is rooted in Pen's home life, where her identity is constrained by her parents' traditional values. Ahmed's (2020) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* is particularly relevant to how the physical setting of the home mirrors Pen's experience. According to Ahmed, walls and doors are not merely physical barriers but also symbolic and affective ones, shaping Pen's experiences and relationships. Pen's home becomes a space where she cannot express her true self, instead reinforcing societal norms that limit her freedom.

In YA fiction, themes of home and cultural conflict are often made accessible through straightforward narrative strategies that resonate with younger readers. While works like *Cemetery Boys* and *Girl Man's Up* engage with deep and often painful issues of identity, they do so with an immediacy that allows readers to empathise with the characters' struggles, even if they lack the same lived experience. The use of familiar tropes, such as the home as both sanctuary

and site of conflict, makes these stories relatable while exploring complex intersections of identity, culture, and family.

Reimer's *No Place Like Home* (2013) describes how the home can evoke feelings ranging from comfort to alienation, especially for LGBTQIA+ individuals. For queer characters like Yadriel and Pen, the home becomes a contested space, requiring them to conceal or perform aspects of their identity to maintain peace. This performativity mirrors Ahmed's concept of heteronormative temporality, where individuals must conform to societal norms in order to access certain spaces, including their own homes.

By addressing these tensions in an accessible and emotionally resonant manner, YA fiction demonstrates its capacity to explore complex themes without alienating its audience. This balance contrasts with adult literary fiction, which may adopt more subtle or abstract methods of examining similar themes, allowing for greater thematic depth at the expense of broad accessibility.

Temporality: not just where, but, when

While Winter utilises the geographical setting to create a microcosm to comment on societal approaches to trans* individuals, Reeve's neo-Victorian novel *The House on Half Moon Street* relies primarily on temporal setting for its commentary. Reeve writes in the neo-Victorian genre as a means of reevaluating the past with contemporary understandings of gender identity. Reeve adopts a Jack the 'Ripperesque' style in his novel, both utilising the gothic backdrop of gas lit London streets, while also incorporating features such as love, loss, the desire for knowledge and answers as common tropes of the Victorian novel (Jameson, 1988). Shiller suggests this offers 'visions of the present as an endless recycling of moments from past lives' (Shiller, p.558). Neo-Victorian novels challenge what 'constitutes history and how history should be represented' (Worthington, 2013, p. 13). The neo-Victorian genre can be used as a means to 'foreground [...] the present state within the narrative from the past' (Weiss, 2013, p. 291).

In *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative* (2010), Hadley asserts that neo-Victorian novels adopt an almost dual plot structure by dramatising the present and the past. As such, it is important to consider the intentionality of this genre piece as Reeve highlights the rigidity and inequality of the gender-binary in the Victorian age. This is particularly overt with regard to the inclusion of the zoological assignation of sex, alluded to in Leo's father's interest in Darwin. Moreover, Leo's father's inflexible perspective on gender may also have been influenced by his familiarity with Darwin's theories and his adherence to the concept of evolutionary determinism (Greene, 2020). Finally, the rationale behind Reeve's adopting of the neo-Victorian genre resonates with Foucault's conception of the 'history of the present' (Foucault, 1978), which 'contemplate[s] the topical effects of repression based on denied or suppressed identity' (Weiss, 2013, p. 291).

Reeve's geographical setting is also consistent with the understanding that Victorian London represents a prominent, historical image of industry, and a time of significant change (Weeks, 2017). Reeve utilises the Victorian London setting to enrich the narrative, presenting an analogy with contemporary issues surrounding gender queer identity. In the context of the rapid industrialisation of the era, Victorian London stands as a symbol of significant societal change and upheaval (Weeks, 2017). The uncertainties brought about by modernisation compelled individuals to cling to traditional values and norms, which deeply influenced their perception of gender roles and identities.

While Reeve may exhibit technical proficiency in his use of genre, it is crucial to consider here that the author's understanding of Leo, his trans protagonist, is necessarily limited, and may be somewhat inauthentic: Reeve is writing from the perspective of a cis male, about a scenario that takes place in the Victorian era. Reeve has been explicit in clarifying the use of historical setting, partly for the very purpose of avoiding presenting a potentially inauthentic representation of the trans experience *contemporaneously*, and justifies Leo as his protagonist thus:

So, I gave myself some rules. Firstly, this would be a historical novel, thus somewhat removed from the present-day experience of trans people. Secondly, this wouldn't be a novel about being or becoming trans, it would be a novel about a man who happened to be trans. [...] He has a unique perspective, but being trans is just one part of who he is, not the sum of it.

Thirdly, I wanted to get the views of trans people, so I approached some I knew, who were very supportive. I also took both my initial ideas and then the manuscript to the Beaumont Society, a non-profit run for and by trans people. Its President read a draft and responded with incredible patience and encouragement.

(Reeve, 2019)

Reeve's use of the famous London street Half Moon Street is a symbol of Victorian enlightenment. Half Moon Street was a bohemian street for creative and theatre types in Victorian England, being heavily featured in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Wilde, 2018). This area is renowned for its association with the Victorian Aesthetic Movement (Friedman, 2019), a cultural and artistic movement that emerged in Britain in the late 19th century. The Aesthetes believed in the value of art for art's sake and rejected the conventions of Victorian society. They were known for their flamboyant dress, extravagant lifestyles, and unconventional attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Reeve's use of Half Moon Street as a setting for his novel invokes this rich cultural history and imbues the story with a sense of artistic and intellectual sophistication. At the same time, the novel's themes of gender identity and social justice challenge the norms and values of Victorian society, resonating with the ongoing relevance of these issues in our own time.

Reeve's use of setting in his neo-Victorian novel brings to the fore the stifling societal expectations regarding gender norms and roles for which the era is often remembered, as asserted by Mitchell (2010). Although Reeve does not capture and utilise the descriptive aspects

of their protagonist's surroundings like Winter, at interview, Reeve elucidates upon his decision to write in the genre of neo-Victorian fiction and explains his choice to focus more on temporal specificities (Reeve, 2019). Reeve explains that, as a writer, he felt a sense of obligation to chronicle undocumented, or underrepresented, lives in a time where being different was criminalised: 'I believe that we owe it to those brave people to represent them, even long after their deaths, to show the world that they existed, that they had agency in their own lives and that humanity was as rich and diverse then as it is now' (Reeve 2019). Reeve's rationale echoes Foucault's notions about interrogating the past to expose new truths about the present: 'I set out from a problem expressed in the terms current today and I try to work out its genealogy. Genealogy means that I begin my analysis from a question posed in the present' (Foucault, 1977, p. 262). Leo is marginalised, living in constant fear of being exposed as a trans man; his agency is constrained by stigmatising attitudes of the Victorian era. Reeve presents his protagonist's marginalisation as analogous with the challenges faced by trans* individuals in the present era (2018). Leo's experience of being arrested and held in jail exemplifies this:

> Sooner or later, I would be searched, or required to change my clothes, or need to piss. And, after all, I truly was a criminal. Every time I called myself Leo and put on trousers I was breaking the law. My crime wasn't something I'd *done*, out of greed or ill-temper, it was something I *was*, every minute of every day, flouting the will of God who created me as a woman.
>
> (Reeve 2018, The House on Half Moon Street, p. 63).

Reeve uses this incident to exemplify the lengths gender queer individuals had to go to in order to appear to fit the gender binary. Although the Victorian laws that Reeve references in *The House on Half Moon Street* may seem archaic and outdated, the novel may encourage readers to reflect on contemporary UK laws surrounding gender identity, still heavily influenced by a gender-binary framework. While it may not be a criminal offence to present as a gender

different to the one given at birth, many acts, such as using the 'wrong' public toilet, can still result in discrimination, harassment, and even violence (Wirtz et al., 2020). As Barnett et al. (2018) describe in their article 'The transgender bathroom debate at the intersection of politics, law, ethics, and science', new legislation in North Carolina, U.S.A., restricts trans* individuals by enforcing the use of the bathroom that is in accordance with their assigned 'biological sex'. Though eventually abandoned, McLean (2021) attests that Theresa May's 'Gender Recognition Act Reform' (2017), was indicative of a wider, growing Anti-Transgender Movement in the United Kingdom.

More recently, the Cass Review (2022) raised significant concerns about the provision of gender-affirming healthcare for trans* youth. Rather than offering a compassionate understanding of the needs of transgender individuals, the review demonstrated ignorance regarding the complexities of gender identity, leading to recommendations that could hinder access to essential support and services. This has fostered an environment of uncertainty and fear for many young trans* individuals, exacerbating their vulnerability in a society that already marginalises them. Public discourse has also increasingly been shaped by anti-trans narratives, further entrenching transphobia within society. Although trans* individuals are no longer criminalised solely because of their identity, they may still face prosecution for their actions, perpetuating harmful views and discrimination (Parent & Silva, 2018).

These developments underscore the critical need for advocacy and reform to protect the rights and dignity of trans* individuals in the UK. Within this fraught context, fiction plays a vital role in fostering empathy and understanding. Representations of gender diversity in literature can offer meaningful insights into the lived experiences of trans* individuals, validating their struggles and promoting resilience in the face of societal challenges.

YA fiction, in particular, holds a unique place in addressing these issues due to its accessibility to a broad spectrum of readers, including young people exploring their own

identities. Unlike some adult fiction, which may focus on thematic complexity and theoretical nuance, YA fiction often employs narratives that are intended to be both eminently relatable and emotionally resonant. By presenting diverse characters and experiences in a straightforward manner, YA literature provides young readers with an entry point into conversations about identity and belonging, enabling them to navigate complex topics in an accessible way.

Through stories in young adult literature, readers are introduced to characters whose experiences may mirror their own or broaden their understanding of others. These narratives can challenge societal prejudices and offer validation to trans* and non-binary youth, showing them that they are not alone. YA fiction's focus on accessibility also makes it a powerful tool for fostering allyship, encouraging readers from all backgrounds to engage with and advocate for greater inclusion and understanding.

This capacity for connection and representation highlights the importance of exploring YA fiction alongside other literary works in examining gender diversity. By bridging personal and societal perspectives, these stories contribute to a broader discourse on identity and the rights of trans* individuals, offering hope and understanding at a time when they are critically needed.

Gender expression and safe spaces

The above discussion describes how elements of setting may constrain gender diverse individuals; this may necessitate the search for safety in 'queer spaces'. Kokkola (2014) explores how queer spaces, whether physical or digital, foster a sense of community and acceptance, which, ideally, allow individuals to embrace their identities openly without fear of judgment or rejection. For marginalised individuals, a growing awareness of space may become a prominent element in their everyday lives. In Scheuerman et al's (2018) work 'Safe Spaces and Safe Places', researchers interviewed trans* individuals, findings that 'safety was a universal concern for [their]

participants' (p.2). Safety in spaces is of utmost importance to all people, but is a particular necessity to those who are marginalised. Safe spaces entail 'a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance' (Kenney, 2001, p. 26), conferring a sense of security and resonating with discourses around inclusion and diversity. Safe spaces, as a term, was introduced during the women's liberation movement in the 1960's (Kenney, 2001), having since been applied to all places that offer support to marginalised peoples, where they can exist without the threat of harm.

As not all spaces are safe spaces, marginalised, subjugated groups may need to create their own spaces. Indeed, Dourish (2006), expanding on work by Massey (1999), asserted that all spaces are imbued with power, which may give rise to injustices and discriminations. Both Massey and Dourish identify this as the 'power geometry' of social spaces which is reminiscent of Foucault's notion of heterotopia (Foucault, 1986). To elaborate, certain figures that inhabit a given space may, effectively, exert control over it, when they hold power which is embedded within social structures. This is particularly true in spaces labelled as 'queer' spaces, which often, 'reproduce power relations which are mostly based on the heteronormative constitution of identities' (Nash, 2016, p. 135). Although there are many threats, particularly with the rise of far-right groups, to trans* and other minority groups, these books and authors offer a sense of hope that the constraints of traditional structures are being questioned.

Those who are controlled and manipulated by authoritative figures in common social spaces may be driven to create their own safe(r) spaces, excluding normative social structures and controlling figures, developing a space that is free from dominant hierarchies and harm. Akin to Foucault's concept of heterotopias, these spaces are separate from the dominant hegemony that exists in public spheres (Topinka, 2010). Thus, a safe space is a place that provides the scope to express and present in the most authentic way suited to one's identity.

Recognising my own need to access safe spaces, within which I feel able to express myself authentically, has been essential to the development of my gender identity construction. Indeed, it was a long time before I came out and began to express myself in public; a stage of transition in my life that I approached very tentatively at first. As a young child, I would sometimes adopt the name 'Alice', similar to Alex becoming Sasha Masha, but this was treated by adults as only an amusing character quirk. I would never have felt able to live authentically as a young girl without a great deal of resistance from my family; like many of the protagonists in my selected novels, I privately expressed my 'alter ego' only to close friends.

Binary gender encoding was certainly rife throughout my childhood, with denigrating comments from family members frequently equating femininity to weakness, urging me to 'man up' and be a 'proper boy' like Penn being told to behave like the young woman she 'should be'. As time went on, these negative influences took a toll on my mental health, and the urgency grew to access any safe space where I would not be judged for being incongruous with the rigid gender-binary encoding I was subjected to. My journey towards embracing gender authenticity as a fundamental aspect of my identity took a significant leap when I attended university in Wales. Moving away from home was a pivotal moment as it allowed me to cast off the shackles of repression that had become familiar in my family setting. At home, the pressure to conform to my assigned sex was considerable, especially from parents and grandparents; figures who fulfilled the role of primary socialisers.

By contrast, the safety I felt on campus, and particularly in my dorm room, was cemented when I first arrived; in fact, it was at this time that I struck up one of my most enduring friendships. Upon meeting a new acquaintance outside of the male dorm rooms (where I was staying), she passed comment on how progressive the university was, 'having mixed the dorms this year' assuming that I was biologically female. While this appraisal may seem somewhat innocuous, for me it represented a highly significant moment of affirmation: finally, I was seen

for who I really am. This initial encounter encouraged me to express my authentic self at all times while I was away from home. Throughout my time at university, I enjoyed an enormous sense of personal freedom and never even contemplated a return to more masculine dress, or even clothes that I saw as more asexual; here, I could be me.

I have been able to maintain the confidence that I enjoyed at university in everyday life for the majority of the time, continuing to dress in a feminine way when in public. It is crucial to point out, however, that when I return to the environments where I grew up, I do dress more modestly in terms of gender expression. On these occasions, I wear clothes that, while not masculine, are certainly more asexual, because I have found that some of my close relations tend to continue being critical when I wear dresses and similar clothes. While the safe space may continue to allude me in such a setting, I have reconciled with the necessity of being selective with my choice of clothing, depending upon the situation I am in, exemplifying my SGF model in practice.

The notion of the *safe space* can be clearly recognised within my selected novels. Returning to Winter's Annabel, Wayne struggles to find a safe space where they can be themselves until they eventually find solace in St. John's. In the larger city, they start afresh and build a new life for themselves, free from the constraints of their small town upbringing. They take on a new job, rent an apartment, and begin to explore the city's vibrant cultural scene. Although they still struggle with issues related to their gender identity, the move allows them to find a measure of peace and acceptance. Unlike Winter's *Annabel,* most of the YA fiction discussed in my thesis utilises contemporary settings, arguably presenting a more relevant and familiar depiction of the construction of gender identity to young adult readers (Murphy, 2007). Perhaps the most overt difference in setting that distinguishes contemporaneity is engagement with technology; in these novels, the internet often represents a digital safe space to protagonists, though certainly not without risk.

Online (safe) spaces

Over the last two decades, the development of online and digital spaces has meant that 'technology and the proliferation of the internet has opened new opportunities for trans* individuals and communities to create and join safe spaces' (Lucero, 2017, p. 119). Online communities are a prevalent theme in my selection of contemporaneously set fiction. In Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* (2016), set in modern California, protagonist Riley's therapist suggests that they should begin a blog to better understand and monitor their thoughts and feelings. A lot of Riley's mental anguish relates to them not being able to authentically express their identity, i.e. to live and be treated in a manner consistent with gender identity rather than gender assigned at birth (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 35). Riley's blogging is an example of creating their own digital space, as 'online environments may encourage distinct forms of identity expression' (Davis, 2013). This blog becomes Riley's personal landscape of self-discovery, through which Garvin addresses the majority of the trans* issues presented in the novel, 'I know how they found me-the same way I discovered there was a name for what I was feeling-by searching the internet. Browsing hashtags.' (Garvin, 2016, *Symptoms of Being Human*, p. 57).

Riley's posting online becomes a cathartic experience (Mitchelstein, 2011), helping them deal with their own problems, while also showing how many others benefit from this channel as they go through similar experiences.

> I click Post, feeling gratified and honestly, kind of fired up. Giving advice to strangers felt weird at first-but I'm starting to like it. It makes me feel like my own situation isn't so hopeless. It makes me feel brave.
>
> (Garvin, 2016, *Symptoms of Being Human*, pp. 142-143)

Over time, Riley's blog begins to represent a meeting point for those who deviate from the socially accepted gender-binary framework, to express and ultimately find support which is otherwise inaccessible. This representation is consistent with findings made by Johnson et al.

(2020, p. 37), recognising that 'the internet offers Trans* and Gender Diverse (TGD) youth an affirming space that, for the most part, does not exist in their offline lives. This affirming space allows TGD youth to engage with others as their authentic selves, often for the first time, creating a safe context which fosters processes of healing and growth'. Safety in this sense 'is not merely physical safety but psychological, social, and emotional safety as well' (Hartal, 2017, p. 1056), providing individuals with 'a chance to explore their identities, and, for some, to cement how they identify or gain new language that prompt[s] a revelation' (Miller, 2017, p. 509).

Garvin presents new media as a provision of 'LGBTQ youth to explore their identities and develop important skills, rehearse crucial developmental tasks (e.g. coming out, cultivating identity, increasing self-confidence and self-acceptance, and building relationships)' (Craig & McInroy, 2014, p. 105). Wagaman et al. (2020) further highlight how LGBTQ+ individuals 'find pathways to resilience in the face of adversity' (p.3) by forming online and offline communities and settings; creating microcosmic safe spaces separate from, school, work, external areas which are not safe to be in as a queer person, cultivating a safe space to open up and explore, present, and express their authentic selves. With reference to my SGF model, these digital 'safe spaces,' created by LGBTQIA+ individuals, constitute an extension of the private expressive sphere. These spaces, although technically in the public eye, are also, simultaneously, a form of a private space, as they create a welcoming environment for people to form, reflect, discuss, and express their authentic selves without judgement.

Rather than using the internet solely as a platform for asserting and affirming their identity, Felix (*Felix Ever After*) employs the internet as a foundation for exploring and labeling in order to discover both his identity and its underlying significance. As Garrison states, 'many go to great lengths to fortify their identity claims, conducting exhaustive searches for proof of their gender variance.' (Garrison, 2018, p. 614). Callender depicts Felix conducting a secondary search to consolidate his identity, conveying the notion that gender identity is not fixed. Callender

portrays Felix as 'learning to connect abstract theories [ideas and labels] to concrete, real-life situations' (Lackey, 1994, p. 167):

> I bite my lip, then bring up Google. I don't even know what to type – not at first. *Am I transgender?* Feels like a stupid question to ask, when I know for a fact that I am, even if being labelled a *guy* doesn't feel completely right, either. I know that I'm not a girl. That's the only thing I know for certain.
>
> I'm Transgender, but I don't feel like I'm a guy or a girl.
>
> The results are overwhelming. [...] a Tumblr post with a bunch – feels like hundreds – of transgender terms, labels I didn't even know existed.
>
> One of the results takes me to a Facebook event at the LGBT Community Centre. The event is for a gender identity discussion group. It's supposed to be tonight at eight o'clock, in about three hours. It's a little too much of a coincidence, right? I click on 'Going'.
>
> (Callender, 2021, *Felix Ever After*, p. 180)

Virtual and digital spaces have become a vital method of support for trans* individuals in seeking to understand and establish their gender identity. While Felix has an intrinsic knowledge that they do not fit into the gender binary, they scour the internet to try to understand their identity, being uneducated about gender queer identities (Namaste, 1996). Bornstein (1994) emphases that '[v]irtual reality is a method of making partitions [of gender] obsolete', further claiming that 'we have the opportunity to play with gender in much the same way that we get to play with other forms of identity – through performance in any virtual medium. In any medium, there have always been cross-gendered performances' (p. 139). Whilst Bornstein was not directly referring to the internet in the form it is known today, her sentiments maintain high relevance, conveying how in virtual spaces such as internet forums, an individual is not constrained to adhere to strict social narratives because these spaces, like in the pages of fiction, are not stark realities.

Despite these apparent advantages, it is vital to acknowledge that the positive influence of social media has been challenged and diminished in recent times, particularly as a facet of the current political climate in Europe and America. As such, it is crucial to consider the historical context when exploring the impact of social media on marginalised communities, recognising that societal attitudes and the digital landscape are in a constant state of flux (Boyd, 2014). The rapid expansion of social media platforms has exposed various issues related to privacy, mental health adversity, and the manipulation of information (Zimmer & Proferes, 2014). Additionally, young adults are often more active users of the internet, so these issues may reflect the reality of their experiences in particular. YA fiction is often imbued with a particularly hopeful and optimistic tone, which may influence the portrayal of online settings as positive and empowering spaces.

In light of this, it may be argued that Garvin has created a somewhat simplistic narrative of hope, emphasising the presence of supportive and positive elements in online settings, while in reality there are also many negative elements to these spaces, with potential exposure to hate, terror, crime and danger (Haji et al., 2017). Social media platforms have faced criticism for their role in disseminating misinformation, fostering polarisation, and amplifying hate speech and harassment (Smith & Anderson, 2020). In their review of the benefits and disadvantages of young people's engagement in online communities, Abreu and Kenny (2018) found that, while engaging online can open new channels and opportunities, there also exist dangers in relation to cyberbullying. This is defined by Pham and Adesman (2015) as 'behaviors performed through the use of digital media or technology with the goal of communicating aggression and inflicting harm in an individual or a group of people' (p. 2).

Even where ostensible online *safe spaces,* such as those depicted in these narratives, are concerned, lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ support groups vary drastically. For example, Bachmann and Gooch (2018) found that whilst LGBTQIA+ organisations, groups and venues

offer affirmation and validation to individuals, 36% of trans* individuals face discrimination that is situated within LGBTQIA+ environments themselves. More broadly, research has shown that marginalised groups, particularly LGBTQIA+ individuals, are more likely to experience harassment and abuse online (Duggan, 2017; Davidson, 2022). A study by the Pew Research Center found that women were more likely to experience online harassment in the form of sexual harassment, stalking, and physical threats (Vogels, 2021). Finally, a survey conducted by the Anti-Defamation League found that LGBTQ+ individuals were more likely to experience online harassment and hate speech (ADL, 2021). As researchers continue to study these effects, it is essential to address both the potential benefits and risks associated with online spaces, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking safe and supportive settings. Understanding these complexities can lead to a more nuanced and informed perspective on how social media contributes to the construction and exploration of gender identity for marginalised individuals.

Some authors of YA fiction have begun to address the potential and real? dangers of the internet, particularly in relation to cyberbullying and harassment. For example, in Angie Thomas's (2017) novel 'The Hate U Give', protagonist Starr experiences online harassment and cyberbullying after speaking out about police violence. Similarly, in Rainbow Rowell's (2017) novel 'Carry On', the character Simon is targeted by an online troll who threatens his safety and well-being.

The settings portrayed in my selected novels serve as metaphors for the experiences of gender non-conforming individuals. Setting is a fundamental aspect of gender identity construction, as it shapes the norms, cultural values, and expectations that individuals internalise and perform in their daily lives. From early childhood, individuals are conditioned to adhere to specific gender roles based on the norms and expectations of their immediate setting. These early experiences have a significant impact on an individual's gender identity development and their ability to explore and express their gender in ways that feel authentic to them.

Chapter 4 – Socialising & Gender [de]coding

The influence of socialisation on constructions of gender identity

The previous chapter presented an investigation into the influences of setting on gender identity and how local narratives shape perceptions of gender. Now, I turn my attention to the equally significant impact of socialisation, as protagonists navigate the web of social interactions and expectations that contribute to their construction of gender identities. The chapter is arranged by first introducing each subject and providing textual analysis; I then include my own autoethnographic insights to compare and contrast my experiences with literary representations. While I have addressed the physical and social settings separately in individual chapters, it is essential to recognise the interplay and crossovers between the two. A prominent example of such overlap lies in the cultural elements that permeate both realms. Although culture is often associated with specific regions and places, it also becomes ingrained in the people inhabiting those spaces through socialisation processes (Featherstone & Lash, 1999).

Where my selected novels are concerned, socialisation is fundamental to each protagonist's construction of gender identity and is exhibited differently in each text, reflecting the subjectivity of this process. For much of my analysis, I will be focusing on the role that parental figures play in the construction of gender identity through primary/linear socialisation. Primary socialisation, as assumed by parental figures, may be considered to encompass three core domains: language, play and games (Stockard, 2006). As discussed by Hines (2018), socialisation entails the codifying of behaviour which, when abiding to social norms, reinforces the gender binary framework. Talcott Parson's model of socialisation (2010) follows a similar premise, referring to people in an individual's life who have a significant impact on the development of their beliefs, morals, and identity. Finally, Parson's (2010) model defines primary socialisation as an individual's initial learning of the world, usually conducted by the parents/carers/guardians of the child, while secondary socialisation refers to the external influences of an individual, away

from home life; schools and peer groups being prominent examples. A central challenge that the protagonists in my core texts face is the internal battle of either fitting into conventional models of gender by performing to encoded norms - to be 'accepted' - or expressing their individual identity, regardless of norms, with the risk of rejection.

Trans* individuals often encounter significant challenges at various developmental stages, as individual's experiences frequently disrupt the conventional narratives associated with rigid male or female identities outlined by the gender binary framework (Simon et al., 2011). This dissonance reveals a deep cultural misunderstanding of gender, where societal expectations compel individuals to fit into predefined categories that fail to capture the fluidity of their identities. Consequently, the journey of self-discovery and affirmation for trans* individuals is not merely a personal struggle; it is a confrontation with deeply entrenched societal norms that marginalise their existence and experiences. As they navigate the complexities of their identities, these individuals often face the dual challenge of reconciling their self-perception with external expectations, highlighting the urgent need for a broader societal acceptance of diverse gender identities that transcends binary limitations.

Negative consequences of noncompliance can present themselves as familial rejection (Toomey, 2011) resulting in a disconnect from the family and their support, and rejecting behaviours such as hostility and neglect (Bradley, 2009). When a trans* person internalises these negative appraisals, this can result in gender dysphoria and co-morbid mental health issues (Pardoe & Trainor 2017). Trans* identity does not in itself cause gender dysphoria and co-morbid mental health issues, but instead, it is the *reaction* of socialisation agents to gender diversity that problematises 'noncompliant' behaviour (Simon et al. 2011). Opposition to Non-Binary and Gender diverse individuals is therefore rooted in their presenting a challenge to the fabric of the binary. This notion is an important aspect of my analysis in my selection of fiction

texts, each of which reveals how their respective protagonists interact within a socially constructed framework.

The majority of my selected novels are in the Young Adult (YA) genre, focusing on the construction of gender identity in this tumultuous time of becoming. As Fois (2018) highlights 'during adolescence, identity is indeed a matter of comparison which develops either in conformation or confrontation to one's peers. Social constructions and ideals burden the individual with expectations – about body and personality – and adolescents find themselves pressured to comply to normality, less they are stigmatised and marginalised.' (p. 2). Thus, the YA genre constitutes a key literary area to investigate how trans* characters construct their gender, particularly as they challenge various social factors and institutions that teach them to conform.

The pressure placed on gender queer young people can largely be traced to established forms of social categorisation that were 'developed to contribute sociologically to our understanding of human experience' (Dietert & Dentice 2013, p. 29), influencing youth perceptions, and their negotiation, of gender identities in contemporary times. With reference to my SGF model, this chapter explores the conflicts that arise for the protagonists in my core texts as they encounter socialised norms and codified behaviours as an aspect of their own gender exploration. I aim to show how "queer-fullness" and playfulness in fiction have often provided a 'space of possibility' for the concepts of gender, sexuality, identity, and power, presenting challenges to existing power structures 'in creative and subversively joyful ways (Harper et al, 2018, p. 4).

Textual analysis of socialisation

This part of the chapter examines how socialisation is enacted by parental figures in my core texts, as they attempt to instill their norms and ideals in the protagonists (Walter, 2007). The social influence of parental figures is considered in this thesis? as having a significant bearing on each protagonist's construction of their gender identity, whether they conform to these influences or, more frequently, deviate from them. Ultimately, I aim to show how my selected literary works reflect the lived experiences of gender diverse young people, with the protagonists responding to significant socialising figures as part of their journey to construct a gender diverse identity.

Traditions and norms are apparent in each of my selected texts, manifesting almost as antagonists, whether faced by the respective protagonists head on, in the public eye, or as they clash with the people trying to enforce them. For example, author Reeve presents Leo's father in *The House on Half Moon Street* as a domineering role model who seeks to impose his ideas regarding gendered norms onto his son. Mr. Pritchard is active in his socialisation of all of his children, particularly Leo, as he engages and is interested by things which are labelled as masculine, in line with his 'true' gender identity.

> At eleven years of age my father had looked me up and down, his gaze pausing disapprovingly on my small yet ineluctable chest, and declared that my studies were over. I was top of my class, even called upon to instruct the others when the teacher was away, yet I was evicted, forced to rely on the library we had at home, snatching time between learning to play the cacophonous violin and condemning seedlings to death in the flower beds. My father read widely and quickly on a range of topics, Hardy, Homer, Browning and Carlyle, Darwin and John Stuart-Mill, as well as books on anatomy and ornithology ... but (I) never mastered my mother's delights of music, planting and pruning. That I took so much after him was a source of sadness for her and bewilderment for me, but I don't think he noticed at all.
>
> (Reeve, 2018, The House on Half Moon Street, p. 12)

The social conditioning of Leo, moving him away from his strengths and passions of education and learning and into a world of domestic discipline, highlights the cruel and restrictive nature of binarity (Hines, 2018). Leo's father's reading is wide, varied and liberal, but the limits of his world view cannot escape the trappings of the Victorian era setting. The conflict of expressing an individual identity versus performing to expectations is also prevalent in Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human.* As a gender fluid individual, Riley constantly battles the socialisation and conformity of gendered norms. Similar to both *Annabel and The House on Half Moon Street, Symptoms of Being Human* explores parental figures and their socialisation of norms and values and the influence they hold over the protagonist with regard to their gender identity and expression:

> "Please, you guys, I just want to walk in."
>
> "You mean you want to make an entrance," Dad says, a smile turning up one corner of his mouth.
>
> I blink at him. He couldn't misunderstand me more if he actively tried. But if believing that will keep him from making a scene out of my arrival, I'll fake it.
>
> (Garvin, 2016, *Symptoms of Being Human*, p. 4)

Riley's overbearing parents encroach on many aspects of their life, and in order to deal with the demanding nature of their social conditioning, Riley often 'fakes it'. Riley hides their gender queer identity behind the normative performance for their parents and peers. Riley's self-harm and depression are used to illustrate how rejecting or accepting a young person and their gender identity can have life-or-death consequences. This is reflected in real life research, for example Tanis (2016) found that trans youth who are not accepted by their family have a 41% suicidality rate, a figure that drops to 4% as a result of familial acceptance: "Even if they are rejected by everyone else [...] Calling trans youth by their preferred name [and pronouns] is suicide prevention." (Tanis, 2016).

In *Annabel,* Wayne's father Treadway may be regarded as the embodiment of machismo, instilled with masculine dominance. As such, Treadway is threatened by his child being intersex, 'His son looked like a girl. He talked like a girl, his hair was like a girl's and so were his throat and chest.' (Winter, 2010, *Annabel,* p. 159).

Treadway is adamant that he will raise Wayne as his son, to maintain and inherit his machismo. Treadway reinforces certain behaviours to indoctrinate Wayne into his rigid outlook that sex determines gender. As Winter explained at interview (Winter, 2013), Treadway and the other men in Labrador engage in activities specific to this setting, performing within their socially mandated gender role. While Treadway's actions could be interpreted as a comment on the way he himself has been socialised, here I would like to focus on how Treadway's actions ultimately affect Wayne and the construction of their gender identity. Treadway's actions see Wayne engaging in 'men's work' from a young age, ensuring that Treadway fulfils his duty (Foucault, 1972) to socialise the gender norms, as to mark his success in raising a 'normal' child:

> Treadway had been careful to take Wayne down to the shed earlier than he would have taken a girl. He took Wayne to parts of the house that were men's parts ... normally he would have waited until a son was four or five before he trained him in the ways of how to become a man. But with this child Treadway did not want to take a chance. He treated the child seriously and told him with a grim face how to cut hide and shave wood.
>
> (Winter, 2010, *Annabel,* p. 68)

In his discussion of 'men's parts', Treadway seeks to encode (see appendix. A) the masculine instrumental role into Wayne[2]. To understand how gender encoding functions in our society, Hines exemplifies its propagation in the media: 'gender difference is coded in cultural

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[2] The codifying of gender discourse, particularly in children and young people, is central to the maintenance of gendered systems, and is apparent throughout history, for example *The Codex Mendoza* indicates how children were trained in roles befitting of their assigned sex from a young age, even being punished for not adhering to this role (*Codex Mendoza, C. 1542, Figure B, in 'Is gender fluid',* S. Hines, 2018, p. 55

representations: media products for and about boys tend to emphasise activity and bravery, whereas those for girls tend to emphasise kindness and beauty' (p. 67). Girard (2018) presents their protagonist Pen (*Girl Mans Up*) in a similar predicament to Wayne, as they want to engage in activities deemed by their parents to be inappropriate for their assigned sex. Although Pen Oliveira is a little more defiant to their parents than Wayne, Pen's mother, Mrs. Oliveira, is insistent that they learn the ways to be the 'woman of the house'. As such, she is very focused on passing on her knowledge of adhering to her gender role, 'To me, she says, "You wanna learn the something? I teach you to do the stuff. I teach you to make the house nice. I teach you to make comida. I teach you everything I know."'(Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up,* pp. 20-21).

In *Annabel*, Treadway believes he is the father of a '*son'*, while Mrs. Oliveira (*Girl Mans Up*) believes she is the mother of a '*daughter'*; their children do not behave as they want them to, which leads to extreme and restrictive parenting, and continued, ever more concerted efforts to encode rigid gender norms. Pen admires their brother's ability to engage in seemingly masculine roles, like landscaping outside, and desperately wants to be part of this world. However, their mother has different ideas: "No, no, no. You want job? I give you a job to clean with you mãe. This outside is you irmão job." This episode highlights the delineation between gender spheres, as Pen's mother assigns outdoor work—an activity traditionally associated with masculinity—to Pen's brother, reinforcing the expectation that certain roles and spaces are inherently gendered. This dynamic reflects the broader themes of internal and external spaces discussed in the previous chapter, illustrating how societal norms dictate not only individual aspirations but also familial expectations around gender expression.

The consequent impact, in terms of how these figures socialise their children, is evident in the way that the respective protagonists (Wayne and Pen), learn about these gender zones, being taught where they 'belong' based on their assigned gender. Later in the narrative of *Girl Mans Up,* Pen manages to 'escape' their gender zone designation when they begin to help their

brother in the garden. As a result, Mrs. Oliveira becomes ever more determined to engage Pen in a traditional gender role.

> That's when I notice my mom watching from the kitchen.
>
> "You come here," she says.
>
> "Why?"
>
> "I make massa. I show you how." All of a sudden, it's super important for me to learn how to bake sweet bread all by myself.
>
> (Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up, p.* 73)

Girard presents Pen as a resilient protagonist who feels comfortable with disregarding their mother's enforcing of gender roles. However, in reality, such independent behaviour is not always possible. The portrayal of overpowering parental figures and a 'misunderstood teen' may be considered a common, relatable trope in YA fiction (Scholes & Ostenson 2013). Garvin uses this trope in *Symptoms of Being Human* to highlight the constraints that exist for those whose gender identity may be different to socially conditioned norms, within the same context as the more universal difficulties of being a young adult. Langer & Martin (2004) describe adolescence as the danger zone, the time which young people are most likely to assert 'deviancy' and the time in which parents are typically more disciplinarian.

With the above discussion in mind, one is able to distinguish between the two core texts, *Annabel* and *Girl Mans Up*, in several notable ways. Foremostly, where genre and readership are considered, Girard's *Girl Mans Up* is a YA fiction novel presenting a young person who is able to channel their agency into their gender expression regardless of the socialised gender expectations imposed by Mrs. Oliveira, their primary socialiser. The novel encourages the reader to either feel a sense of self-determination as a gender diverse individual or, alternatively, as a cisgender reader, to be galvanised with a vicarious sense of defiance and allyship in solidarity with

Pen as an outsider (Boffone et al., 2020). Though this appears to present a somewhat idealised scenario, the author's own identity and experience as a gender diverse individual lends a sense of credibility to the narrative.

In contrast, Winter's *Annabel* is situated within the realm of literary fiction, which often prioritises depth of character and thematic exploration over the accessibility and immediacy found in YA narratives. This genre distinction allows for a more nuanced examination of the complexities of gender identity and the emotional weight of alienation that Wayne experiences. Furthermore, Winter's status as a cisgender author may influence the portrayal of Wayne's struggles, potentially leading to interpretations that reflect a more outsider perspective on trans experiences. This juxtaposition between the two genres and authors' identities highlights the varied ways in which gender identity can be explored and understood within contemporary literature, demonstrating that while YA fiction can offer empowerment and solidarity, literary fiction often engages with deeper existential questions surrounding identity and societal norms.

This is particularly recognisable in Treadway's teaching Wayne the world of work, which plays a vital role in Wayne's development:

> The child knew that a grim, matter-of-fact attitude was required of him by his father, and he learned how to exhibit such an attitude, and he did not mind it because it was the way things were, but it was not his authentic self.

> (Winter, 2010, *Annabel,* p. 71)

Core socialisers, like Treadway and Mrs. Oliveira, are themselves informed by gender norms, or expectations, and in turn socialise their children to adhere to the which carry value for them. Ryle (2015) describes this process as 'sets of rules for what is socially accepted masculine and feminine behaviour in a given culture' (p. 110). These rigid frameworks inhibit the young person in their ability to freely form an identity, as they feel pressured to conform. Due to the

rigidity of this encoding, young people may feel the need to placate their parents, whether by hiding their authentic gender identity and performing to the rules they have been taught, or by proving to their parents that their true-to-self gender identity is worthy of bending restrictive gender encoding. The prerogative to prove one's authentic gender is exemplified by Yadriel (*Cemetery Boys*):

> "Why do you have to prove that you're brujo – a guy – to them?" Julian suddenly asked scowling up at the ceiling.
>
> The question took Yadriel by surprise. ...
>
> "Why do you have to prove anything to anyone?"
>
> Yadriel shifted uncomfortably. "It's just how it is, how it's always been. In order for them to let me be a brujo-"
>
> "You don't need anyone's permission to be you, Yads," he cut in, frustration starting to edge his voice again.
>
> (Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys,* p. 183)

Unlike the other novels being studied in this thesis, *Cemetery Boys* is a magical realist YA novel. Thomas, similar to Reeve in *The House on Half Moon Street*, playfully subverts genre tropes: *Cemetery Boys* adopts a Mexican-inspired magical realist genre, utilising elements of popular fairy tale narratives to explore complex ideas. Alonso (2020) champions the significance of Latinx and Chicanx YA literature, including *Cemetery Boys,* for its portrayal of queer characters navigating self-discovery during adolescence. Alonso asserts that these narratives not only reflect the complexities of identity formation in marginalised communities but also provide vital representation, stating that "these stories challenge dominant narratives and allow for a richer understanding of the diverse experiences of queer youth" (Alonso, 2020, p. 45). Moreover,

Alonso (2020) emphasises the importance of inclusive representation in literature, providing young readers with narratives that mirror their own lives and promote empowerment.

In *Cemetery Boys*, protagonist Yadriel represents a queer, Chicanx character undergoing the coming-of-age process. Yadriel's identity is shaped not only by his experiences as a trans man within a traditional Brujx family but also by the complex intersection of cultural and historical legacies tied to his Chicanx heritage. It is important to note that, unlike common depictions that frame Latinx identities primarily through the lens of immigration, Chicanx people often have ancestral roots in regions such as California or Texas long predating the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, when the U.S.-Mexico border shifted (Acuña, 2015). Similarly, Puerto Ricans, as U.S. citizens, complicate simplistic narratives of Latinx immigration. By embedding Yadriel's experiences in the broader spectrum of Latinx and Chicanx identities, Thomas highlights the importance of challenging reductive assumptions about these communities.

Yadriel's journey focuses on proving himself as a trans man to his family and community, not only by asserting himself through ordinary and "traditional" masculine traits but also by mastering the masculine magical abilities (Brujo magic) of summoning, communing, and banishing spirits (as opposed to "feminine" magic, which focuses on empathic abilities, healing, and potion-making). Thomas employs magical elements in their novel as a metaphor to explore and provoke discussion about the age-old question of innateness. Traditionally, in Yadriel's cultural framework, an individual's assigned sex determines their type of magical ability, resulting in becoming either a Bruja (female witch) or a Brujo (male witch), thereby exemplifying and enforcing the gender binary.

Because Yadriel transcends the gender binary, he wrestles with the fear that he might not fully embody the brujería ways and could remain tethered to the "female" magic he was born with. The narrative interweaves magical discovery and self-discovery, as Yadriel strives to validate his authentic magical abilities as a Brujo and, by extension, his authentic gender identity to himself

and those around him. Through this dual narrative, Thomas not only critiques traditional gender norms but also invites readers to consider the diverse and dynamic intersections of identity, culture, and self-expression within the broader Chicanx and Latinx communities.

Intergenerational gender encoding

To further highlight the influence of socialisation, Reeve emphasises Leo's mother's 'sadness' that her 'daughter' is not conforming to normative gender roles and ideals, instead following more closely in his father's footsteps:

> And when I told her that I had always been male underneath my skin, she sat down on a chair with her hands over her face and told me that God had made us all and we couldn't *choose*. Even to think about such things was lunacy, idiocy, *blasphemy*.
>
> (Reeve, 2018, The House on Half Moon Street, p. 46)

This extract portrays the rigid confines of social conditioning between generations (Walter, 2007). Mrs. Pritchard has a clearly defined framework of normativity and, due to external pressures, religion and the community, is committed to upholding these values in a constant false hope of homogeneity (Halliday, 1992).

> "You can't leave. You're just a girl."
>
> *Just a girl*. I smiled at that, aware of how callous it must seem. She was more of a child than I was, an innocent, married to my father at seventeen, passed to him by her own father like a sickly foal that wasn't expected to last.
>
> (Reeve, 2018, The House on Half Moon Street, p. 46)

With this extract in mind, one recognises that the socialisation within the Pritchard family is intergenerational, with Leo's parents repeating the same socialising behaviours that they were

taught as children. Similarly, in *Girl Mans Up,* Girard focuses on the learned behaviour of Pen's mother to show how gender encoding may persist from the early experiences of socialising agents.

> "I no yell. Listen. You cut you hair, you get people laugh," she says. "You go outside like this, what you think gonna happen? I tell you this all the time." She asks how I can expect people to understand something that doesn't make sense. "João (Johnny) no need problemas de sua irmã. You irmão he need to grow up, be a man. You grow up and be a woman. ... I tell you when you not try to be a good girl, the other people they gonna have to ..." She gets tongue-tied here, so she starts over in Portuguese, telling me when I insist on not being a good girl, I'm making things harder not only for myself, but harder for everyone around me. She says I should be bending for other people instead of expecting everyone else to bend for me.
>
> (Girard, 2018, *Girl Man's Up,* p. 142)

Here, Mrs. Oliveira embodies socialised gender norms and the reinforcement of the gender binary; she conforms to traditional expectations of femininity and gender roles within the context of her Portuguese immigrant background. Further, the novel explores the impact of societal pressures on individuals and families, shedding light on the challenges faced by parents, particularly mothers, to adhere to these norms and uphold the gender binary (Hadley, 2010).

In immigrant communities, where cultural traditions and expectations may often be intensified, Pen's mother becomes particularly preoccupied with Pen's gender expression, which deviates from both societal norms and her own cultural expectations (Montgomery, 2009). This dynamic reveals how the intersection of gender and immigrant status complicates parental responses to gender non-conformity. For Mrs. Oliveira, the enforcement of rigid gender norms can be seen as an attempt to preserve cultural identity while also striving for social acceptance within a predominantly different cultural framework. Such pressures highlight the significant role that intersectionality plays in shaping the experiences of immigrant families. The interplay of

race, gender, and cultural expectations means that individuals like Pen often face compounded challenges, navigating both their identity and the aspirations of their families within a society that may not fully accept them. This intersectional lens, therefore, offers an insight into how societal norms not only influence individual behaviour but also impact familial relationships, illuminating the complexities faced by those at the nexus of race, gender, and immigrant identity.

The decisions surrounding how an individual chooses to present or express their gender are encapsulated within the framework of my SGF model. This model highlights the disjunct that may exist between an individual's public performance of gender and their private, authentic expression of it, thereby underscoring the inadequacy of the rigid codification inherent in a binary understanding of gender. This disparity illustrates how societal expectations and the enforcement of gendered norms contribute to the perpetuation of binary structures and the associated dichotomous roles (Hines, 2018).

A poignant illustration of these dynamics can be found in *The House on Half Moon Street*, where Leo's visceral hatred of dolls as an adult stems from the trauma of having them imposed upon him during childhood. This memory exemplifies how forced engagement with prescribed gendered activities not only alienates individuals from their intrinsic identities but also perpetuates the restrictive binary framework. Such narratives underline the importance of models like the SGF in dissecting the multifaceted negotiations of gender identity, challenging binary norms, and fostering a more inclusive understanding of gender diversity, 'I'd always detested dolls; cold, counterfeit babies foisted on me by my aunts.' (Reeve, 2018, The House on Half Moon Street , p. 19).

Leo's violently emotional description of dolls as 'counterfeit babies' provides an insight into his self-perceived gender identity as an individual who defies socially assigned roles based on anatomical markers. Leo challenges the predominant view that, when assigned female at birth, an individual is subsequently predestined to follow a maternal and domestic role, as delineated

by Victorian society (Young, 1986). He departs from such expectations, coming from a fractured family background and embracing a life of bachelordom, sharing his home with a pharmacist, Alfie, and Alfie's daughter Constance. This arrangement diverges sharply from the conventional image of a husband and father typically depicted in the Victorian era.

The typical Victorian bourgeois family was epitomised by figures such as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who carefully constructed their image as a paragon of domesticity and moral virtue. Their self-presentation as a 'normal' bourgeois family was rooted in the era's ideals of gender roles, with a clear demarcation of responsibilities between men and women (Shields, 2003). However, this idealised version of family life often obscured the reality for many Victorians, who lived in diverse and sometimes makeshift arrangements similar to Leo's. For instance, many families were shaped by economic necessity, resulting in various configurations that did not conform to the dominant narrative of the nuclear family (Bourke, 1994).

By challenging genre norms inherent to historical novels, Reeve creates an intriguing space for an 'intertextual postmodern novel to be at once self-reflexive and historical' (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 546). This narrative choice not only disrupts established literary patterns but also offers an opportunity to explore the interplay between modernity, historical contexts, and evolving gender dynamics. In doing so, Reeve invites readers to reconsider the rigid structures of Victorian family life and the potential for alternative forms of existence that reflect a broader spectrum of human experience.

As Carroll (2010) discusses, postmodern elements of neo-Victorian novels such as *The House on Half Moon Street* relate to their unifying of cultural artefacts that apparently persist from the nineteenth century to the present day. By situating his protagonist in Victorian London, Reeve conveys to the reader how little has changed in terms of the lack of free expression that is possible for gender divergent individuals.

Autoethnography

There are numerous personal reflections that I can draw upon to exemplify where I have diverged from social expectations related to my being assigned male at birth. For example, when I was younger, it was always my natural inclination at school to gravitate towards subjects that had few, if any, male students in attendance. My highest grades were achieved in dance, for example, and I was captain of the netball team. I spurned the more male oriented sports in particular, and was usually absent from P.E. entirely because of the way students were segregated based on birth sex assignation. I felt intimidated by the atmosphere when I was among the boys at school because it was difficult to relate to them. The experience of being socialised in these kinds of situations, to spend more time with the boys at school (on the numerous occasions that I was unable to control who I was grouped with), was acutely alienating.

While the categorising of school subjects based on gender may be seen as somewhat reductive and arbitrary, and may risk perpetuating stereotypes, it is crucial to consider that, far more impactful than anything about the specific subjects themselves, the very fact of feeling more comfortable among female peers conferred a significant, positive impact in terms of socialisation. I have always chosen to make friends with girls, developing deeper friendships, both at school and in my free time. This is because I have always found female friends far more relatable and easier company, with the feeling of being accepted and included, as opposed to the alienation that was so pervasive when among boys. Though I may not have been able to recognise it as such at the time, I benefitted greatly from the socialising influence of female peers because they were essentially affirming my own identity as female.

There have been a great many instances whereby I have encountered rigid gender binary encoding myself, when accompanying my own parents and close family in public within the local community. For example, my close family have always insisted on using male pronouns to

describe my position in the family, to those outside of it; being called 'brother' by my siblings, and introduced variously as 'son', 'grandson' and 'nephew'. My incorrect male identity is always assumed when we are in public together as well, because I feel inclined to wear masculine clothing, for example when we go on shopping trips to the local town, and even when my family and I go on holiday. I conceal my authentic gender as best I can around my family members; in public, often family members will 'correct' other people who refer to me as she/her.

I love spending time with my family, but my enjoyment in being among them continues to feel hampered by only being accepted and loved when I am dress as a man and therefore conceal my authentic self. From experience, I have learned that by insisting on wearing female clothing and being addressed with my correct she/her pronouns, this either leads to discord with my family, or their outright refusal to respect my wishes, causing me to return to placating them through gender performance. As well as this, the whole conversation regarding gender fluidity and diversity is a highly contentious subject among my family (for example, stimulated by trans* rights articles on the news); on the whole, they are simply unwilling to entertain the fact that there exist individuals whose identity does not conform to birth sex assignation, disregarding the heightened visibility of gender diverse individuals as part of an, often politicised, discourse. Reactions from my family? around conducting this PhD itself have largely comprised of ridicule and a refusal to engage.

One of the most significant events in recent memory, when I conformed to the title associated with my male-assigned birth sex, was when I attended my father's wedding and was given the role of page boy, without any consideration afforded to my personal wishes. This was particularly significant for me, as I have often envisioned participating in wedding celebrations as a bridesmaid, aware that gender encoding is a prominent element of traditional Anglican celebrations. At this event, I experienced gender dysphoria, feeling displaced and removed from proceedings. I could not relate to the character I felt I was forced to portray, and my memories

of the occasion are vague. Had I taken the position of bridesmaid, as I felt I should have, then I would have felt far more present, and obviously any feelings of dysphoria would have been negated.

Fortunately, I have also enjoyed the affirmation of my authentic gender identity by close relations on alternative occasions. Though not biologically related to me, the mother of my closest friend has always referred to me as her daughter. Though in the earlier years of our friendship, from the age of 13, I may have been referred to in this way somewhat humorously, she still addresses me as such. At present, being called daughter by this significant figure in my life feels more like a true affirmation of my being a trans*woman, being fully accepted as female in her eyes. When we engage with the local community (a few towns over from where my biological family live), I enjoy embracing my authentic self and express myself accordingly, dressing in congruence with my female identity, and I am known as a sister to my best friend.

Defying & questioning primary socialisation

Each of the protagonists demonstrates internal conflict regarding their gender performativity. In *The House on Half Moon Street,* Leo reflects upon his childhood and whether he should have continued to pretend to be a girl for his mother's sake:

> Would it have killed me to continue wearing a dress for a few more years, for her (mother's) sake? Was my sex such a fragile thing that I couldn't hide it for a little longer beneath powder and petticoats?
>
> "Why should I?" I said out loud. "Why should I seem other than what I am?"
>
> (Reeve, 2018, The House on Half Moon Street, pp. 193-4)

This extract exemplifies an individual's complex battle with choosing whether to do the 'right' thing for themselves, expressing their authentic self, or complying with the socialised

expectations of primary socialisers. Broadly, the fictional world's liberty to manipulate and exaggerate such external factors allows for captivating scenarios wherein gender roles can be entirely subverted, or characters possess magical abilities to freely express their gender without the burdens of societal judgment, including the imposition of gender encoding. These inventive portrayals not only offer readers an escape, but also a profound opportunity to reconsider and challenge established gender norms and expectations.

Leo's trajectory in *The House on Half Moon Street* sees him move away from performing the part of daughter, questioning and ultimately defying his parents' attempted social conditioning. Leo is described by another character as being 'upset' and takes particular exception to this term, asserting that it is a feminine word. 'U*pset*, such a feminine word. I wasn't upset, I was *angry*.' (Reeve, 2018, The House on Half Moon Street, p. 35).

Leo's reflection typifies how the gender-binary framework is embedded through specially encoded language; the character's relationship to masculine and feminine language and narratives is a common theme throughout the novel. Language, according to Hall (1995), is the way in which individuals are taught to decipher symbols, gestures, and words, seeking to impose order and categorisation to make sense of the world. Hall states that language is essentially a marker of gender throughout the world and claims that it 'does not exist independently of social structure, but rather mirror(s), and eventually come(s) to symbolise, cultural patterns of dominance and subordination.' (Hall, 1995, p. 5).

In *Annabel*, Wayne is presented as being an inquisitive person, interested in a range of subjects, especially science and art, subjects long regarded as symbolic areas of the rational and the intuitive, the objective and subjective, respectively (Bud, et al., 2018). Wayne's interest in both subjects in analogous to his transcending of a normative, binary dichotomy (Epstein, 1988). Wayne's may be recognised as gender diverse, reflected in their interests and life choices; for example, despite his mother's efforts to deter him, Wayne decides he wants an orange bathing

suit instead of swimming trunks. This represents a symbolic act of defiance whereby Wayne seeks to affirm his authentic self despite the dictates of his mother or primary socialiser (Serano, 2007). Further, instead of conforming to his father Treadway's narrow definition of masculinity, Wayne adapts to his settings, resonating strongly with the notion of situationally dependent performativity (Butler, 1990) set out in my SGF model.

"Boys don't wear them?"

"They could, if people would let them."

"But people won't?"

"No."

"Maybe there are some (boys) and we just haven't seen them on TV yet. Maybe the boys are on another channel."

"Your dad doesn't think so."

"But just because Dad hasn't seen them doesn't mean there aren't any."

(Winter, 2010, *Annabel,* pp. 85-86)

Here, Wayne questions his father's strict conformity to gender encoded behaviour. Socialisers such as parents and teachers often promote gender-typical behaviours while discouraging behaviours that deviate from the societal norm. My own experiences, as well as many of the interactions between Treadway and Wayne, resonate with theories put forth by Montgomery in her 2009 book, *Children within anthropology: lessons from the past.* Montgomery's exploration of the influence of socialisers such as parents and teachers sheds light on their role in reinforcing and perpetuating the gender binary framework. Through subtle cues, and norms conditioned through socialisation, children are taught to adhere to gender-specific behaviors and to suppress expressions that challenge the established binary model (Montgomery, 2009). Wayne is portrayed as an individual who questions how and why their social world does

not allow them to be themselves. 'How much of his body image was accurate and how much was a construct he had come to believe? He tried to see his body objectively.' (Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 343).

Wayne does not question why they do not fit into the socialised normative categories that are imposed upon them, but rather, they wonder why the categories and labels do not fit who *they* are.

> You define a tree and you do not see what it is; it becomes its name. It is the same with woman and man. Everywhere Wayne looked there was one or the other. The loneliness of this cracked the street in half. Could the two halves of the street bear to see Wayne walk the fissure and not name him a beast?
>
> (Winter, 2010, *Annabel,* p. 350)

Throughout Wayne's life, he confidently traverses the divide between constructed norms and hierarchal categories, seeking a deeper understanding of the world; Weber (2016) refers to this as a 'will to knowledge', a power not confined to individual actions, but that which exists within larger social movements (Detel, 1996). Wayne walks this 'fissure' with unwavering determination, defying the limitations imposed by societal expectations and embracing their gender diverse identity, '... while Wayne was being brought up as a young boy, part of him was as feminine as she was.' (Winter, 2010, *Annabel,* page. 95).

Similarly, as introduced in the prior chapter, in *Symptoms of Being Human,* protagonist Riley utilises the internet as an important platform in their gender identity construction. In their blog posts, Riley expresses an internal monologue almost as an interactive soliloquy, to give voice to their feeling of disaffection about how individuals are conditioned to categorise and codify identity based on social norms. This socialisation of *either/or* culture (Dvorsky & Hughes 2008) is dangerous to those who do not befit the binary.

I can't blame you for trying to categorise me. It's a human instinct. It's why scientists are,

to this day, completely flabbergasted by the duck-billed platypus: it's furry like a mammal,

but lays eggs like a bird. It defies conventional classification.

I AM THE PLATYPUS. (Coo coo ka-choo.)

(Garvin, 2016, *Symptoms of Being Human*, p. 58)

Riley's use of their blog provides a compelling example of private expression, a space that allows them to explore and articulate their authentic identity away from the constraints of their public life. As Craig and McInroy (2014) suggest, online platforms often enable individuals to experiment with their true selves in a digital setting, testing reactions and seeking validation in ways that are not always possible in physical social contexts.

Through this lens, Riley's blog can be seen as a subtle act of resistance against the encoded gender norms imposed during primary socialisation. These norms dictate the performances required in their daily life, reinforcing a binary understanding of gender. The blog thus serves as a platform for challenging these norms, providing Riley with the freedom to navigate their identity authentically. This dynamic resonates with the principles outlined in my SGF model, which emphasises the fluid and multifaceted ways individuals negotiate and express their gender identity within private and public spheres:

We're all taught from a young age that there are only two choices: pink or blue, Bratz or

Power Rangers, cheerleading or football. We see gender in two dimensions because

that's what society taught us from birth. But, are you ready for a shocking revelation?

SOCIETY NEEDS TO CHANGE.

#genderfluid #crushinghard #lightsaberblue

(Garvin, 2016, *Symptoms of Being Human*, p. 59)

Collectively, the three novels, *Symptoms of Being Human, The House on Half on Street,* and *Annabel* may be considered to offer the understanding that 'gendered behaviour is learnt, not innate' (Hines, 2018, p. 66), and that, furthermore, 'The ways society expects us to perform our gender do not always follow a smooth linear route of progression, with improved equality and rights for both genders over time.' (Hines, 2018, p. 69). By analysing the settings of *Annabel* in the 1970s, *Symptoms of Being Human* in the contemporary era, and *The House on Half Moon Street* in the Victorian period, these novels collectively exemplify Hines' argument.

The 1970s in rural Labrador, as portrayed in *Annabel,* is depicted as a time and place in which societal norms enforced rigid gender roles, illustrating Hines's point about learned gender behaviour through the struggles faced by Wayne. In *Symptoms of Being Human,* set in California in the modern age with the internet's influence, the evolving nature of societal expectations in progressive areas of the U.S. may be recognised, demonstrating greater visibility and acceptance of diverse gender identities. Conversely, *The House on Half Moon Street,* set in the Victorian era, underscores the extreme rigidity of societal norms, emphasising the historical continuity of gender identity challenges. Examining these novels through Hines' perspective deepens our understanding of how societal pressures shape gender identities across different historical contexts, emphasising the ongoing struggle for recognition and acceptance of diverse gender identities in today's society.

Autoethnography

My earliest memory of my own gender expression diverging from my assigned birth gender was my strong desire for a Betty Spaghetti doll and a Polly Pocket when I was a child. Though this may seem trivial, I carried a feeling of rejection for many years after the denial of those dolls. I can still vividly recall the shared, bewildered expressions on my parents' faces when, as Christmas approached, they told me I could have anything I desired. I had been 'making them both proud' as they always told me. Their child was denied the one thing she truly desired, and despite

'making them proud', in this one aspect that seemed so fundamental to them, I failed to meet their expectations. Their reactions made me feel as though I had committed a grave error; while they did not scold me explicitly, the look of confusion and misapprehension that passed over their faces made me feel ashamed and proved, in many ways, more damaging.

I understand now that I was likely drawn to the colour pink because society embedded in me the notion that it symbolised femininity. Each year, when we went shopping for school clothes, I would immediately make my way to the girls' section and select a pair of sparkly pink toe socks. With each passing year, my belief that my parents would ever actually buy these socks diminished. It became almost a test I presented to them when I picked them up, as if I were saying: 'This is what I want to wear; this is *still* who I am. Will you continue to reject the real me?' Eventually, fate seemed to intervene, as I won a pair of similar toe socks as a prize at a nearby arcade.

My childhood could be a perplexing time, not because I was confused by my innate inclination, gravitating towards interests typically associated with my female peers, but because of the reactions exhibited by my primary caregivers. Despite many negative responses, there were instances when my Mum, in particular, and my great grandmother, were much more accepting. Although I was denied girls' clothing, I would attempt to express myself as best I could by dressing up as a girl at home. For example, I cherished parading around the house in my dressing gown, allowing it to slip off my shoulders and gather at the waist to resemble a dress. On some occasions, my mum encouraged me to turn it into a little performance; I would sing and dance to songs by my favourite groups at the time - the Spice Girls, S Club 7, and Abba - or join the chorus line in show tunes from productions like 'The Little Shop of Horrors' and 'Oliver!', as they blared out from the television.

It was at my great grandma's house that I received the most encouragement in this regard. Looking back, I cannot help but think that my great grandmother must have always known I was

a girl. When I visited her house on the other side of town, she would encourage me to experiment with makeup, let me try on her clothing, and even clip-on earrings. I would envelop myself in her long scarves, immersed in the feminine scent of Estee Lauder's 'Youth Dew' that permeated the silk. While these experiences took place in a private space, they served to normalise behaviours that I might otherwise have suppressed, representing some of the earliest instances in my life when I was allowed to express my true self.

Similar to Riley and many other protagonists in my selected novels, I too have grappled with the need to 'conceal' my gender identity. My own journey has been fraught with gender dysphoria, primarily stemming from the necessity to mask my true self. The gradual accumulation of thinly veiled remarks, often masked as 'well-intentioned' advice, has been particularly damaging. For instance, I have frequently been advised that I appear more comfortable in men's clothing, prompting me to adopt a more masculine attire when in the presence of my family. It is challenging to convey the profound impact of continually receiving seemingly innocuous comments like, 'You look much better in trousers'. Collectively, these appraisals have led me to question not only myself but also my inclination to present as female in public.

In such instances, I feel compelled to disengage entirely, isolating myself from public scrutiny to evade potential stigmatisation. As someone naturally inclined towards sociability, who gains immense joy from connecting with friends and family, these experiences have been particularly detrimental. Consequently, I have frequently slipped into depression and battled with severe body dysmorphia. Ironically, following a suicide attempt during my early teenage years, it was within the secure confines of an adolescent psychiatric facility that I felt a newfound freedom to express my authentic self, liberated from the familiar but constraining influences of certain family members.

This chapter has explored the social influences that often constrain the protagonists' ability to express their true gender identities. These characters frequently face societal expectations rooted in historical gender norms that are passed down through generations. Each author subverts genre tropes, challenging readers' expectations regarding conventional gender norms. By utilising the SGF model, I have mapped the protagonists' transformative trajectories as they navigate from adherence to restrictive gender norms imposed by their primary socialisers to achieving a sense of liberation through authentic self-expression. Central to these narratives is the act of challenging the expectations of primary socialisers—most often their parents—as the protagonists assert their true identities in the face of societal and familial pressures. This process underscores the tension between conforming to ingrained gender expectations and the pursuit of personal authenticity.

The forthcoming chapter will delve further into these themes, closely analysing moments within the core texts where characters engage in acts of gender expression that defy and disrupt codified gender norms. Through this exploration, I will highlight how these narratives illuminate the complexities of gender identity and the potential for transformation and resistance within oppressive frameworks.

Chapter 5 - Rewriting the Beast

Non-conformity: transcending the gender binary by defying and questioning encoded gender norms

This chapter will focus on private expression, exploring how trans* individuals create, experiment and redefine their own identity in the private sphere. To continue exploring the construction of gender identity, it is crucial to revisit and clarify the concept of 'private expression' within the context of my SGF model. As discussed in the introduction, private expression is an integral component of the model, often serving as the initial stage in an individual's journey before they express their gender identity in public spaces. Private expression provides a safe, personal realm where individuals can question, explore, and experiment with their trans* identities, free from external judgment or societal expectations. This private space is not merely a precursor to public expression; it is a critical period for self-discovery, allowing individuals to engage with their authentic gender identity in a way that feels safe and unpressured. The importance of this private space lies in its capacity to enable individuals to form a sense of self, before confronting the often-overwhelming forces of public validation and societal norms that may challenge their sense of authenticity. In the subsequent analysis, this idea of private expression will be further examined through the protagonists' experiences, illustrating how these private moments of self-exploration contribute to their broader journey of gender identity construction and expression. Through this lens, the SGF model offers a deeper understanding of the fluidity and non-linearity of gender identity, highlighting the essential role of private spaces in the process of self-definition.

Unfortunately, many trans* individuals find themselves marginalised (Tan et al, 2021), leading them to explore their identity in secret, fearing animosity from close relations, and to evade society's condemnation and the label of being 'monstrous', as Marrina Warner (2000) explores in her work. In this chapter, I analyse the profound impact of the historical labelling of trans* individuals, both in overtly material ways and in the development of their identity. The

organising principle for this chapter is inspired by Warner's (2000) observations around trans*

identity historically; I examine how society has associated 'monstrousness' and zoomorphism with

trans* individuals, with the weaponisation of labels as a mode of oppression. Throughout this

chapter, close reading of the selected fiction reveals the challenges faced by protagonists as they

are burdened with such negative labels, necessitating private expression as vital to their gender

identity construction. The chapter will further examine how characters can and do reclaim and

subvert these terms, transforming 'monstrousness' into a source of strength. By doing so, the

literature underscores the role that language plays in shaping identity and challenges the negative

connotations of words like 'monstrous,' illustrating the potential to recreate their meanings.

In the first section, *Defining the Beast: Labelling and Categorising*, the term 'beast' serves

as a metaphor for the social perception of trans* identity as something that deviates from

established norms, and by extension, something that is feared, controlled, or tamed. This

perception is deeply embedded in what Butler (1990) describes as the heteronormative matrix,

which enforces a binary understanding of gender that excludes non-binary or trans* identities.

By referring to trans* identity as 'beastly', the societal gaze constructs it as something outside the

realm of intelligibility—something both alien and threatening to the gender binary. This echoes

Butler's concept of abjection, where non-normative identities are cast out or marginalised to

preserve the boundaries of the dominant gender system.

The label of the 'beast' reflects the external process of categorisation that trans*

individuals often face, where their identity is pathologised or rendered as 'other'. In literature,

these labels and categories are often imposed through the family unit, the community, or

institutional frameworks. Foucault's work on biopolitics (1988) highlights how categorising bodies

serves to maintain social order by policing the boundaries of acceptable identities. Thus, labelling

functions not just as a descriptive tool, but as a disciplinary mechanism that limits trans* identities

from existing authentically. Moreover, Hacking's (1992) concept of dynamic nominalism speaks

directly to this issue of labelling. Hacking suggests that the act of labelling creates the kinds of people to whom the labels are applied. Thus, when trans* individuals are labelled as 'beasts' or 'monstrous', they are simultaneously constructed as something to be marginalised and controlled. However, these individuals, like the protagonists in my selected texts, challenge this categorisation and work towards constructing their own identity narratives in response to societal labelling.

In *Beastly Reflections: The Role of Self-Reflection in Private Expression*, the 'beastly reflection' is a metaphor for the internal dialogue that trans* individuals engage in as they begin to privately question the labels and roles that constrain them. Self-reflection is not just an introspective process; it is a critical act of resistance against the external forces that seek to confine them. The notion of self-reflection ties into Foucault's (1988) work on technologies of the self, where individuals exercise power over themselves by critically reflecting on the identities imposed upon them. In the context of trans* identity, this self-reflection allows for a re-negotiation of the terms by which they understand themselves, moving beyond the binary frameworks perpetuated by society. In my analysis, this act of reflection serves as the turning point where trans* individuals begin to question the societal narrative that has constructed their identity as deviant or monstrous.

Edelman's (2022) theory of queer negativity also offers an important lens through which to view this process of reflection. Edelman argues that queer identity often occupies a space of negation within the social order—forever outside, resistant to assimilation. The protagonists' engagement with their own 'beastly' reflection can thus be seen as a moment where they reject the binary frameworks of gender as inherently exclusionary and embrace the complexity of their non-binary identities. This reflection, therefore, is an essential part of the process of constructing an authentic self, one that rejects the stigmatising labels imposed upon them.

In the section, 'Unleashing the Beast: Renegotiating Labels, Roles, and Behaviours', 'unleashing the beast' symbolises the moment when an individual decides to publicly express their authentic trans* identity, rejecting societal norms and expectations. It marks the transition

from private reflection to public affirmation. Sedgwick (2008) introduces the idea that individuals possess agency over the performance and expression of their gender, emphasizing that identity is continually constructed and reconstructed through social interactions. This perspective contrasts sharply with Butler's notion that such performances are largely dictated by societal norms, suggesting that individuals can exert control over when and where they choose to express their gender identity. Sedgwick's theory highlights the fluidity of gender and offers a framework for understanding how individuals like the protagonists in my selected texts can move beyond the 'beast' label and redefine themselves on their own terms.

The process of 'taming' and 'unleashing' mirrors the performative nature of identity construction. Initially, individuals attempt to tame or fit their trans* identities within societal norms, often by concealing or modifying their true selves to avoid stigma. However, as they move towards 'unleashing' their authentic identities, they reject the constraints of labels and societal expectations, opting instead to live openly and truthfully. This act of 'unleashing' involves considerable risk, as it often necessitates a public confrontation with the very power structures that sought to label and confine them. In *Cemetery Boys* by Aiden Thomas (2020), we witness a similar journey in Yadriel's struggle to balance his identity as a trans boy within the rigid traditions of his family and their expectations of gender roles. Initially, Yadriel works to 'tame' his identity, seeking validation by adhering to cultural norms that align him with the male brujx, in order to gain acceptance. However, throughout the novel, Yadriel gradually 'unleashes' his authentic self, not just by performing the magic traditionally reserved for men, but by fully embracing his trans identity, independent of the validation he once sought. This mirrors the 'taming' and 'unleashing' stages of identity construction, as Yadriel ultimately reclaims his narrative, confronting both his family's expectations and society's limited views on gender. Yadriel's acceptance of his true self marks a pivotal moment of autonomy, where he rejects the confines of gender binaries and the need for external validation, instead defining his identity on his own terms.

The fourth section of the chapter is entitled *Reclaiming and Untaming the Beast: Realising the Authentic Self,* in which the gender diverse protagonists of my selected fiction subvert the 'monstrous' or 'beastly' label, using it as a means of authenticating their gender nonconformity. This exploration leads to an understanding of the empowering concept of reclaiming and taking back labels, an idea deeply rooted in prior queer theory (Snow & Maiden, 2019). By engaging with these points of discussion, the reader is able to chart the protagonists' journey of empowerment, where once stigmatising labels become sources of strength. The final section of the chapter *Training the Beast: perfecting the growl* analyses how, with this newly embraced sense of empowerment, the respective protagonists become emboldened to express their gender nonconformity unapologetically in the public sphere. Thus, this chapter aligns with the overarching thesis structure, where the construction of trans[*] identity is examined through various interconnected stages. Again, it is important to consider that phases of internal recognition, identity reconfiguration, and public expression are not rigid or sequential. Instead, they are fluid, often overlapping, with individuals revisiting different stages throughout their journey. This reflects the non-linear and complex process of constructing a gender-diverse identity, which involves ongoing negotiation with societal expectations.

Defining the Beast: labelling and categorising

The 'beast' as a metaphor for individuals who defy societal norms, particularly concerning gender, has deep historical roots in Western literature, dating back to antiquity. Classical texts like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1567) provide early examples where transformation and hybridity blur the lines between human and animal and between sexes, often as a consequence of defying social or divine rules. In these stories, monstrous or animalistic depictions were used to represent those who transgressed boundaries, whether moral, social, or physical. This trope persisted throughout literary history, evolving during the medieval period

with works like *Beowulf* (1815), where monsters symbolised external threats to societal order, and into early modern literature with figures like Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* (1623) —a 'savage' or 'beast' whose difference is framed as a threat to European norms of civilisation and identity. By the 19th century, Gothic fiction and later works, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), further cemented the connection between monstrosity and those deemed 'unnatural', both in body and in identity. Writers of fiction and non-fiction alike employed such monstrous or animalistic imagery to dehumanise individuals who defied societal norms, including gender nonconforming people. The 'beast' became not just a symbol of fear, but a justification for excluding these individuals from the social order (Hughes, 2015). This literary and cultural heritage reinforces the perception of the nonconforming as monstrous, a trope that continues to resonate in contemporary portrayals of gender-diverse individuals.

Of particular relevance here, Haraway (2006) suggests that the metaphorical role of the beast signifies and defines 'the limits of community in Western society' (p. 115). Labelling individuals as monstrous or beastly is a common tactic used to coerce individuals into conforming to societal norms through socialisation. By marking those who are nonconforming as 'beasts' or 'monsters', society not only dehumanises them but also frames their existence as a threat to the social order, justifying their marginalisation or forced assimilation. However, these labelled 'creatures' are significant not merely for their deviations from physical, mental, or spiritual norms (Baumard & Boyer, 2013). As Cohen (1995) argues, they symbolise a deeper, more profound 'difference'—an elusive 'Other' that resists easy categorisation and exposes the limitations of normative social structures. Rather than being simply abnormalities, these figures represent a form of otherness that challenges the rigid boundaries of identity, revealing the instability and socially constructed nature of the norms they defy. In essence, such individuals challenge our understanding of what is considered normal and confront us with the complexities of human experience and identity.

In *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995), Marina Warner explores the cultural and symbolic significance of the monstrous, especially its connection to gender norms, showing how those labelled as 'beasts' or 'monsters' have been used to reinforce patriarchal structures. Warner demonstrates that these labels serve not only to marginalise but also to encode deeper anxieties about gender and power. Building on Warner's insights, I extend this analysis by examining how these labels function in contemporary fiction, revealing their diverse purposes. Beyond enforcing conformity, the 'beast' or 'monster' becomes a symbolic space for exploring creativity, entertainment, and the negotiation of identity. Through my analysis, I argue that these labels offer more than mere social control; they become sites for both oppression and resistance, where nonconforming identities can reclaim and redefine their own narratives.

To realise and express an individual's identity, Schwartz et al (2011) highlight the significance of labels as powerful constructs. These labels play a crucial role in guiding life paths and decisions, providing individuals with a sense of strength and belonging to social groups and collectives. However, they also shed light on the unfortunate reality of destructive behaviours directed towards members of opposing ethnic, cultural, or national groups (Schwartz et al, 2011, p. 2). Rejecting these social norms, an individual may risk becoming labelled as *the beast*; 'the one who, by simply existing, transcends the boundaries of others [and] will be seen as a threat and will therefore appear to be monstrous' (Wagner, 2010, p. 46). The notion of the monster is frequently employed in both fiction, and in the real world through media representations, to portray characters or individuals who defy social and cultural norms (Worthington, 2013). In fiction, characters who deviate from these norms are often depicted in ways that render them incomprehensible or threatening to others, reinforcing their status as outsiders. Similarly, in real life, people who do not conform to societal expectations may face misunderstanding and marginalisation. Fiction, in this regard, can serve as a reflection of real-world dynamics, imitating the ways in which society grapples with and often struggles to accommodate those who challenge established norms.

With reference to classic literary examples, I consider the monster trope relating to nonconforming individuality, a prevalent theme in Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass.* Alice herself is considered a 'fabulous monster' (Carroll et al., 1998, p. 228) because she defies the socially constructed norms followed by the various beings that inhabit 'Wonderland'. This emphasises the idea that being outside of a cultural norm, regardless of what the constructed norm may be, creates the monstrous label (Warner, 2000). Carroll exemplifies how the image of a monster is conjured through deviation from social norms, as, while Alice represents the norm to readers in our familiar world, as she explores Wonderland, it is Alice who becomes deviant; monstrous because the values she adheres to are at once at odds with the characters she meets.

Despite this, in many narratives, particularly mythology, those who transcend or migrate between genders are not always demonised. In ancient Greek mythology, for example, characters such as Tiresias, who lived as both a man and a woman, are depicted in ways that both challenge and enrich the understanding of gender. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Tiresias is transformed into a woman for several years before reverting to his male form, illustrating the fluidity of gender in mythological contexts (Ovid, 1567, pp. 330-331). Kłonkowska and Bonvissuto (2019) examine the relationship between mythology and trans* identities, noting that cultural myths present instances of gender-crossing, both temporary and permanent. These myths create a unique space, a liminal and inherent realm, where these 'otherwise forbidden acts' can take place. (p. 70).

When exploring specific mythological examples, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid, 1567), we see that ancient cultures grappled with the fluidity of gender. For instance, in Ovid's narrative, the character Tiresias undergoes a transformation from male to female and back again, illustrating the ancient acknowledgment of gender fluidity. This mythological portrayal reflects how ancient societies navigated non-binary identities. Notably, Tiresias possesses special powers

that are attributed to this fluidity; they act as a mediator between humans and the gods, as well as between the world of the living and the underworld. This duality enhances Tiresias's role as a seer and prophet, suggesting that their gender fluidity is not merely accepted but also revered as a source of unique insight and wisdom. Tiresias retains their prophetic abilities even in death, reinforcing the notion that fluid identities can transcend traditional boundaries, granting individuals exceptional capabilities that enrich their connection to both divine and earthly realms. This illustrates how ancient cultures viewed gender fluidity not just as a deviation from the norm, but as a special condition that endowed individuals with extraordinary gifts and insights, elevating their status within the mythological framework.

However, in contrast, monstrous and beastly imagery often serves to reinforce binary gender systems in later texts. Such imagery is used to enforce conformity to traditional gender norms, portraying deviations as threatening or unnatural. This approach reflects what Stryker (2000) describes as the risk of exposing the constructed nature of gender norms, where encountering trans* identities threatens the perceived natural order (p. 254). This linkage illustrates how gender nonconformity is depicted as monstrous in order to preserve rigid societal hierarchies. In the ongoing pursuit of equality, this historical and literary tension underscores the persistence of gender bias in the UK and the Americas, where the novels examined are set. These narratives, therefore, reveal the constructed nature of prevailing gender norms and scrutinise the deeply ingrained patriarchal controls within societal structures (Davis, 2008).

Historical perspectives on gender binary frameworks, particularly in relation to 'hermaphroditism' and intersexuality, offer crucial insights into how these identities challenge and 'threaten' traditional binary constructs. Dreger's work, *Hermaphrodites in Love: The Truth of the Gonads* (2013), delves into historical narratives that have significantly shaped societal views on intersex individuals. By examining the medical and cultural treatment of intersex individuals, Dreger highlights how these identities have been managed to fit within the conventional

male/female binary. Dreger discusses a cohort of infants who have undergone medical interventions, including surgeries and hormone treatments, aimed at aligning their anatomical variations with established gender norms (Dreger, 2013). This historical context enriches our understanding of how gender constructs are maintained and contested. Dreger's analysis provides a comprehensive view of how historical and medical practices have influenced perceptions of gender nonconformity, thus offering a deeper comprehension of the ongoing interplay between trans* identities and entrenched gender norms and how these affect the individual in their gender identity construction.

Against this backdrop of disruptions within the sphere of intersexuality and trans* gender identity, the shadow of stigmatisation emerges. The prevailing practice of assigning sex seeks to rectify what is perceived as intersex 'deviance', to offset the ensuing stigma (Money and Ehrhardt, 1972). Further exploring these notions, the constructs underpinning gender and sex assignation materialise as social constructs.

The prevailing practice of assigning sex, often through invasive and reductive methods, seeks to correct what is perceived as intersex 'deviance' in an attempt to mitigate the stigma associated with deviations from binary gender norms (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). This process is emblematic of broader societal efforts to enforce binary classifications, effectively marginalising those who do not conform to conventional gender categories. Intersexuality and its historical counterpart, 'hermaphroditism', challenge these rigid frameworks by exposing the constructed nature of gender binaries. To elaborate, intersexuality refers to a spectrum of conditions where an individual's sexual and reproductive anatomy does not fit typical definitions of male or female, a concept that disrupts the traditional binary understanding of gender. Historically, terms like 'hermaphroditism' have been used to pathologise such variations, reinforcing the marginalisation of those who do not fit neatly into binary gender categories (Dreger, 2013).

In this context, Wayne's journey in *Annabel* serves as an illustration of how societal constructs shape and constrain gender identity. Within the narrative, Wayne's life is significantly influenced by the use of the phallometer, a primitive device historically used to undertake sex assignment in infants. This device, which measures genitalia to categorise individuals as male or female, underscores the extent to which societal and medical practices enforce binary gender norms. As a conversation between Jacinta, Wayne's mother, and Dr Ho, the family's physician, reveals:

"Normal?"

"And I think it's the most compassionate one. We try to decide the true sex of the child."

"The true one and not the false one."

"We use this phallometer."

"... Penis size at birth is the primary criterion for assigning a gender."

(*Annabel,* Winter, 2010, pp. 50-51)

This dialogue exemplifies how medical professionals, driven by the imperative to conform to binary gender norms, used the phallometer to make critical decisions about sex assignment based on anatomical measurements. In the past, particularly in the 1960s, such practices were rigidly focused on gonadal measurements as the primary determinants for assigning sex at birth. For instance, in rural Canada during this time, a child's assigned sex was predominantly based on physical anatomy without consideration of other crucial factors such as hormonal levels or the child's broader physical and psychological development (Meyer et al., 2017).

In contrast, contemporary medical practice has evolved to acknowledge the complexities of gender identity and the limitations of binary categorisation. Current guidelines now recommend a more holistic approach that considers not only anatomical and gonadal features

but also hormonal assessments and the individual's psychosocial context (Davis et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is increasing recognition of the necessity to involve families in discussions about gender identity, allowing for more inclusive and affirming practices (Rafferty, 2018). The shift from a purely binary focus to a more nuanced understanding reflects a growing awareness of the diversity of human experiences and the need to respect individual identity.

Wayne's subsequent sex assignment as male illustrates the invasive and often reductive methods employed to maintain traditional gender categories. Through Wayne's experience, Winter (2010) illustrates the profound impact of these societal and medical constructs on individual identity. The phallometer's role in Wayne's story highlights how historical and ongoing practices not only reinforce binary gender norms but also contribute to the marginalisation of those who challenge these norms. This narrative aligns with broader theoretical discussions about the social construction of gender and the ways in which gender binaries are maintained through both historical and contemporary practices. Thus, the examination of intersexuality and trans* identities within this framework reveals how deeply ingrained gender binaries are in societal structures. In sum, it underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of gender that acknowledges and accommodates the complexity and diversity of human experiences beyond the binary.

As discussed in earlier chapters, throughout the 'becoming' process of socialisation in childhood and adolescence (which includes the questioning, experimenting, and negotiation of norms), trans* individuals are taught that anything outside of the binary framework is, in more extreme appraisals, monstrous and therefore wrong. Nonetheless, within this process, fiction enjoy the creative freedom to incorporate support characters such as parents, socialisers and friends who dissent from indoctrinating binary norms, for example Ben's sister in *I Wish You All the Best* who is instantly supportive of Ben being nonbinary:

"So, what are your pronouns?" she [Hannah] asks.

The question strikes me. Not in the bad way. It's just weird. Hannah is the first person

to ask. The first person who had to ask. "They and them," I say [...]' (p. 20) [...]

"Really? Pink? The blue would match your eyes better," I'm grinning despite myself. "I

like pink."

"You do you, little sib. I'll have to teach you a thing or two about picking colours."

(Deaver, 2019, *I Wish You All the Best*, p. 175)

Deaver's use of colours in this section is a playful nod to their gendered use, humorously

alluding to the absurdity of associating colors with specific genders (Malpas, 2011). The practice

of gendered colour coding finds its roots in the early 20th century, shaped by marketing

strategies and societal norms that assigned colours to masculinity and femininity (Del Giudice,

2012). Interestingly, before the 1940s, pink was a masculine color, while blue was linked to

femininity, highlighting the fluidity of colour symbolism (Paoletti, 2012) and the arbitrary nature

of gendered colour encoding. Furthermore, this historical variability challenges the essentialist

perception of gender and emphasises its socially constructed nature (Connell, 2020). By

satirically highlighting the arbitrary nature of gendered colours, Deaver prompts readers to

critically examine how cultural and historical influences shape our understanding of even

seemingly trivial aspects like colour (Malpas, 2011).

This exchange also reflects the social change occurring during the time period that I

analyse in this thesis, particularly in the US, Canada and the UK (Allen et al., 2022). Multiple

factors explain this shift, including increased *trans visibility and representation in media and pop

culture, greater education and awareness campaigns, and changing attitudes towards gender

norms and roles. Additionally, the rise of online spaces, such as social media, allow for greater

visibility and advocacy for these groups (Miller, 2017), as discussed at length under the *Online*

Spaces subheading in Chapter 4. Despite some positive changes, it is important to note that

trans*, non-binary, and gender queer individuals still face significant discrimination and

harassment in Western society. This includes barriers to accessing healthcare and other essential services (Johnson, 2021), as well as increased risk of violence and hate crimes (Colliver & Silvestri, 2022). Ultimately, these challenges echo the narrative of monsters and beasts that permeates the fiction discussed in this thesis, underscoring how societal fears and prejudices manifest in the portrayal of those who defy traditional gender norms.

As a trans* individual, the journey to realising, observing, and understanding one's true self often involves confronting deeply ingrained societal labels and expectations. For me, this process began in earnest at university. Before this, I had been instructed to conceal my authentic self, which was deemed 'monstrous' and 'strange', especially from my younger family members. The concern was that revealing my true identity might confuse, scare, or even negatively influence them. On reflection, I posit that this pressure to hide who I truly was reflected a broader societal tendency to marginalise and stigmatise those who deviate from established norms.

Moving to university in September 2014 represented a pivotal shift, akin to Wayne's transition to the city of St John's in *Annabel* (Winter, 2010). This new setting provided me with the space to express my authentic identity without fear of judgment or repercussion. It was at university that I began to realise that the labels I had been taught to associate with my identity— the 'beastly' and 'monstrous'—were not inherent truths but rather imposed constructs designed to enforce conformity.

In Wayne's case, their reflection on their 'monstrous' nature due to their divergence from societal expectations is analogous with my own experience. Like Wayne, who confronts the notion of being 'beastly' and ultimately rejects it, I came to understand that my true, authentic self was not a 'beast' but rather a more beautiful, genuine version of who I was. This realisation was liberating; it allowed me to see beyond the labels of 'monstrous' that had been imposed upon me and embrace my identity with confidence and pride.

With his body's new softness, the breasts and the new shape of Annabel, a man's haircut would have looked stranger than hair that had some freedom in it. ... His face had always been smooth, though had he not shaved there would have been some downy facial hair, gold and soft. He bought a razor and a comb. But if he was going to grow into the softness of Annabel, he did not want to have a man's barbered head or face. He did not know what he wanted, but he knew he did not want to continue to pretend to be a man.

(Winter, 2010, Annabel, p. 403)

Wayne's narrative, much like my own, underscores the theme of reclaiming and redefining an individual's identity beyond the confines of imposed labels. This broader reflection highlights the personal and societal significance of moving beyond the binary and embracing the authentic self, free from the constraints of stigmatising constructs

Winter highlights the confining reality of labels, which are ingrained into every fibre of social life; for instance, labelling a tree based on a set list of characteristics reinforces the idea that until something or someone is classified or labelled, it cannot exist (Hacking, 1998). In queer studies, labelling is approached with a nuanced perspective. Labels can indeed serve as tools for recognition and solidarity within marginalised communities, helping individuals articulate their identities and foster a sense of belonging. Queer theorists like Halberstam (1998) have explored how labels can offer critical resistance against normative structures by providing a space for alternative identities to emerge and be recognised. However, labels also have their limitations and can inadvertently reinforce constraining binary frameworks. This duality is evident in the work of queer theorists like Creed (1993), who argues that the figure of the monster can both challenge and reinforce societal norms. Creed's analysis of the monstrous-feminine highlights how such labels can symbolise both resistance to, and reinforcement of, gender binaries. Similarly, Braidotti (2013) emphasises the need to navigate between the empowering and limiting

aspects of labels, advocating for a form of queer resistance that allows for fluidity and complexity in identity.

Thus, while labels can be tools to facilitate self-expression and solidarity, they also risk perpetuating rigid norms and exclusionary practices. The challenge, therefore, lies in using labels thoughtfully, ensuring they serve as a means of liberation rather than a mechanism for imposing limiting frameworks. This nuanced understanding is crucial for the argument that labels must be critically examined to avoid reinforcing the very binaries and exclusions they seek to challenge.

With regard to the above extract, Wayne battles with an internal monologue of indoctrinated classifications, feeling that they have never fit the criteria of any gender labels. Wayne's loneliness may be attributed to feeling like an outcast who does not belong, outside of the norms; a 'beast'. Wayne's marginalisation exemplifies the damage that social categories and expectations can cause by forcing an individual to either conform to the respective rigid frameworks or reject these norms and break the confines of normality by becoming an outcast, or monster (Haraway, 2006).

The allegory of monsters and mythical beasts is an extremely potent one; 'at one level, they're emanations of ourselves, but at another, they are perceived as alien, abominable and separate so that we can deny them, and zap them into oblivion at the touch of a button' (Warner, 1995, p. 21). Warner's perspective illustrates the challenging path that trans* individuals must navigate in their quest for acceptance and a sense of belonging. By comparing trans* individuals to mythical beasts, societally constructed labels, categories, and norms lead to the ostracising of those who are naturally different. Western society has erected social barriers and narratives that portray non-binary individuals as 'beasts'. Hence, Wayne precariously treks along the chasm of binarity, constantly striving to make sense of their identity, desperate to find a place to belong. '"Everyone is a snake shedding its skin," she said. "We are different people all through our lives. You even more so..."'(Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 207).

Jacinta's statement draws attention to the fluid nature of identity, emphasising how this fluidity is particularly fundamental to the trans* experience. The snake metaphor serves as a symbol of transformation and renewal, representing the continuous evolution of identity. Unlike the static binary of traditional gender norms, the snake's shedding of its skin signifies an ongoing, dynamic process of self-discovery and reinvention. In many cultural narratives, snakes are both revered and feared—representing both wisdom and monstrosity. In this context, the snake reflects the trans* experience as it embodies the transformation that defies static labels and challenges societal expectations. Thus, while the snake can be perceived as monstrous due to its deviation from normative forms, it also embodies the potential for personal growth and the reclamation of one's authentic self.

This duality of the snake as both a symbol of monstrousness and transformation underscores the complex journey of self-realisation experienced by Wayne in *Annabel*. Wayne's struggle with their gender identity, isolated from a supportive community, highlights the broader implications for individuals navigating their identity in a world that often marginalises them. Deaver emphasises the necessity of this introspection with insights from their protagonist Ben (*I Wish You All The Best*) as they grapple with feeling that they do not belong: 'Everything looks so bright and new and put together. Like everything here has a place and that's exactly where it belongs. And I'm the extra piece that doesn't fit.' (Deaver, 2019, *I Wish You All the Best`*, p. 24).

Here, Deaver conveys how being outside of societal norms precipitate feelings of isolation, fragmentation, and monstrousness. The norm being referred to by Deaver, as defined by Gleghorn (2011), is a symbolic boundary that sets the standard for all 'normal' human beings to follow. This creates a sense of displacement for those who do not fit into these prescribed categories, as is evident in Ben's feeling outcast. The use of classification systems often allows authorities to alienate and discriminate against individuals who do not conform to conventional

labels. In *The House on Half Moon Street*, Leo's father disowns him because Leo rejects traditional gender norms, viewing him as a deviation from expected gender roles. This rejection reflects broader societal mechanisms that aim to uphold rigid classifications, portraying Leo as a mutation of his 'proper' nature.

Further, returning to earlier discussions around Leo's father's fascination with Darwinism, references to selection criteria, used to label (classify) different species of animal, are analogous with the experience that trans* individuals are exposed to as they fall outside of socially mandated categorisation. According to Darwin, when a species defies categorisation, it is consigned to a sub-class or sub-species (Tanghe, 2019). The prefix 'sub', especially when referring to a person or their identity, is a condescending and cruel term, suggesting that they are a lesser species, implicitly not quite enough to belong – a monster of sorts. According to Foucault (1972), such sub groups are 'essentially a mixture [...] of two realms, the animal and the human: the man with the head of an ox, the man with a bird's feet [...] It is the mixture of two sexes: the person who is both male and female is a monster' (p. 63). These definitions concern what makes a person a person, and, conversely, decide what constitutes 'abnormality' (Hacking, 1992). Hence, Leo's father's treatment of his son as he holds fast to his chosen doctrines drives inner conflict within himself.

External labelling represented in the monstrous imagery of trans* individuals is frequently internalised. As these negative attitudes are directed towards gender diversity, non-conforming individuals are constrained in their public expression and develop ways to express their authentic selves in private instead. *Girl Mans Up* captures this very aptly with its protagonist Pen's inner monologue, as they grapple with their own thoughts and emotions, including those in response to what others have said:

> Everything's always made me wonder if I was supposed to be a boy. When I was really
>
> little, I even thought maybe I was born one and then some weird circumcision disaster

happened and my parents decided to take home a little girl instead. But the older I got, the less that made sense to me. Because –

I don't feel wrong inside myself. I don't feel like I'm someone I shouldn't be. Only other people make me feel like there's something wrong with me.

(Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up*, p. 150)

Although Pen feels as though there was something strange about how they were born and, growing up, something was not 'quite right', it is only with the influence of external forces that their feeling *wrong* is ultimately manifest. Pen's original feelings of questioning their labels and behaviours, again only stem from external teachings of what it means to be born with particular genitals, and how to behave and act due to an assignation of sex at birth. Throughout the novel, Pen expresses how they feel restricted by the encoded gender roles and norms they are coerced into living by. They express how, without these constraining influences, they would simply be able to live as themselves, embracing their authenticity.

Consistent with Pen's experiences of displacement, Alex in *Sasha Masha* feels confused and out of place because, not only dealing with an internal conflict concerning their identity, but with the people around them who are continually judgmental and disparaging: 'She didn't get me. I was an in-between kind of person after all.' (Borinsky, 2020, *Sasha Masha*, p. 48).

Social intelligibility is a great cause of conflict for gender non-conforming individuals, particularly when external forces voice confusion and demonstrate a lack of understanding, or even hostility.

Beastly reflections: learning the self through contemplation

Throughout my corpus, the self-learning of individual identity is a crucial stage of private expression, frequently carried out through the use of mirrors. To frame this discussion theoretically, the mirror serves as a symbol in queer theory and gender studies, reflecting the interplay between self-perception and societal expectations. Lacanian theory posits that mirrors represent a pivotal stage in the formation of the self, where the reflection acts as a site of both recognition and misrecognition (Lacan, 1977). This theory suggests that the mirror stage is crucial for the development of identity but can also highlight the dissonance between one's internal self-concept and external perception.

Contemporary queer theorists build on these foundational ideas, exploring how mirrors function in the construction of identity beyond traditional frameworks. For example, Jack Halberstam's concept of the 'queer art of failure' (Halberstam, 2011) addresses how non-normative experiences, such as those reflected in mirrors, can challenge conventional success metrics and offer alternative pathways to self-realisation. Similarly, Lisa Duggan's notion of 'homonormativity' (Duggan, 2003) critiques how mainstream queer identities can be co-opted by conformist values, often creating friction between one's internal identity and external societal expectations.

Pen's interaction with mirrors in *Girl Mans Up* illustrates a pivotal aspect of this self-learning process. Early in the narrative, Pen describes struggles with seeing their true reflection in the mirror. While this initially appears as a negative experience, suggesting gender dysphoria and a disconnect between self-perception and societal labels, it also offers a more nuanced perspective. This reflective process becomes a site of transformation and self-discovery. The mirror's dual role as both a tool of self-recognition and a barrier to authentic identity underscores the chapter's theme of private expression. It provides insight into how Pen, like many individuals navigating gender nonconformity, engages in a complex negotiation of self-image and societal

expectations. The mirror, thus, answers theoretical questions related to the challenges and possibilities of self-realisation in the context of queer identity, highlighting the tension between self-perception and societal norms.

The reflection of Pen, to them, does not match their authentic self, and this mis-match in turn generates feelings of needing to renegotiate their gender identity:

> Usually, I don't check myself out in the mirror. Mostly because without clothes on, I weird myself out. Maybe everyone thinks they look funny naked. My body is fine, I guess, but I wouldn't want anyone to see it. [...] When I have my clothes on, I feel normal. When my clothes aren't on, it's like I lose something important about myself. When I think about someone else seeing me like this, it feels like they'd actually be seeing some other person. Like it wouldn't be me they'd be looking at.
>
> It's not like I want to be looking at a boy's body in the mirror. It's just that a girl's body is so ... girl.
>
> (Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up*, pp. 54-55)

At this solitary stage of their private expression, Pen is concerned about how others will perceive them, expressing how their reflection is not the 'real' them, but somebody else entirely. This is a prevalent emotion for trans* individuals and a key symptom of gender dysphoria, as was explored in the previous chapter, (Richards et al, 2016). Mirrors are used prevalently as a thematic device throughout much literature, as Lee (2018) states: 'Mirrors trigger self-awareness. Looking into our own subconsciousness enables us to become aware of the shadow and the persona, bring them to consciousness. In other words, mirrors are closely related to human self-awareness and the corresponding psychological and emotional elements; concepts related to individuation in analytical psychology' (p. 45). Hence, mirrors and self- reflection are a prominent feature of the private expression of gender queer identities. Furthermore, mirrors are also associated with the mythic and magical nature of fairy tales, as Bacchilega (1997) explores in

Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies. Akin to the presence of beasts as a recurring image in fairy tales, mirrors are used as a symbol of power, reflecting the 'true self' within. The mirror is also a symbol of wisdom, reflecting an untarnished and unbiased narrative of the world around the onlooker, portraying the authentic self, i.e., without being tarnished by the beastly perceptions imposed by others.

As has been explored throughout this chapter, one of the greatest concerns for trans* individuals is how they will be perceived by others, giving the private expression stage of identity construction great significance. Without the added pressures attached to anticipating how others will respond, questioning, experimenting, and recognising what constitutes a trans* gender identity is difficult enough:

> People should just be allowed to look in the mirror and see all kinds of possibilities. Everyone should be able to feel nice when they look in the mirror. They should be at least able to see themselves reflected there, EVEN IF THEY LOOK ALL WEIRD.
>
> (Girard, 2018*, Girl Mans Up`* , p. 301)

Although often considered a simple and sometimes clichéd device in fiction, Cole (2022) argues that the mirror holds significant potential for exploring trans identities. Cole's analysis, 'Changing the Reflection: Re-visions on the Trans Mirror Scene', highlights how mirrors can be used to explore the dynamics of self-perception and transformation, particularly for trans individuals navigating their identities (Cole, 2022). In queer theory, the concept of the 'trans gaze' further enriches this discussion. Prosser (1998) and Halberstam (1998) have both examined how mirrors and reflections function within queer narratives. Prosser's exploration of the trans body in the mirror focuses on how these reflections can both reveal and obscure the complexities of gender transition, emphasising the tension between internal self-perception and external societal expectations (Prosser, 1998). Similarly, Halberstam's work discusses the mirror as a site of both

affirmation and alienation, where the reflection can both validate and distort one's sense of identity (Halberstam, 1998).

By integrating these perspectives in the context of this thesis, the mirror emerges as a multifaceted symbol, representing both the struggle for self-recognition and the societal constraints imposed on non-normative identities. It is not merely a clichéd device but a crucial element in understanding the nuanced experiences of gender identity and transformation. As discussed by McNamara (1979) in 'The Mirrors of Fiction Within,' the mirror acts as a complex symbol, presenting itself as a universal truth teller, reflecting an unbiased view to the onlooker. However, the onlooker's interpretation of their reflection will inevitably be influenced by the self; how a person views their reflection is dependent on how they feel about the image. In the next citation, Pen describes feeling somewhat satisfied with their appearance. However, they cannot help but consider their mother's opinion, recalling earlier discussions about the power of socialisation and its capacity to restrict an individual's identity formation. When they are confronted with their reflection, Pen considers how they *ought* to present; their mother wishes them to present in a 'normative' binary sense, scared of her child becoming a beast in the eyes of society:

> In the mirror, I see myself standing there and I think I'm all right. I think there's no other way I could look, or should look. My mom must be blind if she thinks her vision of me would look normal. It wouldn't. I know it wouldn't.
>
> (Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up`*, p. 301)

Penn's self-perception is unique to them and their own gender identity. The reason Pen 'knows' that their mother's idea of how they ought to present is wrong is because it would not match Pen's intrinsic inclination towards their authentic self, and whilst Pen is still experimenting with how their authentic self does look, they know that it is not matched to a stereotypical cisgendered female. These passages convey how influences from close relations reinforce feelings

of incongruence between one's physical and mental gender, leading to emotional distress and giving rise to gender dysphoria (Zucker, 2015). In *The House on Half Moon Street,* Leo's sense of disconnection between his physical body and his internal gender identity may be understood through the lens of monstrosity and beastliness. The following passage highlights how societal expectations enforce a binary gender system that turns those who deviate from it into something monstrous or beastly in the eyes of others—and even themselves: 'I looked down at my anatomy, which was not something I generally chose to do… But it wasn't a man's body either. So what was it? Something detached from me… a vessel for my brain and soul.' (Reeve, 2018, p. 20).

This moment of alienation from his own body shows how Leo's corporeality, marked by society as female, becomes something he views as monstrous, a 'vessel' entirely disconnected from his true self. The detachment from his physical form is consistent with what Halberstam (2011) refers to as the queer body as a site of horror and otherness, where those who do not conform to normative frameworks are rendered into figures of monstrosity. Leo's description of his body as 'detached' and unworthy of love evokes the image of the beast—a creature trapped in a form that others perceive as alien, something to be feared or shunned. His body, seen as neither wholly male nor female, forces him into the liminal space of being 'other' within society's rigid gender classifications, reinforcing his entrenched feelings of alienation. The monstrousness is therefore an external construction, forced upon Leo by a society that cannot accommodate his identity. Later, Leo's contemplation becomes even more explicit: 'I couldn't carry on living in a state of utter hopelessness, looking in the mirror every morning at someone who wasn't me. Not anymore. I'd rather be dead than be Lottie Pritchard.' (Reeve, 2018, p. 272).

This passage reveals the deep emotional turmoil caused by the incongruence between Leo's internal identity and his external physicality. The mirror, a device often linked to introspection and self-realisation, here becomes a symbol of gender dysphoria—a reflection of the monstrous 'other' that society has imposed upon him. In looking at 'someone who wasn't

me', Leo confronts the enforced narrative of his body, much like a figure from mythology who is trapped in a form that does not represent their true nature. These struggles echo the experience of many trans* individuals who are compelled to conform to external labels, leading to emotional distress and feelings of monstrosity. The idea of the monster, as Halberstam discusses, is not inherently tied to the body but to how society constructs difference. Similarly, Leo's body is not inherently monstrous, but society's binary views of gender turn it into something 'beastly' and detached from his true identity.

As Garrison notes, 'for trans[*] individuals to be recognised as their expressed gender, they must justify their perception of themselves as gender-incongruent', constructing frameworks for others to understand their experiences (Garrison, 2018, p. 633). However, this option was not available to Leo in Victorian England, where the absence of a legal process for gender affirmation rendered his identity invisible and invalidated, leaving him without the means to articulate or legitimise his experience within the rigid confines of the era's gender norms. This need for validation through external frameworks mirrors the societal tendency to cast those who challenge gender norms into the role of the 'other', or even a 'monster', in order to maintain binary systems of control and tradition. In *Cemetery Boys*, Yadriel's defiance against being labelled as a 'beast' is a crucial part of their journey toward self-acceptance and gender authenticity. In the novel, Yadriel's refusal to conform to the gender expectations of his community leads to his ostracisation and further reinforces this 'monstrous' label: 'There was a reason they had performed Yadriel's portaje ceremony in secret... Going against those traditions was seen as blasphemous.' (Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys.* p. 24).

Yadriel's rejection by the brujx community for defying gender traditions is more than a personal slight; it represents society's fear of difference and unwillingness to accommodate those who do not fit into its strict gender norms:

They wouldn't even let him try. It was easier to hide behind their traditions than to challenge their own beliefs and understandings of how things in the world of the brujx worked.

It made Yadriel feel ashamed of who he was. Their blatant rejection felt personal because it *was* personal. It was an outright rejection of who he was – a transgender boy trying to find his place in their community.

(Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys*. p. 24).

Stryker argues that the trans* body is often seen as 'monstrous' because it defies the normative understanding of gender. In her pivotal work, she writes, 'To encounter the transsexual body, to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself is to risk a revelation of the constructedness of the natural order' (Stryker, 2006, p. 245). Yadriel, by simply existing and asserting his identity as a trans boy, forces his community to confront the socially constructed nature of gender itself. In this way, his monstrosity is not inherent but imposed upon him by the fear and rigidity of societal norms.

Embracing the Beast: renegotiating labels, roles, and behaviours

This section will explore the journey that the protagonists in my selected novels take as they recognise the association between their trans* identities and beastliness, but then 'embrace' this metaphorical beast by accepting who they are through private expression. For many gender diverse individuals, the process of questioning and experimenting in a private sphere is a critical step prior to going out into the world and expressing their authentic self to the population as a whole, as set out in my SGF model. Garrison (2018) found that, in order to claim public identities as trans*, non-binary individuals are often motivated to present accounts that closely reflect prevailing understandings of trans experience (e.g., the 'born in the wrong body' narrative, a perpetuation of the gender binary), even when these accounts fail to capture the nuance of their

experiences.' (p. 615). This holds high relevance to the gender performance concept (Butler, 1990): individuals who identify as non-binary are driven to conform by performing typical gender behaviours in public in order to demonstrate cultural and social intelligibility. Though this represents progress away from the more literal monstrous associations discussed above, the 'beast' remains tamed, with trans* identity only being accepted in relatively strict terms.

Trans* and gender queer individuals, therefore, embody their identity through the defying of social norms and expressing their authentic selves. Embodiment refers to the physical manifestation of a person's identity, experiences, and emotions. Bodies are recognised as sites of contestation because they are not neutral; they are shaped by cultural and social discourses. As discussed in the previous chapter, these discourses often reinforce binary gender norms and heteronormative ideals. However, embodiment also provides a resource for contestation, as individuals may use their bodies to subvert dominant discourses and challenge oppressive norms. In *The Material Queer*, Morton (1996) asserts that embodiment is a crucial component of queer theory, and that physical bodies can be tools for resisting and subverting dominant discourses.

Queer theorists have contended that the notion of a rigid, dualistic gender system is a construct of society (Johnson, 2021). Bodies that do not conform to this binary system, like those of the gender non-conforming, transgender or intersex protagonists explored in this thesis, threaten the dominant discourses that aim to impose strict gender standards. By embodying different forms of gender expression, these individuals challenge and subvert these norms, resulting in increased acceptance and visibility for gender non-conforming and non-binary people (Anderson et al, 2020). Similarly, queer embodiment challenges heteronormative ideals around sexuality and desire. By openly expressing non-normative forms of desire and intimacy, queer individuals subvert dominant discourses that position heterosexuality as the only valid form of sexual expression (Butterfield, 2018). This can lead to greater acceptance of diverse sexualities and more inclusive social attitudes towards queer people. Further, by embodying alternative forms

of gender expression and non-normative desires, queer individuals challenge oppressive norms and promote gender queer individuals to be more open with their authentic selves (Nicholas, 2019).

Even during the private expression and experimenting stage of renegotiating gender norms to better fit a gender diverse individual's identity, external structures associated with, for example, schooling and taking part in everyday activities like shopping, precipitate further alienation. Deaver's protagonist Ben struggles with traversing the gendered world when trying to occupy their non-binary gender identity:

> I mean, I should expect these kinds of things by now. Every retailer pretty much does the same thing. Men's, women's and children's sections; even the ones with the neutral changing rooms can't escape the way things are gendered.
>
> (Deaver, 2019, *I Wish You All the Best*, p. 168)

Most often, the experimentation and questioning of gender queer identity happens in private (out of the public eye), including the disclosure of thoughts and feelings to close friends and family, prior to publicly expressing. In *Sasha Masha,* Borinsky depicts Alex's first experimentation with physically altering gender, through clothing, and adopting a feminine persona with their best friend Mabel. Here, their emotions and thoughts come to fruition and things start to make sense, a moment in their past which continues to bring them strength later in the narrative:

> I squinted at the image of Mabel in a tuxedo with sleeves too short for her long arms. A razor-thin moustache in eyeliner pencil completed the look. She had announced in a gravelly voice that her name was "Jimmy Crevasse."
>
> I slid the zoomed image over and squinted at the person standing beside her, with a hand draped over the nearby bedpost: me. I had on a green velvet dress that fell to just below my knees. There had been plenty of pants and cowboy shirts in the bag, but none of

them seemed exciting to try on. The dress was calling me, even though I'd never worn a

dress before. There was a little bit of trim around the neck, which opened in a rectangle

around my collarbone. I had a string of blue plastic diamonds around my neck. I could

still remember how exciting it felt to wear that dress, and how dangerous.

(Borinsky, 2020, *Sasha Masha*, pp. 64-65)

Alex's flashback, brought on by the photograph, encapsulates an important moment in

the past when they realised they were not cisgender. In the scene, Alex found that there were many

garments associated with masculinity within the costume bag, but Alex did not find them appealing

or enticing. According to Goffman (1963), clothing is a social cue that others use to judge an

individual, including assumptions regarding gender. Adopting semiology in their investigation,

Barnard (2013) found that clothing is heavily labelled and weighted in meaning, with an outfit or

garment holding the capacity to express or hide an individual's authentic self. As Alex embraces

their experimentation with clothes, this leads to an exciting and dangerous feeling of belonging

whilst simultaneously questioning and disavowing the binary socialisation of gender expectations.

Alex describes the sheer happiness that they associate with this process, feeling that they have

finally found their niche. This feeling is known as *gender euphoria.* Gender euphoria is often

overlooked in both non-fiction and fictional portrayals of trans[*] individuals, with the focus

instead placed on the overwhelming discomfort of feeling 'wrong' in one's assigned gender

(Beischel et al., 2022). The omission of gender euphoria from such depictions diminishes the

richness and depth of the trans[*] experience.

My approach in analysing the literary works selected here is consistent with work by Dale

(2021) in their chapter 'Gender Affirmation Through Girly Sleepovers'. The chapter outlines

how affirming experiences such as sleepovers are enjoyed by many cis gendered individuals

as a means of developing their gender identities, but owing to the 'beastly' stigma around gender

diversity, non-binary individuals are often excluded from these affirming and informative

experiences. Borinsky, however, creates a narrative which allows Alex to be liberated by this experience through having sleepovers with their best friend Mabel, where they recognise, for the first time, that the repression of the 'beast', their trans* identity, through codified socialisation, was the cause of their internal disquiet.

Inferring from Alex's experience above, embracing the metaphorical beast of trans* identity may only be achievable within codified parameters, and this holds true even within ostensibly more accepting sectors of society. Being a part of a queer community may entail 'connecting with other binary and non-binary transgender people [which] can expand an individual's potentiality of gendered self-conception through accessing discourses previously unknown to them' (Vincent, 2019, p. 108). However, even within queer communities, when questioning one's identity, welcoming support is not necessarily present. There are often judgemental and condescending forces within these communities (Valocchi, 2005), due to the hierarchy they uphold. Using queerness itself as a category of analysis seems to invite a new round of debate devoted to who is 'really, properly queer'. A voice that originated from one set of margins begins to create its own marginalised voices (Wilchins et al, 2020, p. 29).

The above problems can repel questioning and experimenting individuals away from supportive settings where they would otherwise privately express and develop their identity, effectively 're-caging' the beast. Due to the cruelty that may be present in these spaces, not everybody will seek support from them; Vincent (2018) found that many trans* individuals felt intimidated and more 'insecure' when engaged in queer communities, as they were made to feel as though they were not 'trans* enough' (Vincent, 2018, p. 115). Deaver's protagonist finds this when they experiment with their appearance. Deaver portrays Ben as strong and resolute, defying the expectations set by the queer community, where they felt they did not conform to the 'ideal non-binary look'. Instead, they confidently embrace their individuality and refuse to conform to the imposed standards.

Such a contrast to the other nonbinary people I've seen online. Their smooth, hairless, acneless faces, their trimmed hair that always seems perfect. These things I could never be. Because no matter how hard I will it, my body isn't how I want to see myself. Not that there's anything wrong with those kinds of enby people, I just ... it's hard to describe. Bodies are fucking weird, especially when it feels like you don't belong in your own. But it's too late for things like puberty blockers, and surgery isn't something I want.

(Deaver, 2019, *I Wish You All the Best*, p. 49)

Thus, even after battling through cisnormative regulations of binarity, trans* individuals are doubly judged by the expectations of the already existing trans* community and are often 'unvalidated' (Vincent, 2018, p. 118) and 'delegitimated' (Vincent, 2018, p. 117).

Although it remains intimidating to step outside of pre-existing social structures regarding gender, and risk becoming a beast, gender queer individuals who know themselves may find courage to express their authentic selves regardless of the lack of support within external spaces. Recalling the sense of euphoria that they derived from affirmative clothing, Alex (*Sasha Masha*) finds the strength to resist the negative appraisals of others:

What did I know about myself? What did I want?

When I closed my eyes, all I saw was that velvet dress, and the only words I thought of were: *Sasha Masha. Sasha Masha.* It was a feeling in my body, a look in my eye, maybe the texture of the velvet and the lavender smell from Agatha's trunk. I couldn't figure out much else about it.

What kind of dream was that?

(Borinsky, 2020, *Sasha Masha*`, p. 81)

Alex dreams that they will one day be able to adopt and express the spirit of their *Sasha Masha* persona. Untaming the beast, they will release their authentic self and express this

publicly, shedding the public performance of their assigned gender, embodying who they truly feel they are. Leo (*The House on Half Moon Street*), experiences similar determination to express his identity publicly. Privately, Leo still doubts his identity and how he is perceived, but he clings to his true feelings, expressing why he is a man: 'I was a man because, underneath my skin, I had a man's beating heart. Nothing more, nothing less.' (Reeve, 2018, *The House on Half Moon Street`*, p. 121).

Although the heart is simply an organ and cannot be gendered, Leo's heart here is a symbol of the identity he feels as a man; his intrinsic inclination. The heart is symbolic of love and is at the centre of corporeality, it is the organ that is used to declare life or death. For Leo, the heart categorically legitimises his gender; he was born with the same heart he has now, and it has always been male, representing his whole person. Prominent gender theorists such as Owen (2014) critique narratives that incorporate a journey such as Leo's, claiming that to reduce gender difference to being born in the wrong body equates 'transgender [to] some sort of birth defect' (Owen, 2014, p. 22). Further, Owen proposes that transgender phenomena transcend normative and trans-identified experiences, revealing a diverse range of possibilities for bodily experiences and gendered subjectivity, therefore rejecting the reductive medicalisation of trans identities as *defective.* Owen particularly criticises fictional narratives that present the 'idealised resolution in most trans* fiction, simply to 'cure' the transness, with corrective surgery, as opposed to sharing stories of individuals who live outside of the binary without intervention and without ascribing to any gender norms'. He argues that 'transgender phenomena suggests a much more varied and complex range of possibilities for bodily experience and gendered subjectivity, drawing our attention to the contingency of any subjective arrival whether it be normative or trans-identified' (Owen, 2014, p. 22). The corpus of new queer fiction under analysis in this thesis, written since 2014, offers more nuanced representations than those to which Owen alludes, moving beyond reductively medicalising trans identities (as 'defective'). This shift marks an important evolution

in trans* narratives, highlighting the growing emphasis on stories that resist binary frameworks and medicalised resolutions.

For example, Alex (*Sasha Masha*) describes how the presentation of their gender matches their internal, subconscious gender:

> I looked in the mirror and saw my face hovering awkwardly above the glowing ruddy neckline (of the dress). I smiled at myself. I touched my arms and noticed there were goose bumps everywhere, but that was probably just because the bathroom was cold. I went back to Andre's room to get his approval. Still – and I was starting to know what it felt like to know things in your bones, your heart, your gut – in some deep part of my body I knew I looked good.

(Borinsky, 2020, *Sasha Masha*, p. 166)

Borinsky portrays a euphoric moment in Alex's development of gender exploration, using clothing (the dress) to express the intrinsic inclination of their gender. While Alex continues to dress according to their assigned gender, they are seen as 'normal' and accepted because their true, authentic self is in hiding under their clothes, masking the beast under socially accepted expectations. Self-knowing, or, as Serano labels it, *intrinsic inclination* 'occurs on a deep, subconscious level and generally remains intact despite social influences and conscious attempts by individuals to purge, repress, or ignore them.' (Serano, 2007, p. 99) This is pivotal for Alex because they are extending their private circle of expression and feeling self-assured by their intrinsic inclination. Further, Alex begins to feel a sense of anticipation at the prospect of self-actualisation, embracing the beast within. The scene conveys how Alex begins to become more familiar with their intrinsic inclination, finally feeling that sense of excitement that comes with the potential liberation from being formerly constrained by gender binary related expectations about the way they ought to present themself.

This 'self-knowing', as represented above, may be cultivated despite the overwhelming social pressure for 'a person to identify and behave as a member of their assigned [gender], which strongly suggests that there are indeed natural and intrinsic gender inclinations that can precede and/or supersede social conditioning and gender norms.' (Serano, 2007, p. 210). Self-knowing is a vital tool in a trans* individuals' arsenal to develop their identity through building confidence at the private expression stage, and sharing their authentic self with those close to them. If those they have chosen to share their self with respond negatively, they may draw upon self-knowledge of their authentic gender to reclaim and untame the 'beast'.

Reclaiming and untaming the Beast: realising the authentic self

Earlier in this chapter, the damaging effects of labelling were identified, with discussions about the risks of bullying and segregation. This part of the chapter focusses on positive experiences of labelling within the trans* community, as individuals may utilise labelling as a facet of realising and unleashing the authentic self. One may recognise that Leo (*The House on Half Moon Street)* finds comfort in his labeling, expressing dissidence with his given name and assignation at birth, and asserting himself with his chosen name as a means of consolidating his identity:

> That was my name: Leo Stanhope. Not Lottie Pritchard. Not *Charlotte*, which I'd always
>
> hated, even back then. No man could make me something I wasn't, no matter how they
>
> used me. ...
>
> I was what I was a boy who'd been named Lottie and was now Leo.
>
> (Reeve, 2018, The House on Half Moon Street, p. 276)

The name Leo Stanhope empowers his 'sense of self-identity [...] the fact that once a transgender individual has decided on a name, they own it. It becomes theirs and there is nothing

that can change their mind about that particular name' (Vanderschans, 2016, p. 12). Leo uses his name as a symbol (Hacking, 1992) like a rebirth; a reinvention into his authentic self. To communicate this rebirth with the world, he needs a 'true name' (De Pina-Cabral, 2010, p. 520). Vanderschans (2016) offers a summation as to the vitalness of a true name, stating that 'It is through names that we are able to project our sense of self into the world and through names that we are empowered to take action and perform our identity.' (p. 20). Vanderschans asserts that by adopting a true name, individuals are able to express themselves authentically. A name, particularly to a trans* individual, encapsulates not just a transition into their authentic self, but it communicates to others who they truly are, labelling them into existence. To elaborate, finding a true name or a label for personal identity is an empowering act, as the protagonists in my selected novels discover. With a true name, their intrinsic feelings and identities are made manifest, no longer just something they feel; in turn, this allows them to authenticate and establish their identity.

In the context of our earlier discussion on beastliness and monstrosity, the act of naming contrasts sharply with the dehumanising labels often imposed upon those who defy normative expectations. While societal frameworks may cast non-conforming individuals as 'monstrous' or 'beastly' to maintain binary structures and preserve traditional norms, claiming a true name represents a profound reclamation of self. By choosing and embracing their own names, these individuals challenge the negative connotations associated with monstrosity and assert their authentic identities. This process of naming transforms the 'beastly' into a symbol of personal agency and self-realisation, underscoring the complex interplay between societal labels and individual empowerment.

As a point of contrast to the earlier discussion of Leo's father and his fascination with Darwinism, Garvin (*Symptoms of Being Human*) utilises zoomorphism not as a degrading form of categorisation, instead presenting the image of the duck-billed platypus almost as a mascot for trans* individuals.

I can't blame you for trying to categorise me. It's a human instinct. It's why scientists are,

to this day, completely flabbergasted by the duck-billed platypus: it's furry like a mammal,

but lays eggs like a bird. It defies conventional classification.

(Garvin, 2016, *Symptoms of Being Human*, p. 58)

With reference to this passage we understand that, even though there are rigid, socially constructed classifications within the animal kingdom, nature can still defy these labels. The breaking down of traditional classifications within the 'natural world' becomes a metaphor for the trans* community breaking free of the gender binary and moving away from conventional classifications. Protagonist Riley embraces and celebrates being outside of the framework, which Garvin highlights with the image of the platypus. As may be recognised here, when an individual identifies a label that reflects what they have been feeling internally, this serves to legitimise their experiences. Collectively, each of the narratives in my corpus revolve around a constant, striving towards acceptance and realisation; because trans* identities are hidden, the journey becomes akin to a mystery that needs decoding. Callender portrays this in a revelatory moment for their protagonist Felix, when they feel a kinship with the trans character in a book:

It wasn't until I was twelve, almost five years ago not, that I read this book that had a trans

character in it: *I Am J* by Cris Beam. Reading about J, it was like ... I don't know, not

only did a lightbulb go off in me, but the sun itself came out from behind these eternal

clouds, and everything inside me blazed with the realisation: I'm a guy.

I'm a freaking guy.

(Callender, 2021, *Felix Ever After*, p. 24)

Weaving Cris Beam's novel *I Am J* (Beam, 2011) into their narrative, Callender highlights the importance of external resources, particularly literature, in navigating the complex terrain of gender identity and construction, moving beyond the confines of societal influence. By incorporating this text, Callender underscores the deep value of diverse narratives and

experiences as potent tools for individuals grappling with the intricacies of their gender identities. *I Am J* offers a parallel journey through the eyes of a transgender protagonist, mirroring the tumultuous exploration of identity. This intertextual link within *Felix Ever After* goes beyond mere literary connection, illustrating the profound role fiction plays as a vehicle for validation and self-discovery. By offering a range of lived experiences and alternative narratives, fiction provides a crucial space for trans* individuals to see themselves represented and understood. This is particularly significant for those whose realities are often marginalised or misrepresented within broader societal discourse. By using fiction as a case study, this thesis not only emphasises the transformative potential of storytelling but also argues for its centrality in shaping self-perception and challenging oppressive societal structures. Literature, in this sense, becomes a lifeline—a space where trans* identities can be affirmed, explored, and celebrated.

Representations, within the media and literature, invite the reader to see alternatives to the gender binary. As discussed previously, social media opens a world of possibilities to those who have been taught there is only one right way: the cisnormative way. Thus, trans* individuals find that the feelings they experience have a name which may, in turn, allow them to develop their identity in private expression. This is, of course, not to say that reading the book *makes* Felix trans*, but it brings the possibility of trans* identity into focus, revealing a whole world outside of the binary, and they recognise a name for their feelings. Through this journey of introspection, Felix accepts that they are a trans male, but still does not feel this entirely captures every part of their being. Thus, Felix continues their search for authentic identity.

Similar to Felix, Wayne is able to reflect on their identity while away at university, seeing themself and their trans* identity reflected in others on campus:

There were girls who looked like he did, and there were boys who did too, and there were certainly students who wore no make-up and had a plain beauty that was made of

insight and intelligence and did not have a gender. He felt he was in some kind of a free

world to which he wanted to belong.

(Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 456)

Seeing the opportunities reflected in this free space is a vital part of Wayne's development. While they have always felt different to how their gender was assigned and how they were raised, they were unable to see other possibilities. Thus, when seeing others who appear to reflect their authentic selves, Wayne finally feels more comfortable with their own identity.

Training the Beast: perfecting the growl

This chapter has explored gender queer identity and the process of individuals expressing their authentic identity in private. Continuing with the metaphoric beast as a symbol for gender non-conforming identities, this section explores how, as gender queer individuals, the protagonists develop their identity, based on their findings during the initial process of private expression. The section explores under which circumstances the individual feels confident enough in their identity, to affirm who they are in a more public manner. By contrast, they may also feel the need to continue to hide their authenticity due to a lack of support or judgmental attitudes within ostensibly 'supportive' communities.

In *Cemetery Boys,* Yadriel is portrayed as assured in his own identity, with his biggest hurdle being to prove himself to those around him. Following my SGF model, being sure in oneself in the private sphere, including as a result of acceptance from others, is a key step in the journey towards public expression. Similar to Reeve in *The House on Half Moon Street,* Thomas uses characteristics and elements of genre in *Cemetery Boys* as metaphors. Thomas may have recognised the marginalisation of trans* identities under the beastly narrative, but rather than subjecting his protagonist to a simplistic tale of discrimination, he situates Yadriel's difference in

his belonging to the magical community, and therefore being supernaturally powerful: in the context of this thesis, I conceive of this experience as *training the Beast.*

Thomas employs the magical realism genre as a device to subvert the familiar tropes of trans* individuals being excluded and segregated, almost as though their gender identity is a disability, instead empowering them based on their difference. Unlike fantasy, which often constructs entirely separate worlds governed by their own distinct rules, magical realism situates the supernatural within a recognisable, realistic framework, seamlessly blending the extraordinary with the everyday. This allows Thomas to ground Yadriel's journey in the cultural and familial contexts of his Chicanx heritage, enriching the narrative with layers of both personal and cultural significance.

Yadriel's journey entails him seeking to become a *brujo* (male sorcerer) as an extension of his trans* identity. Effectively, Thomas enhances the process of self-actualisation from assigned female to male by placing Yadriel within this magical realist context: obtaining the status of *brujo* equates to being recognised as a powerfully magical being. Magical realism often uses themes of monsters and beastliness as metaphors for marginalisation and difference, but here, Thomas reclaims these motifs to empower rather than ostracise.

The narrative of *Cemetery Boys* is based on a dichotomous structure in which women are healers and men are sorcerers, reflecting the binary gender roles that pervade Western society. This simple yet effective metaphor encapsulates the rigid gender binaries that often leave little room for trans* identities. Yadriel's journey presents a response to the question of what happens when an individual falls between the dichotomy: when assigned sex and authentic self do not align. By navigating these magical roles, Yadriel's experience parallels the challenges faced by those living beyond the gender binary, reclaiming monstrous or beastly imagery as a source of strength rather than something to fear or suppress.

He wanted to scream or break something. Or both.

His dad's face – the look of regret when he realised what he'd said to Yadriel – flashed in his mind. Yadriel was always forgiving people for being callous. For misgendering him and calling him by his deadname. He was always giving them the benefit of the doubt, or writing it off as people not understanding or being stuck in their ways when they hurt him.

Well Yadriel was tired of it. He was tired of forgiving. He was tired of fighting to just *exist* and be himself. He was tired of being the odd one out.

(Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys*, pp. 28-29)

Frustration and anger are prevalent emotions through much of the corpus. Yadriel's frustration in *Cemetery Boys* is vividly portrayed through his intense desire to scream and break things; an impulse tied to feelings of losing control, a common destructive response when one feels powerless (Budge et al., 2013). This frustration arises from being constrained by the boundaries of gender binaries and the failure of others to recognise his authentic self. In this context, Yadriel's anger is not just a personal emotion but a response to the societal structures that deny him his rightful place, creating deep feelings of alienation and rejection.

Anger, in fact, can be seen as a signifier of beastliness, especially when we consider how literature and culture have historically depicted anger as a primal, uncontrollable force. This loss of control over rationality and civility often transforms individuals into something monstrous or 'other'. Anger, in this sense, becomes the emotional trigger that strips away social masks, revealing the more 'beastly' or untamed aspects of human nature. As Halberstam explores in *The Queer Art of Failure,* anger is often the result of failing to conform to societal norms. In this way, Yadriel's anger is a reaction not to personal failure but to society's failure to accommodate his existence within rigid gender roles. His emotional volatility, far from marking him as inherently

monstrous, represents his resistance against oppressive frameworks, using anger as a radical rejection of societal expectations.

Literature provides us with several other notable examples of anger being intrinsically tied to perceptions of beastliness. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creature is driven to violent outbursts due to his exclusion from society and the profound isolation he feels as a result of being denied his own identity. His uncontrollable rage, born from loneliness and rejection, marks him as a 'beast' in the eyes of others, reinforcing his outsider status. Similarly, in *The House on Half Moon Street*, Leo's growing frustration with his assigned identity and society's refusal to acknowledge his true gender identity creates an inner conflict that leads to feelings of self-detachment and alienation from his physical body. His father's rejection only exacerbates this, marking him as 'monstrous' for defying the expectations of gender conformity.

The theme of anger as beastliness ties closely into how trans* individuals like Yadriel, Leo, and others in my corpus are perceived as 'monstrous' or 'beastly'. Trans* individuals are often made to feel beastly not because of any inherent characteristic but because of the ways in which society labels them as such, when they do not conform to traditional gender binaries. This externalisation of anger, often driven by rejection or frustration at not being seen, mirrors the way non-normative identities are misunderstood and marginalised. Halberstam's argument that anger serves as a way to reclaim one's identity in the face of societal failure to accommodate difference is particularly relevant here, where anger becomes a form of resistance rather than a sign of inherent monstrosity.

Again, Thomas subverts the association between trans* identity and beastliness. Were Yadriel able to embrace his status as Brujo, and therefore his authentic self, he would not act in this beastly manner. Further, the physicality of Yadriel's frustration also emphasises how he is struggling to verbalise his anger, and this may derive from the lack of education regarding trans* issues; evidenced by those around him demonstrating a lack of understanding. Yadriel's key

conflict arises in having to choose between either adhering to the 'traditional' norms of binary magic, performing to his assigned gender role, or embracing his trans* identity. In ostensibly denying his magical heritage, Yadriel also feels that he is turning his back on his family and community:

> But belonging meant denying who he was. Living as something he wasn't had nearly torn him apart from the inside out. But he also loved his family, and his community. It was bad enough being an outsider; what would happen if they just couldn't – or wouldn't – accept him for who he was?
>
> (*Cemetery Boys*, pp. 28-29)

Thus, the main narrative of *Cemetery Boys* surrounds Yadriel trying to prove his trans* identity to his family and community by embracing the ascribed male magic, regardless of what he was assigned at birth. In order to become a *brujo* [male sorcerer], one must first be assigned male at birth. Yadriel yearns to be accepted as a *brujo*, instead of a *bruja* [female sorcerer].

> Julian's expression was suddenly pinched. "Back up a sec – are you trying to prove to them that you're a brujo [sorcerer], or that you're a boy?"
>
> The bluntness of the question caught Yadriel off guard. It took some of the wind out of his self-satisfied sails. "It's the same thing," he said, pricking with annoyance.
>
> "'Cause if it's to prove you're a brujo, didn't summoning me already do that?" Julian asked.
>
> Yadriel huffed a laugh. "You just don't get how it works," he said, crossing his arms. "That's not enough."
>
> "Not enough for who though?" Julian questioned. He wasn't being pushy about it, not on purpose, anyway. He just seemed curious, which only irritated Yadriel further. "Not enough for *them*, or not enough for *you*?"

Yadriel froze. The question stuck in his chest. "It's the same thing," he repeated, but was it? Yadriel shook his head. He was tired, and Julian's incessant questions were just confusing him.

"You just don't get it because you're not one of us," he insisted.

(Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys*, p. 84)

Thomas' framing of Yadriel's journey in a magical community is notably effective given the historical and cultural marginalisation of trans* individuals. Snow (2019) highlights that 'witchcraft has always belonged to the outsiders and outcasts in society' (p. XVII). This association underscores a broader cultural pattern where those who defy societal norms, such as witches and trans* individuals, are positioned as outsiders. By situating Yadriel's narrative within a magical realist context, Thomas draws a parallel between the historical vilification of witches and the contemporary marginalisation of trans* individuals.

Historically, witches have often been portrayed as monstrous due to their deviation from normative expectations. This portrayal serves to reinforce societal boundaries by demonising those who challenge established norms. In *Cemetery Boys*, Yadriel's quest to be recognised as a brujo rather than a bruja mirrors this dynamic. His magical identity becomes a metaphor for his struggle with gender identity, reflecting how both witches and trans* individuals are cast as 'monstrous' by mainstream society due to their nonconformity.

By employing magical realism, Thomas not only critiques the marginalisation faced by trans* individuals but also reclaims the narrative of the 'monster' or 'witch' as symbols of resistance and self-realisation. This framing emphasises the complex relationship between societal exclusion and personal empowerment. Yadriel's journey highlights how narratives of monstrosity and magical identities can both reflect and challenge cultural attitudes, illustrating the transformative power of embracing one's true self despite societal pressures. Embracing his

authentic self by expressing his intrinsic gender, Yadriel crosses the traditional binary gender identity and in so doing implicates his place within the magical community. Research, such as that by Selkie et al. (2020), underscores that external validation from family and community can significantly enhance self-esteem and mitigate mental health risks. This dynamic reflects how societal perceptions and the need for external affirmation shape the experiences of those marginalised or labelled as 'beasts' and monsters, aligning with the broader discussion of monstrosity in the chapter.

This chapter has provided a comprehensive investigation into the role of private expression in the formation and realisation of gender identity, particularly within the framework of beastly and monstrous labels imposed by societal norms. By exploring various fictional texts, this chapter reveals how private spaces—such as personal reflection, intimate experimentation with gender presentation, and confidential disclosures to trusted individuals—serve as critical arenas for trans* and gender-queer individuals to navigate their identities away from the scrutiny of the public eye. This private realm becomes a refuge where individuals can confront and renegotiate the beastly and monstrous labels that society imposes on non-conforming identities.

Finally, the analysis presented in this chapter underscores the importance of private expression as a preparatory stage in the journey towards public identity. The use of beastly and monstrous metaphors illustrates how societal norms often cast deviations from the gender binary as aberrations or threats, compelling individuals to first grapple with these labels in a private context. Through the characters' struggles and triumphs in the texts analysed, it becomes evident that private expression allows individuals to experiment with and affirm their authentic selves, away from the immediate pressures and prejudices of public perception.

The theoretical framework of monstrosity and beastliness is crucial to understanding this process. By incorporating concepts from queer theory and analyses of monstrous identities, the chapter connects the private struggles of characters to broader societal dynamics. For instance,

the concept of monstrosity as discussed by theorists like Stryker (2000) and Creed (1993) is not merely a marker of otherness but also a tool through which individuals confront and resist normative expectations.

Furthermore, the chapter highlights that while private expression is a vital stage in personal identity formation, it also prepares individuals for the subsequent phase of public expression. This transition is informed by the positive and negative experiences of private expression, which shape how individuals present themselves to the wider world. The nuanced portrayal of private expression in the texts studied reveals how individuals navigate the complexities of their identities, reject oppressive labels, and assert their true selves. Thus, the chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how private and public realms interact in the process of gender identity development, providing valuable insights into the ongoing negotiation of gender norms and the reclamation of personal authenticity.

By examining these themes, the chapter not only addresses theoretical questions regarding the fluidity of gender identity and the impact of societal labels but also demonstrates the significant role of fiction in portraying and exploring these complex dynamics. Through the lens of literary analysis, the chapter illuminates the processes involved in private and public identity formation, enriching our comprehension of the transformative journey of trans* and gender-queer individuals.

Chapter 6 – Transcending the Beast Through Public Expression

Manifesting authenticity in the self

The final chapter of this thesis focuses on the fourth quadrant of my SGF model: Public Expression. Building upon the investigations of the previous chapters, which addressed the uncertainty and questioning associated with the Private Expression quadrant and the public-facing performance quadrant, this chapter explores how individuals within the public sphere articulate their authentic gender queer identities.

This chapter applies the SGF model as its central analytical tool while also incorporating various theoretical perspectives to understand the public manifestation of gender identity. The exploration is guided by several key research questions: Firstly, how do the processes of gender identity construction, as outlined in the Setting, Socialisation, and Private Expression quadrants, influence the ways in which protagonists publicly express their gender identities? Secondly, in what ways do external validation and rejection affect the public expression of gender queer identities? Thirdly, how do supportive figures, such as friends and allies, contribute to the authentic expression of trans* individuals' gender identities? Finally, what are the manifestations of gender euphoria in the public expression of gender queer identities, and how do they impact the well-being of trans* individuals?

In asking these questions, this chapter elaborates on how the gender identity construction processes discussed in preceding chapters collectively shape the protagonists' public expressions of their gender identities, in accord with the Public Expression quadrant of my SGF model. It examines how protagonists seek validation and authentication from others and how experiences of acceptance or rejection from significant individuals, particularly family members, influence their ability to express their authentic gender identity. The chapter explores how rejection from

close individuals can impede self-expression, while acceptance and support from friends and allies are often critical to facilitating authentic expression.

Additionally, the chapter investigates how key figures in the lives of trans* individuals, such as primary socialisers like parents, may be driven to reassess their internalised notions of gender. This reassessment can lead to a shift in understanding and greater acceptance of non-binary identities, often instigated by the trans* individuals themselves, who challenge traditional gender norms to foster greater inclusivity.

In addressing the positive aspects of public expression, the chapter highlights significant moments of gender euphoria experienced by the protagonists in the analysed fiction. The concept of gender euphoria, supported by scholarly research including studies by Beischel et al. (2021) and Pechey (2022), is linked to improved mental health outcomes for trans* individuals. The chapter illustrates how moments of gender euphoria—characterised by a sense of fulfilment and delight when one's gender identity aligns with their gendered features—represent significant milestones in authentic expression. This aligns with the findings of Austin et al. (2022), who describe gender euphoria as a form of rebirth or reawakening, reflecting a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction from the correspondence between one's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth (Ashley & Ells, 2018).

The chapter concludes by acknowledging the fluid nature of gender identity construction. Despite the sequential structure of the thesis, which is largely consistent with the literary journey that each protagonist embarks upon, it is important to recognise that gender identity is not a fixed, linear process in the real world. Individuals may move between different quadrants of the SGF model or occupy multiple quadrants simultaneously. For example, a trans* individual might publicly express their gender identity among friends while still engaging in behaviours that align with their assigned gender in specific social contexts, such as with family.

Autoethnography

My SGF model, as previously discussed, primarily emerged from my personal experiences with gender identity and how it fluctuated based on my surroundings and company. Even to this day, I adjust my appearance, posture, and even my voice depending on the situation, mainly as a means of ensuring my safety and avoiding conflicts within my family. Although I often feel a sense of compromise when resorting to the concealment of my true self around family, it is not because I am ashamed of my identity. Rather, it is a strategy I employ to prevent conflict.

To elaborate, I find it more practical to make slight concessions, such as wearing women's trousers and sturdy block-heeled boots paired with a casual top, when visiting my family. The alternative, to arrive in my usual stiletto pumps and vibrant dresses, would mean facing insults and engaging in heated arguments about why I take on my preferred appearance, and would likely involve their desire to see me conform to what they perceive as 'normal'. Yes, it is challenging, but I do cherish my family deeply, especially after the bereavements we have endured. It is essential to acknowledge that, even in these moments of compromise, I remain true to myself, never losing sight of who I am. I take solace in the fact that everyone outside of my family circle acknowledges and accepts the authentic me. This knowledge serves as a constant reminder that the compromises I make within my family are only temporary, and my genuine self remains unwavering.

My SGF model, in essence, illuminates the fluidity of gender identity as shaped by situational necessity. It reflects the dynamic and adaptable nature of gender, mirroring my own personal experience, where I shift between expressing my authentic gender identity in private and adopting more conventional, socially expected roles in public. This ability to navigate different expressions of gender while maintaining a deep connection to my intrinsic sense of self highlights the resilience and complexity of gender identity. It underscores that gender is not fixed or static but can manifest in various ways depending on the context and circumstances. Through

this model, I explore how individuals, like the protagonists in the texts analysed, engage in a continual negotiation of their gender expression—one that is responsive to both personal authenticity and the external demands of societal expectations.

Seeking recognition and validation

A recurring motif persists throughout my corpus, underscoring a critical truth: gender diverse individuals must assertively embody their authentic identities as a fundamental step to securing comprehension and support. A key factor in coming out and expressing trans* identity, therefore, is having confidence in oneself and assuredness in one's identity. As Meadow (2010) states: 'The "distinctive" problematic of modern identity exists not in being who we are but in establishing who we are and solidifying recognition by others' (p. 817). In pursuance of 'solidifying' a trans* identity, as discussed in the previous chapter, an individual must 'prove themselves' and 'validate' their identity. Again, the first stages of moving towards being validated by others is the process of *coming out*, where the trans* individual declares their authentic identity in a public sphere.

> I've been mentally preparing myself to come out all over again, but I've been doing that for a while now. That was one of the things I realised early. If you're queer, your life has the potential to become one long coming-out moment. If I ever want to be called the right pronouns, I'll have to correct people and put myself out there first and who knows what could happen.
>
> (Deaver, 2019, *I Wish You All the Best*, p. 53)

The process of coming out is 'both a personal and a social process that appears to be omnipresent as long as we operate within a [cisnormative and] heteronormative society.' (Guittar, 2013, p. 185). There is no single way for someone to come out, representing a distinctive and deeply personal journey for each individual, with no definitive formula. Still, coming out is often described and portrayed as a 'one size fits all' external/physical process whereby a member of the

LGBTQIA+ community discloses to those around them that they are different to the social norm (Rasmussen, 2004). However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 4, more recent fictional accounts show that coming out tends to be a private and individual process from personal questioning and experimenting to self-acceptance. As evidenced by the protagonists in my corpus, coming out *to oneself* is particularly fundamental to the formation of trans* identity as we explored at length in the previous chapter when looking at private expression.

While there are a multitude of ways that an individual may choose to come out, shared concerns and worries are felt by individuals as they embark on this step. Iantaffi and Barker (2017) describe these concerns as 'how you might communicate all the thoughts, feelings, and experiences with others. This can make you feel very vulnerable, and one of the risks of vulnerability is that it can be betrayed. Others might invalidate what we share with them, use it against us, or simply not appreciate it for the gift of trust that it is' (Iantaffi and Barker, 2017, p. 199). Therefore, when publicly expressing an authentic trans* identity, a crucial expectation is for those around the individual to make an effort to comprehend and accept the identity, given that it may fall outside of common societal norms. This is demonstrated in the example of Yadriel in *Cemetery Boys*, who attempts to assert his identity to those around him, emphasising the importance of normalisation, recognition, and legitimacy (Neary, 2018, p. 439).

Yadriel wants to prove his authentic identity to his family and community. Where coming out is concerned, Yadriel seeks approval of his identity, regardless of his own intrinsic knowledge of his authentic self. He feels the need to be acknowledged and 'solidified' by those around him:

> He would show her he was a true brujo. A son she could be proud of. He would perform the tasks that his father and his father's father has as the children of Lady Death. Yadriel would prove himself to everyone.
>
> (Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys,* p. 17)

Yadriel's trans* identity, akin to Leo's in *House on Half Moon Street*, is categorised within the binary framework. This aligns with Ekins and King's concept of migrating gender identity, which describes the process of transitioning from an assigned gender to an authentic gender identity (Ekins & King, 2006). Yadriel's experience, as portrayed in Thomas' novel, reflects this binary transition, highlighting a structure that aligns with his journey from assigned female to male.

However, this binary framework does not adequately represent the experiences of many trans* individuals whose identities fall outside the binary. As outlined by Stryker (2006) and Butler (1990), non-binary and genderqueer identities often face challenges due to a lack of established terms and frameworks within existing cultural and societal structures. For these individuals, creating personal identity signifiers and labels becomes a necessary strategy to navigate their experiences, as traditional binary categories do not encompass their identities (Stryker, 2006; Butler, 1990).

In addressing the balance between identity expression and societal expectations, it is crucial to recognise the constant vigilance required of trans* individuals. They must navigate between their authentic selves and societal expectations, often adapting their presentation to mitigate conflict and violence (Budge et al., 2013). This dynamic is essential for maintaining a fragile peace between personal authenticity and societal norms, as described in the SGF model. Research by Meyer (2003) supports this notion, emphasising that trans* individuals frequently engage in strategic management of their gender presentation to avoid discrimination and violence.

Furthermore, trans* individuals are compelled to navigate complex social terrains, constantly shifting between their authentic gender identity and performative expectations to maintain safety and social acceptance (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). This balancing act is a critical

aspect of their daily lives, underscoring the need for ongoing research into how societal frameworks and individual identities interact and impact each other.

> Real people are comfortable being themselves and don't have to think about what they want. They laugh out loud and they eat when they're hungry and they say what they're thinking no matter who is listening. And the paradox of it is the harder you try to be real, the deeper you know that you're not.

(Borinsky, 2020, *Sasha Masha*, pp. 6-7)

Even when publicly expressing, trans* individuals are frequently driven to mask their authentic self because of the vulnerability they face. In these situations, trans* individuals, whether binary or non-binary, may feel inclined to 'pass' as a gender which befits the common social narrative. *Passing* refers to being recognised as part of a particular (often dominant) cultural identity group, like cis and/or heterosexual individuals. When someone is able to pass, it brings a level of safety, shielding them from enforced vulnerability. Historically, passing has been a survival strategy for marginalised individuals to resist against the vulnerability that authentic expression may bring. Conversely, passing may be equally important to validate and uplift those who choose to authentically express themselves, as this can be a source of liberation. Ultimately, the decision to pass or authentically reveal oneself is deeply personal and should be met with respect, free from judgment (Hegarty et al, 2018).

A key consideration that may influence the necessity of passing, is whether an individual feels that they inhabit a setting in which they are able to express their authentic selves safely. Often, decisions such as this relate to how one feels in the privacy, or sense of exposure, offered by the family home (a space rife with contention for young trans* people, as is explored extensively in chapter 4). Examining the broader context of young adult (YA) fiction, it is important to acknowledge that the significance and nuances of the 'home' differ markedly depending on specific circumstances. For many trans* individuals, including the protagonists in my core texts,

especially Pen in *Girl Man's Up,* the birth family home may in fact be conceptualised as a public space. Although traditionally a family living together at home are seen as occupying a private location (Allan and Crow, 1989), this sense of privacy only extends to the adults or individuals holding authority over the space.

In *Girl Mans Up*, the younger characters are beholden to the rules and boundaries enforced by their parents. Public expression at home is particularly difficult when 'the home does not always deter heteronormativity that may infiltrate via neighbours and family' (Johnston and Valentine, 1995, p. 647). Thus, a core concern that pushes the typically labelled 'private' home space into a public space for a gender queer individual, is the persistence of cisnormative narratives within the household. As Doan (2010) asserts 'the relationship between gender and the space in which it is performed [or expressed] is dynamic and contingent upon both the spatial context and the degree of heteronormative variance of the performer [or expresser]' (p. 648). The level of cisnormativity or heteronormativity in the home narrative exists as an indicator about whether it is safe for a trans* individual to embrace their authenticity or not, and whether in so doing they would disrupt the family narrative. This relationship, between private and public domains, becomes fundamental to the shaping of trans* individuals' decisions to express their authentic selves within a familial context. Sensitivity to these contextual differences invites the reader to recognise the interplay between personal identity, societal expectations, and the evolving concept of home itself.

Rejection

This decision to publicly express one's authentic gender identity is laden with apprehensions, in particular the fear of encountering social rejection. Many trans* individuals 'experience rejection or alienation from their families, and often discrimination within communities, during and beyond their transition' (von Doussa et al., 2017, p. 2). In *Felix Ever*

After (Callender, 2021), for example, Felix experiences a great sense of discrimination and rejection from his own father. Further, Felix experiences a pervasive struggle that may be familiar to many trans* individuals, having to defend and legitimise their own identity in order to gain validation from others. Throughout the narrative, Felix constantly strives for validation of his trans* identity; reflecting on earlier childhood experiences, he feels that he always belonged with the boys at school, seeking out their approval to no avail:

> I'd always tried to line up with the other boys whenever teachers split us up. I followed those boys around the playgrounds, upset that they'd ignore me and push me away. I had dreams sometimes – dreams where I'd be in a different body, the kind of body society says belongs to men. I'd be so effing happy, but then I would wake up and see that nothing had changed. I remember thinking to myself, Hopefully, if I'm reincarnated, I'll be born a boy.

(Callender, 2021, *Felix Ever After*, p. 23)

Felix's need to belong stretches back to his early childhood, a significant time for identity formation, as discussed in Chapter Four (Socialisation). In this passage, Felix's struggle with gender dysphoria is vivid, reflecting his longing for a different self and a strong desire for acceptance. This inner conflict remains with him as he grows from a child to an adolescent, even after coming out as trans* to his father and receiving support during his transition. To reiterate, in my SGF model, an 'authentic' gender is not viewed as a fixed state but a personal journey, aligning one's subconscious/intrinsic gender identity with outward expression. For Felix, this means reconciling his inner self with societal expectations as he strives for authenticity. My SGF model further emphasises how an individual's subconscious or intrinsic gender interacts with situational factors, often leading to inner conflict. Felix's journey towards authenticity illustrates this dynamic, as his path involves harmonising his true self with how others perceive him. This tension between personal identity and external expectations is central to the model, as it highlights

the ongoing negotiation of gender that many individuals experience. In the following extract, Felix reflects on the challenges he has encountered, encapsulating the complexities of navigating his authentic gender identity while confronting societal pressures and misconceptions:

It pisses me off that he doesn't *understand* in the first place.

"I need you to be a little more patient," my dad tells me. "I've had a certain idea of who you are in my head for twelve years. That's a long time." He hesitates, and I can tell he almost called me by my old name.

My dad won't look at me. I don't know if he even knows how to look at me. He can't see me for who I really am – only who he wants me to be. Maybe this is fucked-up, I don't know ... but somehow, it's his approval I need most, even more than anyone else's. I need his validation. His understanding, not just acceptance, that he has a son.

(Callender, 2021, *Felix Ever After*, pp. 68-69)

Callender's novel highlights a somewhat nuanced representation of trans* identity, subsequent to coming out. Felix's frustration at his father may be regarded as more of a frustration at himself for requiring another's approval in order to be who he is. It is important to remember that Felix is a child, and children are uniquely vulnerable due to their dependence on their parents. For trans* individuals like Felix, having a supportive network is especially crucial for openly expressing their gender identity in public. The greater the number of people who understand and support them, the less likely it is for gender-diverse individuals to feel as though they are 'walking a treacherous tightrope, with invisibility on one side and unintelligibility on the other' (Garrison, 2018, p. 633). Felix's attempt to enlist allies, such as his father, eventually yields a support network, enabling him to express his gender with greater comfort and confidence, alleviating the sense of isolation that often comes with navigating these experiences alone.

As may be implicit in the extract above, in the early stages of Felix's transition, his father only offered support begrudgingly as he began to access gender affirming treatments. Indeed, even after coming out and expressing oneself as trans*, there is still a 'process of navigating gender expectations and altering gendered behaviour and presentation accordingly.' (Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull, 2019, p. 1158). Below, we see that Felix's dad seems to still cling to the child he thought he knew, not the authentic Felix:

> My dad points at the roll of paper towels in my hands and says my name to get my attention – but not my real name. He says my old name. The one I was born with, the one he and my mom gave me. The name itself I don't mind that much, I guess – but hearing it said out loud, directed at me, always sends a stabbing pain through my chest, this sinking feeling in my gut. I pretend I didn't hear him, until my dad realises his mistake. There's an awkward silence for a few seconds, before he mumbles a quick apology.

> We never talk about it. How he doesn't like saying the name Felix out loud. How he'll always slip up and use the wrong pronouns, and not bother to correct himself. How some nights, when he's had a little too much whiskey or beer, he'll tell me that I'll always be his daughter, his little girl.

> (Callender, 2021, *Felix Ever After*, p. 22)

Paternal rejection is prevalent throughout the novels explored, from Wayne's father, Treadway (*Annabel*) to Leo's father in *The House on Half Moon Street.* Much of the rejection portrayed in these narratives is rooted in a lack of understanding from parental figures, with their refusal to understand a different gender narrative to the predominant binary framework. This lack of understanding is represented as transphobia and rejection or, as Kristeva (1995) describes, 'abjection'. Abjection becomes a critical mechanism for marginalised individuals, particularly those navigating non-binary or fluid identities, to maintain a sense of self amidst societal pressures. This process involves rejecting elements that could destabilise their identity,

particularly those in liminal or hybrid states. Abjection complicates the notion that the boundaries between subjects and objects, as well as between self and other, are stable and fixed (Bettcher, 2014). Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as detailed in *Powers of Horror* (1982), illustrates how the abject disrupts conventional definitions of identity by presenting elements that resist integration into the self. The abject represents those elements that defy easy categorisation and challenge the coherence of identity, often revealing a "monstrous" quality that unsettles traditional boundaries.

In relation to the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model, the concept of abjection is particularly relevant, exploring how gender identities can shift and adapt in different contexts, reflecting fluidity rather than fixed categories. The liminal or hybrid identities examined through the SGF model are inherently abject in the sense that they challenge and disrupt traditional gender norms. This disruption highlights the complexity of identity formation and the difficulties faced by individuals who do not conform to binary gender categories. Protagonists who navigate between their authentic gender identities and societal expectations often encounter elements of abjection as they struggle to maintain a coherent self. These interactions with the abject—whether through societal rejection or personal conflict—underscore the fluid and negotiable nature of gender identity within the SGF framework.

Interrelatedly, the empathy felt by those with a close acquaintance who identifies as gender queer may benefit from this relationship because 'knowing someone who is a member of a minority group may increase knowledge, reduce anxiety, and increase empathy towards the group' (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008, p. 4). With more people knowing and understanding an individual's belonging within a minority group, the more familiarity and intelligibility of these identities is made possible, or as Skey (2010) asserts, these types of relationship cultivate 'ontological security'. This contributes towards assuaging the 'fear' of the unknown, in turn reducing prejudicial behaviours: 'Visibility is crucial. Without exposure to others who think, feel,

and live in a similar way to us – especially for those who exist outside of society's norms – we can feel lost and alone' (Maheshwari-Aplin, 2022). While visibility and familiarity of trans* identities will not create wider social tolerance or acceptance in isolation, visibility *does* support gender-creative individuals to understand and more confidently construct and express their own identity. Garrison (2018) similarly outlines how identity formation processes 'link' individuals into place within cultural scripts, while Loseke (2007) asserts that these cultural scripts 'afford social intelligibility to groups and individuals. If respondents present an account that seems inconsistent, they face misrecognition at best, and stigmatisation, exclusion, or violence at worst' (p. 618).

In the fiction under analysis, the relationships maintained between trans* individuals and significant figures in their lives such as Felix and his father, and Pen (*Girl Mans Up*) with their mother, involve a lot of conflict and instances of rejection. For many trans* individuals, this conflict, or potential conflict, leads to the concealment of their authentic selves from members of their family, and sometimes 'slows [down] or halts their transition out of concern for family members' well-being or the need to preserve relationships' (von Doussa et al., 2017, p. 1). Pen faces a lot of negative commentary around their gender expression, forcing them to try to conceal their authentic self:

> And then something happens. My hood. It's gone.
>
> She (mãe) yanked it off my head. Right off my damn head!
>
> Mom's hand is hanging in the air behind me when I turn, like it froze there from the shock of what it revealed. Her whole face scrunched up under the weight of her eyebrows and I know that if I don't move right now, I'll be getting a swat on the back of the head. So I back up until I'm against the wall.
>
> She shakes her head and her lips go all tight. She puts a hand against her heart and for a second, I wish I hadn't done it.

"What you do? What you do, stupid girl?" She says. "Why you do that? You no like me. You no like you *mãe*. You break my heart. So many times, you break heart. No *respeito.*"

I don't like when my mom cries. I like it even less when it's me who made it happen. She shuffles toward the living room, her face in her hands, rambling on about me.

(Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up*, pp. 36-37)

Crucially, Pen's regret is not the fact that they shaved their head, as they are happy and comfortable with this act of gender expression, but is tied to the response from their mother. This draws attention to how much of the regret and misery trans* people face derives from the judgement of others, which obstructs their authentic expression. Authenticity is often constrained by feeling unable to publicly express due to fear of rejection and possible persecution in the public arena. Similar to Pen, Felix from *Felix Ever After* is portrayed as engaged in a continuous struggle with his father, striving for acceptance of his authentic self. This dynamic underscores a broader debate: whether the parents' resistance is a direct rejection of the trans* individual's authentic expression or a reluctance to relinquish the image of the child they originally raised, which paradoxically results in rejection. The dialogue between Felix and his father captures this tension:

"I don't ever feel like I have to convince (Ezra) of that. I mean that he calls me by my name: Felix." "Listen," (dad) says, "it isn't easy to just suddenly switch my idea of who you are in my head. For twelve years, you were my baby g-"

(Callender, 2021, p. 68).

The father's struggle to reconcile his past perceptions with Felix's present identity expression reveals a genre-specific portrayal of familial conflict in contemporary young adult (YA) literature. YA fiction often deals with themes of identity and personal growth through intense emotional and psychological journeys. This genre provides a unique platform to explore

the inner lives of characters grappling with significant transitions, such as Felix's process of navigating the expression of his authentic gender identity in the face of familial resistance. The language in this excerpt—filled with raw, emotional exchanges—enhances the authenticity of Felix's struggle and mirrors the genre's commitment to portraying genuine, often painful, personal conflicts.

'That's never who I was. That's who you assumed I was', highlights the disparity between Felix's father's constructed identity of him, and his own self-understanding. The father's subsequent admission of trying to understand, 'I'm trying', coupled with Felix's internal conflict—feeling both grateful and frustrated—further illustrates the nuanced nature of their relationship (Callender, 2021, p. 69).

In the context of the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model, this interaction can be seen as a manifestation of the dynamic interplay between Felix's public and private expressions of gender identity. Again, the SGF model emphasises the fluidity and situational nature of gender identity, conveying how individuals navigate multiple zones of expression, including personal, social, and public domains. Felix's experience of his father's conditional acceptance reflects the model's concept of navigating between authentic self-expression and societal expectations. Felix's struggle to reconcile his father's fixed perceptions with his own evolving identity exemplifies the challenges faced by individuals whose gender identity shifts between these different contexts.

As previous chapters have shown, the genre of YA literature allows for an in-depth exploration of these dynamics, offering a narrative space where protagonists like Felix can voice their struggles and desires in a manner that resonates with young adult readers and beyond. The novel's portrayal of Felix's quest for validation and understanding aligns with the SGF model's focus on how individuals continuously negotiate their gender identity in relation to others and their setting.

Unlike Pen's mother, Felix's father seems to try and understand his authentic gender expression, which signals a shift in his learning, as opposed to rejecting Felix outright. He is trying to relearn or reinterpret the norms with which he has grown so familiar and has hitherto been keen to uphold. However, many trans* individuals do not have parents who are willing to try to renegotiate their own taught social frameworks in order to accept their child's authentic gender expression (Wren, 2002). A prime example of this from our corpus is when Wayne's father (*Annabel*) is unequivocally dismissive of Wayne's identity in attitudes perhaps more typical of the time when it is set. Another overt example of rejection is in Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best*. The novel opens with protagonist Ben being forced out of their parents' home for expressing his authentic gender, coming out as non-binary:

> I came out to my parents, and they kicked me out of the house.
>
> To think I'd been ignorant enough to believe it'd go well. I really did. I thought that we could still be this happy family, no secrets between us. I could actually be me. And I should've known better than that.
>
> (Deaver, 2019, *I Wish You All the Best*, p. 16)

Ben longs to embrace his authentic self, identifying as non- binary, but their parents do not support this. Ben attempts to educate their parents on non-binary identities, attempting to get them to understand and comprehend the identity due to it being outside of common binary rhetoric. Parents of trans* individuals like Ben can be seen to reject their children due to their trans* identity creating a 'traumatic disruption' to familial role narratives. Wren (2002) indicates 'non-accepting parents [of trans* individuals] tend to have strategies that are repetitive and inflexible and are aimed towards restoring the lost status quo. ... There is a hope that if they ignore the problem, it will go away ... They do not seek to inform themselves about [trans* identities] ... They are preoccupied with negative views of transgenderism' (p. 390). Ben's parents seem to skip most of these strategies however, moving straight to erasing the 'problem' from their lives.

Ben is fortunate to have a supportive sister who becomes Ben's ally as she learns more about his identity, accepting them for who they are as they continue to express their authenticity. Ben's endeavor to educate their older sister about non-binary identities underscores a paradigm shift during the period in which my corpus of novels was written, where children are educating and challenging the preconceived notions of close relations, fostering a reciprocal learning dynamic (Norman, 2017). Further, shaping the understanding of parents and families regarding gender diverse identities represents a notable change from the traditional model of parents/carers socialising their children into established gender norms. In Salinas-Quiroz and Sweder's (2023) recent study on gender development, non-binary children had an active role in educating parents about evolving gender norms, challenging the traditional model of one-way parental socialisation. In this context, the family unit becomes an arena for 're-socialisation', not just of children but also of adults. Incorporating this understanding into a broader societal context, research by Norton and Herek (2013) elucidate upon the profound impact that families and communities have in shaping attitudes towards marginalised groups, underscoring the critical role that parents have in challenging traditional gender norms. This expanded role of parents in the re-socialisation process not only supports trans* individuals but also paves the way for a more inclusive and understanding society (Newhook et al, 2018). Thus, the process of educating parents becomes a microcosm of the larger struggle for societal acceptance and affirmation of diverse gender identities, as shown over the period studied within this thesis, 2010-2020.

The ability to express one's authentic self publicly is often diluted or hidden completely for trans* individuals, drawing attention to a key difference between gender identity and sexuality. In their study conducted towards the beginning of the period I am researching, Norton and Herek (2013) found significant differences in attitudes towards members of the LGBTQIA+ community with respect to questions of sexuality and gender diversity. They note that 'attitudes towards transgender people tend to be significantly more negative' (p.3), strongly suggesting that

diverse sexuality is more accepted than are trans* identities. Girard (2018) explores this notion in *Girl Mans Up,* with Pen's mother expressing that she would be able to accept Pen if they were a lesbian, as opposed to being gender queer:

> "You like the girls?" Mom asks, and as if she thinks I might not have understood what she meant, she goes, "You kiss the girls? That's okay. That's okay. You don't need the boy clothes. You don't need to cut you beautiful hair. You can kiss the girl and be a nice girl. It's okay."

> "That's not why I'm not a *princesa*," I tell her. "It's not about that. They don't go together." I liked boy stuff before I knew I was into girls, so I don't think one caused the other. I'm pretty sure that's not how it works. "I'm the way I am because that's how I am. That's it."

> "It's okay if you want to be ... *lésbica*," she says. "*Sua prima é uma.*"

> "You're not listening, Ma. I dress like this because I like it. It's how I'm supposed to look, even if I'm not kissing anybody."

> (Girard, 2018, *Girl Mans Up*, p. 352)

Essentially, one may deduce that the more an individual conforms to traditional gender binary norms, the more likely they are to be accepted, due to the level of familiarity (Norton and Herek, 2013). Similar to Girard, Thomas also utilises sexuality as a point of comparison in *Cemetery Boys:*

> Being transgender and gay had earned Yadriel the title of Head Black Sheep among the Brujx. Though, in truth, being gay had actually been much easier for them to accept, but only because they saw Yadriel's liking boys as still being heterosexual.

> (Thomas, *Cemetery Boys,* p. 13)

The resistance to learning about and accepting non-binary identities is part of a larger societal issue – transphobia. Many trans* individuals continue to face discrimination (Singh et al., 2021) and lack of representation in mainstream culture (Sumerau, 2019; Koch-Rein et al., 2020). Therefore, while the earlier example of Ben's experience is fictional, it represents a common and important issue faced by many trans* individuals in their everyday lives as they stive to express their authentic selves in the public domain. Ben's challenges in educating their carers about gender creative identities find resonance in recent research. The empirical findings of Klein and Golub (2016) substantiate the struggles faced by trans* individuals in gaining acceptance and understanding from their families as they begin to express their authentic gender identities publicly. The challenge posed by the current gender framework is that individuals are accountable to others to perform gender in specific ways. Those who violate gender norms often face severe consequences for their 'inappropriate gender displays', as (Goffman, 1976) observes.

> When the child separates from its parents to explore the new world, the parents can do one of two things. They can fight it with rules, pleading, tears and anger: 'Why do you want to go out in minus-fifteen-degree temperatures in that T-shirt when you could wear the wool I've warmed for you over the woodstove? It's so cosy.' Or they can admit the new world exists, dangerous and irresistible. Cosy is not what awakening youth wants. Safety is not what it wants.

(Winter, 2010, *Annabel*, p. 231)

Wayne's identity, which defies the traditional familial understanding of gender, compels his parents to make a pivotal choice: to accept, embrace, and support their child, or to respond with rejection. This conflict highlights the profound impact that deeply entrenched gender norms can have on a trans* individual's capacity for authentic self-expression. The novels portray this familial struggle as a reflection of broader societal expectations, suggesting that the journey of

understanding and accepting a trans* identity is a shared endeavour, not solely the responsibility of the individual. Those around them must also engage in this process of learning and adaptation.

This portrayal of acceptance and rejection is intimately linked to the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model, which underscores the fluid and context-dependent nature of gender identity. According to the SGF model, gender identity is not a static trait but is significantly shaped by social interactions and societal expectations. The tension between acceptance and rejection within familial contexts illustrates how gender identity is navigated through complex relational dynamics and institutional pressures.

Building on this foundation, the next section will explore the roles of allies and the significance of acceptance in fostering a supportive setting for trans* individuals. We will examine how such support contributes to experiences of gender euphoria, an emotional state where individuals find profound satisfaction and affirmation in their gender identity. By integrating these themes, we aim to deepen our understanding of how supportive relationships and settings can enhance the authenticity and well-being of trans* individuals, thereby enriching our interpretation of the SGF model and its application to real-world experiences.

Allies, Acceptance & Euphoria

Research into trans* identities has traditionally been dominated by medical and scientific perspectives, which often concentrate on gender *dys*phoria and the more challenging aspects of the trans* experience. As noted by Dale (2021), this focus can sometimes be narrow, with a tendency to highlight 'misery and discomfort' (p. 1) rather than the full spectrum of trans* experiences. In contrast, literature and fiction offer a unique and valuable opportunity to explore a more comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of trans* identities. While medical and scientific

research provides important insights into the physiological and psychological aspects of gender dysphoria, it can sometimes miss the richness of personal and emotional experiences.

Fiction allows for a multidimensional exploration of trans* lives, presenting characters and stories that reflect both struggles, as well as moments of joy and affirmation. By delving into these narratives, literature may capture the complexities of gender identity in ways that traditional research methods do not necessarily address. It provides a platform for examining themes such as gender euphoria and the impact of supportive relationships, offering readers a more empathetic and rounded understanding of trans* experiences. This thesis highlights how literature not only complements but also expands upon the findings of medical and scientific research. By engaging with fictional portrayals of trans* identities, we gain a deeper appreciation of the diversity and depth of these experiences, moving beyond a purely clinical view to embrace a richer, more humanising perspective.

The final part of this chapter analyses how several of the protagonists from my selected texts find affirmation from a person or group of people who accept them as they are, with experiences of gender euphoria cementing their trans* identity. With regard to public expression, the experience of gender euphoria may afford an individual the realisation that what they have actualised and brought into fruition with regard to their identity is right for them. Subsequently, this sense of euphoria may afford a trans* individual the strength to face coming out and being their authentic self in public, regardless of being accepted or rejected. Acceptance from close relations and acquaintances when expressing one's gender identity is a form of affirmation, a key component in *becoming* and expressing a trans* identity. Conversely, the rejection of a person's trans* identity is destructive, often compelling the individual to retreat back to concealing their 'beast', reverting to private expression and public performance, and in many cases seriously affecting their mental health (Pardoe & Trainor, 2017). Occasionally, rejection can be taken by a trans* individual as a fresh start, as seen in *The House on Half Moon Street* with Leo, as he leaves

his past life and identity as Lottie behind, therefore not complicating his true identity with past narratives.

Yadriel has the support of his best friend Maritza, who serves as a strong ally. The earlier, Private Expression chapter analysed how allies like Maritza provide essential support to trans* individuals in the experimentation and questioning stage of their diverse gender identity construction, within private settings. The role of allies is also highly significant to authentic gender expression in the public domain as, once an individual has come out, they may continue to play a crucial role in providing support. While others around the trans* individual struggle to accept their new identity, allies remain a constant source of support for the trans* individual:

> "You know who you are, *I* know who you are, and Our Lady does, too." She (Maritza) said with fierce conviction. "So screw the rest of them!" Maritza grinned at him. ...'
>
> During that time, Maritza had been his reliable secret keeper, smoothly going back and forth between pronouns when they were alone versus when they were around everyone else, until he was ready.
>
> It took him another year, when he was fourteen, to work up the courage to come out to his family. It hadn't gone nearly as well, and it was still a constant struggle to get them and the other Brujx to use the right pronouns and to call him by the right name. Other than Maritza, his mother, Camilla, had been the most supportive. It took time to relearn old habits, but she'd caught on surprisingly fast. Yadriel's mom had even taken on the task of gently correcting people so he didn't have to. It was a heavy burden, small instances piling up but his mom helped him shoulder some of the weight.
>
> (Thomas, *Cemetery Boys,* p. 16)

Winter portrays Wayne's mother Jacinta in *Annabel* as being lovingly responsive to Wayne's intersex identity. In stark contrast to Treadway, Jacinta embraces his differences. Further, instead

of representing an abstract threat, Jacinta sees Wayne's gender identity as a symbol of hope and magic, endowing a mythical and ethereal strength to Wayne's differences:

> Whereas he [Treadway] struck out on his own to decide how to erase the frightening ambiguity in their child, she envisioned living with it as it was. She imagined her daughter beautiful and grown up, in a scarlet satin gown, her male characteristics held secret under the clothing for a time when she might need a warrior's strength and a man's potent aggression. Then she imagined her son as a talented, mythical hunter, his breasts strapped in a concealing vest, his clothes the green of striding forward, his heart the heart of a woman who could secretly direct his path in the ways of intuition and psychological insight. Whenever she imagined her child, grown up without interference from a judgemental world, she imagined its male and female halves as complementing each other, and as being secretly, almost magically powerful.
>
> (Winter, 2010, *Annabel,* p. 28)

Unlike Treadway and Mr. Pritchard in *The House on Half Moon Street*, Jacinta is unafraid of what others would call a 'monster' or 'beast', and instead embraces the difference. She rejects the 'frightening ambiguity' and reclaims it as beautiful. Being supported and accepted during public expression, having somebody to rely on and confide in, is vital for continuing to express one's authentic self, and is of great benefit to health and wellbeing. 'The role of an ally outside of the family emerged as important for some transgender and gender diverse people whose family members were deeply affected by isolation, stigma, shame, and as a result were unsure how to support their transitioning family members' (von Doussa et al., 2017, p. 14). Thus, allies are essential in a trans* person's life (Ravago, 2019).

Although never gaining unconditional support from his father, Felix is relieved to find that his fears are somewhat assuaged, and he does not face outright rejection. Accessing the LGBTQIA+ support group gives Felix an extra bout of encouragement and resilience to

approach his father, coming out, once more, as his authentic demi-boy self. Callender's portrays the pivotal role of allies in *Felix Ever After*, particularly when navigating public expression. This dynamic illustrates how literature can weave theoretical ideas into the fabric of its storytelling, portraying the importance of allies in the journey of gender identity construction (Ballard et al., 2008). As Levitt and Ippolito (2014) found in their research, a large proportion of trans* individuals report that 'affirming communities can be lifesaving: they provide safety and support in exploring gender and promote self-acceptance.' (p. 1740). Utilising support groups as Felix does is an important process in becoming one's authentic self. Another key element in Felix's story is how he continues exploring and questioning his gender identity until it feels right, because 'identity formation is an ongoing process of balancing authenticity and necessity (e.g., safety); with purposeful shifts' (Levitt and Ippolito, 2014, p. 1743). Whilst Felix often feels unsafe or as though he is in danger of being rejected, he perseveres and utilises support around him to facilitate public expression on his gender identity journey.

The role of an ally may be adopted by any supportive person in a trans* person's life, whether they are directly related to the gender diverse individual or not. As a consequence of expressing his authentic gender identity, Ben in Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best* is outright rejected by their parents and forced out of their home, subsequently moving in with their estranged sister, Hannah. Ben is initially nervous to meet Hannah, thinking that she might respond similarly to their parents. However, she is extremely welcoming and immediately begins to try to understand Ben's non-binary identity.

Hannah is a great example of an ally. Deaver portrays her as being not well versed in the terminology and culture of trans* identities, but instead open to learning, and to being as affirming and supportive as possible. In this situation, Hannah works hard to make their sibling feel comforted by the use of inclusive language. 'The power of language in fostering acceptance: In hearing transgender narratives and becoming aware of social process that don't enforce

traditional gender standards and the possibilities for self - exploration expand.' (Levitt and Ippolito, 2014, p. 1740). Allies like Hannah, despite being a family member, exist outside of the confines of the traditional nuclear household; she provides Ben with a secure haven detached from the home setting that had rejected them. Von Doussa et al. (2017) found that 'the role of an ally outside of the family [home] emerged as important for some transgender and gender diverse people whose family members were deeply affected by isolation, stigma, shame, and as a result were unsure how to support their transitioning family members' (p. 14). While Ben is with Hannah, she continues to support their self –discovery, helping to build Ben's confidence to express their authentic trans* identity.

Hannah's engagement with Ben throughout the novel is sweet and simple, demonstrating the value in just listening to the trans* individual and treating them as another human being, which allows them to live an authentic life as themselves. In *Cemetery Boys,* a different narrative regarding allyship and a journey of acceptance exists with regard to Yadriel's relationship to his father. As previously discussed, Yadriel's father is not the most accepting of Yadriel's trans* identity, being tolerant at best. However, through Yadriel's quest to prove to everybody that he is a true *brujo*, or true man, he succeeds in the magical sense, proving his masculine powers and subsequently showing his father who he truly is, finally gaining his father's approval.

"My son.

A brujo.

How long had he been waiting to hear those words? Having them said aloud, to a room full of brujx, made Yadriel's legs feel weak. It was like a dream, but so much better. ...

"The aquelarre celebrates *transition*. All of you are on the precipice between youth and adulthood," he said to the line of young brujx. "Between uncertainty and confidence. Our traditions should grow and change with every generation.

Just because we follow the ancient ways does not mean we can't also grow. I have been shown that these past few days," Enrique said. "I failed my son, Yadriel, as both a father and a leader. ... He tried to tell me who he was, but I didn't listen, I didn't understand." He looked at Yadriel then. "But now I am listening, and I will learn to do better," he promised. ... Growth isn't a deviation from what we've done before, but a natural progression to honor all those who make this community strong."

(Thomas, 2020, *Cemetery Boys*, p. 339)

Yadriel's personal journey unveils not only his magical capabilities, but also mirrors the broader experiences of trans* individuals in their quest for validation and visibility. The culmination of Yadriel's transformative quest finds resonance in his father's evolving perspective, symbolising an acceptance that extends beyond Yadriel's gender as he embraces his rightful place within the family and the magical Brujeria community.

The journey of the protagonists explored in this thesis reveals the multifaceted nature of gender identity and its public expression. This exploration not only delves into the challenges faced, such as rejection from close relationships and the pain caused by societal pressures to mask one's true self, but it also highlights the transformative potential of positive experiences, such as gender euphoria. These moments of affirmation and joy often provide a counterbalance to the negativity encountered, showcasing the profound impact of authentic self-expression.

In addressing the theoretical questions posed in the chapter introduction, this analysis has sought to illuminate how gender identity is navigated and articulated through both personal and public spheres. The nuanced depiction of our protagonists' experiences underscores how their journeys are not merely about overcoming adversity but also about embracing moments of genuine self-recognition and joy. The exploration of gender euphoria and the role of supportive relationships—whether from allies or within supportive communities—provides a deeper understanding of the positive dimensions of gender identity.

Fiction serves as a vital tool in this context, offering insights into realms that are often inaccessible through traditional research methods. While some fictional narratives may inhabit fantastical worlds that prioritise imagination and wonder, others, such as those employing magical realism, blur the boundaries between the extraordinary and the everyday. Magical realism, unlike the purely fantastical, integrates magical elements seamlessly into realistic settings, grounding its narratives in lived experiences and cultural specificity while challenging conventional notions of reality. This interplay between the imagined and the tangible allows fiction to act as both a means of escape and a reflective tool for examining issues surrounding gender identity. By engaging with these narratives, whether through the fantastical exploration of entirely imagined realms or the culturally rooted magical realism that juxtaposes the magical with the mundane, readers can confront psychological and societal processes that influence gender diversity. In doing so, they gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape individuals' lives.

Ultimately, the gender-diverse protagonists in my corpus strive to achieve Public Expression: the authentic and open communication of their true selves despite the rigid gender norms that have historically governed their lives. Through the analysis of fiction, this chapter has demonstrated how the interplay of positive and negative experiences contributes to a richer and more nuanced understanding of gender identity. This examination not only answers the theoretical questions posed but also illustrates the significant role fiction plays in exploring and reflecting upon the diverse experiences of trans* individuals, ultimately enriching our comprehension of their journeys towards self-expression.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

In this thesis, I have critically examined how the authenticity of trans* identities are depicted and interrogated within contemporary fiction, offering a comprehensive understanding of gender identity construction. Central to my research was the exploration of how literature can serve as a powerful medium to advance our comprehension of trans* authenticity, particularly in relation to personal identity formation and societal pressures. Through the analysis of key texts, this work underscores the significant role literature plays not only in reflecting but also in shaping discussions about trans* identities and the complexities of gender diversity.

A key aim of this thesis was to investigate how literary works depict and engage with the notion of 'innate gender', particularly in terms of how characters persist in their gender identity despite societal opposition or personal struggle. Through my extensive research and writing I have emphasised how fiction reveals the resilience of gender identity, drawing upon McLachlan's (2010) findings regarding the persistence of gender identity among trans* individuals. For instance, by analysing novels such as *Felix Ever After* and *Cemetery Boys*, I was able to illustrate how protagonists persist in their pursuit of authentic self-expression even when confronted by external pressures. The representation of these characters reveals how fiction can encapsulate the complexities of trans* and non-binary experiences, reflecting the broader societal challenges faced by gender diverse individuals.

Throughout this thesis, I applied my Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model as a framework for understanding the dynamic processes of gender identity construction as depicted in literature. The SGF model enabled a comprehensive examination of the interplay between setting, socialisation, private expression, and public expression within the texts studied. By focusing on these quadrants of identity formation, I have uncovered the multiple layers of experience that inform the protagonists' gender journeys. In the analysis of texts such as *House on Half Moon Street* and *I Wish You All the Best,* for example, I explored how the protagonists

navigate societal expectations while seeking validation of their gender identities, revealing the intricate processes that contribute to authentic self-expression.

Moreover, this thesis has contributed to an inclusive understanding of gender diversity in literature, demonstrating that literary representation serves as both a reflection of real-world gender issues and a critical space for exploring trans* and non-binary experiences. I have drawn heavily on Rosenblatt's (1982) transactional theory, highlighting the way in which fiction facilitates a transaction between the reader's personal experiences and the narrative. This approach underscores the vital role that fiction plays in engaging readers with the complexities of trans* identities, making literature a powerful tool for exploring personal, often deeply complex, areas of study such as gender diversity. By inviting readers to engage with the narratives of gender diverse characters, literature has the potential to challenge traditional norms and foster greater empathy and understanding across society.

The intersection of trans* and literary studies remains an emerging yet crucial area of academic inquiry. This thesis has addressed key research questions concerning how literature enables or limits representations of gender diversity and how such representations contribute to a more inclusive discourse on identity. By offering a critical examination of the portrayal of trans* authenticity, my work has not only advanced knowledge within literary studies but also within broader discussions on gender diversity. My analysis has demonstrated how fiction can be used as a methodological tool to offer insights into the lived experiences of trans* individuals, revealing the potential for literature to push beyond mere representation and into the realm of advocacy and social transformation.

The cornerstone of this thesis is my SGF model, a framework that synthesises insights from Serano's work on gender identity, while also expanding upon them with elements drawn from Butler's theory of performativity. This model captures the four stages (or 'quadrants') of gender identity formation: Subconscious/Intrinsic Gender, Private Expression, Public

Performance, and Public Expression. Each of the core texts in this thesis exemplifies these stages as characters evolve or fluctuate between experiences of self-discovery and authentic expression. The alignment between theory and narrative underscores both the universality and individuality of the gender identity journey, demonstrating how gender-diverse individuals navigate complex and multifaceted identities.

While Serano's work emphasises the internal facets of gender—particularly the distinction between *brain sex* and *genital sex*—my approach builds on her theory by further exploring the interplay between the internal, subconscious understanding of gender and the external expressions shaped by social contexts. The SGF model extends Serano's focus on individual self-determination by analysing the evolving relationship between subconscious gender identity, private expression, public performance, and public expression, all within the confines of societal structures. This differs from Butler's framework, which prioritises the performative nature of gender and its social construction through repeated acts. In contrast, the SGF model offers a more fluid understanding of gender identity formation, recognising both the subjective, subconscious facets of gender and how these intersect with public and private expressions in diverse social contexts.

The integration of the SGF model with literary analysis bridges a scholarly gap by offering a multidimensional approach to gender identity formation that considers both the internal, subconscious experience of gender and the external, social performances that occur within structured settings. The characters within *House on Half Moon Street*, *Felix Ever After*, and others vividly demonstrate these stages of identity formation, showing how gender-diverse individuals experience the tension between self-expression and societal expectations. The flexibility of the SGF model allows for a comprehensive analysis that brings together theoretical inquiry and literary exploration, providing new insights into both the individual and collective experiences of gender. By synthesising these elements, this thesis contributes to a broader

discourse on gender identity, challenging reductive models and offering a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender diversity.

This fusion of theoretical and literary analysis has enabled a robust investigation into gender diverse identities, contributing to trans* studies, literary criticism, and gender theory. By using literature as both a lens and a tool for understanding the lived experiences of trans* individuals, this thesis situates itself as an essential contribution to ongoing dialogues on inclusivity, representation, and the evolving understanding of gender diversity in contemporary society.

The analysis of Young Adult (YA) fiction played an essential role in this research, as it provided a rich and accessible lens through which to explore gender diverse identities in formative stages of life. YA fiction, often concerned with themes of identity development, self-discovery, and social belonging, is uniquely positioned to reflect the complexities of gender exploration during adolescence—a period where the construction and negotiation of gender identity is particularly salient. This genre also creates a space for younger audiences to engage with stories that mirror their own struggles and journeys, fostering greater awareness and empathy for diverse experiences of gender.

In employing the Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model, the YA texts studied in this thesis allowed for a nuanced investigation of how young characters navigate private and public expressions of gender in settings that either constrain or support their authenticity. The emotional stakes of YA fiction, combined with its broad readership, make it an ideal vehicle for representing the evolving dimensions of gender identity in accessible yet profound ways. By exploring these narratives, the study has highlighted how societal pressures, family dynamics, and personal exploration intersect in YA fiction to either inhibit or facilitate authentic gender expression.

Moving forward, I am eager to extend these parameters in future research, particularly as new trans*-focused YA fiction continues to emerge. Since 2022, there has been a surge of diverse and nuanced representations of trans* characters in YA literature, reflecting the ongoing shifts in both cultural and literary landscapes. Expanding the corpus to include these newer works will offer fresh insights and further develop the applicability of the SGF model, contributing to a broader understanding of the representation and construction of trans* identities in literature. This ongoing development underscores the value of YA fiction as a dynamic space for critical discussions about gender diversity.

The structure of this thesis echoes my SGF model, providing a comprehensive explanation of each quadrant as part of my literary analysis. Exploring the influence of setting, I have drawn primarily on the works of Peace et al. (2006) and Dourish (2006) to examine how physical space and place impact gender identity construction. Rather than focusing solely on abstract power dynamics, as seen in Foucauldian approaches, this chapter centres on the external, tangible factors that shape identity—particularly how the settings in which individuals are situated can either inhibit or enable authentic gender expression.

In highlighting the situatedness of gender, I analyse how rural, urban, and liminal spaces impact the lives of gender diverse individuals. For example, *Annabel* vividly illustrates the isolation and rigidity of gender norms in the remote Labrador setting, which constrains Wayne's ability to fully express his identity. Conversely, *Felix Ever After* explores the complexities of an urban environment like New York City, where Felix navigates both the anonymity and hypervisibility that urban life brings for a transgender teen. Both texts underscore the ways in which setting—whether through isolation or social pressure—interacts with personal identity construction.

Drawing on Dourish's (2006) exploration of embodied interaction and Peace et al.'s (2006) concept of place, I argue that settings are not merely passive backdrops but active agents

in shaping gender identity. By linking this analysis to my SGF model, I demonstrate how different settings shape key aspects of the gender identity journey; particularly the movement through the quadrants of Private Expression, Public Expression, Public Performance, and Subconscious/Intrinsic Gender. These settings, whether familial, social, or cultural, play a pivotal role in influencing how individuals navigate and negotiate their gender identity. The fluidity between these quadrants underscores how individuals may shift between private and public expressions of gender, perform gender differently depending on context, and reconcile their intrinsic sense of self with external expectations. This model, therefore, provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the complex, dynamic process of gender identity construction. In this way, the geographic and social setting is shown to play a critical role in determining how, and to what extent, gender diverse individuals can authentically express their true selves.

Furthermore, investigating setting in my selected contemporaneous novels revealed the particular relevance of digital spaces for the respective, gender diverse protagonists. Focusing on the novels where digital spaces were most consequential, *I Wish You All the Best* and *Symptoms of Being Human*, it was apparent that, aside from instances of harassment and online bullying, these digital spaces constituted an extension of the private sphere; areas in which an individual can safely explore, experiment, or disclose their gender identity prior to 'coming out'. For many cisgender young people, the private sphere typically encompasses the family home; I discussed how trans* individuals are frequently unable to express themselves within this setting. As such, safe spaces such as trans* support groups, as in *Symptoms of Being Human*, or in a best friend's bedroom, as seen in *Sasha Masha,* serve this essential purpose. By drawing on my SGF model, it can be seen that the private domain is not necessarily denoted by a place itself, but the people and the level of trust that is cultivated within it; in the case of digital spaces, this includes the anonymity that is offered. In sum, setting has a profound effect on gender diverse individuals

with regard to how ably they can authentically express themselves, or whether they mask their authentic gender and perform to what is expected of them.

Throughout my thesis, I have focused on and assessed the formidable obstacles that individuals encounter when challenging encoded, binary gender norms. The examination of socialisation within the context of my core texts serves as a compelling testament to the multidimensional nature inherent to constructing gender identity. In Winter's *Annabel*, Wayne's father Treadway persists in his attempts to mold Wayne into a conventional representation of masculinity, exemplifying how socialised gender values create pressure to conform to prescribed norms, suppressing individual authenticity. By contrast, affirming and positive socialisation is exemplified by the portrayal of Ben's sister, Hannah, in *I Wish You All the Best*. Hannah provides affirmation, rather than denigration, encouraging Ben to embrace their true identity, representing the influence of a nurturing backdrop in fostering authentic gender identity exploration.

By investigating how socialised gender values impact authenticity, my research underscores the importance of narrative fiction in providing a deeper understanding of this domain of human experience, countering the harmful effects that adhering to strict gender binary norms confer to mental health. Ultimately, my exploration of socialisation's commanding influence within our core texts underscores the complexities involved in constructing gender identity. Examining the varied facets of these narratives has provided substantive insights into the challenges, and resilience, embedded within each character's journey. These trajectories mirror the real-world struggles of individuals grappling with societal norms and expectations.

As provided by the framework of my SGF model, my analysis of private expression and public coming out emphasises the significance of exploration and experimentation in establishing an authentic gender identity, acknowledging the complexities involved when preparing to express oneself authentically in public. It is within private spaces that the idea of authenticity is created,

where gender identity evolves from an introspective revelation to a poised assertion. Throughout this thesis, I assert that private expression is more than just a stage of my SGF model; it is a transformative journey that emboldens individuals to redefine their identity on their own terms. Within the textual analysis, diverse examples of private expression emerged. A key example of the significance of private expression was discussed in relation to *Sasha Masha*, in which the protagonist of the novel, Alex, relies upon the support of their best friend in their private expression, experimenting with clothes and characters; they are both affirming and accepting of each other. Another prime example from the corpus was represented by Wayne's (Winter's *Annabel*) and their bridge fort, constituting a metaphor for their experimental journey and a private expression of Wayne's gender diverse self. Collectively, each novel showcases the transformative potential of the private domain, within which the protagonists enjoy cultivating resilience, including by reclaiming derogatory labels as symbols of empowerment. This stands as a testament to the courage, fortitude, and determination of trans* individuals as they navigate the uncharted waters of self-discovery.

Drawing on the findings from my research on the subject of public expression, this stage represented an essential goal for trans* individuals, usually written into the denouement of each narrative. This stage encapsulates the synthesis of internal self-examination and external declaration, being the culmination of the protagonists' arduous yet triumphant journeys. Throughout this thesis, I have worked through the key stages of gender identity construction with the SGF model as a guiding principle to determine the order of the chapters. While the process of gender identity construction should be regarded as fluid and flexible, a key goal of trans* individuals is to be live authentically, publicly declaring their gender diverse identities.

As this thesis navigated the lives of the characters in the novels, each forging a unique trail through the multifaceted maze of societal expectations, a deeper appreciation for the power of public affirmation and recognition has been gleaned. The narrative arc following each protagonist

resonates as a universal human quest: the aspiration for validation, an assertion of self, and a celebration of identity within the broader sense of existence. As witnessed in Leo's unflinching resolve in *The House on Half Moon Street*, the historical confines of Victorian London prove no match for his determination to live authentically as a man. Similarly, Yadriel's journey in *Cemetery Boys* echoes with the liberating impact of public acceptance, resonating deeply as a narrative of belonging and recognition. These tales encapsulate the force of external affirmation in enriching personal identity and fostering communal cohesion.

My research advocates for the crucial role of representation in promoting belonging and empowerment among gender diverse individuals, particularly the younger generation. Young Adult (YA) literature, specifically, plays a vital role in this conversation. Since 2010, YA fiction has begun to emerge as a significant genre for exploring gender diversity, offering more visible and nuanced depictions of non-binary, transgender, and gender-questioning protagonists. The focus on young individuals navigating the formative stages of their identity development makes YA fiction uniquely suited to tracing the complexities of gender identity construction. These narratives frequently centre on the journey of self-discovery, where protagonists encounter challenges around acceptance, societal expectations, and personal authenticity—key themes that mirror the lived experiences of many young readers.

By choosing recent YA works, I aimed to reflect how these novels not only capture the urgency of exploring gender diversity in contemporary settings but also resonate with younger audiences who are actively shaping their identities. Literature in this genre becomes an essential tool to trace these processes because it enables readers to engage in a transaction between their personal experiences and the narrative, as outlined by Rosenblatt's transactional theory. Through this, YA fiction offers a safe and imaginative space where readers can explore identity, question norms, and feel represented. My SGF model, when applied to these narratives, illuminates how external factors—socialisation, setting, and public expression—interact with internal

understandings of gender, allowing a more comprehensive insight into identity formation. Additionally, my personal reflections on the gendered negotiations in these texts provide a further dimension of credibility, affirming the value of YA fiction in understanding gender diversity. For future research, expanding this parameter is critical, especially considering the proliferation of trans*focused YA fiction since 2021.

Collectively, the findings highlight that trans* and gender diverse fictional portrayals provide a platform for initiating dialogue, fostering cultural intelligibility, and offering a safe space for navigating the complexities of gender identity. It is my hope that my thesis and subsequent, interrelated work leaves behind a legacy that extends beyond the written word. In a world where authentic gender diversity remains a pivotal issue, this research draws attention to the necessity of inclusive and diverse representation in literature. As novels provide a unique platform for validating, authenticating, and celebrating gender diverse identities, they play a vital role in shaping cultural perceptions and facilitating societal change. The journey of these characters reflects the journeys of countless individuals, urging society to embrace and celebrate the multifaceted nature of gender identity. This thesis contributes to both the academic and social spheres by shedding light on the dynamic interplay between fiction, gender identity, and setting with the representation of gender-diverse characters in literature from 2010 to 2021 It illuminates the evolving landscape of literary narratives, where authors have increasingly engaged with the complexities and nuances of gender identity construction. My corpus of fiction represents a shift towards more authentic and diverse portrayals of gender diverse individuals, shedding light on their unique journeys, challenges, and triumphs. This progression highlights the growing recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusivity in contemporary literature, allowing readers to connect with a broader range of lived experiences.

The development and application of my Situational Gender Fluidity (SGF) model invites exciting new avenues of research. Scholars and literary enthusiasts exploring the model's potential

may feel inclined to adapt and expand its various elements to further enhance our understanding of gender identity construction in fiction. With its focus on the interplay between setting, socialisation, private expression, and public expression, the SGF model paves the way for a deeper exploration of how these interrelated elements shape characters and narratives in literature and beyond. Further, the model's adaptability makes it a valuable tool for analysing various forms of literature, from different time periods to diverse cultural contexts. The model also has the potential to be applied to other media forms, such as film and television, offering a comprehensive framework for examining gender representation across different artistic mediums.

By advocating for authentic representation and employing my original SGF model, this research expands the theoretical understanding of gender identity, as well as illuminating its real-world implications for individuals and society at large. Moving forward, let these findings inspire continued efforts towards a more inclusive, empathetic, and understanding world for gender diverse individuals, where their stories are not only acknowledged, but celebrated.

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