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“Transgender Transgenre: The Precarious Body in  
Alyssa Brugman’s *Alex as well* and Casey Plett’s *Little  
Fish*”

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## 1. Introduction

“Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres,” (3) says Jacques Derrida in his essay “The Law of Genre” (1980), only to proceed and disprove the notion of pure genres. The imperative is broken whenever genre is enacted; genre defined as a discourse in which texts participate and transform but to which they never belong. Originally written in French, the word genre presents not only genre but also gender and genus, which are therefore included in Derrida’s essay. It leads to contemplations of the nature of gender in comparison to genre, the possibility of mixing genders, and the relation between gender and genre. Concerning mixtures of gender, the term transgender comes to mind, which has received increased attention from various fields in the last years. In Literature Studies, potential connections between gender, transgender, and genre have been of interest, and the question of influence between transgender and genre constitutes the main interest of this thesis.

A look at previous research into the relation between transgender and genre reveals a nearly exclusive focus on the genre of auto/biography (see Hausman 2006; Kérchy 2009; English 2014), which is known for its tendency to cross genre borders and to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction. Aside of this particular genre, only one other genre with transgender as main topic appears to have gained the attention of researchers: Young Adult Literature (YAL). However, studies and analyses concerning texts of this particular genre appear similarly focused in their approach: The pedagogical value of transgender young adult texts is seen as central in their considerations and is most often the focus of such studies (see Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth 2015; Boyd and Bereiter 2017; Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar 2013). To my knowledge, no study focusing on the relation between transgender and genre in transgender young adult novels has been conducted as of yet, and studies analysing texts with the topic transgender of a genre aside of auto/biography and YAL are scarce if not absent from current research.

It is therefore the aim of this thesis to analyse how transgender characters and the transgender body are created in narratives of different genres and in how far genre expectations are adhered to or disregarded. To achieve this aim two novels will be analysed with regard to the following topics: adherence to genre conventions, unconventional narratological features, intermediality, construction of transgender through language, and the depiction of the transgender body. Two recent narratives which are commonly attributed to different genres and feature a transgender or gender non-conforming person as the main character are analysed: *Little Fish* (2018) by Casey Plett and *Alex as well* (2013) by Alyssa Brugman. The chosen texts differ not only in genre but also in their geographical setting, intended audience, and even

nationality: *Little Fish* is a Canadian novel set in a contemporary Canadian city, whereas *Alex as well* is from an Australian author, aimed at adolescent readers and its locale is an Australian city. As such, two texts differing not only in genre allocation but also in language and their transcultural and transnational context. Such aspects, while in need of discussion, might be the focus of another study and are not further discussed here. This thesis focuses on the *trans*- as pertaining to gender and genre, and the analysis concerns aspects such as narratology and language choices and their function in creating and contributing to the representation of concepts such as transgender, gender binarity, and embodiment. The following questions are the main research questions:

- How do genre conventions and expectations influence or restrict queerness and transgender in the texts and are genre conventions adhered to or disregarded?
- How is transgender produced in the text? How are binaries of sex and gender created or challenged?
- How are transgender or gender non-conforming bodies produced in the texts? What is the relationship of the transgender person in the text to his or her body, and how is it mediated to the reader?

The thesis consists of three main chapters: The first chapter focuses entirely on the relationship between transgender and genre and introduces essential concepts such as genre, transgenre, and queer. Insights of previous research into the relationship between (trans)gender and genre are presented before the adherence of the narratives to generic norms and queer narrative aspects that disrupt such genre expectations are analysed in the second chapter. Intermediality is also considered as such disrupting factor and discussed in relation to queering genre. The third part focuses on the creation of transgender and the transgender body as precarious entities in the texts and examines how binaries of sex and gender are created or questioned by examination of characterisation, word choice, gendered language, and the creation of the transgender body.

## 2. Transgender and Transgenre

Before the relation between transgender and genre is analysed, an overview of the topic transgender in literature is necessary to understand the development of the topic's portrayal and its relation to specific literary genres. In contrast to Film Studies, where texts such as John Philipps' *Transgender on Screen* (2006) provide a detailed overview of transgender in film, a comprehensive list of literary texts with transgender characters or a history of transgender literature is yet to be written. As such, the first instance of transgender characters in literature, or transgender literature, is undetermined. Transvestism, cross-dressing, or sudden sex changes have occurred in literature before the conception of the term transgender in the twentieth century, which further complicates locating the beginning of transgender in literature.

Recognised early works with the transgender topic are Gregory Casparian's *The Anglo-American Alliance* (1906) or Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). The former is attributed to science fiction and the second includes supernatural elements, such as the main character's extraordinary life span of 300+ years. Both these texts include a rather rapid and unproblematic change of sex: In Casparian's novel, Margaret, a central character, volunteers to undergo a "mental and physical metamorphosis" (Casparian 112) through "hypnotism, surgery and magic" (113). After awakening, the new man is able to marry his previously homosexual lover. The sex change is a means to a specific end: to allow for the marriage between two women. In *Orlando*, the main character suddenly wakes in the body of a woman, which is accepted without further ado. The sex change in both texts is not pursued by either character out of an explicit desire to change sex and gender and occurs through magical means. Another early work featuring a transgender character is Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), a satirical novel featuring a transsexual woman who transitions from male to female and de-transitions in the sequel *Myron* (1974). The play with gender, sexuality, and power relations are central topics in these texts. It is only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that transgender in the contemporary sense gains more consideration in literature. This development is focused on two genres in particular as a look at contemporary studies concerning transgender narratives suggests: young adult literature and auto/biographies.

From a historical perspective, auto/biography is of great importance to transgender literature. Transgender and the memoir are closely linked, which results in the subgenre known as transgender memoir or transition memoir. The exact beginning of this genre remains a topic of debate and unclear. Jennifer Boylan (2017) sees the first text of this genre in Christine Jorgensen's *A Personal Autobiography* in 1967, whereas Juliet Jacques (2017) mentions Lili Elbe's *Man Into Woman* (1933) as the first text of transgender life writing (Jacques 358). But

the genre established itself as such, when the growing public interest in transgender and ‘sex change,’ as it was termed, led to publications of other memoirs in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly by transgender women (359). The genre of the transgender memoir was established, as Jacques notes, “with recognisable clichés and conventions – not all of which sat comfortably with feminist or gender-variant readers” (359). The stereotypical example of this genre is seen in *Conundrum* (1974) by Jan Morris, which portrays transgender as a problem to be resolved (359). The memoir can be seen as the earliest mode of writing for transgender authors. Even in academic theoretical texts about transgender, the influence of the autobiographical experiences is noted. In fact, the prevalence and influence of the transgender theorist’s life and their personal experiences in their texts “ensured that directly autobiographical writing would remain the dominant mode of trans discourse” (357).

A possible reason for the concentration of transgender texts in this particular genre is given by Kate Bornstein in *Gender Outlaw* (1994): “Up until the last few years, all we’d be able to write *and get published* were our autobiographies, tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pining away in the bodies of women [,] [...] the romantic stuff which set in stone our image as long-suffering” (Bornstein 12). Boundaries and restrictions regarding genre and the portrayal of transgender therein were placed on transgender writers by publishers, editors, and audience alike. It is therefore of no surprise that numerous studies, such as Hugh English (2006), Anna Kérchy (2009), Bernice Hausmann (2006), or Kate Drabinsky (2014), concern the transgender memoir seeing as it is the dominant genre for transgender texts.

However, the genre of the transgender memoir did not remain static in its form. Most influential in this regard were Sandy Stone’s *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1987) and Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw* (1994). The former is seen as one of the fundamental texts in the development of transgender studies and explicitly addresses the genre of transgender (auto)biographies, influencing the development of transgender literature. Stone criticises the perpetuation of the gender binary in the transgender memoirs of Lili Elbe, Morris, and in Hedy Jo Star’s *I Changed My Sex!*: “[T]he authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between” (Stone 225). In these texts, the transgender character is either a man or a woman, and it is possible to identify the moment of transformation, where the ‘change’ from one gender and sex to another occurs due to its explicit narrative construction: “This moment is [...] gender reassignment or ‘sex change surgery’” (225). Before this transformation, the characters are described and referred to as the gender they



were assigned at birth, and it is only through sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) that they become the desired gender and sex and see themselves as such.

Stone asks the question for whom these texts were written since transgender persons in literature as well as in reality appear to conform to rather than question or disrupt the gender binary by the means of passing. Passing, the act of being successfully read as a non-transgender person is “the most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that constitutes success” (231). It results in the transgender person’s invisibility, which, according to Stone, is what is necessary to gain “acceptability in society” (230). From this perspective, “[t]he highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself, to fade into the ‘normal’ population as soon as possible” (230). For a non-transgender readership, the transgender or transsexual person is therefore portrayed as acceptable to mainstream society since they are ‘trapped in the wrong body’ and ‘cured through transition’. The binaries of gender and sex are not endangered due to the transgender person’s adherence to these binaries. Considering the socio-cultural context of the time, with *Manifesto* first being published in 1987, censorship and enforcement of heteronormativity and gender binarity in official text do not surprise since LGBTQ+ persons were not as accepted in these times as they are now.

Other important milestones in the development of transgender literature are *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) by Leslie Feinberg and *Luna* (2004) by Julie Anne Peters. *Stone Butch Blues* is seen as the first novel with a transgender protagonist, whereas *Luna* marks the rapid development of transgender young adult novels. Besides transgender memoirs, the adolescent novel featuring transgender characters has been the focus of numerous studies concerning transgender in literature, in particular regarding the pedagogical use of these texts in relation to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) and the portrayal thereof in literary texts (see Ryan et al. 2013; Parsons 2016; Boyd and Bereiter 2017). For reasons of readability, I operate with the abbreviation LGBTQ+ instead of LGBTQIA or other variations thereof.

Regarding the second dominant genre of transgender literature and the binary portrayal of gender, similar observations have been made. Robert Bittner (2017) sketches the development of LGBTQ+ literature in young adult literature (YAL) and remarks on the low number of young adult novels with transgender protagonists and the portrayal of transgender. The inclusion of transgender protagonists in YAL has been and continues to be comparatively slow in comparison to adolescent novels with homosexual or bisexual characters (68). While there have been earlier texts with crossdressing and gender non-conforming behaviour of protagonists, the first explicit transgender young adult novel according to Bittner is *Luna* (2004)

(61) and the number of young adult novels (YAN) with transgender protagonists has increased but remains at less than 1% of young adult novels published annually (69). Regarding adherence to gender norms and genre conventions, Bittner notes that a multitude of published transgender adolescent novels focus “on characters who wish for eventual gender reassignment surgery” (69), which is similar to Stone’s critic of transgender memoirs adhering and reinforcing the gender binary. This appears as problematic since the gender binary is unquestionably maintained in the novels and conceptions of gender as a spectrum and the possibility of positions on such spectrum or outside of it are negated, especially considering the development of LGBTQ+ discourse and acceptance of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary.

Furthermore, Bittner speaks of a certain prevalent structure of transgender narratives and stereotyping of the transgender characters as “‘the bitchy drag queen’ or the ‘confused teenager’” (69). The eventuality of seeking gender reassignment surgery, or SRS, is seen as almost typical for the transgender YAN plot, posing another genre convention. Consequently, Bittner identifies “an empty space within publishing for more literature with genderqueer, intersex, and gender variant content in which characters [...] do not necessarily identify with a specific binary gender” (69).

Concerning the development of the relation between genre and transgender, the genre of auto/biography appears central, especially regarding genre and genre transgressions. To address the genre-transgressing potential of transgender narratives, it is first necessary to consider the parallels between the concepts of gender and genre for which the different conceptualisations of genre are discussed first.

## **2.1. Gender and Genre**

Genre is used interdisciplinary with corresponding differences in definition and has a long tradition resulting in a variety of conceptions and theories of the term. As David Duff in *Modern Genre Theory* (2000) therefore describes it aptly, genre is an unstable and problematic concept with a long history (1), which can be traced back to antiquity.

Relevant insights into the current perception of genre are provided by Ivo Ritzer and Peter Schulze in *Transmediale Genre-Passagen: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven* (2016). Genre is examined in relation to terminology and taxonomy, structure, discourse, and mediality, and is conceptualised as a multidimensional concept with the central elements of classification and organisation and regulation of reader expectations (1). Genre denotes configurations of texts that share specific aesthetic characteristics, and concepts to categorise such texts according to specific historical and cultural settings under specific terms (2). In short, at its most basic

definition, genre can be defined as “a recurring type or category of text, as defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria” (Duff xiii).

Another important characteristic of genre, from a poststructuralist perspective, is its discursive origin. Genres do not exist outside or independent of the texts attributed to them. They are constructed in interdependent relation to texts and recurring patterns. So, genres are inherently unstable and subject to historicity and transformation processes (2).

Nevertheless, prescriptivism and compulsory rules inhibiting the author’s creativity are often associated with the concept of genre. As Duff notes, “[e]ven when there is no mention of ‘rules’ or ‘conventions’ [...], [genre] seems almost by definition to deny the autonomy of the author, deny the uniqueness of the text, deny spontaneity, originality and self-expression” (1). The relation between prescriptivism and literary genres can be seen as dependent on the conceptualisation of genre.

Conceptualised in their function of classification and their use for creating taxonomies, genres are seen as distinct, separate, and mutually exclusive, from this perspective (38). A text ascribed to such a class ought to exhibit the characteristics or formal criteria attributed to this genre raising the question of prescriptivism and inhibition of the author’s creativity. Prescriptivist views of genre were mostly commonplace in the Renaissance and in Neoclassicism. Especially neoclassical genre criticism is known, as Alastair Fowler in his *Kinds of Literature* (1982) expresses it, for being “crudely prescriptive” (26). Genre definitions and even genre rules were based on texts of the antiquity, were generalised, and applied to medieval and vernacular genres (27-28), which Fowler sees as one of two “great error[s] of neoclassical genre theory” (27), the other issue being the conceptualisation of genres as immutable and seeing the generic rules as fixed. With this conceptualisation in mind, new texts either had to adhere to these antique rules or be of such exemplary quality that exemption of these generic rules was possible (27). Or, as Duff puts it plainly, Neoclassicism would “deny the existence of a new genre on the grounds that Aristotle didn’t define it” (4).

It was only in Romanticism that generic rules and the concept of genre itself became topic of debate, which was furthered by recognising the historicity of genre (3-4). The Aristotelian triad of poetry, epic, and drama was called into question, which, until then, was accepted without question, if not seen as the ‘natural’ taxonomy of literary texts considering Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Naturformen der Dichtung*, which were based on the Aristotelian division (3). The main legacies of Romanticism were, however, the realisation that ignoring generic ‘rules’ was feasible and the explicit formulation of this idea, firstly in Friedrich Schlegel’s *Fragments on Literature and Poetry* (1797) (Duff 4-5). This realisation carried into

Postmodernism and -structuralism, where the notion of genre as separate classes of texts that exhibit the same prescriptive characteristics within their class, was debated and laid to rest. Highly influential in this regard was Derrida's essay "The Law of Genre" (1979).

### **Law of Genre and Discourse Theory**

Derrida's essay first discusses the conception of genres as separate categories which, under no circumstances, are to be intermixed. This leads to realisation of the inherently prescriptive and normative aspect of the concept of genre: "[A]s soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity" (Derrida 5). The conceived impurity in case of such feared mixing of genres confirms the notion of 'pure genres,' which constitutes the law of genre. A text ought to be classifiable and attributable to one singular genre according to certain features or code. Derrida argues against such a purifying law by discussing the relation between text and genre, and between texts, the latter by referring to intertextuality. According to him, text cannot belong to a genre while genre-less texts are impossible: "[A] text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (14). Instead of 'belonging' to genres, texts participate in them, and through their participation, the perceived genre borders that constitute the genre are broken. The relationship between present and absent characteristics of texts participating in a genre creates tension: Present characteristics either correspond to conventions of genres or not.

Belonging to and the 'purity' of a genre are impossible, and the impossibility of such constitutes the true law of genre. The consequence for the individual text is "dass er niemals in einem Genre aufgeht, dennoch immer aber Relationen zu Genres ausbildet. Somit lässt sich ein spezifisches Genre nie an einem einzelnen Text festmachen, ebenso wenig wie an einem einzelnen Text alle Merkmale eines spezifischen Genres zu demonstrieren sind" (Ritzer and Schulze 6). The impossibility of pure genres implies the openness and productivity of genres.

At this point, the discursive origin of genres mentioned above becomes relevant once more. Since genre do not exist independently of the text participating in them and are subject to historic change, it seems obvious that the participation of texts in genres shapes the genre itself in terms of typical features and conventions. Following Michel Foucault's discourse theory and its application to genre theory, Ritzer and Schulze note that every recourse to the term 'genre' implies a performative modification to the genre itself: "Wer Einzeltexte bestimmten Genres zuordnet, erzeugt damit immer erst auch diskursiv die Konzeption des

entsprechenden Genres selbst” (11). The historical-cultural context is of utmost importance since it is through interdependence with it that the structure and elements of a genre evolve and develop. Through repetition and iteration of such elements, iterative patterns form, which, however, cannot be essential or constitutive of the genre but are typical or conventional (14).

### **Relation between Genres**

Regarding the relation between genres, then, it follows that it is dependent on the conceptualisation of the term genre and its connection to genre conventions. Conceptualised in their function of classification, through which all texts attributed to a particular genre are seen as sharing common characteristics, genres are separate, distinctive categories and thus mutually exclusive, as seen in Fowler (1981). However, this conceptualisation of genre as separate classes cannot be maintained since there will be texts that elude the defined categories and demonstrate a combination of features that make seamless and precise categorisation impossible. Even if subclasses or -genres are defined, the same problem applies on this level as well; some texts would continue to elude these narrow categories necessitating the formulation of even more specific categories, leading to absurdity of genre itself since this problem would be solved only when each text would have its own specific genre class (40).

It is therefore favourable to follow anti-essentialist conceptions of genre and Ritzer and Schulze, and the relation between genres might be best explained using Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblance: Instead of closed and separate categories within a taxonomy or hierarchy, genres, texts attributed to a genre, and the relation of genres to each other are likened to those of familial relationships. Texts of a genre may not have common characteristics but are related to each other (40-41) as are genres since they do not possess a definite and concrete structure and have multiple qualities in common (Ritzer and Schulze 14-15).

### **Generic Norms or Conventions?**

Even if prescriptivism and essentialism in genre theory have abated, the notion of ‘essential’ elements and characteristics of genres prevails in genre criticism and can be seen as one of the nearly universal features of genre theory. Fowler, whose work is of the 1980s and takes a more traditional view, argues that while certain elements exist that can be seen as essential for genres, they are too few in number to be considered as a solid basis for an encompassing theory of genre:

A very few necessary elements exist [...], but not nearly enough to supply a theory of genre. No for-mal genres could usefully be distinguished in such as way[.] [...] With

modern genres, boundaries are even more indistinct and shifting, overlapping and allowing intricate mixture. Necessary elements are sparse. (Fowler 39)

Thomas Pavel (2003) posits that there are essential characteristics for some genres, most often regarding formal requirements. He differentiates between formal and non-formal genres. An example of the former would be the sonnet, which is defined by its formal characteristics as a poem with fourteen lines and certain rhyme scheme (Pavel 203). Defining formal characteristics for categories such as fiction is considered misguided and futile (204). However, he asserts that the non-formal genres “have an internal set of normative requirements” (206), but then argues that they are not as normative as they are traditional and customary. Pavel concludes that these seemingly normative generic characteristics might be worth imitating, but do not constitute inevitabilities: “Such norms are not obligatory rules of behaviour, they are just effective recipes worthy of being imitated [...] [b]ut they are not set in stone” (209).

In anti-essentialist theories, however, genre conventions are seen as the product of texts being attributed to or participating in generic discourse: “Was als generische Konvention erscheint, ist als diskursive Verhandlung eines spezifischen historisch-kulturellen Kontextes zu begreifen. Nur in Interdependenz zu diesem Kontext entstehen generische Iterationsmuster, die aber nie konstitutiv für ein Genre sein können” (Ritzer and Schulze 14). Since texts do not belong to but rather participate in genre(s), only traces of a genre or elements of various genres can be found in them. Since these elements are not essential and not all characteristics commonly associated with a genre are present in a text, it is preferable to use the term genre conventions or expectations instead of characteristics or norms.

The concept of genre has been discussed in its conception as fixed category with essential characteristics and as product of discursive processes, in which participation in genres and the relational aspect of texts to genres were central. Considering gender, then, certain parallels to genre become obvious since gender has been conceptualised similarly.

### **Parallels between Gender and Genre**

The most apparent connection between gender and genre is etymology since both terms can be traced back to the Latin *genus*, but also the link between the two concepts appears obvious. Mary Gerhart in *Genre Choices, Gender Questions* (1992) sees two general meanings for both concepts: the categorial and the productive, with the former referring to “a kind or sort” (Gerhart 98) and the latter meaning “the act of rooting, begetting, bearing, producing” (98). The categorial function of genre arises once more as one of the common functions of both concepts:

[T]o claim that something or someone belongs to a gender or genre begins by observing how one something or someone behaves as a genre or gender. In everyday life, how do we decide if someone is a man or a woman? [...] [W]e depend on behaviour – clothing, hair, body shape, gait, and activities. [...] Do not texts behave in the same way? (99)

Gerhart identifies three contemporary views on ‘belonging’ to a genre in literary criticism – the traditionalist, the ideological, and the deconstructionist view – and poses that gender may be understood according to these three perspectives as well: “It is possible to understand gender according to the same three options. Several elements in this topology apply to gender as well as to genre with similar results” (115).

The traditional view pertains to the conception of genre in its function of classification with essential characteristics. Attributed to gender, then, the view would refer to classification according to anatomy and ‘typical’ gendered behaviours. The presence of female genitals is seen as dictating the person’s gender, which is tied to social expectations and norms regarding behaviour. Furthermore, as separate categories, variations of gender are denied due to the essentialist characteristics that allow for identification as either male/man or female/woman. This perspective has been challenged due to its inconsideration of the relation between gendering and cultural processes: “The traditional way of understanding gender [...] has been challenged by the realization that traditionalism does not account for the ways in which persons and things are gendered by cultural processes” (115).

Of minor importance to this thesis but mentioned briefly nonetheless is the ideological view on genre, which is “built on the tension between texts and social contexts” (108). Genres are used “on the basis of their power to explain social privilege or oppression” (108) and function as a tool of negative criticism since they are seen as inscribed in ideology. Used to understand gender, the ideological view introduces the historical-critical aspect which is absent in the traditional view to understand “the effects of gender indicators in particular cultures” (116).

The third perspective in Gerhart (1992), the deconstructionist view corresponds to the discussion of genre as a product of discourse and texts as participating in genre rather than belonging to them. Applied to gender, a link is created between discourse and the conception of gender and its construction: “the deconstructionist view of texts runs parallel to the view that a person’s gender is constituted (or controlled) by the texts of one’s culture” (113). A similar conception of gender that has since gained rapid acceptance across various disciplines is Butler’s definition of gender and her notion of gender performativity (Butler 1993, 1999). The social and cultural construction or the discursive origin of gender and gender performativity

has since become widely accepted. Gender becomes non-essential and through iterative participation or performance of gender the typicality or gender conventions become established. A person's own gender participates in the gender discourse and thereby modifies the definition/s of 'woman', 'man', or other genders.

The concepts gender and genre have both been defined as separate, pre-existing categories of 'natural' origin and as products of discourse. Following anti-essential approaches, texts and people alike participate in genre and gender, without belonging. Both concepts can be seen as practices and performances but also be set in relation to each other. In fact, the relationship between gender and genre in literary texts has been discussed with regard to transgressions or transformations of the genre of literary texts.

## **2.2. Trans Genre?**

In literary theory, the interest in the two concepts of gender and genre was mainly sparked by the feminist revolution. The central interest was initially on sexual difference, the figure of the female author, and the conditions for female authorship throughout history. Mary Eagleton in *Genre and Gender* (1989) notes that a point of interest was to investigate the presence or absence of female or male writers in genres (56) and writes of male- or female-dominated forms with regard to recognition and artistic value attributed to these forms by society: "High tragedy, epic poetry, sermons, the philosophical treatise, criticism carry more kudos than journals, letters, diaries, even, for the most part, fiction – forms in which women have proliferated. The *female forms*, we have been told, are less literary, less intellectual, less wide-ranging, less profound" (57, emphasis added). Entire literary genres are seen as 'gendered' according to the majority of the gender of the authors.

Feminist criticism also approached the gender/genre debate by discussing the "subversive potential of women's writing" (58) and the connection between gender and generic transgressions. The central question in this regard is "how women may transform the male-dominated forms and in so doing expose their gender bias" (58). Eagleton mentions the female appropriation of the bildungsroman as an example (58). For some feminist critics, the switch from male to female protagonists in male-dominated genres constituted such subversion while others doubted "whether a change of personnel alters fundamentally the aesthetic and social values of the form" (58). Some critics go further and claim that female writers' subversion of genres resulted in hybrid forms. Marjorie Stone (1987) states "women write between existing genres or adapt male-defined genres such as the bildungsroman to their own needs and rhetorical purposes, *often creating new hybrid genres*" (101, emphasis added) and refers to



adaptations of the bildungsroman, of the Gothic romance and selected essays by Judith Gardiner, Catherine Stimpson, Carolyn Burke (101).

In addition to the genre subversion by mixing elements typically attributed to different genres, gender itself might be presented in an unconventional manner as well. For example, gendered tropes in the poem *The Princess* (1847) by Alfred Tennyson are inversed in addition to the genre hybridisation. The poem features narrative instances and the gender inversion is most prominent in the use of words since the male protagonist is described with words typically reserved for women (105).

Susan Stanford Friedman in “Gender and Genre Anxiety” (1986) argues that the poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Hilda Doolittle, commonly known as H.D., subvert and cross gender tropes and genre conventions in their texts, and even writes of the “feminization of epic” (206) and “genre feminization” (217). The epic poem *Aurora Leigh* by Browning is the often-referenced example in the literature regarding the influence of gender on genre (M. Stone 1987, Friedman 1986, Rooney 2015). The text includes elements of the novel, which was regarded as a genre more typically for women as well as of the male-dominated epic. Melissa Rooney (2015) analyses how genre conventions of the epic are transgressed and subverted by comparing it to the genre-defining epic, Homer’s *Iliad* in content, gender, and narration.

One aspect the feminist literature often focuses on and sees as highly significant is the author’s gender, which is often as relevant as the gender of the literary protagonist, if not more so. Oftentimes, a link between the content of the literary text to the author’s own life is made as well: Friedman, regarding *Aurora Leigh*, even explicitly states that “[a]s a narrative of the birth and becoming of a woman-poet’s self, the epic *is* autobiography” (208). *Aurora Leigh* is about a girl growing up, pursuing a career as a writer, and about her romances. Parallels between the text and Browning’s own life may be drawn, such as locations since as the same cities the author lived in are locale in the poem, or the fact that a woman pursues a career in writing.

To summarise, the relationship between gender and genre has been investigated in feministic criticism in relation to sexual difference and genre subversion. In some texts, such as *The Princess*, genre subversion occurs alongside inversions of gender and gendered tropes. In *Aurora Leigh*, differentiation between fiction and non-fiction and between the text’s character and the author appear complicated, which foreshadows the focus of studies concerned with the relation between transgender and genre, for which a discussion of the definition of transgender is necessary.

## Defining Transgender

Since Judith Butler, it is common to differentiate between gender and sex, with the latter referring to the physical body, and the former to the socially constructed norms and expectations connected to the attributed sex. While Rogers Brubaker notes an erosion of the distinction between those two terms in the media due to the extensive use of the term gender (Brubaker xii), I continue to apply this distinction where reasonable, firstly to use widely known and established terms, secondly, to differentiate between body and mind with regard to sex/gender, and lastly, to be able to discuss erosions of such a distinction and of created binaries of sex and gender. As will become obvious, there is a difficulty of differentiating between sex and gender in relation to transgender. The most common association in Western society regarding transgender implies crossing from one sex to another inside the sex binary male – female due to identifying with a different gender than the one assigned at birth. This perceived mismatch between gender and sex is resolved through medical measures and physical transition: The body is changed to match the person's gender implying that gender and sex are linked and cannot be regarded as completely separate. As such, the sex and gender binary are often referred to together through combinations such as man/male and woman/female in theoretical texts.

Regarding a definition of transgender, the aspect of movement as hinted at above with crossing is indicated in the Latin prefix *trans-*, which is highlighted in Susan Stryker's definition of the term in *Transgender History*. She defines transgender as referring to "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" (1). Stryker does emphasize that the crossing need not necessarily occur within the established gender binary and can also lead to positions outside of these categories.

It is the movement away from a starting place which was not of one's own choosing that is encompassed in the term transgender for Stryker (1). It is here that two possible definitions for transgender become obvious: the narrow definition would indicate the crossing from A to B, operating within the gender binary, whereas the other encompasses a broader range of possible movements in and outside the gender binary resulting in 'transgender' as an umbrella term. Other terms that become increasingly popular in the LGBTQ+ community in the last few years that highlight the migrational aspect outside the gender binary are *gender-nonconforming*, *genderqueer*, and *nonbinary / non-binary* (Stryker 24). Each term differs slightly in meaning but with the common feature of rejecting the binary notions of gender and sex, and expressions thereof.

Commonly used in place of transgender and oftentimes seen as denoting the same phenomena is *transsexual*. However, this is not the case. Typically attributed to Magnus Hirschfeld, the term was enmeshed with transvestism, the desire to wear clothing typically attributed to a different gender for some period of time. Due to Dr Harry Benjamin and the sexual reassignment surgery of Christine Jorgensen, the term ‘transsexual’ became popular in medical discourse and a distinction was made between transvestism and transsexualism (38). The term transgender developed to distinguish between people who wanted body modification and people who desired to change their social gender - a distinction then, between those seeking medical aid to express their gender through body alteration and those who did not (38). Recent developments led to blurred lines between those terms since many people who identify themselves as transgender underwent such medical procedures, so that the distinction between transgender and transsexual is not as distinguished anymore (39).

Brubaker in *trans* (2016), on the other hand, distinguishes between transgender and transsexual, with the latter referring to people who “permanently [move] from one clearly defined sex/gender category to another, often by surgically and hormonally remolding the body” (Brubaker xiii). Transsexual focuses more on the physical transition and on sex and appears more restrictive than transgender since Brubaker defines three dimensions of ‘trans’: the “trans of migration,” the “trans of between” and the “trans of beyond” (Brubaker 10).

The first type of trans refers to the narrow definition of transgender indicating movement between the categories of the gender binary which is often, but not necessarily, accompanied by surgery, body alteration and change of legal status or name (10). The *trans of migration* is often understood as a “unidirectional transgender trajectory” (74), where the desired gender and sex category is seen as the ‘final destination’.

*Trans of between* refers to transgender people who do not necessarily move between gender categories but position themselves on the gender spectrum with reference to the gender ‘poles’ male/man and female/woman (93). Between-ness might be expressed through oscillation between those genders and recombination of heterogenous and dissonant aspects, in stylization and body (98). In other words, “transgender between-ness can be understood as an intermediate position on such a [gender] spectrum” (99).

Negative critics concern the reliance on the gender binary as the two main poles anchoring and defining the spectrum (100-101), which is where the *trans of beyond* becomes relevant as it seeks to escape these categorical classifications. Brubaker differentiates between three different forms of *trans of beyond*: the neo-categorical, anti-categorical and post-categorical (113) with the former “assert or recognize categories that are not located on this

continuum” (114) and also “include the categories ‘trans woman,’ ‘trans man,’ ‘trans\*,’ or simply ‘trans’” (114). Through the differentiation between woman and trans woman another dimension is added: the transgender - cisgender axis. Cisgender is the antonym to transgender denoting identification with the gender assigned at birth. ‘Man’ and ‘woman’ alone do not suffice in this conception of trans. Anti-categorical forms, then, are defined as taking “a stand not just against binary forms of gender categorization but against gender categorization per se” (116), whereas post-categorical forms refer to overcoming the concept of gender in its entirety and are seen as closely linked to feminist discourses instead of transgender ones (119).

The complexity of transgender becomes apparent and it would be deceiving to see it as exclusively referring to persons undergoing medical sex reassignment surgery. Transgender has become the umbrella term denoting any kind of convolution of gender, gender roles, and biological sex that includes movement beyond or within the gender spectrum. If gender is perceived as separate classes, transgender is trans-gressing the borders of the gender binary. The migrational aspect of transgender is of central importance and can be seen as the defining characteristic irrespective of whether the migration is temporary or a permanent state. Transgender disturbs preconceived notions and definitions of gender.

### **Transgender, Genre, and Transgenre**

It has been established that various theorists criticise the portrayal of transgender in literary texts as supporting the gender binary by depicting passing as the ultimate goal. First and foremost, Stone in her *Manifesto*, argues against such seamless conforming and denying one’s transgender and gender non-conforming history. She likens this adherence to the gender binary to genre by recurring to Derrida and “The Law of Genre”: “A transsexual who passes is obeying the Derridean imperative: ‘Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres.’” (S. Stone 232). In fact, the notion of genre is at the centre of her argumentation when she suggests “constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a *genre* – a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (231). Transsexuals, according to her, possess the potential to not only disrupt the established norms of sex and sexuality but to reconfigure them as well, as indicated by ‘productive disruption’ (231). Seeing as S. Stone refers to Derrida in this regard, his concept of belonging/non-belonging to a genre is enacted here with regard to embodiment. Such a transsexual genre, then, seeing as there are no pure genres, would mix with already defined gender/sex genres resulting a variety of embodiments that cannot belong to but participate in these gender/sex genres thereby reconfiguring gender and sex embodiments.

Concerning literary texts, S. Stone suggests that transgender people ought to openly disrupt such established gender/sex norms and literary genres, a notion which resurfaces in Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* in structure, style, and content. Like S. Stone, Bornstein pleads for transgender voices to lead the discussion (14), against invisibility through passing and suggests as well as exemplifies a 'transgendered writing style' (3): Her book is an amalgamation of academic text, transcripts of interviews, which are either fictive or real, autobiographical anecdotes, quotations from poems, quiz questions for the reader, and pictures. *Gender Outlaw* refuses to conform to conventions of any genre and 'mixes' modes and media, in the same manner as the author refuses to identify as either male or female (Bornstein 4). Later studies concerning the relation between transgender and genre in literary texts often use the term transgenre to denote such mixtures of genre.

In general, the concept of transgenre can be understood, according to Sofie Van Bauwel (2010) and with regard to film, as a "body of formats that articulate the idea of the hybrid of flexible genre" (181). Through combination of characteristics of different genres or transgressions of generic boundaries and conventions, fixed conceptualisations of genre are destabilized and questioned (181). The concept denotes formats characterised by their fluidity and movement between genres. As an example of such transgression, the boundary between fiction and non-fiction is mentioned: "specific transgressions of format and genre boundaries, for example, the transcendence of the boundaries between the factual and the fictional" (181). In Literature Studies, transgenre is conceptualised differently and more specifically. In fact, it appears to refer almost exclusively to auto/biographical texts with the topic transgender or transsexuality and to the blurring between fiction and non-fiction therein. The relation between those concepts, however, differs. Nonetheless, the following three aspects can be seen at the centre of considerations of transgenre in Literature Studies: the relation between transgender and transgenre, the blurring of fiction and non-fiction, and the connection to the genre of auto/biography.

In some studies, transgender and transgenre appear to simply mirror each other, as is the case in Claire Lynch (2010). The term transgenre is used to denote the problem of ascribing definitions and genre expectations to the genre of autobiography that is characterised by its tendency to evade definition and genre boundaries (Lynch 209). The transgender memoir *Conundrum* is analysed and parallels between subject matter and genre are drawn. While the use of the term transgenre remains tied to auto/biography in her discussion, reference is made to the inclusivity or to the potential of transgenre to distinguish it from life writing:

To an extent, the concept of life writing is synonymous with thinking autobiography as a trans-genre due to the ease with which it acknowledges the link between subtly different categories. Trans-genre is different, however, because it also allows for the inclusion of other texts which fall beyond the remit of life writing. (210-211)

The relation between transgender and transgenre remains on the level of comparison and parallels: “As a ‘trans-genre’ type of writing, autobiography echoes the analogous state of transgender people in which physical appearance and self-image are incongruous, avoiding binary distinctions through a simultaneous connection to more than one category to undermine rigid classification” (218).

The openness of transgenre as hinted at in Lynch (2010) is absent in an earlier and more renown definition of the concept. In fact, Jay Prosser’s definition of the term in *second skins* (1998) is specific. The connection to auto/biography and life writing and to the blurring of fiction and non-fiction remains and transgender as the subject of the text becomes part of the definition. Prosser analyses the generic placement of Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* in fiction and poses that the text blurs fiction and autobiography. The term trans-genre is used to denote the generic hybridity of the text that mirrors the protagonist’s own gender: *Stone Butch Blues* is a fictional character’s autobiography using the generic narrative convention of the first-person narrator, but, when juxtaposed with Feinberg’s own biography, appears as “the author’s autobiography in fictionalized form” (Prosser 190). Prosser states that the text can be seen as “autobiography disguised as fiction” (191) and as a “form between fiction and autobiography, a trans- or intergeneric space” (191). In fact, Prosser uses the term transgenre synonymously with fictional autobiography: “[Lejeune] allows no place for fictional autobiography, for the trans-genred text” (196). Transgenre becomes tied to autofiction, to the convolution of fiction and non-fiction in autobiographical texts. Furthermore, the topic transgender becomes part of his definition as well. It is seen as a necessary element of a text to identify it as transgenre since the concept is defined as “a text as between genres *as its subject is between genders*” (191, emphasis added). Transgender becomes part of the definition of transgenre.

The concept of transgenre is modified in two following studies that based their definition on Prosser: Larissa Heinrich’s (2012) and Ann Heilmann’s (2018) analyses operate with the concept of transgenre as well. In Heinrich’s work, the analysed text is described as “a semiepistolary, memoirlike experimental novel that may be situated within the transnational mid-1990s *belle époque* of queer ‘testimonial’ or ‘confessional’ novels” (162) and can be seen as situated on the blurred line between fiction and autobiography as well: Mainly consisting of personal letters to a lover and to friends, the novel “opens with the death of a beloved pet rabbit

and closes with an ominous expression of the narrator's resolve to kill herself. In-between, we follow Qiu along the streets of Paris to mail letters; into descriptions of affairs with both men and women" (162). The author, Qiu Miaojin, committed suicide and *Last Words from Montmartre* (1995) can be seen as a "literary last testament" (162). However, as Heinrich mentions, the text does not only blur the line between non-fiction and fiction, but "challenges the limits of any genre" (162) due to its experimental style. The blurring of lines between fiction genres is included in this transgenre concept and can be tied to the theoretical openness of transgenre as mentioned by Lynch (2010). The transgender aspect of the text is seen as disrupting narrative conventions since the gender-neutral narrative instance expressing the wish to trans-form, splits during the narrative into character and narrative voice. This split or self-destruction is expressed through the form of the text:

Form follows content: as [sic!] the structure and style of the letters begin to diversify and open out, the momentum of the narrator's inevitable self-destruction builds, and various chapters begin to incorporate French or Chinese alter egos and shifts in perspective such that the reader often has to relearn, several pages later, who the narrator is, and to whom she—or he—is referring. (Heinrich 168)

Transgender is not just the text's subject matter but finds its expression in the form as well. This is also the crucial difference to Prosser's definition in Heilmann's (2018) definition of transgenre: She analyses so-called biographilia surrounding the historical figure of James Miranda Barry, whose female anatomy remained a secret until his death. The texts are broadly categorised as biofiction, biodrama, and biography, seen as partaker of the genre of neo-/Victorian life writing (Heilmann 184). While the study does concern itself with genre crossing and hybridity, the main focus remains nonetheless on the genre fluidity of biographical texts connected to a specific historical setting and figure. The term transgenre is therefore used once more in conjuncture with the genre of auto/biography, a genre that has been said to be characterised by intermixing, blending, and crossing (190). However, it is Heilmann, who explicitly posits that transgender "finds its most typical expression in *transgenre*" (Heilmann 8). Transgenre becomes a necessity for texts with transgender topics and protagonists and not a characteristic of the 'unruly' genre of autobiography: Transgender requires transgenre as it creates the subject matter on the formal level of the text as well.

Transgender as the organising principle of the text is seen in Woolf's *Orlando* as well, according to Pamela Caughie (2013), who identifies the text as "the prototype of the transgenre" (502). Her definition of the term is derived from S. Stone's mention of the transsexual as a genre and is said to be used "for narratives treating transgender lives that transfigure

conventions of narrative diegesis” (503). However, her analysis focuses on texts of auto/biography and autofiction, and the influence of transgender on these particular genres. She states that “[t]he figure of the transsexual allows for a truer depiction of the genre called life writing [...] than does the conventional single-sexed subject. The transsexual’s life narrative essentially changes the definition of life writing itself” (519). Thus, transgenre is used once more in connection with texts close to or assigned to auto/biography and life writing.

One aspect neglected in all these considerations is mediality. While genre transgressions, especially regarding fiction and non-fiction, are at the centre of contemplations regarding transgender and transgenre, the questions might be posed how transgender might be expressed not only through written text, through printed pages in a book. Parallel to transgender and transgenre, the concept of transmediality in relation to creating transgender or even in relation to narrating transgender stories ought to be considered, and, with reference to Heilmann, if transgender would not find its *best* expression in a combination of transgenre and -media.

To my knowledge, there has not been an analysis of such genre blurring in non-auto/biographical texts with the topic of transgender, with the exception of one singular study: Jennifer Schmidt’s *The Girls Who Don’t Die* (2016) analyses the transgression of genre conventions of Lauren Beukes’ crime fiction through transgender characters. She sees such transgressions in the negation of heterosexual romance (Schmidt 139), transgender victims as opposed to the female victims (140), the transgender body (147) and concerning the conventions of time in crime fiction (141). However, Schmidt refrains from using the term *transgenre* – instead, she refers to these ‘transgressions’ also as ‘queering’: “A further way in which Beukes disrupts expectations of both gender and genre is through victims who are queer and who *queer dominant conventions*” (140, emphasis added).

To conclude, it appears as if transgenre, in relation to text with transgender themes and protagonists, refers to blurring the line between fact, fiction, and genre in auto/biographical texts. A possible reason for this connection might be found in the prevalence of auto/biography in transgender literature or in the fact that life writing is characterised by genre blurring. A different term in connection to genre blurring that does not primarily relate to autobiographies might be found in the term queer.

### **Queering the Genre**

*Queer* is at the centre of Queer Theory, which was developed in the 1990s and was heavily influenced by feminism and sexuality studies. Indeed, one of the founding texts of Queer



Theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), addresses the construction of the seemingly binary categories *heterosexual* and *homosexual* and argues that such binary oppositions are too simplistic to capture the full extent of human desire. The central claim is for the recognition that binary oppositions about sexuality and gender are restricting and do not cover the full human experience of these aspects. Instead, human sexuality is seen as unstable or not fixed, which is the quintessential aspect of *queer*: David Halperin in *Saint Foucault* (1995) emphasises the relational aspect of queer in his popular definition of the term: "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer,' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative" (Halperin 62). There are no essential or fixed aspects to what constitutes as queer aside of the relational position to the norm rendering the entire concept precarious. While *Saint Foucault* also defines queer in relation to sexuality and gay in particular, the term itself has since found use in academic discourses: Susan Lanser, who has been working on the theoretical conceptualisation of queer narratology since the 1990s, identifies three academic uses of *queer* in her article "Queering Narrative Voice" (2018): "(1) to make a claim for the non-heteronormative sex, gender, or sexuality of someone or something; (2) to disrupt or deconstruct binary categories of sex, gender, and/or sexuality; and (3) to disrupt or deconstruct any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries or norms" (923). Queer does not necessarily refer to sexuality or gender. Instead, the relational position to the norm, the deconstruction thereof, and the precariousness of queer itself, as emphasised in Halperin's definition, are central. 'Queering genre,' then, denotes deliberate refusal to conform to generic conventions and expectations and rendering the concept of genre itself precarious and uncertain.

Regarding such refusal, particular subgenres of the novel come to mind, and the question arises whether the genre novel can be queered at all since attempts to disrupt its genre conventions have been identified as subgenres themselves: The antinovel, according to Meyer Abrams, is characterised by its violation of traditional norms and its play with reader expectations (Abrams 195). Another example would be the *poioumenon*, in which metatextuality, the reference of the text to itself, is of central importance (Fowler 123). Since intentional refusal of generic norms leading to questioning the attribution of the text to any particular genre is central to queering the genre in this thesis, the *poioumenon* or the anti-novel may be described as queering forms of the novel.

For the subsequent analysis of contemporary novels *Alex as well* (2013) by Alyssa Brugman and *Little Fish* (2018) by Casey Plett, the distortion and disruption of genre and of

gender and the expectations on the forms will be examined. It is assumed that these disruptions do not suffice to queer the genre but will establish what I call a queer aesthetic, in which blurring and disrupting categories and precariousness of gender and sex is central while still adhering to the genre conventions. The genre conventions are analysed before the creation of transgender in the novels will be discussed, followed by a study of the portrayal and importance of the transgender body in disrupting norms.

### 3. Queer Genre in *Little Fish* and *Alex as well*?

To establish whether *Little Fish* and *Alex as well* can be described as trans genre or queering the genre, the following aspects will be analysed and discussed: adherence to established genre expectations of the genre to which they are commonly attributed, queer or norm-disrupting narrative aspects, and the use of intertextuality and intermediality with regard to transgender.

#### 3.1. Adherence to Genre Expectations

*Alex as well* and *Little Fish* are attributed to the adolescent novel and the novel, respectively. For *Little Fish*, the genre novel is suggested to the reader immediately as it explicitly proclaimed in the subtitle: “*Little Fish* – a Novel” (Plett cover), whereas for *Alex as well*, the genre adolescent novel is indicated through the blurb proclaiming that the text “explores the teenage world of identity” (Brugman blurb). Therefore, the genre expectations of the novel and the adolescent novel are of interest. Some of the sources cited here consider genre as categories and discuss the features of genres as essential while they are assumed here as conventional.

Defining the genre of the novel and conventions thereof presents a challenge since the genre is versatile and has been the subject of intense discussion in the twentieth century as to its development and form. The novel has and continues to play an important part in genre theory itself, since it refuses to fit traditional literary categories resulting in long theoretical discussions, for example in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel* (1941) or in Georg Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* (1971). As Pavel (2006) notes, “critics found it so difficult to identify [the novel’s] features and agree on its date of birth”. Now, the so-called rise of the novel is seen at the end of the sixteenth or at the beginning of the seventeenth century with former genres such as the picaresque as predecessors (Abrams 190). For an overview over the most important texts of the discussion of the novel as a genre see Michael McKeon’s *Theory of the Novel. A Historical Approach* (2000).

While the debate around the novel’s development may seem to have reached a consensus, the conventions of this particular genre remain a much-debated topic still. The task

is further complicated through the extended use of the term ‘novel’ to refer to a variety of different texts. According to Meyer Howard Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999), the only feature the texts attributed to this particular genre have in common is “the attribute of being extended works of *fiction* written in prose” (Abrams 190). An enormous number of texts could be attributed to the genre, and as a consequence, as Fowler states it, “the novel has largely ceased to function as a kind in the ordinary way” (118) due to its comprehensiveness. Fowler discusses various categorisation attempts suggested in the literature for the problematic genre (118-120), such as the categorisation model by Northrop Frye. Frye identifies four ‘strands’ of prose, the romance, confession, novel in a narrow sense, and anatomy but the model is criticised and dismissed due to the lack of formal characteristics mentioned and the problematic category of ‘anatomy’ which unites “so many forms” that “it threatens to prove a baggier monster than the novel” (119).

One differentiation of prose fiction has proven itself as persistent as it is often mentioned with regard to the classification of novels (Pavel 2003, Abrams 1999, Fowler 1982): The differentiation between the realistic novel, also called novel proper or central novel, and the romance. This distinction was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is repeatedly remarked upon by critics (Abrams 192). The former is characterised “as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism, by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a developed social structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible, everyday modes of experience” (192), whereas in the romance the characters are clearly conceptualised as heroes or villains with the main characters depicted as isolated or removed from social settings. Adventure, usually in form of a quest, constitutes the plot (192).

In addition to these two subgenres, others have been identified, such as the stream-of-consciousness novel, picaresque novel or the multiplot novel (Fowler 121). Furthermore, the central novel has also been divided into many subgenres “by specifying additional subject matter” (122). There are subgenres depending on the setting, such as the school novel or university novel, or based on plot, as can be seen in the espionage novel or the Bildungsroman. All these subgenres, of which there is an undetermined number depending on their status of recognition as such, differ from each other in “a constellation of characteristic features. The proportions will vary: different constituents carry emphasis, or the same constituents sustain distinct functions” (122). Therefore, the novel appears as one of the most problematic genres regarding genre expectations since there seems to be no consensus, which features, apart from the minimal definition, are of deciding factor. Depending on plot, subject matter, and even setting, different subgenres and their respective expectations are activated in the reader.

Nevertheless, certain expectations are tied to the novel aside of its extended length and prose-writing. Even though “[t]he novel has never received the explicit genre prescriptions accorded to ancient kinds, [...] it has suffered extremely intensive formal analysis that implicitly prescribed elements such as narrator, hero, dialogue, episode, character” (165), which are assumed as central genre expectations. In addition to these elements, often mentioned features are plot, setting, and symbolism, as by Anthony Burgess (2019).

Concerning the case of *Little Fish*, the text can be attributed to the genre of novel according to its subtitle. Due to the text’s focus on intercourse and the physical, the subgenre erotic novel might be relevant to consider as well. In Jane Mills’ *The Bloomsbury Guide to Erotic Literature*, erotic literature is defined with regard to its content, which includes graphic description or depiction of sexual behaviour and activities, and the purpose of such texts, which is to incite sexual arousal (Mills 6-7). Connected to this particular kind of literature are questions of artistic value, morality, and legality; a discussion dating back prior to the sixteenth century (8). With regard to sexually explicit fiction in prose, Bradford K. Mudge in *Novel Pleasure* (2017) discusses the development of such explicit fiction and the differentiation between literature and pornography. The former is seen as pursuing moral purposes and the latter as amoral, artistically lacking, and corrupting. Eroticism, then, can be seen as “the middle ground [...] [which] connotes approbation, albeit of a grudging sort” (136). Nevertheless, the criterion of artistic value was still used to distinguish between pornography and erotica: “This criterion of whether a book affords aesthetic satisfaction in addition to sexual arousal lies at the core of attempts to define the terms ‘erotica’ and ‘pornography’” (Mills 9-10), but the distinction between them has since become blurred (10). As for genre expectations, graphic portrayal of sexual behaviour, obscenity, and the intention of arousing the audience can be seen as conventional for the erotic novel.

In the case of *Alex as well*, the genre in question is the adolescent novel, commonly attributed to Young Adult literature, which is seen as to encompass a variety of genres similar to the central novel. The main difference to the novel described above concerns the age of the main protagonist and the age of the targeted audience, which is assumed to be between 12 to 25. According to Günter Lange and Leander Petzoldt (2011), the adolescent novel denotes novels “die sich mit dem Problem des Erwachsenwerdens beschäftigen” (10). The beginning of the adolescent novel in its contemporary form is commonly seen in J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and so-called jeans prose, emancipatory texts concerning the female adolescent experience, and “problemorientierte Jugendliteratur” (11) were important influences in the 1970s and 80s (11). The common theme of YA literature is growing-up and Lange and

Petzoldt identify three central topic areas: Love, partnership, sexual awakening, sexuality; questions of identity, perception of self and body; parent-child-relationship and detachment from the parents (11-12). The adolescent novel is problem oriented and “problemoffen” (12) meaning failure of the protagonist is just as likely as his or her success and neither conclusion is part of the narrative at times, resulting in open-ended narratives (15). Another typical feature is the characterisation of the protagonist, which is described as brash, arrogant, ironical, or even cynical, especially for male main characters (12).

Regarding formal and narratological aspects, Mary Hilton and Maria Nikolajeva (2012) mention the importance of the spatio-temporal construction in YA novels, which is typically a combination of short duration and urban setting. Indeed, they mention that “urban realism of contemporary young adult literature was, till very recently, its most distinguishing characteristic” (Hilton and Nikolajeva 9). The narrow timeframe emphasises the moment of crisis of the protagonist, another convention of the genre. Regarding narrative perspective, the first-person narration is most common and seen as typical (10). Since the focus of the narrative lies on the emotions and thoughts of the protagonist, various techniques are used to convey the emotions and thoughts of the protagonist, such as internal monologue passing into stream of consciousness, analepses, narration on different timelines, variation of tenses, or sudden changes of place (Langer and Petzoldt 12). Regarding transgender adolescent novels, Bittner notes that multiple such texts focus on the transition of the transgender character. He or she wish to transition from one to another gender, which disallows the possibility of positions within or outside the gender binary. This continuation or maintaining of the gender binary could therefore be seen as a genre expectation if not a convention.

### **Genre conventions in *Little Fish* and *Alex as well***

Both texts fulfil the minimum definition of the novel as they are longer text written in prose and include narrative instance, characters, dialogue, a specific setting, and plot. Concerning the generic expectations of their respective genre, *Alex as well* appears to conform to the conventions of the adolescent novel nearly completely, whereas *Little Fish* appears to be more complex.

In the adolescent novel, the above-mentioned genre expectations regarding content can be seen as fulfilled since the main topics of young adult literature are found in *Alex as well*: The conflict between parents and child also in connection with growing-up and independence is presented through the conflict between mother and child; questions of identity and perception of self and body are realised most prominently and central as part of the transgender and intersex

topic. Even sexual awakening and teenage love can be found in the novel since Alex develops feelings for a classmate (Brugman 38) and becomes aware of her homosexuality (106). The beginning and end of the narrative are also conventional for an adolescent novel: The narrative opens with and continues with Alex in a moment of crisis. After an incident at her old school, she stops her medication, and refrains from going to school by hiding out in a shopping centre (7). She decides to live as a girl instead and asserts her gender in the first chapters by undergoing a makeover at a make-up saloon (8-9), enrolling in a new school (13-14), and by engaging the services of a lawyer (18-22). The ending is also typical for an adolescent novel since it is open-ended and the major conflict between parents and child remains unresolved. Furthermore, Alex's living situation, the outcome of her law suit for medical emancipation, and the public acceptance of Alex's gender remain uncertain as well.

*Little Fish*, on the other hand, appears more complex: The text fulfils the minimum definition of a novel seeing as there is a specific setting, characters, and a plot. *Little Fish* adheres to the genre conventions of the central novel according to the definition given above: The text is set in contemporary times as evidenced by the use of the Internet, smartphones, and Facebook, and the characters can be described as complex seeing as other aspects such as religious beliefs, mental health problems, or financial problems become relevant in the plot as illustrated by the discussion about God (Plett 142-144), Sophie's suicide (155) and losing one's job (126-128). The main character can be seen as rooted in a marginalised social class: As a transgender woman, Wendy operates within an established community and experiences discrimination and harassment due to her being transgender. The precariousness of this community is discussed in detail in chapter 4.1. Another genre convention of the central novel concerns the number of characters: Interaction with multiple characters is seen as one of the defining features (Abrams 192), which is indeed the case in *Little Fish* as well. Through her occupation and through the transgender community, Wendy interacts with many characters who appear only once in the narrative: Her clients, which remain nameless with the exception of Kaitlyn, the boy at the laundromat, a hotel receptionist, Eddie and Red, or Carla, a transgender woman she meets at a funeral. The novel can definitely be seen as a central novel.

The following aspects of *Little Fish* can be seen as central for other subgenres: the focus on the physical and graphic descriptions of sexual intercourse, the quest, and the focus on the emotions and thoughts of Wendy; which are typical for the erotic novel, the romance, and the psychological novel, respectively. Due to the focus on the physical and graphic descriptions of intercourse, the subgenre of the erotic novel has been mentioned as a possible subgenre for *Little Fish*. The genre conventions of obscenity and portrayal of sex are adhered to: Through

the main character's occupation as a prostitute, various sexual encounters are depicted, with the details varying from short sentence summaries (Plett 281) to thorough descriptions of sexual acts such as anal penetration (217-218). Wendy's chosen profession corresponds to the genre since pornography has also been defined as "*description of the life, manners etc. of prostitutes and their patrons*" (Mills 6, emphasis added). However, the erotic potential of the descriptions of sex in the novel is debatable. Instead of providing details or slow build-ups of the sex scenes, the language used and the focus on Wendy's conflicting emotions about and during almost all sexual encounters disturb and destroy any illusion of pleasure for Wendy and the reader alike:

He throat-fucked her, standing as she lay on his bed for a long while, and she vomited in her mouth a few times but swallowed it down fine. She hated doing this. [...] The velvety sliding feeling of her puking and swallowing with her mouth closed around their dicks. [...] He never managed to cum. She left after half an hour, and he didn't make a fuss. Her hands and face were a mess from his dick. (Plett 153)

By presenting these encounters as matter-of-fact, the credibility of the attribution of the text to the genre erotic novel becomes questionable in this regard. As such, the narrative relates to the genre of erotic novel only insofar as sex is a central theme of the text.

The quest is another such feature that is regarded as central for a specific subgenre and is referenced in the text. As far as a main plot can be identified, the story appears to revolve around the grandfather's secret and Wendy's desire to learn more about him, which is reminiscent of the quest, in which the main protagonist has a clear task to fulfil, and whose journey to reach that goal is perilous and hindered by obstacles. The notion of the quest in *Little Fish* is supported by the story time, which spans the moment Wendy learns about her grandfather's secret (18) to her meeting with Anna Penner (264), the person in possession of the desired information, and to her dream about her grandfather as a woman (289); and by Wendy's physical journey to Penner's house to reach her goal (242-246). By then, the meeting is no longer voluntary: "Wendy didn't want to see Anna anymore; it was an obligation now" (240). Other events interrupt or hinder Wendy from visiting, such as Sophie's suicide: "she remembered she was supposed to see Anna the next day. She had to call her. Tell her she wasn't coming" (164). Thus, the main story line resembles the quest, which is a central element of the subgenre of the romance, which demonstrates once more that *Little Fish* includes various features seen as conventional for different subgenres.

Another such aspect is the intense focus on Wendy's thoughts and feelings. The main character's internal processes are described in minute detail at times, for example when she panics over a skin infection (199-200), which is seen as characteristic for the psychological

novel, in which the inner mechanics of a character are equally or even more important than the external action (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Another such convention for the psychological novel concerns the subordination of the plot to the description of the protagonist's inner life, which is not the case in *Little Fish*. There are entire passages that consist nearly entirely of dialogue (Plett 86-89) demonstrating that the novel does not focus exclusively on psychological mechanisms but considers them secondary at times.

While both novels can be identified as such, *Little Fish* seems more complex with regard to genre than *Alex as well*. The latter shows great adherence to the genre conventions of the adolescent novel, whereas the former can be undoubtedly be described as a realistic novel but includes features typical for an array of genres resulting in an interesting form of the central novel. Therefore, the overall adherence to the genre conventions in the narratives indicates no queering of genre itself. Instead, there are other elements to be found that can be regarded as 'queering' the narrative, nonetheless: There is a definite influence of transgender and intersexuality on narratology, and intertextuality plays an important role as well in disrupting generic conventions.

### **3.2. Disrupting Narrative Conventions**

Regarding queer narratology, there is no consensus as to its concrete definition and to what elements constitute a queer reading. Lanser asserts that "despite work of extraordinary breadth and depth in queer literary studies, queer narratology itself remains underdeveloped" (925). Nevertheless, there have been studies on queering elements as demonstrated by Mollie Blackburn, Caroline Clark and Emily Nemeth's *Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature* (2015) or Iris Bierschenk's work (2010), in which she analyses queer narratological structure in Swedish YA literature. Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth (14) focus on the central notion of disrupting norms and rejecting fixed gender and sexual identities and isolate literary elements that aid the creation of queerness: mode, focalisation, unreliable narration, metonymic configurations, and distortions of story time (16-17).

An analysis focusing on disruptions or queering of narrative instance, narrator/narratee-relationship, and setting provides insight in how a queer aesthetic is established and transgender is created. First, the relation between narrative voice and the transgender main character in the narratives is discussed.



### **Relationship between Transgender Character and Narrator in *Little Fish* and *Alex as well***

The relationship between the main transgender character is conceptualised differently in the narratives but can be described as queer in both. In *Little Fish*, the queer aspect relates to the focalisation of Wendy, the main character, and the use of heterodiegetic narrative perspective. Focalisation is understood as “a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities of the story world”, as Burkhard Niederhoff defines it (Niederhoff). *Little Fish* uses internal and external focalisation. The former refers to instances in which the narrator relays only what the focalised instance knows, which is the type of focalisation most often used in *Little Fish*. Thoughts and feelings of Wendy are mediated but are not always tagged or marked as such. Instead, a combination of both, tagged and untagged, is used, changing from one sentence to the next:

[B]ut she hadn't posted in months – and besides, what if he was uncomfortable with that? Oh, for fuck's sake! She could just ask Sophie – who actually knew him. Duh. And then, arrestingly, heart-droppingly, she thought, *You know, guys who fuck you then want to hang out again usually have a way of making sure that'll happen...* (Plett 51)

Through the combination of tagged and untagged presentation of Wendy's thoughts, the distinction between narrator and focalised character becomes blurred. It could be the narrative instance commenting on Wendy's behaviour and suggesting to question Sophie. On the other hand, free, indirect discourse is just as likely since the sentence structure imitates the thought process, which reoccurs often in the narrative: “Look, if she saw that dude again, she'd just sock him. Done. Sealed. He was a loser. Whoever that guy was, he was an evil fucking do-nothing loser who was probably some unloved poor drunk and a fucking dipshit. Whatever. [...] What more was there to think about” (Plett 102).

While the use of free, indirect discourse serves to convey Wendy's thoughts and feeling in the character's own personal language, the integration into the third-person narration creates distance to the character. This distance is contrasted by the use of interior monologue in first person singular through which Wendy's thoughts appear immediate: “*A man did something to me in an alley weeks ago, and I'm burying it because too much else has happened. Your father might've been a woman, but I can never tell you that, ever, ever. I don't want to kill myself, but I don't know if I want to live either*” (185). In addition, the profound focalisation on Wendy is intensified further through the impact the character's emotions and sensory perceptions have on the text's syntax and language. For example, when Wendy is intoxicated, sentence length varies in a notable manner:

Aileen led her through the front door, hung their coats on the overflowing rack, through the kitchen with the two fridges and impossibly tall black cabinets, through the back the decaying stairs, down into the basement past the laundry into what Wendy recognized as some boy's bedroom who'd lived here forever, who Aileen explained in patches was away ... somewhere ...doing ...something. [...] And now this girl Aileen was here. There were posters. Wendy couldn't focus on them. She was so, so drunk. (181)

Through variation of sentence length, repetitions of words, ellipses, and imitation of speech Wendy's sensory perceptions are represented through the text. Another instance in which Wendy's emotional state is mediated through language use occurs when Wendy becomes overwhelmed by the comments on Sophie's Facebook page following her friend's suicide. The comments blur into one another without any punctuation and only snippets of each are presented: "*We had to do a presentation one day in Queens you were dating Raina if you had asked me about her last week I would have told you I'd vowed never to speak to Sophie again she was the first trans woman I ever met*" (167). The ungrammaticality, the repetition of words, and ellipses disrupt the narrative by drawing attention to the language itself. The narrator appears completely absent. Wendy's emotional life is not explicitly described but demonstrated and performed to the reader emphasising the queerness of the writing style.

However, this close focalisation on Wendy is broken through instances in which external focalisation is used. The character appears distant and more knowledgeable than the narrative instance and only observable information is conveyed to the reader. One such instance occurs when Wendy organises an appointment for a professional photo-shooting. The identity of the person she contacts, the purpose of the phone call and of the photoshoot are not mentioned and remain obscure to the reader (129-130) and only when the appointment arrives does it become clear to reader for what purpose the pictures are needed (130-131).

As such, the combination of these different narratological techniques results in presenting the novel as unorganized, messy, and unstable. The narrative oscillates between internal monologue in third person, in first person, and different types of focalisation, in rapid succession at times. Aside of instances of longer internal monologue, the heterodiegetic narrative situation is consistently maintained. But the combination of these mentioned techniques results in blurring the line between narrative instance and the main character. Furthermore, the heavy focalisation of Wendy and the distanced third-person narration create certain irritation, or a contradiction, even: The heterodiegetic narration creates distance to the character which is reversed by the intense focalisation, resulting in an outright queer, in the sense of 'strange,' relationship between narrator and main character.

The relationship between narrative instance and transgender character in *Alex as well*, on the other hand, can be described as queer as well but differs greatly from the adult novel. The queer aspect pertains to the construction of transgender on the narratological level. In general, the narrative perspective in *Alex as well* can be described as adhering to narrative conventions of the genre with a ‘queer twist’: Hilton and Nikolajeva assert that the dominant mode of narration for young adult novels is autodiegetic narration (Hilton and Nikolajeva 10). The narrative perspective of *Alex as well* cannot be categorized as a simple autodiegetic narrative since heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narrative situation are blurred to present the character’s transgender and intersexuality. Alex’s character is presented as if she were two separate persons; one male, the other female gendered. Through the use of the pronouns *he* and *I* the perceived female side of Alex functions as narrative instance. The distinction between these two Alexes is made directly at the beginning, when the reader is addressed for the first time as well: “Alex is with me. The other Alex. I am Alex as well. We are the two Alexes.” (Brugman 7). This split is further explained: “Alex and I are the one person, but I feel like two people and this is the problem” (18). However, instead of alternating between male and female pronouns, two entities are established that also converse and interact with each other, which is also directly addressed and explained to the reader: “Is it OK with you if we keep us separate?” (28). The split into male and female Alex is exaggerated at times to the extent of creating the impression of two distinct individuals. When the character Alex acts in the narrative, both sides of Alex have a chance of being presented as the one in charge: “I tap ‘compose’ again and I write, hey you, pressing send quickly before I can change my mind” (110), “Alex is smiling. He takes a step forward” (137). Furthermore, the two Alexes converse and interact with each other, which results in impossible scenes, such as: “Alex and I stare at each other” (66) or “It is the boy Alex being hugged. I stand back with my thumbs in my belt loops” (30).

However, this split cannot be maintained indefinitely and collapses at times into the first-person plural pronoun *we*: “What could we be doing differently?” (66). As such, there are three different pronouns in use to refer to one character: *I*, *we*, and *he* are used throughout the narrative as the distinction between Alex and the other Alex is continued but collapses at times. The collapse of male and female Alex into one, as indicated through the use of *we*, results in a blurring of narrative perspective and, ultimately, in the blurring of gender lines.

In addition to Alex’s perspective, her mother’s view on the unfolding events is included in form of blog entries. They are inserted at random times in the narrative and provide the reader with additional background information concerning Alex’s intersexuality. These insertions are presented as if they were online blog posts, which is analysed in detail in section 3.3, disrupt

the fluency of the text and serve to queer the narrator-reader relationship in the adolescent novel, which constitutes the next narratological aspect of interest here.

### **Narrator/Reader-Relationship**

Both narratives include aspects related to the relationship between narrative instance and the fictional reader that could be considered as disrupting generic conventions necessitating analysis. The following aspects can be identified as unexpected and disruptive: direct address of the reader, unequal distribution of knowledge concerning events in the narratives, and unreliable narration. While all three aspects can be seen in both narratives, they influence the overall text to varying degrees: In *Alex as well*, these aspects are most prominent and of relevance for the overall queer effect on narratology, while they are of minor to inconsequential importance to the overall queerness or transgenre in the adult novel due to their rare occurrence. Concerning direct address of the reader in *Little Fish*, there are some instances in which the second person singular *you* is used. However, with the exception of one singular instance, they are part of Wendy's thought processes and cannot be considered a direct address. The exception occurs at the end of the narrative and indubitably addresses the fictional reader: "What kind of world does the core of your brain expect that *you, you personally*, get to live in? Wendy wanted to be loved. However easily she might have abandoned or ruined her prospects, Wendy did still believe she would have love" (Plett 292-293, emphasis added). The repetition of 'you' with the adverb 'personally' marks the sentence as different to generic comments and implies direct address. Furthermore, the narrator becomes overt by summarising Wendy's past behaviour regarding romantic prospects. However, since it constitutes a singular instance in the entire narrative, the queering or disrupting potential of this aspect is questionable. The same observation can be made regarding knowledge of reader, narrator, and character about the narrated events. While knowledge is an important part of the plot itself, as evidenced by the grandfather's secret (21) or the withholding of one's occupation as a prostitute from close friends (108, 285), it is mainly through a change of internal to external focalisation that disproportionate levels of knowledge occur between character, narrator, and reader, as discussed above. The third aspect, unreliable narration occurs in such minor degree as well and can be seen as connected to the intense focalisation of Wendy. For example, her actions and thoughts regarding her drinking behaviour appear at odds with each other: "She drank and drank and drank – though not wildly. Really, she never drank wildly. The gulps hit her stomach[.] Glug, breathe, glug, breathe, and she did this until she stopped, stopped, stopped, stopped, stopped" (119). In addition to showcase the unreliability of the description of Wendy's drinking

behaviour, the quotation further demonstrates the influence of Wendy's emotional life and her sensory perceptions on the language of the narrative itself. Overall, while these elements are present and can be seen as minor disruptions of expectation on the form, they do not influence the overall narrative to a greater degree than being aspects of interest.

In *Alex as well*, the narrator/narratee-relationship can be described as unconventional since direct address and unreliable narration are used consistently and simultaneously, and information is purposefully and explicitly withheld from the reader. Breaking the fourth wall is an important feature in the narrative and occurs first at the beginning of the novel, when the narrative instance clarifies that Alex and 'I' are one character by 'pausing' the narrative mode and addressing the reader directly: "I should stop here, because it's not Alex and me, not really. We're just the one person. Did you get that already? You guessed it from the blurb, right? I put in some clues" (Brugman 18). The quotation demonstrates the use of direct address of the reader; metatextuality, by commenting on the act of writing itself; and reference to a paratext of the novel. A paratext, as defined by Gerard Genette, is a text that surrounds the main body text of a book but is strictly not part of the story, such as title, preface or the blurb (Genette 3). Furthermore, the narrator engages the reader in one-sided conversation and addresses the reader as if he or she were actively witnessing the narrated events: "You were there, you saw" (Brugman 152) or by tricking the reader by presenting false information:

You could imagine a Shaun Tan book of it, couldn't you? [...] Just documents and journals and old diaries. Now you go, 'Ooh, old diaries, that could be interesting,' and I thought that too, but they're my mother's and they're full of obscure lists like: Potting mix, light? Anna 10.15. Posted Cindy. I made that up. It's been a few years since I have looked, and I can't remember *exactly* what they say (29).

The most important instance of such narration occurs, when an entire scene is described, in which Alex arrives at home, the parents accept their daughter's gender and the family has an enjoyable evening at home (59-60). Only when the scene ends with Alex going to bed, is the scene disclosed as imagined and the reader as tricked: "So we had ice cream and I went to bed a happy girl knowing it would all be all right. The end. Actually, that's not how it happened. Could you tell? [...] This is what really happened" (60-61). The reader is consistently addressed in the narrative and tricked by Alex presenting false information. This play with the reader is further heightened when Alex withholds information about the incident that led to her stopping the medication and changing schools: "Also, this very bad thing happened, and I can't go back there. [...] But *I'm not going to tell you* any more about that" (36, emphasis added). When Alex shows her mother a video about this incident, the content of the video is withheld from the

reader once more (128). At another point of the narrative, a description of the video is given, and the reader is informed about the incident, which is preceded by the following comment of the narrator: “Y[ou want to] know what the YouTube thing was that made my mother have an asthma attack and leave the country, don’t you. I’m just going to tell it really fast” (149). Through the direct address of the reader, and paratextual and metatextual reference, the narrative breaks with genre expectations. The reader becomes more than a covert spectator because he or she becomes involved through these direct addresses and one-sided conversation. Therefore, the norms regarding the narrator/reader-relationship are disrupted and queered, most notably through unreliable narration and direct address of the reader.

### **Time and Setting**

Regarding time and setting, *Little Fish* appears to be conforming to genre expectations. The story is set in contemporary time as indicated through technology such as the internet, smartphones, and social media like Facebook, and in a realistic urban environment. Therefore, the setting implies adherence to the genre expectation of the novel proper. In fact, the city is identified as Winnipeg, Canada (Plett blurb), which is actually the birth town of author Casey Plett (Hill 2018). Disruptions regarding time and setting relate in *Little Fish* first and foremost to time. Despite the titles of the two chapters of the novel, ‘November’ and ‘December,’ the timeline of the narrative is disturbed as the story time appears fragmented through the frequent use of ellipsis, unmarked time jumps, and flashbacks. Actions in between are omitted and need to be inferred through the reader. For example, when Wendy is informed of her grandmother’s death, the chapter opens with “The night Wendy’s Oma died, she had sex dreams” (13) informing the reader before the character of the grandmother’s death and foreshadows the content of the following phone call between father and daughter, of which only the beginning is presented followed by an unmarked change of time and place to the funeral itself: “When the phone rang, she made her body get up and scramble for her phone. It was her father. ‘Jesus shitstick Dad, what,’ [...] Her dad was crying. ‘Ben?’ [...] The funeral was quiet and simple” (13-14). How much time passed between the phone call and the funeral is mentioned afterwards (18), but the exact dialogue between father and daughter, Wendy’s reaction, or her journey to the funeral are omitted. Smaller ellipsis spanning the time frame of a few moments to minutes are common as well: “Then, in the kitchen, the phone on the wall rang. ‘Hello?’ Wendy said into the receiver” (18). Through such disruptions of chronology, time in the narrative appears as fragmented, irregular, and unstable, which aids to the creation of the queer aesthetic as consistent inference of the reader is necessary. Furthermore, the flashbacks disrupting the time

continuum can be observed as aiding the creation of transgender and can be regarded as central in this regard. Scenes of Wendy's transition and childhood are presented, such as a previous sexual assault on the university campus (100-101) or the days prior and after her sexual reassignment surgery (219-224). This disruption of time distorts Wendy's biography by presenting events in disorder, which supports the construction of a queer aesthetic and aids the presentation of the transgender content.

In the adolescent novel, adherence to the genre expectations regarding time and setting can be observed. The story is set in an urban environment and the story time is comprised of a few weeks. The spatial-temporal construction in the text is typical for the genre adolescent novel (Hilton and Nikolajeva 9). However, queering elements are to be found with regard to time as well: The time continuum is disturbed through flashbacks and time jumps: At the end of the story, an indeterminate amount of time has passed, and important events are summarised in a flashback (Brugman 208-209). In comparison to *Little Fish*, in which flashbacks occur randomly and are marked as separate paragraphs, they are integrated into the main story and are comparatively brief and unobtrusive in *Alex as well*. Furthermore, the adolescent novel includes an instance of foreshadowing through which unreliable narration and the role of Alex as narrative instance are emphasized and the time continuum is noticeably disrupted: "And it doesn't cross my mind to make a connection between these little buds of breasts and the medication I'm not taking. [...] It doesn't cross my mind till much later" (70). The reader is presented with information relevant to the plot and Alex as the narrative instance possesses more information than Alex as the character, queering this relationship further since the narrator appears as removed from the male and the female Alex in this scene.

Time is therefore used to add to the queer aesthetic and aid the presentation of transgender in *Little Fish* by presenting important information pertaining to Wendy's past and by transporting the reader to different moments of Wendy's transition, whereas the disruptions in time in *Alex as well* appear more conventional, in fact, nearly inconsequential regarding a queer aesthetic or the creation of transgender. The foreshadowing instance is the sole queer aspect regarding time in the narrative since it adds to the queer relationship between transgender character and narrative instance.

As mentioned above, *Alex as well* includes the mother's perspective on the events in the form of blog posts. In fact, both narratives include instances in which different texts and even different media are referenced. This indicates another aspect that can be identified as adding to potential queering of genre: intertextuality and intermediality.

### 3.3. Intertextuality and Intermediality as Disrupting Factors

Both texts include references to, pieces of, or even complete other texts and also media. These references further disrupt generic norms and enhance the queer aesthetic of the narratives necessitating definition of intertextuality and intermediality. The definition of intertextuality may appear complex since it was topic of debate in the 1970s to 1990s with various definition as result. The central aspect of intertextuality concerns the relationship between texts, even if the exact nature of this relation depends on the chosen definition of intertextuality: In the broader sense, as Julia Kristeva sees it, intertextuality can be seen as a common feature of all texts. A narrower and more concise definition of intertextuality would be Genette's, who defines intertextuality "as the actual presence of one text within another" (Genette 1-2). The literal and most explicit form of intertextuality in this definition is the quotation, or, when unmarked, plagiarism. A less obvious form would be the allusion, for which knowledge of the prior text is necessary to recognise the reference (2). These two definitions reflect the polarities of the debate surrounding intertextuality with one position regarding intertextuality as a universal feature of texts and the other seeing it as referring to intentional and marked references between texts.

Intertextuality can also be linked to intermediality, as can be seen in Irina Rajewsky's (2002) definition of the latter. She defines intermediality as a "Hyperonym für die Gesamtheit aller Mediengrenzen überschreitenden Phänomene [...] also all der Phänomene, die dem Präfix *inter* entsprechend, in irgendeiner Weise zwischen Medien anzusiedeln sind" (Rajewsky 12). Based on this definition, a distinction between intramediality and transmediality becomes possible, and it is with the former that a link to intertextuality can be established: Intramediality is defined as denoting phenomena that establish a relation to other texts of the same media and, therefore, do not cross the border of their medium (12), which is reminiscent of intertextuality. The relation between these two concepts has been discussed in the 1990s and can be seen as dependent on the definition of 'text'. If the broader definition of 'text' were used, pictures, movies, and linguistic text would all be referred to as such and phenomena, where medium borders would be crossed, would fall under the term intertextuality. If a narrow definition were assumed, as Rajewsky does (60), intertextuality would be part of intermediality, but pertaining to linguistic texts only. Therefore, intertextuality could be described as one of the possible forms of intramediality (12).

Transmediality, then, are "medienunspezifische Phänomene, die in verschiedensten Medien mit den dem jeweiligen Medium eigenen Mitteln ausgetragen werden können, ohne daß hierbei die Annahme eines kontaktgebenden Ursprungsmedium wichtig oder möglich ist"



(13), according to Rajewsky. The content referenced is not tied to a specific text but independent of text and medium as it is part of the collective memory of the recipients (13). While it is not further discussed at this point, it should be noted that different definitions of transmediality exist in the literature and that this conceptualisation of the term has been criticised by others, for example by Jens Schröter (1998).

Rajewsky suggests a tripartition of intermedial phenomena as three distinct areas of can be identified: the combination of media, where more than one medium is present in material and contributes through its own media-related techniques to the overall construction of meaning of the product (Rajewsky 15); the media transformation or change, for which film adaptations of literary texts are the prime example; and intermedial references (16).

For the subsequent analysis of the narratives, intermedial references and their intramedial counterpart, the “intramediale Bezüge” (71) are of importance and will be discussed here further. Intermedial references relate to a text of a different medium or to the system of the other medium itself through the primary medium’s own techniques (19). Specific elements and techniques of another medium are thematized, imitated or reproduced using the primary medium’s own techniques (17). The difference between the primary and referenced media is highlighted and mediated to the reader since the primary medium’s own mediality is raised and contrasted with the referenced one (73-74).

Intramedial references, on the other hand, denote relations of the primary text to “einem oder mehreren (real oder fiktiv existierenden) Einzeltext(en)” (71) or “einem oder mehreren semiotischen Systemen” (71) without crossing media borders. However, concerning the reference to another semiotic system, the literary system itself and also literary subsystems such as genres may be referenced. Texts that are attributed to a different genre may be present or referenced in the primary text and can activate the literary subsystem to which they are attributed (71-72).

While the concept of transgenre neglects the question of mediality in its current conception(s), intermediality and intertextuality can be identified as queering factors of narratives. While the narratives may be restricted to one dominant medium and genre, they can be observed as pushing these borders through the inclusion of texts of different modes and genres or even different media in the narrative.

### **Use of Inter- and Intramedial Instances in the Novels**

Turning to the narratives under discussion, one notable difference between them concerns the variety and multitude of intermedial and intramedial references and another concerns the

function of these integrated texts which differs in the narratives. In *Alex as well*, the inter/intramedial references are relevant to the story since they provide additional and essential information to the reader, whereas in *Little Fish*, these references appear to further the creation of a queer aesthetic through the formatting and relevance of these references.

In *Alex as well*, the most important instances are the mother's blog entries, day care incident reports, and the description of a YouTube video. While text messages are used or referenced in the text as well, they mainly serve to further the plot and place the story in contemporary times. Overall, they do not disrupt the narrative or can be regarded as queering the text. Heather's blog posts, on the other hand, may be considered as queering the narrative since they offer a different perspective on the unfolding events of the narrative and background information on Alex's up-bringing and development. They are explicitly described as blog entries through the first sentence of the first installment: "This is my first post" (24) and are distinguished from the rest of the narrative through the use of another font, different visual representation of the chapter number. The narrative references the genre of digital blog posts by imitating central features through the narrative's own means such as the link address as the headline, "www.motherhoodshared.com" (Brugman 24), Heather's name at the end of the 'post', a separate comment section headlined by the capitalised "COMMENTS:" (27) and the sequencing of the comments. Furthermore, allusions are made to the medium of this genre through the inclusion of typing errors: "fitteen" (24), "obnoxious" (116), or "explainms" (86), and through reference to conventional online behaviour since the fictional commentator Vic corrects misspelt words through preceding the correction with an asterisk: "\*mettle" (116), "\*obnoxious" (116). Through these aspects, the likeness of the text to the referenced genre and medium is enhanced. The function of the blog entries is quite clear: They offer additional information relevant to the plot. Heather dosing her child with crushed testosterone pills in her food is only mentioned in one of the blog posts (86) as well as the entire medical discourse surrounding Alex' intersex 'condition' and her upbringing. The blog post further presents the mother's internal struggle regarding her child's gender, explaining her actions, and offers an exclusive insight into Alex's upbringing. As such, the form of the web log appears particularly well chosen since it creates a platform for Heather to share her thoughts in a fashion reminiscent of diary writing while simultaneously allowing for discussion in the comment section. It is therefore possible to present Heather's perspective and thoughts and to include the 'public' opinion on Heather's educational methods through the comment section. Intermediality in this case furthers the plot by providing a suitable platform through which Heather's perspective and other people's opinions regarding the parent-child-conflict can be presented, and provides

additional information for the readers, who then possess more knowledge than the main character or the mother. However, the blog entries, while unconventional, do not suffice to queer the genre or narrative conventions: Since they serve to portray both sides of the mother-child-conflict, one of the central themes of the adolescent novel, the genre cannot be seen as queered through the blog entries. Nonetheless, they constitute an important unconventional aspect of the narrative, second only to the unusual relation between narrator and main character.

Another medium referenced in Alex as well is a fictional YouTube video. The video is mentioned for the first time when Alex shows the clip to her mother on the video platform YouTube: “I find the page I am looking for on YouTube and I click play” (128). It is only afterwards that the reader is informed of the details of the filmed bullying incident since Alex decides to “tell it really fast” (149). Instead of a recount of the incident, however, the video of the bullying incident is described:

They held me down and tore off my school pants and undies, and then they threw them over the fence, into the drain. I had to climb over the fence naked from the waist down, and then scramble down the concrete side into the drain to get my pants back, and I’m shoving my leg in and the stupid things were wet and inside out, and kept wrapping round my leg like a snake, and I’m trying hard not to cry, but I was anyway, I could feel the snot running over my lips, and one of them filmed the whole thing on his phone and then uploaded the clip on YouTube. It goes for four minutes and fifteen seconds. They are not even laughing. Sullivan says, ‘Toldjuz,’ at the beginning, and then all you can hear are cars going past on the bridge and the pathetic sound of me crying. They film me in silence and with disinterest, as if I am an exhibit in the zoo. (150)

The quote demonstrates how the audio-visual medium video is referenced and how auditory and visual information are separated. Instead of a simultaneous description of both, they are rearranged and separated from each other. The scene breaks therefore with previous narration through this alienation. Furthermore, it creates a distancing effect for Alex and the reader alike: Alex does not inform the reader of the incident but describes a video about it in an almost neutral manner.

Concerning intramedial instances and intertextuality, the three reports of day care centres included in the narrative constitute the most relevant (67-69) since they offer further information on Alex’s upbringing and behaviour. Each report takes up exactly one page in the book and the use of various typefaces and pictures imitates the layout of official reports. Handwriting is imitated through different handwriting fonts, and each form differs from the other in layout and fonts supporting the notion of the reports originating from different institutions. Since the referenced medium is still written text, these forms can be seen as intramedial references. These official forms provide information in a very impersonal manner,

which disrupts the narrative due to their non-narrative and objective mode. They offer information about Alex's behaviour objectively and factually, which stands in sharp contrast to the emotional perspectives of Alex and Heather. The suddenness of and the impersonal and factual language used in the reports interrupt the fluency of the text, which furthers the impression of disjunction in the narrative. Furthermore, the information they convey relates to violent outbursts of Alex as a toddler, which is relevant for the creation of transgender insofar, as that the use of testosterone pills for the child might be questioned by the reader since testosterone is commonly associated with inducing violent behaviour in the narrative: "The medication that made me want to punch people" (70).

Two references to specific texts of popular culture are included in the narrative, which serves to connect the text to a specific time period. The singer P!nk and her song 'So What' (2008) are referred twice through the unmarked quoting of lyrics and mentions of the singer (107, 109), and the Nickelodeon TV-show *Back to the Barnyard* (2007) (63-64) is referred to in relation to incongruence between body and gender: "the main character is a cow, Otis, with huge pink udders, except Otis is a he. Nobody ever explains why he has massive udders hanging between his legs. None of the other animals ever draw attention to them. It's just not a big deal" (63-64). These instances of intermediality/textuality differ from previously mentioned ones since they refer to independent non-fictional texts, thus anchoring the text in a specific time and cultural context. Since the name of the singer and of the TV-show are mentioned (105, 63), the readers possess the necessary knowledge to find the texts if they so desire, which might be of relevance when texts become unknown in the future and are no longer part of contemporary popular culture.

The inter- and intramedial references in Alex as well appear very structured and are most often of relevance to the overall plot. Disrupting or queering potential can be observed in the day care reports through its contrast to the emotional perspectives of Alex and Heather, and the mother's blog entries since they offer an additional perspective on the events of the story.

In great contrast to the structured integration and relevance of references to the plot in *Alex as well*, intertextuality and intermediality can be observed to further the queer aesthetic in *Little Fish* since the text oscillates between disorganized and consistent in its integration and representation of different media and texts. Similar to *Alex as well*, internet and social media serve to place the narrative in contemporary times. Facebook is repeatedly referenced and quoted throughout the narrative. Facebook posts are mentioned in combination with 'likes' (Plett 51), and Wendy writes posts (27) and interacts on the platform: "Walking back home, she saw that Sophie and Lila had posted a breakfast picture together on Facebook, at 2:34. They

were at Sal's. They both looked happy. Wendy posted a heart" (120). The ubiquitous presence of social media is further reinforced through reiteration of quotes attributed to Facebook through Wendy: For example, the following quote "Facebook said: *What's on your mind, Wendy?*" (120) is echoed by Wendy shortly afterwards: "What's on your mind?" (137). Other websites such as Backpage and ShemaleCanada are mentioned in combination with Wendy's advertisement of her services (131), and an online test for transgender or gender questioning people is mentioned as well (267-269). These references are used to situate the plot in contemporary time, but do not aid the queering of the text.

The following inter- and intramedial references can be seen as adding to the creation of a queer aesthetic in the narrative: the inconsistent formatting of text messages, the picture of parts of an illegible letter, included texts without relevance to the plot, and references to specific texts without clarifying their relevance. The text messages are presented using the mediums own means with their content relevant to the plot. However, the graphic layout is not uniform since three different ways of integrating text messages can be identified: "Sophie: *Oh did you end up at Ernies? Raina said you left with a guy. Haha nm ;D get that d (8:35 a.m.)*" (Plett 50), "After her shift, she texted Raina: *You home tonight?* and got an instant response: *Covering at work.*" (96), and "(204) 822-9532 2:36 a.m. *wd u do an outcall to morden! I got 100 plus party treats for u babe n im ...*"(232) demonstrate the difference between the layout and integration of the texts clearly. The first and last formatting is used when Wendy switches her mobile phone back on and receives previously sent messages, which demonstrates that the formatting varies independent from the situation in which they were sent or read. The inconsistent formatting furthers the impression of the novel as disorganised, adding to the queer aesthetic.

The central instance of intermediality in the narrative constitutes the inclusion of a monochrome picture of parts of a letter handwritten in what is called "Gothic script" (257), which can be identified as Kurrent, in the narrative (256). The picture shows only the paper of the letter itself but does not encompass the letter's full content. Indeed, the letter appears photographed or scanned slightly off-centre since some of the letters are cut off. This intermedial instance is interestingly layered as there is an intramedial reference to another written text, the fictional handwritten letter, which is presented in another medium, as a picture of it, and therefore as an intermedial reference in the narrative. The inclusion of the letter as a picture disrupts the narrative through the change of the semiotic system. A possible reason for the inclusion of the letter as a picture instead of inclusion through the use of an alternative font could be seen in the use of Kurrent, which adds credibility to the letter's historicity as well as rendering the letter illegible to the readers and to Wendy (257). Its inclusion and illegibility add

to the queer aesthetic of the novel since the mediality of the novel itself is foregrounded through the inclusion of another medium.

The queer aspect can also be observed in connection with the unclear purpose of some integrated texts, whose subject matter appears irrelevant to the plot. For example, the patient information of MEPRATE (66), a medical product containing medroxyprogesterone, serves no purpose for reader or plot. Instead, its use can be seen in blurring the boundary between texts since there is a product called MEPRATE that contains medroxyprogesterone and is used for HRT (Pharmaright). The description in the narrative partly matches the labelling of the tin foil sheets of the actual product. The inclusion of such potentially ‘real’ texts results in the fragmentation of the narrative as it blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction, which can be assumed as the purpose of its inclusion and presents a queer aspect of the narrative.

Furthermore, Bible verses and a song are mentioned by verse number or title only, without additional information regarding their relevance to the narrative. The song “Violet” (1994) by the band Hole appears to be of personal significance to Wendy and is mentioned twice (Plett 153-4; 290), a reference in Henry’s letter is made to a specific Bible passage, and Anna mentions specific Bible verses that were of importance to Wendy’s grandfather: “*Your invocation of Romans 12 has been of great solace as of late*” (258), “There was some-thing I forgot to tell you. Last time you were here. Philippians Chapter 2, verses 12 through 18. Those were also. Meaningful verses to Henry” (283). While the importance of these specific texts is established in the narrative, the specific nature of the relevance remains unclear since insufficient information is provided. The lyrics of the song and the Bible verses are not part of the narrative. The readers are put in an unusual position since they become responsible for clarifying the relevance of these references. Why were these specific Bible verses important to the possibly transgender grandfather? What is the personal significance of the song? In order to answer these questions, the referenced texts need to be consulted. As such, the readers are referred to external texts to make sense of the references in the narrative, which presents another queer aspect of the narrative.

It could be shown that intermediality and intertextuality feature in both narratives to disrupt the reading experience and to queer the narratives, but that the effect is not uniform: The integration of texts appears well structured and the texts referenced are of relevance to the overall plot in *Alex as well* since they provide additional information pertaining to the topic transgender. In contrast, the inter- and intramedial references in *Little Fish* add to the queer aesthetic that has been established through the continuous disruption of time and the queer relation between narrative instance and the main character. Texts are integrated that are of no

relevance to the plot and other texts are only referenced as important to the characters without providing more information as to how they relate to the narrative at all.

So far, the analysis has shown that both narratives demonstrate great adherence to their respective genres. Queer elements could be identified regarding narrative instance, narrator-reader-relationship, time, and intermediality. In *Alex as well*, the most obvious queer influence of the topic transgender and intersexuality could be observed in the duality of the main character. In *Little Fish*, the creation of a queer aesthetic could be identified: Characterising for this aesthetic are an elliptical writing style, a dissonance between heterodiegetic narration and intense focalisation on the main character, inconsistent formatting, integration of seemingly irrelevant texts, and an instance of intermediality in form of a picture showing parts of a letter, which also hints at the ‘messy’ organisation of the text. While the topic transgender appears to have an influence on narratology, this influence does not suffice to queer the genre of the text since the texts can still be clearly identified as central novel and adolescent novel, respectively. The narratives do not demonstrate what Bornstein has termed transgendered writing style and neither are they experimental enough to transcend genre classification; despite the queer aspects the texts remain organised, clearly-structured, and with a recognisable plot. Further analysis focuses on the portrayal of transgender characters, construction of categories of sex and gender, and the transgender body images in the narrative.

#### 4. Creating Transgender in *Little Fish* and *Alex as well*

Previous research into the relation between transgender and transgenre identified certain parallels between those concepts regarding the disruption of norms. The narratives under discussion have been analysed in their relation to genres and queering aspects have been identified that aid the creation of transgender on the level of narration. Further analysis focuses on the creation of transgender and binaries of sex and gender in the texts and the influence of genre on the construction of transgender. Thinking transgender with queer, I assume that transgender is created as relational to the norms of gender and sex and therefore inherently precarious.

##### 4.1. Precarious Transgender Lives

The characterisation and the number of transgender characters are the main factors for the construction of transgender in the narratives. The depiction of transgender women is influenced by the genres in both texts and differs greatly in comparison: Transgender women in the adult

novel are presented as a precarious community with victimhood as a major aspect, whereas Alex in the adolescent novel as the only transgender character appears so self-assured that self-heroization needs to be addressed as well.

### **Isolated and Diverse Transgender Community in *Little Fish***

The number of transgender characters in *Little Fish* posits one of the most obvious differences to *Alex as well*, which features only one transgender person. In *Little Fish*, there is more than one transgender person the reader encounters as Wendy is part of the Canadian transgender community and has transgender friends. Interaction with transgender people is common in Wendy's life and the experiences of transgender people portrayed are therefore pluralised through their numbers.

The community is conceptualised as separate from the cisgender main society through language and cultural knowledge. Through the use of certain vocabulary and terminology also, the community is linguistically differentiated from mainstream society. An example of such specific jargon would be the use of *HRT* which is used for the first time in conversation between Wendy and Lila (Plett 59). The narrative instance offers no explanation for the term, which is the abbreviation for hormone replacement therapy, a term commonly used in the transgender community. Another demarcation between transgender and cisgender people in the novel is the use of *sister* between transgender women: "[S]he's gone, you're a sister, I can probably trust you, huh?" (172) and "She dated a sister in uni" (107) are just some examples, where *sister* is used to denote 'fellow transgender woman' and carries the religious connotation of 'sisterhood', which ties in with the religious theme of the novel since the Mennonite background of some characters is thematised as well. Through this separation, the transgender community appears as removed from societal life and placed on the fringe of society, which indicates precariousness of their status therein. Furthermore, the depiction of transgender women as a separate community constitutes an adherence to the genre conventions of the central novel, according to which the character is "rooted in a social class" (Abrams 192).

Regarding adherence to norms, the novel resists construction of a specific depiction of a transgender woman since this social class is characterised by diversity. Transgender women are differentiated by several factors, such as the reaction of the respective families to their coming-out (173) or physical differences: The bodies of transgender people in the novel range from being pre-transition like Kaitlyn to pre-SRS like Raina to post-SRS like Wendy. Another relevant factor is age, which marks difference between transgender and cisgender people (11-12) but is also used to differentiate between 'generations' of transgender people. These



transgender generations differ in their experiences, opportunities, and public acceptance: “Trans women like *us*, Dex had clarified after. [...] Dex was from an older crowd. Well, maybe only five or seven years older but that was a lot in trans years” (214). Age is also of relevance when the topic of Wendy’s grandfather’s potential transgender identity is discussed since time period-typical transphobia and the lack of available information about and for transgender people is thematised (107).

Another relevant factor is cultural knowledge, which allows for differentiation between transgender people on a cultural and national level. Through references to transgender activists Morgan Page (146) and Andrea James (270) and the discussion of the ‘combined gender identity and transsexuality inventory’ or COGIATI (267-270) it appears that there is a certain insider knowledge in the Canadian transgender community. As such, Wendy and her friends appear shocked when the British transgender woman Aileen confesses to her ignorance of the test and Andrea James (270). In fact, this insider knowledge can be seen as another indication for the social isolation of the Canadian transgender community and for the diversity of transgender persons in general in the novel.

Furthermore, the differences between transgender women are not only tied to the topic transgender. Ethnicity is mentioned and becomes relevant when the search for Sophie remains unsuccessful. In order to gain more information from a hotel clerk, Wendy is sent to question him, which is justified with skin colour: “‘Wendy, you should go, hey?’ ‘I should?’ said Wendy. ‘*You’ll* know if it’s the same guy or not.’ ‘You’re a white girl, Wendy’” (116). Ethnicity is used as a category, which further differentiates transgender women, and white privilege is hinted at as Wendy is sent instead of Lila, who is Native American (43). This scene demonstrates that transgender women are not reduced to their gender in the novel as they are portrayed as multi-dimensional characters with other factors than gender playing an important role in their everyday lives; in this particular case, it is ethnicity. The transgender characters in *Little Fish* are more complicated than their gender. The topic transgender is also not the sole focus of the novel, instead, other aspects of life are thematised as well, such as substance abuse, job dismissal, or family secrets.

The novel does not concern itself merely with one transgender person in a cisgender environment. Instead, the story is set in a community in which being transgender is the norm and not a peculiarity. Through mentions of differences between generations and differences between transgender persons, the community is portrayed as heterogeneous and given some historical background while assuming or being assigned a marginalized position in society. Furthermore, the diversity of the transgender women in the novel eliminates any preconceived

notion of the reader as to their ethnicity and appearance. The novel refuses to restrict its presentation of these people to the one image of a transgender woman as presented through Wendy: the white, post-SRS transgender person who is easily recognisable as such. Instead, the characters of the novel defy such limiting preconceptions and evade the specification and definition of a transgender woman's appearance through their diversity. As such, there is not one definite presentation of what constitutes a transgender woman. Instead, the definability of transgender woman itself is called into question and this category becomes precarious.

As mentioned above, the transgender community can be seen as a genre convention for the central novel since it allows for the portrayal of Wendy as rooted within one social class. Instead of a homogenous class, however, this group is characterised by its variety of transgender persons. The mental or physical well-being of transgender characters is threatened at various instances. Factors such as prostitution, sexual assault, suicide, and drug use are presented as ubiquitous in the transgender community, which adds to their overall precariousness.

### **Precariousness, Victimhood, and Passivity in *Little Fish***

Prostitution is mentioned early on in the narrative (78) and becomes a central topic as Sophie is active in this occupation (108), and Wendy returns to the profession (130-131). As a high-risk profession, prostitution can be considered as unsafe and threatening. The substantial personal risk is evidenced by the rape of Sophie (118). Furthermore, a link is established between transgender and prostitution in the novel since it is mentioned that sex work among transgender women is exceedingly common: “[t]here’s, like, a square of trans-girl careers, and it’s anchored by four corners [.] [...] It was like, one corner is social work, another corner is sex work, another corner, like, arts and academia, and the other corner is tech” (241).

The search for Sophie demonstrates the unwillingness of the public to help transgender women and sex workers. The car park attendants ridicule transgender people by misgendering Lila (113-114), and the receptionist refuses to cooperate (111, 116). Due to the nature of the business, the transgender women cannot involve the authorities without risking solicitation charges (114). In fact, the authorities themselves are presented as problematic and unreliable considering the instance in which police violence is indicated (104) and Wendy herself is ridiculed by a police officer (229-230), which demonstrates the precariousness of the characters as they cannot obtain support from public authorities.

The rape of Sophie is only one of the instances of sexual assault mentioned in the novel. In fact, Wendy is assaulted by a homeless person while intoxicated (91-93) and the reader is informed of two previous sexual assaults on Wendy (101, 224). The majority of these instances

can be tied to the woman's transgender status. For instance, when she was assaulted in college, the man acted upon the information on Wendy's transgender status: "'Are you a fuckin' man?' He followed her inside, made a grab for her, demanded she let him suck her dick" (101). Even then, the police remain uninvolved. None of the instances of sexual assault in the novel are reported to the police.

Suicide is another central theme in *Little Fish* that presents transgender people as precarious. It becomes clear to the reader that Wendy suffers from psychological problems such as alcohol abuse and suicidal thoughts since she contemplates attempting suicide (119) and her 'suicide plan' is presented in detail (121). But it is in Sophie that suicide is realised in the novel as she does take her own life (155).

Sophie's suicide is of crucial importance to the portrayal of transgender women in the novel and as a plot device. It completes the image of Sophie as a victim of her circumstances: A transgender woman working as a prostitute whose family appears to judge her decision to transition (139) and who was raped takes her own life despite her friends' continuous support and reassurances (145, 159) and her openness to talk about her mental health. Reasons for her suicide are not explicitly stated in the text but it can be assumed that her mental health and the relationship to her family, especially to the mother, are deciding factors. The fragmented relationship and the lack of acceptance in her family is alluded to at several points in the story (135, 145). Furthermore, suicide is portrayed as a common occurrence in the transgender community: "I had a friend who killed herself years ago. [...] She was trans" (145); "[t]rans women in this city either leave or die" (214). As Lila puts it: "Why's it so fucking hard for us to stay alive, man?" (241). Sophie's suicide exemplifies the precariousness of transgender persons in the novel.

Another factor furthering the portrayal of transgender people as leading precarious lives concerns drugs and drug abuse. Several transgender characters in the narrative are placed within or near the drug scene. For example, Lila has ties to a drug-dealer (58); Carla inquires whether Wendy knows of someone to procure marijuana (171), Kaitlyn is an active drug user (212); and Wendy has a drinking problem. Even when she recognises her drinking behaviour as problematic, Wendy does not abstain from or reduce her alcohol consumption. Instead, she just begins to count the number of alcoholic beverages consumed daily (187).

The precariousness of transgender characters' lives appears as universal and independent of the characters' transition, as can be seen in Kaitlyn. Introduced as an ex-military cocaine addict who hires Wendy over an internet platform, her gender becomes topic of discussion during the appointment with Wendy. Kaitlyn's proclivities – cross-dressing, name-

calling, and her role during the act itself as the receptive and submissive partner – suggest gender confusion to Wendy. Kaitlyn continuously makes self-deprecating remarks hinting at her own confusion and insecurity about her preferences and gender when she confesses to watching transgender pornography (213) and dressing up as a woman (216). Her isolation is hinted at in the description of her bedroom which contains only the essentials, empty delivery-boxes, and a “a human-sized stuffed koala” (216). For Kaitlyn, the questioning of her gender results in drug use, isolation, and soliciting prostitutes.

Being transgender is therefore presented as a precarious existence in the novel, independent of the person’s transition and prostitution, mental illness, and drug abuse are almost customary for transgender persons. In addition to the precariousness resulting from misgendering through members of the public and the necessity of constant reassertion of one’s gender, the existence of transgender characters in society and their economic status appear uncertain and threatened.

However, there are instances when victimhood appears unrealistic and self-staged mainly through Wendy. When the woman develops a skin infection with blisters on her hands, she automatically blames the illegal hormones instead of herself for acquiring them illegally without medical consultation: “*Raina, I don’t know what’s happening to me, I’m so scared, these illegal hormones made this happen to my body*” (200). When seeking medical aid, she neglects to inform the doctor of her self-imposed hormone regiment citing the untrustworthiness of doctors as reason for this oversight (210). In fact, the permanent self-staging as the victims reaches new heights when Wendy blames mainstream society for her house eviction and Sophie’s suicide: “A couple shrank away from her and hurried inside. She saw them pointing her out to a clerk. She hated them. *Hated them*. It was those kinds of people who kicked her out of her fucking house! It was those kinds of people who killed her friend!” (209). Sophie’s suicide is presented as murder and any agency Sophie might have had is denied. Instead, the cisgender society is seen as the perpetrator in counterpoint to the transgender community as victims.

Problematic or illogical actions evidence Wendy’s self-destructive tendencies and self-staging as a victim. An example of such a decision would be her return to prostitution. This decision is rationalised by citing monetary reasons although it is mentioned in the same instance that it is an inopportune time to return to this profession (130-131) and the risks associated with the profession are demonstrated clearly through Sophie’s capture and sexual assault beforehand. Wendy’s immediate return to prostitution appears illogical, especially considering her own opinion on sex work and her decision to resume this line of work: “Wendy’d never

truly despised ho-ing – but she had hoped to never do it again. Oh well” (132). The casualness of this statement is rather disconcerting and relativizing the personal risk involved.

Another example for Wendy’s self-sabotage concerns her love life. Despite her own interest in two men, she declines to pursue a relationship with either of them citing her line of work (148) and her being transgender as reason why she is to be considered ‘unlovable’: “How could men ever love her? She would never be loved” (90); “*Michael may not know all about me, but he knows I’m a transsexual and he knows I’m a drunk [...] Oh, what am I thinking? He just wants to get laid!*” (277). Ultimately, the contact to Ernie breaks off (163) and the idea of a relationship with Michael is decidedly rejected (280). She wilfully remains passive in this aspect of her life instead of grasping the opportunities given to her.

This passivity of Wendy is reflected in the plot of the narrative itself as the unfolding events are rarely initiated by Wendy herself and are portrayed as incidents where her presence appears almost coincidental. The events appear to happen to her, but not because of own actions: Anna’s phone call initiates the plot about Henry’s gender; Sophie’s rape and suicide prompt the search for her, and her funeral leads to the meeting between Wendy and Aileen; the loss of her job and her return to sex work are due to the shop’s closing; Michael’s advances lead to a rendezvous. Wendy is portrayed as almost incapable of initiative or agency since her own actions are almost exclusively prompted by outside forces and actions.

In fact, the notion of Wendy’s passivity is explicitly stated in the novel as Wendy herself remarks on the lack of agency in her life: “*More and more, I feel like life is something that’s just happening to me. My choices don’t feel like choices at all. [...] I think sex work is work like anything else, but there isn’t agency the way the smiley ones say there is. I feel like it was all predetermined and inevitable and it was silly to think I could ever stop*” (186). The position in which one is left without any power over circumstances is the position of the victim. By not even attempting to regain agency over her life, Wendy lets herself become a victim of her circumstances.

The transgender characters in *Little Fish* are presented as a diverse community, who live at the margin of society and with precarious economic and social status. The status of the victim is most often attributed to the characters, who are also willingly assuming this position as demonstrated by Wendy. In contrast to this portrayal of transgender in *Little Fish*, the transgender character in *Alex as well* is conceptualised very differently.

### **Transgender Character and Heroization in *Alex as well***

While *Little Fish* creates a diverse, precarious, and marginalized transgender community, *Alex as well* operates with one transgender person, Alex, as the main character and the narrator. With the exception of the inserted blog entries of the mother, the focus is constantly on the transgender character, who perceives herself as different from others. The main plot revolves around the conflict between parents and child about Alex's gender. Transgender and intersexuality are therefore at the centre of the conflict in the novel. The lack of other transgender or intersex characters emphasise Alex's status as different.

In fact, Alex's outsider position is a continuous theme in the novel and continually reinforces the notion of transgender and intersex as strange and alien, in contrast to the normalisation of transgender in *Little Fish*. The outsider position is reflected in Alex's position as the new student at school since she enrolls there during the school year (Brugman 14) and is first ignored by the others (43). When she befriends some colleagues, Alex comments on the fact that she is "with the exotic chicks, so I guess I'm in the right place" (48). She refers to skin colour, nationality, and unusual eye colour of her friends since Amina is quite tall and Somali (37), Julia is an exchange student from Brazil, and Sierra has green eyes (48). The girls are characterised as unusual and Alex is part of a group marked by their difference to others. Even in her old school was Alex in such an outsider position due to special treatment regarding showering or changing for physical education class separate from the other boys and permission to use the staff toilet (149). She was marked as different to the others and herself, which led to bullying and to the video incident.

Despite this victimisation, Alex is not a passive character like Wendy in *Little Fish*. Instead, Alex takes charge of her own life, which correlates with the 'growing up'-theme of the genre of YA novel. She enrolls in a new school, decides to seek legal advice from the lawyer Crockett, whose first name is never mentioned in the text, and starts a career as a model – all without parental permission or advice and without any indication of doubt.

Indeed, the character of Alex appears at times implausible in terms of self-assuredness and maturity. A number of her decisions result from her spontaneity such as the enrolment in the new school, which is described as a very spontaneous decision: "Enrolling in a new school is doing, impulsively. [sic] I was literally walking past" (13). The same impulsivity is displayed when she spontaneously declares herself to be vegetarian (31), but also when she first enters Crockett's office enquiring after the possibility of legally changing her gender and sex: "Now I am pissed, because I wasn't just walking past his shop and thinking, *I know, I might get my gender reassigned today*. OK, maybe I did, but it's been a long time coming" (21). It

demonstrates that the visit to the lawyer was not planned but impulsive action despite previous thoughts about gender and likens the seriousness of the topic of gender reassignment to teenage impulsivity and thoughtlessness.

However, she does not doubt her gender for a moment even when the conflict with her mother escalates demonstrating unconvincing self-assuredness. It is clear to her that she is not at fault for the conflict with her parents: “When I look over these past few weeks, I can’t see one thing I have done wrong” (159). Alex’s self-assuredness displayed throughout the novel especially with regard to her gender appears at times exaggerated and false, which can be read as a reflection of typical teenage behaviour, which corresponds to the expectations on the genre as defined by Lange and Petzoldt (12).

While Alex is portrayed as self-assured and spontaneous, the doubts are attributed to the male Alex. This results in internal conversations in which the male Alex gives voice to these thoughts and the female Alex reasserts her opinion and beliefs. For example, when the male Alex remarks on the possibility of her secret of ‘being a boy’ becoming known to her new friends, she reasserts that there is no secret since she is ‘not a boy’: “What do you think they’re going to do if ... *when* they find out you’re a boy? Alex asks. Why are you giving people reasons to hate us? But I’m not a boy, I counter. I beg to differ, Alex says. You just keep on begging, I reply” (81-82). The internal split of the character into female and male mirrors the internal conflict about Alex’ gender with the female half as the courageous one and the male as the doubting part. This distribution could be seen as an inversion of gender stereotypes since it is usually the male who is considered as dominant and reckless.

While transgender in *Little Fish* is portrayed as precarious through factors such as economic situation, sexual assault, drug (ab)use, self-sabotage, and mental health problems, precariousness can also be found in *Alex as well*. Two minor aspects are her financial situation and the relationship to the parents. The former is portrayed as precarious at times but is resolved in the narrative. For example, when Alex does not possess the necessary monetary means to hire Crockett, she is allowed to paint the lawyer’s office instead (103). Future financial problems are alluded to but modelling is mentioned as a potential solution: “and even that was nearly fifty bucks. Lien said she has work coming up for me, so that’s good” (208).

The relationship to the parents is the most uncertain or unstable relationship in the narrative but does not constitute Alex’s life as precarious. Nevertheless, the emotional abandonment of the child can be seen as influential in this regard since both parents independently decide to leave the child for a period of time: “My dad left us last night. [...] Well, it is one hundred per cent because of me” (9), “she can’t seriously have just decided to

pack up and go to Fiji since this morning. Can she?” (145), and Alex questions her own self-worth due to their behaviour: “My mother does try to love me. They both do. Why is it so difficult for them? Am I so unlovable that they have to work that hard?” (35-36).

Connected to the relationship to the parents is the question of the legal guardian and Alex’s housing situation. For the most part of the story, Alex lives at home with her parents. When Alex learns of the existence of an earlier birth registration form identifying her as a girl, she decides to ‘leave her parents’ through legal emancipation and moving out (162). Since she is a minor, she is placed in a temporary foster home: “It’s only for a few days until they figure out what to do with me” (165). The temporary home turns out to be only for one night since the foster care mother decides return responsibility for Alex to the Department of Child Services, which leaves Alex in a precarious situation without housing and legal guardian: “Who is the current legal guardian? The Pam woman has handed back the belongings to DoCS, so she’s not the guardian. Did someone from DoCS call back? [...]” (187). In the end, Alex moves out and lives in a house with Crockett’s daughter (208); the question of legal guardianship and her lawsuit for emancipation is left unanswered.

Alex’s gender is presented as uncertain due to the lack of validation through the parents and the legal status of her gender, both of which are due to her intersexuality. The conflict for the parents to accept Alex’s gender is mostly presented through the mother. Heather forces hormone treatment in form of testosterone pills and lotion on the daughter (114, 86) and is the reason for Alex’s sex status as male becoming known at the new school (186), destroying Alex’s self-presentation as female. Her status as male is considered as valid due to the legal papers identifying her as male/boy. However, even the official status of Alex’s sex and gender is uncertain since an older birth certificate identifying her as a girl is found (161), which diminishes the validity of official documents regarding gender and sex in Alex’s case. The reason for the uncertainty of Alex’s official gender status is connected to her body and sex, and to the limits of the binary system of male and female since it fails to include possibilities of sexual ambiguity. Male and female are apparently the only options for the legal sex marker in *Alex as well*, which leads to considerations regarding the construction of gender binary through language in the novels.

#### **4.2. Adherence to the Gender Binary through Language**

Closer analysis of the novels regarding the construction of gender demonstrates that the categories of boy/man and girl/woman are of central importance in the narratives. Since transgender does not necessarily mean adherence to the gender and sex binary of male and



female, possible alternative gender categories could be introduced in the texts, which would disrupt the established norms of gender. This chapter focuses on the construction of gender through language and will analyse the following aspects: gender categories in the novels; gendered language; and precariousness of gender through language.

### **Categories in *Alex as well* and *Little Fish***

In both narratives, the categories man and woman are consistently used and appear of central importance. While alternatives to the gender binary are mentioned, they appear only in minor capacity and do not influence the overall adherence to the binary. Nevertheless, a difference between the narratives regarding the use of gender terms and labels can be observed: The differentiation between cisgender and transgender is added to the concept of the gender binary in *Little Fish*, whereas *Alex as well* focuses nearly obsessively on the categories of boy and girl.

*Little Fish* operates with the gender binary but adapts the concept to include the differentiation between transgender and cisgender. This difference is introduced at the beginning of the narrative: “Age is completely different for trans people. The way we talk about age is not how cis people talk about age” (Plett 11). Cisgender and transgender, here in abbreviated form, are introduced as opposing categories and used consistently: Wendy differentiates her flatmates according to this distinction (33, 156) and uses both terms in discussion with the mother of a transgender friend (135-136). Furthermore, they appear as incompatible with each other, which is linked to appearance in the narratives: Wendy ponders about appearing cis- and transgender after her gender is questioned by a customer at work: “Wendy knew how to deal with looking cis and she knew how to deal with looking trans, but she would never, ever figure out how to be both. [...] *You can’t play their game. You never win by playing the cis game.* [...] And Raina’d say, *I hate that they make me choose*” (125). This incompatibility is also demonstrated when Wendy reminds herself to put on make-up to pass as cisgender when visiting a woman who does not know Wendy is transgender: “She stopped in Arborg to touch up her makeup (You need to be cis for, like, a couple hours, don’t forget)” (244-245), which indicates that to be read as a cisgender woman, a change in appearance is necessary in addition to behavioural changes. The opposing categories here are not man and woman: It is not a fear of being identified as a man in this scenario, but as a transgender woman.

Alternatives to the binarity of man and woman are alluded to but seen as different to transgender, which indicates that transgender is bound to the binary in the novel. A reference is made to positions between the poles man – woman: “She dated a sister in uni. She’s also dated women *on the spectrum*” (107, emphasis added) and since *sister* refers to another

transgender woman, a difference between those two genders is made. While alternatives to the binary are therefore possible, they appear as irrelevant for the transgender persons who still refer to the categories of man and woman.

However, despite this linguistic adherence to the categories transgender man and transgender woman, the common assumption of transgender people as completely adhering to the binaries of gender and sex is challenged in the narrative. The term *transgender* and its definition or common association among cisgender people is discussed and rejected:

‘Nice neat middle-aged white ladies who fretted about their fuckin’ hand-bags, and if you weren’t dead thirsty for a vag then you weren’t a real woman,’ said Lila. ‘I dunno if that’s Miss COGIATI’s experience or whatever, but, like, you know. When I was a teenager, that’s what I thought being trans was. That’s why I was a gay boy until my mid-twenties.’ (268-269)

The characters expose the prevalent understanding of being transgender among cisgender people and mainstream society, and how it does not apply to them at all. Being transgender is here equalled to a desire for undergoing sexual reassignment surgery to pass as a cisgender woman, termed here as ‘real woman’. Only by rejecting this definition of transgender allows for the second speaker’s transition. This passage occurs near the end of the novel, and the readers have been introduced to the fictional, everyday life of a transgender woman at this point, which puts them into a position from which they can judge and evaluate such a definition. In fact, defining transgender as ‘wanting to become a real woman’ can only be regarded as simplistic and limited considering the variety of possible transgender identities and bodies the reader encountered by the end of the narrative.

Regarding transgender bodies and their linguistic categorisation, the following terms are used in the text: *transsexual*, *tranny*, and *shemale*. Transsexualism has been defined as a synonym of transgender which emphasizes the medical aspects of transitioning. It is used twice in the narrative (146, 268) but is not further distinguished or differentiated from transgender. The latter two are terms of abuse in the LGBTQ+ community, with *shemale* being used almost exclusively in the context of pornography and prostitution, as is the case in the novel. *Shemale* indicates blurring of the boundaries between male and female, and the term is connected to a certain image of the person’s body: female secondary sex characteristics with male genitalia, an image that constitutes, according to John Phillips, the majority of depictions of transgender woman in pornography (*Wild Side*, 258). The use of *tranny* and *shemale* can be seen as an attempt to linguistically distinguish between being transgender in everyday life and in sex work.

In a stark contrast, *Alex as well* virtually excludes definitions and labels such as transgender or non-binary. The main character transitions socially from male to female, but the term transgender is used only once in the entire narrative as part of a hypothetical situation: “Yeah, that’s fine, come on in! None of our parents have any problem at all with a transgendered freak getting changed with our little boys and girls” (Brugman 21) Transgender is used with the suffix -ed resulting in a form which ungrammatical and inappropriate, according to the GLAAD media reference guide (GLAAD). In combination with *freak*, being transgender is deprecated especially considering the implied suggestion of transgender people as sexual predators. Transgender itself is not at any time assumed as a viable gender in the YA novel, and no reference to non-binary people is made.

One term that the narrative includes that denotes a different variety of gender identification than the heteronormative boy or girl still adheres to these categories: bi-gender or rather “bi-gendered” (Brugman 41) is used by a commentator on one of Heather’s blog posts: “Someone said I was ‘bi-gendered’ and it really seemed to be right. [...] I switch back and forth from feeling like I should be a boy one day and feeling like I should be a girl the next. It’s like having a dual personality only the other one is a boy. Until I figure out what I am I’m going to keep telling myself that I’m both” (41-42). This seemingly inconspicuous comment could be of relevance to the reader since it relates to the split of Alex into male and female. The term *bi-gender* would therefore be a reasonable option for the reader to apply to Alex. However, the term is problematic since it implies that there are only two valid genders with no alternatives to *boy* and *girl*. Furthermore, it is mentioned that the commentator assumes that he or she ought to choose between boy and girl, with *bi-gender* as a temporary solution to a problem which will be resolved by ‘choosing’ one of the genders. The validity of one’s gender is dependent on selection of one of the traditional genders. Gender labels that do not fit into these two categories are considered invalid until proven to be temporary and eventually rejected.

The reluctance of using terminology unrelated to or subverting the established norms of gender and sex can also be observed with regard to the central term of the novel: intersexuality. The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) defines intersex as “a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” (ISNA). As such, the term does not refer to gender but to sex. The term itself is only explicitly stated once, near the end of the narrative (Brugman 194). At this point, Alex’s body has been discussed in various instances of novel, for example when discussing the exact form of her genitalia with the lawyer (100-101), and the reader has to be considered as informed of her intersexuality. The late mention of the

exact term is a further indication of the novel's opposition to operate with terms denoting gender varieties outside the gender binary.

Instead, the text operates nearly exclusively with the gender categories boy/man and girl/woman through which gender is seen as a binary, rather than a spectrum. *Boy* and *girl* are used, and their mutual exclusion is referred to even before the main body text or the story sets in as the cover features the quote "Why does it matter whether I am a boy or a girl? But it does. It really, really matters" (Brugman cover). 'One is either a boy or a girl, but not both' seems to be the main idea conveyed by this quote. Furthermore, Alex refers to herself explicitly only with the gender categories boy and girl: "I'm here asking for your help because I *am* a girl" (102). Even in instances in which Alex discusses her gender with herself, or, rather, with the other Alex, the two genders are used exclusively: "What do you think they're going to do if ... *when* they find out you're a boy? [...] But I'm not a boy, I counter" (82). While the split of the character Alex into two clearly gendered personas complicates the conception of gender in the novel, it still demonstrates the recurring to the gender binary.

It is only at the very end of the novel that this distinction appears to collapse, when Alex's legal status as a boy becomes known at school. Alex recognises the futility of negating her past as a boy and attempting to leave the male Alex behind: "I don't see how I can get away from the old Alex. [...] He's quiet sometimes, but he's always there, like a shadow" (186). However, neither does she want to "go back to being a boy now" (188). Instead, she attempts to reconcile the split of male and female: "I'm just going to be this endless in-between thing that everyone despises" (188). Karlie Rodriguez (2017), who analyses *Alex as well* regarding sexual agency and focuses mainly on the role of the mother, sees Alex as a non-binary person since the duality of Alex is not resolved at the end: "the ending suggests that while individuals may choose one gender or the other, or might prefer one embodiment over another [...], there is also the possibility of socializing yourself into a non-binary role" (50). The very last sentence of the novel leads to this conclusion: "It's me up there, dressed like a girl dressed like a boy" (Brugman 210). Since the split into male and female Alex is still ongoing in this last chapter, the last sentence of the novel may indicate such reconciliation of the genders in the novel thereby breaking the binary. However, the fact remains that the novel mainly operates within the gender binary and its terms and that the collapse of the binary is implied but not realised due to the fact that the split is continued and that both parts of Alex are not reconciled into one 'I'-Alex.

A possible explanation for the recursing on traditional gender terms concerns the intended readership for the novel, which can be assumed to be adolescents. The text operates

with traditional terminology and gender categories such as girl and boy, and gender-nonconforming or binary-transcending gender varieties are mentioned solely in passing and are not presented as viable alternatives. Through the use of the traditional gender categories, the text explains the topic of transgender and gender non-conformity through known categories.

Therefore, *Alex as well* appears to conform to the genre convention of YAN with transgender characters, as identified by Bittner (69), since Alex identifies herself within the gender binary. Even though the potential of disrupting notions of gender exists through the disruption of sex norms with Alex's intersexuality, gender remains strictly binary in the novel. In fact, the separation between male/man and female/woman is so distinct that Alex herself is split in two to fit this binary. Aside of specific gender terms and labels, trans/gender is created through the use of gendered language and through the use of pronouns. Especially regarding the latter, a more detailed discussion is necessary since the topic of pronouns features heavily in contemporary discourse regarding gender-neutral language.

### **Gendered Language and Transgender**

From a linguistic perspective, it is difficult in English to refer to another person without gendering since English is a naturally gendered language as opposed to a grammatically gendered one (Stryker 22). A choice between the gendered pronouns *he* or *she* appears inevitable when referring to another person using pronouns in English and gendering the referent as a logical consequence.

A closer look at the development of the English language regarding pronouns shows attempts of introducing a gender-neutral pronoun going back to the mid-eighteenth century at least. The discussion of gender-neutral pronouns is therefore not only a topic of debate in the twenty-first century but has been ongoing for decades as Dennis Baron (1981) shows. He traces the discussion back to the eighteenth century when grammarians began to object to the use of *they/them/their* with a gender-neutral, singular antecedent (83). Various suggestions for an epicene pronoun have been made since, which are chronologically listed by Baron (1981). Suggested gender-neutral pronouns include neologisms such as *e*, *es*, *em* (92), or phonetical or orthographic combinations of *he* and *she* such as *hi*, *hes*, *hem* (90) or *s/he*, *him/er* (94), without any of these attempts succeeding in the endeavour to gain wide-spread use and acceptance.

The discussion of a gender-neutral pronoun turned political in the 1970s with the second wave of feminism and was furthered by the discussion of political correctness and gender equality. Epicene pronouns were not seen as a tool to circumvent the use of singular *they* but to prevent sexist language usage and to overcome the gender bias of language. An example of

such sexist language use would be the use of the generic *he*, which was and is seen it as a perpetuation of male dominance, on which John Gastil (1990) elaborates (632).

In the 1990s, with the development of queer linguistics, the perpetuation of heteronormativity and gender normativity through language was also topicalized as Lal Zimman shows (87-88). Language is seen at the centre of debate in the United States concerning transgender people and most transgender activism seeks linguistic reform to allow for more gender-inclusivity (85-86). Transgender Studies scholar and linguist Levi Hord (2016) remarks that language is “one of the most important aspects of identity recognition and acceptance”, especially in transgender narratives (3). The choice of pronouns is heavily featured in LGBTQ+ discourses considering that transgender persons often prefer different pronouns than the ones corresponding to the gender they were assigned at birth. The use of the preferred pronoun is directly linked to the recognition of their identity through others as it indicates acceptance and identity recognition. Gender-neutral language is seen as a way for transgender people, especially for those who identify outside the gender-binary, to claim the power of dictating their own categories and labels (Hord 3). Deliberate use of incorrect pronouns for a person constitutes wilfull negation and denial of the person’s gender identity. This practice is commonly referred to as misgendering (3).

To achieve gender neutrality in language, two possibilities are mentioned by Marie Sendén, Emma Bäck and Anna Linqvist (2015): balancing/feminisation and neutralisation. The former “implies the use of gender-appropriate forms [...] for example by adding feminine versions to masculine titles” (Senden, Bäck, and Lindqvist 2). In English, an example of balancing would be the use of structures such as “*he or she*” or orthographic combinations such as *s/he*. However, such constructions are often regarded as “awkward” (Wayne 88) or “clumsy” (Hord 4) and Linda Wayne notes that transgender activists see a linguistical enforcement of a sex binary in such constructions since it is suggested to transgender people that they ought to fit in this binary: “A failed match between pronoun and person [...] is often treated as a defect of the person, for it is blamed on the individual’s failure to express proper sex/gender identity instead of being seen as a deficiency of our restrictive pronoun system” (Wayne 86). The other possibility would be to ‘neutralize’ the gender bias by abstaining from the use of gendered terms and using non-gendered words and forms instead. An example would be using *parent* over *mother* or *father* (Senden, Bäck, and Lindqvist 2) or *firefighter* instead of *fireman*. However, neutralizing the gender bias in personal pronouns raises the problem of the lack of an epicene pronoun once more.

In the last few years, the singular use of *they* has received increased attention as it has become more popular for the generic use and as the pronoun of choice for transgender and non-binary people. Singular *they* was voted word of the year 2015 by The American Dialect Society for “its emerging use as a pronoun to refer to a known person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of *he* and *she*” (American Dialect Society). The growing importance of the pronoun in singular use has been demonstrated by its inclusion in the user options on social media platform Facebook in 2014 (Mendoza 2014), and in The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law (AP Stylebook) (Hare 2017). As of the 2017 edition, the AP stylebook now includes an entry of singular *they* denominating it as “acceptable in limited cases as a singular and-or gender-neutral pronoun, when alternative wording is overly awkward or clumsy” (Hare 2017). Furthermore, singular *they* appears to make its ways into academic use as well since APA changed its policy on the singular use in its 7<sup>th</sup> edition in November 2019: “Use of singular ‘they’ is endorsed as part of APA Style because it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender” (American Psychological Association).

Alternatives to singular ‘they’ are in use as well. As Zimman (85) points out gender-neutral language has become one of the more debated topics on American college campuses. In university guidelines more gender-inclusive pronouns than singular *they* are discussed and portrayed as grammatically acceptable: For example, the LGBTQIA resource centre of the University of California at Davis offers a comprehensive overview of alternative pronouns to *she*, *he*, and *they*, including *xie*, *ze*, and *co* (University of California) while the LGBT resource centre of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee includes pronouns such as *fae*, *per*, or *xe* (University of Wisconsin). Another university guideline from Western Oregon University mentions *ze*, *per*, *hir*, and *they* as the more common gender-neutral pronouns in use (Western Oregon University).

### **Forms of Address**

Turning to gendered forms of address and job titles, it has been noted above that sexist language use through the use of gendered terms such as *chairman* or *fireman* can be subverted by exchanging them for more gender-inclusive terms like *chairperson* and *firefighter*. Concerning non-gendered terms of address, a new development originating from British English should be mentioned: *Mx* as a gender-neutral alternative to the honorific titles *Mr*, *Mrs*, and *Ms*. While its earliest printed use appears to date to 1977, it has received increased attention in the last few years. It is now included on various official forms in the UK, according to Nat Titman (2014).

Hord's survey (2016) on gender-neutral language use includes *Mx* and he remarks on the surprisingly widespread use of the neologism considering the otherwise hesitancy in the use of neologistic gender pronouns, which might be due to its being the only feasible gender-neutral title (16).

Language is important for the construction of gender and for validation of transgender and non-binary people. The discussion demonstrates the growing awareness of the need for gender-neutral language. There are possibilities to avoid the use of gendered language to allow for higher gender-inclusivity, which is important for transgender people who identify outside of the gender binary.

### **Pronoun Use in Transgender Texts**

While the use of pronouns to create gender in texts with transgender or gender-neutral language in literature has not received much attention, one study can be found in which the use of linguistic gender in literary texts is analysed with regard to transgender and intersexuality: Anna Livia in *Pronoun Envy* (2001) analyses linguistic gender in selected texts of English and French and focuses on transgender and intersex texts. The use of neologistic epicene pronouns such as *kin* or *per* is also analysed. It is noted that the majority of texts using such pronouns are attributed to the genre of science fiction which "lends itself well to experimentation" (134) as the context of alien life provides an excellent opportunity to experiment with pronouns (135) and thus, with gender since the use of such pronouns has a specific effect on the reader: "Each time a reader encounters the neologism *kin*, *na*, or *per*, he or she is obliged to grapple with the ideological motivation behind these terms. Why have these pronouns been invented? What is wrong with the traditional pronouns they replace?" (Livia 138) The use of epicene pronouns continuously compels the reader to reflect upon the use of gendered language itself and the gender categories pronouns represent. Therefore, linguistic gender can be used to queer or disrupt gender norms in literary texts.

A stark contrast to the use of neologistic pronouns in science fiction to transgender auto/biographies is noted. The majority of transsexual autobiographies operate within the established gender binary and alternation between male and female pronouns (167). Possible demarcation lines are seen in scenes in which gender and sex are blurred or when a 'gender-crossing' step is taken, as in sexual reassignment surgery, the start of hormone replacement therapy, or legal gender/sex reassignment. This finding corresponds to S. Stone's critic of the transgender person's adherence to the gender binary with the moment of 'transformation' transpiring in a narrative moment pertaining to the character's transition.



Analyses of narratives with intersex characters yield remarkably similar results: Female and male pronouns are used, and alternation occurs at specific times (*Pronoun Envy* 177). In one narrative, the female and male side of the character are expressed by the corresponding grammatical gender and the character refers to him/herself as being two persons (Delarue-Mardrus qtd. in Livia, *Pronoun Envy* 182). This notion of being ‘dual-sexed’ is observed in two of the three analysed novels with intersex characters, who “have no confidence that this duality will be even comprehensible to others” (*Pronoun Envy* 185). As such, the notion of two persons in one body and the alternation of gendered pronouns can be observed in narratives with intersexuality. It appears that intersex and transgender texts consistently operate with the gendered pronouns he and she, therefore reinforcing the gender binary. Considering this importance of language for transgender and gender non-conforming people, the use of pronouns and gendered forms of address is of relevance when analysing the construction of transgender and gender binarity in the narratives.

### **Pronouns and Forms of Address in *Little Fish* and *Alex as well***

In both texts the perpetuation of the gender binary through pronoun choice can be identified since no gender-neutral pronouns are used. Instead, all the characters in the novels are referred to with the gendered pronouns *he* or *she* only. In *Little Fish*, all characters are referred to in the third person due to the narrative perspective of the text but no neologistic or gender-neutral pronouns are used. Instead, *she* is used almost exclusively for transgender women. In flashbacks to Wendy’s life prior to transition and coming out, no change of pronoun occurs. Instead, the female personal pronoun is used throughout. As such, despite incongruities of body and gender, the narrative presents Wendy consistently as a woman. In *Alex as well*, the creation of transgender and intersexuality has been discussed in relation to the blurring of narrative instance and character. It can be observed that Alex’s portrayal as two separate persons conforms to the notion of being ‘dual-sexed’ as seen in intersex narratives by Livia (2001). However, male, female, and plural pronouns are used for Alex in the narrative, and the usage does not seem as strictly separated as observed in the texts in Livia (2001). The exclusive use of *he* and *she* suggests reinforcement of the gender binary as well since no alternative gender pronouns are mentioned or used.

A change of pronouns can be observed in both novels nonetheless, indicating a change of perception of someone’s gender. In *Little Fish*, two such switches occur without drawing the reader’s attention to the shift: The first instance occurs during the meeting between Wendy and Kaitlyn, the ex-military person whom Wendy meets in line of sex work and for which female

pronouns are used in this thesis. She is introduced as “[t]he guy [who] opened the door in a shirt and jeans. He was young and pale and muscled and he looked happy in a manic way” (Plett 212). Wendy categorizes the person as a “new sissy” (215) when she mentions liking to dress up in women’s clothes. The term “girlie” (217) is also used to address Kaitlyn even before Wendy mentions her suspicions of Kaitlyn’s gender to her after their sexual encounter (219, 225). After a flashback to Wendy’s SRS, the pronoun for Kaitlyn is changed to female: “Then she said: ‘No shit.’ [...] ‘God, thank you,’ said Kaitlyn. She sniffed.” (225). Through the subtle change of pronouns, the reader re-genders Kaitlyn through their reading, as well. However, the pronouns are reversed to *he* once more, even though the name ‘Kaitlyn’ remains:

And already she could feel that forgetting with Kaitlyn; her face, her voice, disintegrating and blending and layering in with all the rest, like every boy did with Wendy, tricks or no. [...] She could go back to Kaitlyn’s house. Politely ask to use his phone. [...] What did his house look like? His street was in the distance. She honestly couldn’t remember how to get back there. His address was – in her phone. (226-227)

In this passage, the consistent and almost obsessive repetition of the possessive pronoun ‘his’ seems striking as it is used instead of the name ‘Kaitlyn’ or the neutral article ‘the’. The pronoun is repeated as if to convince Wendy herself and through it also the reader to forget the gender-queering moment of the encounter, or the encounter itself. When recounting her experience with Kaitlyn to a friend, however, Wendy switches actively from male to female pronouns and from boy to girl, identifying the person as female: “I saw this boy. [...] But he wasn’t. A boy. He was one of us. [...] Girls like her [...] I’m saying, like, my heart breaks for this girl, you know...” (233). It would indicate that when not actively trying to remember this encounter, the question of Kaitlyn’s gender can be ignored, but when re-living this experience, it is assumed to be female. At this point the reader is made explicitly aware of the presentation of gender in language as the gendered term ‘boy’ is pointedly rejected for Kaitlyn (233) and the switch to female pronouns is foregrounded.

The other instance in *Little Fish* in which a change of pronouns occurs is in a dream sequence in relation to Wendy’s grandfather, whose hidden or secret gender constitutes one of the major plot lines in the text. He appears in Wendy’s dream and is referred to with exclusively female pronouns: “Her hair was thinning and grey like it’d always been when Wendy was a kid, but her fingers were long and smooth and lotioned” (289). The scene is insofar remarkable as it is the first and only time that the grandfather is referred to as female. In other section, in which this character is discussed, exclusively male pronouns are used, even when the possibility of him ‘wanting to be a woman’ is discussed (262).

In comparison, the issue of pronouns and gendered terms features heavily in *Alex as well*. It is the main character's changing gender that is one of the central themes of the novel. The change of appropriate terms of address and pronouns is explicitly discussed in various instances due to the rather unforeseen circumstances in which Alex's parents find themselves. The most important discussion of these pronouns occurs in what is presented as the blog of Alex's mother, Heather. In the first entries Alex is referred to with male pronouns and as *boy* (Brugman 40) by the mother and by 'Vic', one of the fictional internet users who comment on the mother's blog post (41). 'Vic' is the first person to change from male to female pronouns to refer to Alex. He or she is aware of the fact that Alex was raised as a boy before (58) and points out the issue of recognising Alex's gender through language to Heather: "Alex is clearly identifying as 'she'. You and David are consistently referring to her as 'he'. Is the first part of your plan for openness to ignore that?" (73). The importance of recognition of transgender people through language is emphasized.

Heather's changing stance towards accepting her child's gender is mediated through word choice and personal pronouns in particular. Initially referring to her child exclusively with male pronouns, Heather changes actively from male to female pronouns from one sentence to the other: "Please believe I am in his [Alex's] corner too. She's my baby. She's so strong and fierce that I am afraid of her sometimes" (164). However, the use of female pronouns for Alex is inconsistent in the following entries of the blog. Heather reverts back to the use of male pronouns at first (180) seemingly negating any progress made on accepting Alex's gender, but then refers to her once more with female ones (198). In the last blog post of the narrative, the issue of appropriate pronouns is directly thematised by Heather once more: "Alex will realise that he needs us. Except David said she. Definitely 'she' the whole time he was talking. I asked what if 'she' discovers that 'she' doesn't need us. [...] So we're setting her free" (206). The change of pronouns in this short passage reflects Heather's changing stance on accepting Alex as her daughter. Moving from male to female pronouns in single quotation marks suggests certain hesitation on Heather's part to apply the female pronoun to her child. It also serves the purpose of emphasizing the change of pronouns for the reader anew. In the end, the unmarked use of *her* suggests final acceptance on the side of the mother.

While both narratives change pronouns to refer to specific characters, the difference is the degree of explicitness of the switch. In *Little Fish*, the change occurs without commentary or explicitly drawing attention to it. Only once is the change discussed: When Wendy talks about her meeting with Kaitlyn with a friend, she explicitly indicates the switch from male to female pronouns (233). There is a lack of commentary on the change of pronouns in the meeting

of Kaitlyn and Wendy itself and in the dream about her grandfather. Instead, re-gendering occurs through the act of reading and the reader becomes part of the re-gendering process.

In *Alex as well*, by contrast, the change of pronouns is explicitly discussed as part of the development of the mother, who learns to accept her child's gender. The reader is not actively involved in this process. Instead, the role of language in conveying acceptance and validation of a transgender person is discussed and explained to the reader.

The pronoun use supports the suggested adherence to the gender binary of the texts as indicated by the exclusive use of boy/man and girl/woman as gender categories above. The preferred pronouns of the transgender characters in the texts are clear and do not change. The pronoun alteration occurs strictly in context of new perceptions of someone's gender and to indicate acceptance and validation thereof. The linguistic adherence and exclusivity of gendered language can be observed in the use of gender-neutral language in the texts as well.

### **Lack of Gender-neutral Language**

Both novels use gendered pronouns and forms of address, which suggests adherence to the gender binary and supports the conception of transgender people as exchanging one gender for the other. While possible alternatives to gendered pronouns have been suggested and are used in literary texts, both narratives refrain from such pronoun use. In fact, the possibility of using language to blur the boundary between genders is not discussed at any point in the narratives. Even though it could be considered a useful tool in *Alex as well* to indicate blurring of sex, as it occurs through intersexuality, in language choice. Instead, the narrative uses gendered pronouns and continues to operate within the gender binary. Furthermore, there are two instances in which gender-neutral language is rejected or implemented incorrectly in the adolescent novel. One gendered form of address is discussed as being problematic when used to refer to Alex, for which an alternate gender-neutral term is suggested. While the advice is heeded, gender-neutrality is not achieved but reversed as the term is used in a gendered way once more: During one of the conversations between mother and child after Alex's declaration of identifying as a girl, the mother refers to her twice as *mister* to which Alex reacts with irritation: "You answer me, mister!" her voice more shrill [sic]. Irritation wells up in my belly. 'Please don't call me mister,' I mumble through gritted teeth" (52-53). It is explained in the next blog entry that the term is well established in the family life as a term used during reprimands (55). Due to Alex's coming out, the term is now inappropriate. In the same blog entry, it is suggested by one of the blog commentators to use a gender-neutral term instead: "In the future, if you think you are going to say 'mister', why don't you try saying 'sunshine'

instead?” (56). It should be noted here that the term is not suggested with a preceding gendered form of address such as *miss* or *mister*. Therefore, the use of *sunshine* would be gender-neutral. However, when the suggestion is taken up and realized in the narrative, it is preceded by the honorific *miss*, becoming a gendered term once more: “Miss Sunshine,’ she hisses” (127) “Don’t you turn your back on me, Miss Sunshine!” (192). The discussion of *mister* and the failed implementation of the gender-neutral alternative *sunshine* exemplifies the unwillingness of abandoning the gender binary, which is demonstrated by example of the name *Alex* once more. It is mentioned in the novel that the name *Alex* was chosen over one of the gendered forms of the name after the parents were informed of the baby’s intersexuality: “We called the baby Alex – not Alexander or Alexandra, but just Alex” (25). Until this moment of clarification, *Alex* was used exclusively to refer to the characters, and it was unclear whether it was an abbreviation of *Alexander*. When Alex registers at a new school, she changes her name on the official enrolment form of the school by filling in *Alexandra*: “On the enrolment form I write: Alexandra Stringfellow, age 14, sex female, religion Catholic” (13). In this instance, in which official records are involved, the transgender character of the narrative rejects the gender ambiguity of her given name in favour of the explicitly gendered variety. Due to the emphasis on gendered terms and the rejection of gender-neutrality, the difficulty of adopting gender-neutral language is demonstrated. It further indicates the insistence of *Alex as well* on using the gender categories of male and female.

As for *Little Fish*, gender-neutral language is not discussed at any point. As such, it can also be read as an example of supporting explicitly gendered language for transgender people. A possible reason for this rejection or the lack of gender-neutral language could be seen in the fact that its inclusion could estrange transgender people from the reader due to the unconventionality of gender-neutrality, especially in literature. Though the discourse has reached a broader audience in the last few years, gender-neutral language remains a debated topic and is not conventionally used. By using gendered language, potential alienation of the reader is prevented. As a consequence of the avoidance of queerness and disruptions of such norms, the norms of gender and sex remain unchallenged. The narratives fail to challenge literary tradition by adhering to the conventions of explicitly gendered language. The potential of using unconventional pronouns and hereby challenging and disrupting linguistic norms regarding the construction of gender remains unrealised and the language used maintains the gender binary in language and in the narratives. Despite this binarity, the gender of transgender persons in the narratives is depicted as unfixed and precarious through the use of language and misgendering.

### **Precarious Gender through Misgendering**

Misgendering has been defined as referring to someone with incorrect gendered forms of address and pronouns. Validation and recognition of identity through others is an important part of gender on the whole, and deliberate misgendering indicates a certain lack of understanding and acceptance and conveys rejection of the self-definition of transgender people. Misgendering has to be interpreted as an attack against a transgender person since the act of deliberate misgendering implies invalidity of the person's gender. Most often, it implies that the migration from one gender to another is impossible and dismal of such notions as nonsensical and invalid. Therefore, misgendering can be used to depict the gender of transgender persons in the narratives as precarious. In the narratives, instances of misgendering and in which the transgender person has to ascertain her/his gender can be found. However, the influence on the portrayal of transgender persons as precarious varies, mostly due to the total of instances and the relevance ascribed to them.

The invalidation and negotiation of a transgender person's gender is illustrated through various instances of misgendering in *Little Fish*. The women in the text are repeatedly accused of subterfuge by not disclosing their 'true identity' while being referred to with male gendered terms. Identifying as a gender different from the one assigned at birth is seen as an attempt to fool not only the self but the public as well. One such instance occurs when Wendy and her transgender friends are in public and a man comments on them: "You're not fooling anyone, boys!" (Plett 44). By addressing the women as boys, the accusation of wilfully tricking the public by presenting themselves as women and the fact that they appear not to pass as cisgender women are emphasized. Furthermore, the public is seen as reinforcing the notion of gender as fixed and unchangeable, and 'changing' gender or sex is ridiculed and negated. In another such instance, Wendy is referred to with the neuter personal pronoun *it* after her transgender status becomes common knowledge in college and a group of men verbally harasses her: "They'd mock-scream, 'It's a maaaaaan! You think you fuckin' *fooled* us?'" (101) If the pronoun is assumed to be a reference to Wendy, dehumanization takes place since the pronoun *it* reduces a person to a mere object. The sentence presents therefore an insult rejecting Wendy's status as a human being. Another possible interpretation would be seeing the statement as a declarative speech act reminiscent of the determination of a foetus' or baby's sex, in which the sentence structure 'It is a boy/girl!' is commonplace. Wendy would therefore be re-gendered and re-categorized as a man – the gender she migrated from through her transition.

Furthermore, when Wendy's gender in the novel is questioned and challenged by strangers, precisely the word 'man' or a similar lexical choice is used for this purpose: "Are

you a man?” (30), “Are you a guy!?” (61), “Are you a fuckin’ man?” (96). The question whether Wendy is a woman does not arise; instead, it is a foregone conclusion that she is not. She is considered a man, and the questions are designed to draw a concession out of her, to push the transgender persons to invalidate their gender. Wendy’s presenting herself as a woman and her medical transition are disregarded, nullified, or seen as a disguise.

The constant attack and invalidation of the person’s gender concerns the transgender community in the text since misgendering occurs to other transgender characters as well. When the transgender friends search for Sophie and question a pair of car park attendants, the men deny having seen a girl and misgender Lila: “The other attendant laughed. “She wasn’t here.” [...] They were both snickering. “You got a boyfriend maybe? Native guy? ‘Cause he came running through earlier. Boy, he was worried about something. He was having a *bad* night. That your boyfriend?” It took Wendy a moment to realize they meant Lila” (113-114). Lila is the Native American transgender woman and, in this passage, the notion of her being a girl is rejected by the park attendants. The rejection of even entertaining the notion of Lila being a woman is emphasized by the laughter of the officials. Instead, they insist on having seen a man through the use of *boyfriend* and male gendered pronouns.

Whether due to appearance or masculine traits, trans/gender is described as permanently rejected, in need of continuous affirmation, and therefore as precarious. Attempts to ‘proof’ or assert his or her gender as valid are met with humour and incredulity as seen in the following: “‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘You just startled me because from behind I thought you were a girl.’ Wendy blinked. ‘I am a girl, ma’am,’ she said. The woman tilted her head slightly. She raised her eyebrows and smirked. ‘I am a girl.’ The woman stayed for another five seconds, smirking, then turned and walked away” (124). Wendy is put into a position in which affirmation of and defending her gender is necessitated and still disregarded. The woman expresses her disbelief and rejection of Wendy’s self-proclamation non-verbally. In this scene, Wendy’s statement of self-identification is denied and seen as an amusing joke, not as an attempt of a person to assert her or his identity, contributing to the overall precariousness of transgender people and of gender itself in the narrative.

After physical and verbal harassment, the precariousness of transgender person’s gender and the dependence on recognition through the public is expressed explicitly in the novel as well: “And she learned right then: You always had to be on your guard. It didn’t matter how often you passed, it could always be taken away. Always. She’d never be little, she’d never be fish. It could always be taken away” (101).

In comparison, misgendering occurs infrequently and substantially less often in the young adult novel. Due to the fact that *Alex as well* sets in the day after Alex has her coming out as a girl to her parents, misgendering occurs within the family through the use of male pronouns and gendered terms. Gendered language and accurate pronouns use is thematised explicitly in Heather's blog, which constitutes the central instance in the novel in which misgendering occurs as well. Aside of the blog, misgendering generally is uncommented upon. For example, when the mother talks to Alex's father about table manners, she refers to Alex with male pronouns: "When he is older he is going to want to know how to eat at the dinner table in polite company. He doesn't understand that now" (Brugman 85). There is no comment on the inappropriate pronoun use here. Another misgendering instance occurs when a student of Alex's former school recognises her: "He's pointing at me. 'He's a... He's a...' [...] 'Faggot!' he shouts" (125), which is also left uncommented.

A combination of gendered terms to refer to Alex is seen in the narrative as well, indicating that, despite Alex's self-presentation as female, her gender is still considered not entirely valid by the public: When a teacher refers to her consistently as a female by calling her "my home girl" (202) and addressing her as *Miss* (203), a fellow student calls out: "You know she's a dude, right?" (203). Alex is misgendered as male through the use of *dude* but referred to with female pronouns, not to be seen a simple instance of misgendering, this sentence epitomizes the complex issue of Alex's gender and sex by including both male and female gendered language.

Therefore, misgendering is one of the major factors of portraying transgender persons and their gender as precarious in *Little Fish* but has no great influence on the presentation in *Alex as well* due to its infrequency. The adult novel includes more instances in which misgendering takes place and in which reaffirmations of transgender people are disregarded or rejected and topicalizes misgendering explicitly. Through the regular occurrence of misgendering throughout the narrative, the reader is constantly confronted with the uncertainty of trans/gender and the dependence on others for validation. In *Alex as well*, on the other hand, misgendering occurs only at the end of the novel while the transgender character's passing as female is unquestioned for the majority of the story. It is also not appearance or behaviour that reveal Alex's transgender to the school, but her official birth certificate. Even then, when misgendering occurs, it involves the use of female pronouns, which begs the question of whether it can be considered misgendering at all. The main instances in which Alex is referred to with incorrectly gendered language occur within the blog of the mother.



In conclusion, the gender binary is created and adhered to linguistically in the narratives. While *Little Fish* adds the difference between cisgender and transgender, the gender categories remain strictly man and woman and only allusions are made to alternative genders. In *Alex as well*, the transgender and intersex character Alex uses both gendered pronouns while identifying strictly as female, despite the split into male and female persona. No alternatives are suggested in a viable manner, and adherence to the gender binary is maintained up until the end of the novel, where the last sentence might indicate non-binarity or deconstruction of the gender binary. Regarding precariousness of gender, the practice of misgendering has been observed as adding to the notion of transgender as uncertain and unstable in *Little Fish*, while it appears as a non-factor in *Alex as well*. Some categories for sex have also been identified, such as *intersex* or *shemale* leading to questions regarding the transgender body images, the relation between sex and gender, and precariousness of body and sex in the narratives.

#### **4.3. Precarious Transgender Body Images**

Transgender people's bodies, the connection to gender, and the transgender person's relation to the body appears as a complex issue in the literature and in trans/gender studies and queer theory. Gender and sex are seen commonly as two distinct categories and concepts, which, however, become enmeshed and entangled in transgender once more. As S. Stone points out, "[s]ex and gender are quite separate issues, but transsexuals commonly blur the distinction by confusing the performative character of gender with the physical 'fact' of sex, referring to their perceptions of their situation as being in the 'wrong' body" (222). In fact, 'born in the wrong body' has become the central statement for the transgender 'condition'. This problematisation of the body as wrong is called wrong body discourse. Physical transition is often sought to align the sex or the anatomy with the person's gender linking gender and sex once more. Since medical alteration of the body is central in this regard, the term transsexual is used here to emphasize the physical transition and the transgender body.

In the literature, this link between sex and gender in transsexual individuals has led to two distinct perspectives on the transsexual's body. One sees transsexual bodies as affirming the link between gender and sex and the binarity of both. This view can be tied to S. Stone's critique about the invisibility of transgender people through passing (Stryker 230). Passing is often unequivocally linked to the body and medical alterations thereof. The body becomes an expression of the transgender person's gender. To achieve passing, steps are taken to manipulate the body to fit in the preformed category of either male/masculine or female/feminine, and thus, to fit into the gender and sex binary. The body is perceived as

‘wrong’ for the person’s gender and altered. By adhering and conforming to norms of gender and sex, the potential of queering norms of sex is reduced or becomes a temporary state until passing is achieved. Therefore, transsexual persons can be seen as between affirming and challenging the binary systems of gender and sex. Due to the temporality or uncertainty of this aspect, the queering of gender and sex norms through transgender or transsexuality is precarious.

In the other perspective, the transgender body is opposing norms and ideas of the appearance and anatomy of the typical male or female body. A transsexual woman pre-SRS but on HRT is in possession of typically female secondary sex characteristics and male genitalia. As such, the transsexual woman’s body represents a combination of features resisting straightforward classification of either male or female. From this perspective, the physical entity of transsexual people can be seen as queer since it disrupts norms of sex and resists clear classification in male-female binary. Butler in *Undoing Gender* (2004) refers to transgender and intersex people in this regard: “The struggle to rework the norms by which bodies are experienced is thus crucial not only to disability politics, but to the intersex and transgendered movements as they contest forcibly imposed ideals of what bodies ought to be like” (*Undoing Gender* 28). Intersexuality is also mentioned and identified as defying the sex binary of male and female similar to the transsexual body. Since they are born as ‘sexually ambiguous’, intersex people queer normative conceptions of sex since birth. Intersex and transsexual bodies alike, in this conception, “challenge the principle that a natural dimorphism should be established or maintained at all costs” (6). It is here that S. Stone’s suggested conception of the transsexual body as productive genre becomes relevant, as she sees potential in the transsexual body to effectively queer established norms of gender/sex: “In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and *reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries*” (S. Stone 231, emphasis added). The transsexual body enables such reconfiguration of what constitutes sexed or gendered embodiment.

This in-between of questioning and adhering to the sex and gender binary can be seen as the crucial difference between queer and transsexuality. Prosser (1998) posits that the central difference between queer and transsexuality is the matter of sex and embodiment:

That Butler chooses to elucidate the limits of the transgendered subject’s deliteralization of sex through the figure of a transsexual is a powerful indicator of the conceptual splitting between transsexual and queer and, indeed, of queer theory’s own incapacity

to sustain the body as a literal category. In transsexuality sex *returns*, the queer repressed, to unsettle its theory of gender performativity. (27)

Due to the recourse of transsexuality to the body, transsexuality and queerness appear as incongruous with each other in terms of sex. The queering of sex through transsexual bodies appears as temporary if a unidirectional trajectory with eventual passing or fading into the binary is assumed. As such, transgender embodiment and the transsexual body's disrupting potential presents itself as linked to the conceptualisation of transgender itself. The discussion and its two distinct positions are of relevance to the thesis since they appear in connection with transgender body images in literary texts.

### **Transgender Body Images in Literature**

Since transgender narratives, first and foremost (auto)biographies, are often linked to transgender theory, the aforementioned discussion features in various studies of literary texts, as evidenced by Sandy Stone (2006). Some studies go as far as to take auto/biographical texts at face-value as to how being transgender is experienced. For example, Marjorie Garber in *Vested Interests* (1992) analyses the most popular autobiographical transgender narratives of the time to conclude that transsexual people are invested in maintaining the gender binary in reality as well: "For transsexuals and transvestites are more concerned with maleness and femaleness than persons who are neither transvestite nor transsexual. They are emphatically not interested in "unisex" or "androgyny" as erotic styles, but rather in gender-marked and gender-coded identity structures" (110).

The prevalence of such narratives with the transgender persons adhering to the gender and sex binary has been linked to censorship and LGBTQ+ acceptance. Garber's view has therefore been criticised on the following grounds by Dean Spade (2006): The selection of narratives appears as biased since the following two aspects were not taken into account: the strategic value of adherence to gender norms to the authors of the narratives and the possibility that the success of these narratives is due to the transgender person's adherence to the gender and sex binary and the subsequent reifying of the "naturalness of normative gender performance" (Spade 327). The queer potential of disrupting norms through the transsexual body remains unrealised in such texts, in which the adherence to the gender and sex binary with the ultimate goal of passing. A possible reason is seen in the fact that these were the only texts that were successful back then, in genre and conception of embodiment, as Bornstein mentioned: "all we'd be able to write *and get published* were our autobiographies, tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pining away in the bodies of women" (Bornstein

12). The conception of transsexuals striving for SRS and physical alteration to fit into the sex and gender binary was prevalent in text of these times.

However, even 25 years afterwards, the wrong body discourse can be seen as persisting in transgender texts, especially in young adult literature. Most often, the transgender experience has been conceptualised as following the unidirectional trajectory, from one gender to another in YA novels (Bittner 2017). Jennifer Putzi (2017) analyses the body in male-to-female transgender narratives in YAL and concludes that the majority of these narratives feature the body as the main problem and employ the wrong body narrative. For example, in *Luna*, being transgender is defined entirely by the wrong body discourse (Putzi 431-432). The transgender character is “not truly a girl [...] until she has a vagina” (432). As such, the ‘wrong’ body, specifically the genitals, is problematised and tied to the person’s gender. The transgender person’s gender does not correspond with the body and the person cannot be recognised as their gender as long as their physical form remains unchanged. A possible reason for the persistence of this convention is seen in its long-standing history in (auto)biographies and transgender memoirs (426). Putzi notes that there has been discussion and attempts to expand the (re)presentation of transgender in adult narratives while the wrong body discourse remains “resistant to revision” (428) in YAL since contemporary transgender teenagers’ autobiographies employ this script as well (428). Another reason is the alignment of the coming-of-age trope in YAL with the transgender person’s transition: “Thus genre and gender come together in the young adult novel to allow for the narration of a trans-gender experience and embodiment that is only momentarily disruptive because it is resolved – even overcome – by the treatment of medical professionals. Surgery is [...] normalized because it reinforces the gender binary” (426-427). The unidirectional trajectory of transgender persons often portrayed in YA novels is accompanied by the wrong body discourse, both of which can be read as reinforcing the gender and sex binary. The queering and norm-disrupting potential of transgender body images is most often not realised in the literary texts.

As such, the transgender/intersex body in *Little Fish* and *Alex as well* is an essential aspect of the analysis of categorisation and queerness in the narratives. The transsexual body constitutes a precarious entity due to its location between resisting and adhering to norms concerning anatomy and gender. The following aspects are of interest: the relation between sex and gender, sex categories and queering thereof, and the conceptualisation of the transgender body as a precarious entity.

## Gender, Sex, and the Construction of Femininity in the Narratives

Through the topics of transgender and intersexuality the relation between sex and gender can be seen as queered and the commonly assumed correspondence between male/female body and male/female gender as disrupted in the narratives. In contrast to the prevalence of the wrong body discourse in literary texts, however, being a woman or being female pertains primarily to emotions in the texts. Sex, body shape, and physical transition appear secondary to social transition or passing in the narratives.

In *Little Fish*, femininity or ‘being a woman’ is mainly related to passivity and emotions instead of body shape or genitals. Wendy’s passivity has been discussed and her conception of femininity or femaleness can be linked to it since she sees being female and passive as connected if not the same. She notes a significant change in her behaviour when she passes the first time as a cisgender woman: “Guys would whistle and slap her ass with their jackets. Before this, she’d always been brave enough to tell boys to fuck off and throw fists when she had to, but *passing as cis, she was suddenly demure and weak* – how could she say anything back at them without them realizing the girl they were teasing was a man?” (100-101, emphasis added). To avoid outing herself as transgender, the gender stereotype of women as the weaker and more passive sex is referenced. Other instances of this ‘female passivity’ can be seen in the power dynamic during intercourse with men in which Wendy assumes the passive as well as the receptive part (158, 291, 194).

While there are instances in which the body is portrayed as problematic, physical transition is not depicted as the ‘cure’ for her problems but is seen first and foremost in relation to Wendy’s emotional state. It is said that Wendy “hated her dick” (Plett 219) and wrong body discourse is hinted at: “how could she like their touch when *her body was so wrong?*” (277, emphasis added). However, Wendy is consistently referred to as a woman, even in moments prior to her transition, and SRS is not portrayed as the ‘cure’ of transsexualism. Instead, the emotional impact of the physical transition is foregrounded: When discussing the effects of the medroxyprogesterone, Wendy repeatedly refers to the influence on her emotional state describing it as calming (77, 185) and HRT in comparison to SRS is said to be “a much bigger deal. You transition and take estrogen and you look more like a girl *and you feel so much better*” (219, emphasis added). The result of SRS is not linked to greater happiness or to ‘becoming a real woman’ but to calmness once more: “No she wasn’t any happier, no she didn’t feel any more like a real girl. But she was calmer now, like a small buzzing part of her brain had been turned off, and was now forever at rest” (223). Transition for Wendy is not necessary to be female but to aid her emotional state instead. Only one other transgender woman is mentioned

as aiming for vaginoplasty (107-108), and SRS appears as a non-factor for the others, indicating that this surgery is not necessary to be a woman.

In *Alex as well*, it is not the body that is problematised but the presence of the male Alex, and physical transition is rejected. While there are phrases in *Alex as well* hinting at the mismatch between sex and gender, the animosity is not directed at the body itself but at the male Alex. Phrases such as “I’m not a boy on the inside” (Brugman 21) or “and I won’t feel like I am a girl trapped in a boy’s body” (22) identify the sexually ambiguous body as male/masculine and as problematic and refer to the wrong body discourse. However, there is a distinct lack of direct and explicit animosity towards her body aside of above-mentioned quotes. Medical alteration of her body to be a girl is deemed as unnecessary and irrelevant by Alex herself. While breast growth is wished for (70), genital surgery is of no importance to her: “I don’t think what’s there really needs changing” (102). In fact, the ‘noodle,’ as her micro-penis is called (10), is not explicitly stated as being hated or resented by Alex at any point. Instead, the negative feelings are directed against the male Alex. The perceived mismatch between appearance and mind is attributed to the split between female and male Alex: “I stand there looking at my new face. I like this face. It’s *my* face. I spend so much time looking at Alex’s face – *his* face” (10), “before the stink of him makes me throw up” (12). It is therefore not the body, but the male Alex that constitutes the problem in the narrative. The gender conflict is therefore not so much about the physical body itself but about gender presentation and being read as female: “But what I would like to be on the outside – what I want other people to see – is a girl. I’d rather be a strong-looking girl, than a, kind of, girlie-looking boy” (127).

Being a girl in the narrative is relegated to behaviour and clothes. Detailed descriptions of clothing and attire are given (34, 94, 158-159), Alex removes clothes deemed too “sporty and boyish” (61), wants to ‘girlify’ clothes (62), which is accomplished by adding rhinestones to them (108-109). Instead of physical transition, hormones, or SRS, clothes are necessary for Alex to express her gender: “I need clothes to wear that match how I feel on the inside” (62). As such, clothes are used to construct Alex’s femininity or femaleness that cannot be conveyed through her anatomy.

Behaviour is the other aspect through which Alex’s gender is expressed and which utilises gender stereotypes. Attending school as a girl, Alex often encounters situations in which her behaviour is remarked upon as improper for girls or in which differences in expectations in behaviour and competences are noticed: “Turns out, girls don’t do that” (75), “there are probably all these rules and rituals that I don’t know about” (79), “which is what boys do when they don’t want to talk about stuff, but it just seems to make girls curiouser” (48-49).

Stereotypes such as difficulties working with tools for girls or random flirting for boys are referenced: “Now that I’m a girl, it’s OK to be incompetent with tools” (78), “This is what boys do. We try to get girls to show us their bits” (137). The narrative uses of behaviour and appearance to present Alex’s femininity or femaleness seeing as sex as a referent for gender has become unreliable due to Alex’s intersexuality. The reliance on gender stereotypes, however, is problematic since it potentially reinforces preconceived notions of gender-appropriate behaviour but may appear as necessary to avoid questioning the entire concept of femininity or asking, ‘what constitutes femaleness/femininity if not behaviour or sex?’ in an adolescent novel.

Therefore, both narratives emphasise the importance of emotions over body shape for the creation of femininity or femaleness. The narratives differ therefore from other transgender texts since being a woman is not tied to the body and the vagina. In *Alex as well*, the sex and gender are entangled through the representation of Alex’s duality of sex in her split persona. Being a girl is not connected to the body, but to behaviour and appearance since medial alterations are deemed unnecessary. In *Little Fish*, even physical transition is primarily about the emotional impact instead of fulfilling expectations of what a female body ought to look like. It raises the question of the creation of such norms and the transsexual or intersex body images’ resistance or adherence to such classification.

### **Bodies and Categorisation in the Narratives**

The transgender and the intersex body in the narratives defy the expectations of what the mainstream society in the texts sees as a woman’s body. Instead, such normative expectations of male and female appearance are refused and confused since the bodies do not conform to such conceptions of sex. In *Little Fish*, the transgender body images lead to reconfiguration of what a woman’s body looks like, whereas in the adolescent novel, the category of the intersex body is added to the sex binary and seen as problematic. Attempts are made to make the intersex and therefore norm-queering body fit into the male category. This problematisation occurs in relation to gender since sex ceases to be the determining factor for it in the novel. Clear classification as male or female is impossible due to the fact that Alex presented with a combination of physical parts that are typically seen as mutually exclusive. She possesses no scrotum nor a vagina but ovaries and a micro-penis (Brugman 24-25). During the story, beard growth and breast development set in (70, 105), further marking the body as neither ‘completely’ male or female. This sexual ambiguity of Alex is seen and treated as a medical condition, and measures to ‘correct’ this ambiguity are taken. The natural development of the

body is interfered with to normalise its appearance to fit the criteria of 'male body': HRT is used to "help him develop into a male as much as he can" (88) and surgery was suggested to the parents to remove female characteristics to allow for clearer identification of the body as male: "[W]e could have [the ovaries] removed later" (25). After her coming-out as a girl, her mother even wonders "if we should have made him a girl to begin with. Should we have had whatever surgery was needed to make him a girl in the first place?" (40) instead of permitting the sexual ambiguous body to exist without external influences. Despite these attempts to alter the body, it remains queer at the end of the narrative since no surgical alteration takes place or is sought after.

The transgender bodies in *Little Fish* defy expectations of the 'categories' women's bodies and even transgender women's bodies. The norm of the body of a woman as possessing female sex characteristics is challenged by the transgender bodies in the narrative that range from pre-transition to post-SRS. Women may be in possession of only male sex characteristics, as evidenced by Kaitlyn, or a combination of male and female ones, as seen in Raina. Furthermore, the persisting conception of transgender women to desire SRS and adhering to gender and sex norms is criticised: "if you weren't dead thirsty for a vag then you weren't a real woman [...] that's what I thought being trans was. That's why I was a gay boy until my mid-twenties" (Plett 268-269). While there are instances in which SRS is depicted as desirable (170), the surgery is not portrayed as compulsory or necessary to be seen as a woman in the narrative as evidenced by the word choice.

In addition to the norms of male and female, transgender women themselves are met with certain expectations regarding their physical form. When working as a prostitute, Wendy advertises her body online and immediate responses involve questions about male genitalia (147). It indicates certain expectations of potential clients regarding a transgender woman's body. In fact, Kaitlyn presumes Wendy to possess a penis and is astonished when Wendy explains differently: "I'm a trans girl with a surgical vagina." The guy gaped at her silently with his jaw open and moving. "You don't have a dick?" (213).

This expectation of the body of a transgender woman is also discussed between the transgender friends: "No guy who likes trans girls is gay. You don't want hairy dudes; you want us as girly as possible." "Heels and lipstick *and cock*." "Yep. And that's all true, there's no question," [...] "You tell me – you're the one with *my dick* up your ass." (78-79, emphasis added). This physical form is seen as sexually desirable by the public as evidenced by other encounters (101), and Wendy herself reasons that Michael's romantic interest is dependent on the penis: "*He just wants to get laid! Maybe suck the dick he doesn't know I don't have*" (277).



As such, transgender women are expected to be in possession of breasts and male genitalia; a body shape denoted by the term 'shemale'.

This classification or norm of a transgender woman's physical appearance is resisted in the novel by Wendy and Kaitlyn. Due to Wendy's genitals, she fails to meet the criteria of a 'shemale' and presents an exception to the assumed transgender woman's body. Kaitlyn can be regarded as a pre-transition transgender person and lacks the female secondary sexual characteristics. Both women are examples of how the categorisation of transgender women's bodies in the narrative is too constrictive. The variety of transgender bodies in the narrative demonstrates the futility of attempting to classify or define a transgender person's body and redefines the appearance of a woman.

Therefore, the bodies in the narratives do not conform to the expectations of traditionally male and female sex. In *Alex as well*, this resistance is realised in Alex's intersexuality. While the public, portrayed through doctors and parents, seem to urge for clear sex identification through physical alteration, the body continues to resist such classification and to blur the constructed border between male and female. The bodies in *Little Fish* resist categorisation and normalisation attempts of transgender women, for whom male genitalia are described as defining feature, and women in general. The sex binary is therefore challenged since the variety of physical shapes presented question and contradict normative conceptions of sex. In addition to destabilising the relation between gender and sex and resisting preconceived norms of male, female, and transgender women's anatomy, the body itself appears as precarious entity in the narratives.

### **Relationship between Body and Self in the Narratives**

Transgender and intersex bodies are conceptualised as adding to the overall precariousness of the transgender characters in the texts. In addition to the feelings of animosity regarding the body, the relationship between the self and the body appears as disturbed since both narratives incorporate instances in which the character appears separate from or having lost control over the body. In *Little Fish*, word choice and sentence formation support the notion of the body as a separate entity since it indicates distance between Wendy and her form: "Her legs were shivering" (Plett 13); "She leaned over the sink, weak again, her skin shuddering" (51); "and she forced her body to breathe [...] Eventually she forced her body up, commanding it like a robot" (49); "her hands were in incredible pain" (199), "Wendy felt herself crying" (228), "actively pressing her brain into pause" (227). The distance between the body and Wendy becomes obvious in these quotes since she appears to be manipulating and fighting the body

and experiencing it as fragmented and distanced from the self. In fact, there are instances in which Wendy appears as disconnected from her body, especially during intercourse with men. Wendy notes herself as being absent from the scene (30) or is depicted as disengaged and reduced to body parts: “He fucked her ass as she lay on her back [...] her legs in his arms like a machine. [...] Wendy studied a spot on the wall” (291). Another instance, in which Wendy does not seem to register what happens to her body occurs when her hands are infected, and she notices the pain only days after its first occurrence (196).

The disconnect between mind and matter is even heightened in one instance in which Wendy appears to have lost control over her body. When a man takes advantage of her in an intoxicated stage, her body seems to take over: “Mechanically she jerked him off, her brain barely catching up to what her body was doing. [...] Her brain lifted her hand away” (92). The body performs manual stimulation on a man without her conscious consent and continues until control is regained once more. As a result, the relationship between Wendy and her body can be seen as disturbed and queer since it appears as fragmented, distant, and out of her control.

In comparison, while Alex’s body does not appear as fragmented, the relationship between self and body is queered nonetheless due to the presence of two Alexes. The body itself is not seen as the central problem in the novel, instead, it is the presence of the male Alex since there is a power struggle between the Alexes. As a consequence, there are instances in which the female Alex appears to have lost control over her body: “Then I look at Alex and I can tell what he is going to do next. Don’t you dare, I say to him, but he already has his hands down his pants” (Brugman 11-12), “‘Sour old bitch,’ Alex says before I can stop him” (177). In these moments, the male Alex assumes control resulting in the body as an uncertain entity in terms of control and agency leaving the female Alex powerless. In one instance, the absence of the male Alex is noted: “I might even be happy. Alex must still be asleep” (159), which reinforces the notion of two Alexes living in one body fighting for power. The male Alex is portrayed as an intruder the female one is unable to stop, eliminate, or, since the split of Alex is still ongoing at the end of the narrative, integrate and reconcile with the female part.

Another queer instance in the novel concerning the relationship between the self and the body depicts the body as erotic stimuli for the male Alex. The female side of the character showcases the body for the other: “He is looking at me being a girlie girl in the mirror. [...] He is staring at the shimmery pink eyelids, but mostly it’s the lip gloss that does it for him. I hate it when he does this. [...] So I pout a little, with the lip gloss on, so he can finish quicker” (11-12). Self-eroticism and -fetishization is therefore also an aspect in the relation between self and body.

The connection between mind and body is destabilised in the novels, which presents another queer aspect of the novels and results in fragmentation of the transgender characters, leaving them in a precarious state. In addition to this queer aspect of the body, the public's relation to it in the narratives reveals another such queer feature since the body becomes a public entity and the line between private and public becomes blurred.

### **The Transgender Body between Public and Private in the Narratives**

The transsexual or intersex body causes repulsion and fascination in the narratives due to their non-conformity. In *Little Fish*, the former can be seen in the rejection of Wendy by a prospective lover when he realises that Wendy was not born as a cisgender female (Plett 30) and the latter is realised in the public's sexual desire, for which a pornography genre, "shemale porn" (213), exists. This sexual desire is seen as illogical: "Who knew he was into that shit [transgender women] too?" (287), "I'm a top, but I like shemales, I dunno why" (281); "*Man, I don't know why I'm so attracted to you!* he said. *I don't get why I like you, but you're so beautiful!*" (105). Transgender women are presented as simultaneously repulsive and compelling, with the attraction characterized as extraordinary as if transgender women do not or cannot appeal to the public in general.

In *Alex as well*, the public's repulsion of the intersex body is referenced briefly (Brugman 20) and can be observed in the avoidance through friends (203, 209) and in the bullying that begins after her secret of having been assigned male at birth becomes known (210). The fascination is due to scientific curiosity since medical students make use of Alex's body as study opportunity (112).

In fact, the fascination or interest in the body causes the line between private and public to become blurred since the bodies are handled and treated as if they were public entities. Consensual and non-consensual 'public use' of the bodies can be observed in the narratives. In both narratives, the consensual use is connected to financial gain and the professions of the main characters, which are prostitution in *Little Fish* and modelling in *Alex as well*; both of which are seen as stereotypically female or feminine professions and in which the body is of central importance. While the one involves undressing and revealing the body, the other showcases the physical form in clothing and costumes, thereby obscuring it. A link might be drawn to the person's own relation to the body: Wendy lives openly as a transgender woman, whereas Alex tries to hide her intersexuality from her friends.

In both professions, the gender non-conformity and classification eluding aspects of the bodies are foregrounded. Wendy advertises herself on websites catering to this interest in

transgender women specifically (Plett 131), whereas the androgyny of Alex's appearance plays into her success and is reason for the professional's interest (Brugman 119, 121). The public's fascination with their bodies is used by the transgender main characters in the narratives, which could be interpreted as an attempt of regaining agency over the body which might be necessitated by the instances in which the body becomes a public entity and is no longer the transgender person's own.

This public use is mainly realised in verbal and physical harassment and abuse. This aspect is reflected to a slighter degree in the adolescent novel but is present nonetheless. The most prevalent manipulation of Alex's body constitutes the hormone treatment Alex undergoes unknown and which is forced upon her through the mother. This constitutes an intervention in Alex's physical integrity and bodily autonomy seeing as the mother forces testosterone on the intersex body operating under the belief that she has the right to change and influence her daughter's body to develop male characteristics against Alex's wishes.

Non-consensual public use of the body can be seen in the doctor's visit, in which medical students await a glimpse at Alex's genitals:

[W]hen we came in he had five medical students there, and they all went around saying how glad they were to be involved *with a rare case study*. One of them actually had a camera. [...] He said it was *important to give the students this opportunity* because these cases came along so rarely, and that I was being hysterical. [...] [A]ll these *people in the room wanted to gawk at Alex's noodle* – for medical reasons, but gawking all the same. (115, emphasis added)

Four-year-old Alex is reduced from a person to a case study to which medical students are entitled. To the professionals, the intersex body is a medical fascination and rarity and presents a learning opportunity instead of a person and Alex's body is used and manipulated by others.

Another example of the public's entitlement would be the 'right' of the public to know about Alex's genitals and the necessity of outing herself as intersexual. Alex has to disclose such private details to Beckett, who, after Alex mentioned that she does not need SRS, is "sorry to pry, but [he needs] to know the particulars" (100). Only when Alex is prepared to show him her genitals does he recognise the inappropriateness of the situation (101-102). Another instance in which the public's entitlement to know the particulars is demonstrated is seen in the bullying incident in which Alex was forcefully undressed. The instigator or bully "really thought he had a right to know" why Alex was allowed to use the staff toilets (149). Alex's body is therefore treated at times as if the public has the right to influence, manipulate, or simply observe it at their leisure.

In *Little Fish*, the public's entitlement to the transgender body is conveyed through verbal and physical harassment and assault. Wendy comments on the public's treatment of her body and sees it as inevitable:

[R]egardless of what she wanted, people still talked about her body, gossiped about her body, men on the street still shouted and groped at her body, old women at work touched her body like they would a doll or a coat. She felt this way far before she ever became a prostitute [...] In every section of the city it seemed Wendy had a memory of someone who had *treated her body with the casualness they would only treat their own*. (Plett 221, emphasis added)

Unwanted touch is part of the narrative and commentary occurs through the father (Plett 57) and clients, such as "Your pussy's good. It's good. Shit, can it ever get wet on its own?" (194). In fact, such comments are seen as normal: "Every physical twitch and surge and loss earned opinions from the mouths of strangers and lovers alike. [...] the commentary seemed natural [...] it was all eligible for public remark" (220), which, however, results in continuous sharing of her transition and in loss of ownership over her womanhood: "[N]o physical part of her womanhood had been allowed to be *solely her own*." (Plett 221, emphasis added). In fact, her decision to undergo vaginoplasty was motivated by this loss with the aim to reclaim ownership. Vaginoplasty is seen as an attempt to create a part of womanhood that would be entirely her own: "And so Wendy wanted her vagina to herself. [...] So here was this thing for her body she could do and it would be hers" (221). The ambiguity of *it* in the quote reinforces the notion of reclaiming the body since it could refer to either the vaginoplasty, the thing she wants to do, or to the entire body itself. The conceptualisation of the vagina as hers is shattered, however, when this part of her body is molested shortly afterwards (224) demonstrating the public nature of the transgender body once more. Sharing of her transition and her femininity with the public appears as unavoidable since an attempt to create a part of her womanhood for herself is unsuccessful. The body does not belong solely to the transgender character, who appears as not in control over or in possession of his or her body, which proves once more the precarious nature of the transsexual existence in the narratives. Furthermore, the shape of the body or its integrity is not consistent. In addition to the blurring of private and public, the form of the body itself is uncertain since it is described as changing.

### **The Body as Uncertain Entity in the Narratives**

While medical transition alters the physical form of a transgender person, constant major change is not a permanent feature of these bodies. Instead, the changing state of the body is

only temporary. In the narratives, however, the bodies of the main characters are presented as shifting entities since they appear as constantly changing. Due to this consistency of the state of flux, the transgender body images in the narratives appear precarious, adding to the overall uncertainty of the transgender characters. This aspect differs in the texts: While the changing nature of the body is relatively minor and can be tied to the genre of the text in *Alex as well*, Wendy's body in *Little Fish* appears more consistent in the depiction of the shifting body adding to the queer aesthetic in the narrative.

In *Alex as well*, the changing body could be considered as a normal characteristic for a teenaged character due to puberty and as almost expected of a YA novel. Instead of mentioning growing pains or height growth, however, the novel focuses exclusively on the development of strictly gendered sexual characteristics, which is irregular in Alex's case since she does not experience a clearly gendered/sexed development of her body. Aspects of male and female puberty take place at the same time: Breast development (70) and beard growth (105) set in. The changes of the body mirror her intersexuality since they oscillate between typically male and female. She begins to develop breasts, and further development of the female sex characteristic is observed: "But I pause when I'm naked in front of the mirror, because there are breasts there. Just little mosquito bites, but definitely girl breasts" (171). These changes can be tied to the public-private conflict addressed above considering that the discontinuation of the unwanted hormone treatment through the mother results in the development of female characteristics (101) and the mother's actions result in beard growth (105) furthering the development of male characteristics.

Other changes the body undergoes unrelated to puberty are temporary but further the blurring of sex and gender categories. Through hair extensions (130) and body hair removal (157) Alex feminizes her appearance, whereas the public, represented through the make-up artists for the fashion show, uses make-up and clothes in order to masculinise Alex once more. They dress her in a bowler hat, pin-striped suit pants, and suspenders complemented by a fake moustache (119). Alex's body offers therefore the possibility of being read as either male or female, which further blurs the line between male/masculine and female/feminine. This oscillation between male and female contributes to the uncertainty of Alex's body as to how it should be interpreted with regard to gender and sex, enhances therefore the queering potential of the body.

In comparison to the changes to Wendy's body in *Little Fish*, the above-mentioned developments of Alex's appear relatively minor. Wendy's form is described as an uncertain entity through HRT-induced growth, illness, and disfiguration in dream sequences. Similar to

*Alex as well*, the transgender body is changed through hormone therapy: The medroxyprogesterone leads to an altered mental state and increases breast growth, which is the aspect the narrative focuses on: “They were tender, pleasantly so, already fragile and hurting again. She hadn’t expected the new hormones to work so quickly” (67); “what about your boobs, what’d they do?” ‘Bigger, rounder’” (77). Even post-SRS, Wendy’s body is still changing, indicating that its construction or Wendy’s physical transition is not finished. The body is still in the process of ‘becoming female’. The processuality of ‘becoming’ could be seen as the body’s characterising feature in the text.

Furthermore, the body loses its integrity and shape in Wendy’s dreams resulting in precariousness of its form and in its unreliability. In one dream, she possesses male genitals again, which feature dominantly in the dream (64), and in another, a man “had gotten into her. She was clothed, wearing jeans and a plain shirt, but a man was in her. She pulled him out, and he was like a long string of beans coming out through her fly. She shrieked and pulled and pulled, but he was laughing” (191). Her bodily integrity is threatened, the body itself appears changed and possessed. Another such instance of unwanted changes to her body occurs when Wendy gets a skin infection with blisters on her hands. When the infection spreads and worsens, it is described as uncontrollable growth: “There were two more bubbles growing on her hand since she’d woken up! It wasn’t stopping!” (202), “The big bubble on her wrist was growing too, the skin splitting further to make room for it” (197). The spread of the infection is portrayed as threatening to the entire body. Wendy sees the infection as turning her into “[a] big hulking cracked monster who would only grow like this more and more, and it would spread to her arms and the rest of her body” (199-200). The portrayal of the infection as monstrous and uncontrollable intensifies the impression of the body as unreliable, foreign, and uncontrolled. Contributing to the shifting nature of the transgender body is the sequencing of the narrated events. Through flashbacks to moments prior to her SRS or HRT, the development of Wendy’s body is not presented in its chronological order but is present in different forms. Through flashbacks to her childhood (287) or to sexual encounters prior to SRS (105-106), the anatomy of Wendy’s body does not remain constant in the narrative. Through the random sequencing of these moments, the chronological development of Wendy’s body appears as disturbed. When viewing the porno of herself with Kaitlyn (215), her body appears in two different forms: Wendy is audience and performer and male and female at the same time since Wendy is post-SRS and in possession of a vagina, whereas Video-Wendy possesses male genitalia. It results in abrupt changes in time and form for the readers and in the impression of Wendy’s body

constantly changing, which contributes to the queer aesthetic of the novel since the body is not only separate from Wendy but its shape itself is uncertain and unreliable.

The transgender body images in the narratives serve therefore the following purposes: First, the seemingly natural sex binary of male and female is questioned, and, in the case of *Little Fish*, expectations regarding a woman's body are redefined. A woman can possess a penis and still be referred to as *woman* and *she*. Furthermore, the main character's bodies are depicted as uncertain entities. While the development of Alex's body is connected to puberty, the developing secondary sexual characteristics of male and female further demonstrate her intersexuality and the norm queering potential of the body. The binary of male and female cannot be used to categorise Alex's body since it appears as between such strict categories. As such, while *Alex as well* conforms to the genre expectations of the adolescent novel and can be ascribed to this genre without any hindrance, it is the transgender and intersex body in the novel that transcends categorisation. In *Little Fish*, the transgender body is presented as a precarious entity through its resistance to strict categories such as male, female, or 'shemale' and through its unstable physical form. Through dream sequences, illness, hormones, and flashbacks to moments prior in Wendy's physical transition, her body changes and presents an uncertain entity. As such, the transgender body images in the novel refuse categorisation in the same manner as the text itself, which cannot be further specified than 'novel'.



## 5. Conclusion

This thesis examined the relation between transgender and genre by presenting an overview of transgender literature, in which the preponderance of auto/biography and young adult literature. A discussion of gender and genre showed that there are theoretical similarities between these concepts indicating that the concept transgender might find its correspondence in transgenre. The focus turned to literary genre and gender, where the tendency of female authors to transgress perceived genre borders and to adapt existing genres such as the bildungsroman are mentioned. This concept of refusing generic conventions was then examined in relation to transgender. Central transgender study theorists Sandy Stone and Kate Bornstein criticise the adherence to the gender and sex binary in transgender auto/biographies and call for intentional portrayal of transgender as transgressing these binaries. Bornstein also calls for a transgendered writing style, in which mixing genres is a central aspect, which led to examining the concept of transgenre, that has since gained attention in connection to transgender and genre. It could be shown that the concept is used almost exclusively in one specific context in literature studies: the blurring between fiction and non-fiction in transgender auto/biographies. In fact, the focus of previous research in the relation between transgender and genre has been nearly exclusively on transgender auto/biographies, with a singular study as exception, in which the concept of queer was used to refer to such genre blurring. Therefore, queer has been assumed as the central concept for the literary analysis with its relational position to the normative, the disruption of established norms, and the resulting precariousness as central aspects.

In the subsequent literary analysis of recent transgender fiction, the adherence to genre conventions, the portrayal of transgender, and transgender body images in Alyssa Brugman's *Alex as well* and Casey Plett's *Little Fish* have been analysed with regard to queering established norms in genre, gender, and sex. It could be shown that transgender is conceptualised as precarious in both novels through characterisation, economic and social background, and through the transgender body images. In *Little Fish*, the transgender women are depicted as an isolated community with mental health, substance abuse, assault, and prostitution contributing to their precariousness.

Concerning the categorisation of transgender characters in terms of sex and gender, the gender binary is consistently used in both texts and is adhered to in linguistic choices as well since no alternative pronouns or gender-neutral language are used. 'Man' and 'woman' are used throughout both texts. Alternative categories such as 'on the spectrum' or 'bi-gendered' are mentioned but not presented as viable alternatives to the gender binary for the main characters. The transgender characters are strictly identified as either men or women indicating adherence

and persistence of the gender binary. The adolescent novel in particular also refers to gender stereotypes, such as clumsiness with working tools as typical for girls in order to validate the main character's gender. It is only at the end of the young adult novel that the split of the main character into two clearly gendered personas appears to collapse. However, even in the last chapter, the division into male Alex and female Alex persists. While *Little Fish* adds the binary distinction of cisgender and transgender to gender, man and woman remain the central categories on both these axes.

Regarding the physical body and sex, boundaries between male and female become blurred. *Little Fish*'s transgender body images resist the categorisation of not only male and female but also the category of 'transgender woman', which denotes a body with female chest and male genitals. Instead, the sex category of woman is redefined since a person with male genitals is seen as woman in the narrative. In *Alex as well*, the category of intersex is added to the sex binary, designating sexual ambiguity or a combination of male and female sex characteristics, and is used to identify Alex in the end (Brugman 194). Thus, the sex binary appears as questioned and disrupted.

However, both narratives deemphasize the importance of sex in relation to gender since transition and thus also conformity to the sex binary are either outright disregarded or discussed mainly in relation to emotional comfort. Furthermore, the transgender body images appear as precarious: The physical body of the main character are described as inconsistent, changing, and even separate at times from the self, further complicating the relationship to the body. Power over the transgender or intersex body is also a central aspect with regard to the public in the narratives, since the bodily integrity is threatened in *Alex as well*, and sexual and verbal harassment depict the body as a public entity as opposed to private in *Little Fish*.

This precariousness cannot, however, be seen in the form of the texts. Despite some queering aspects, *Alex as well* and *Little Fish* remain recognisable as young adult novel and novel, respectively. *Alex as well* in particular appears as more conventional and adhering to the genre conventions. The main narrative aspect that was identified as queer in the adolescent novel concerns the representation of Alex: The split into male character and female 'I'-narrator represents Alex's intersexuality through the use of the gender binary on the level of narration itself and is therefore a clear instance in which the queer content influences the form. Other queering aspects such as unreliable narration or inter- and intramedial references are present but ultimately remain unsuccessful in disrupting the form to such an extent as to elevate the text above the clear identification of young adult novel. In comparison, the queering aspects in *Little Fish* are more obvious and result in the construction of a queer aesthetic. The distant

heterodiegetic narration seems incongruous with the almost constant focalisation of Wendy, the text appears as rather unstructured at times of text messages or the portrayal of Wendy's thoughts and seemingly irrelevant inter- and intramedial references are included which serve to disrupt the narrative. These references range from simple mention of a song to the patient's information of pills, with a picture of parts of a letter in *Kurrent* constituting the most complex intermedial reference in the text. *Little Fish* includes characteristics typical for different subgenres of the novel such as the quest or the focus on sexual encounters. Nevertheless, the text is not experimental enough to escape the generic classification of the novel, even though a more specific subgenre cannot be identified. Therefore, the text's subtitle "a novel" seems befitting the narrative. Both narratives question the binary of sex and blur the boundary between sex and gender but neither challenge the gender binary of man/woman nor elude their generic classification. A certain influence of the queer topic could be observed; however, it did not suffice to classify the texts as trans genre. In conclusion, the analysed texts cannot be described as transgenre but as including queer narrative elements.

The dominance of transgender memoirs in current research leads to a lack of consideration of other genres of transgender literature, such as transgender short story or poetry. Further research may want to focus on other genres than transgender auto/biographies to establish whether transgender influences the overall genre of these texts as well. Another aspect of interest that could not be considered in full in this thesis concerns the question of mediality, transmediality, and transgenre. Inter- and intramedial references were identified as queering factors in the narratives, raising the question of the inclusion of transgressions of media borders or mixing of media in the concept of transgenre. In other word, the question might be asked whether transgender might not find its full realisation not only in transgenre but also in transmediality.

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## 7. Appendix

### English Abstract

Based on the concept of transgenre and queer, this thesis discusses the relationship between transgender and literary genre. Previous research indicates that the transgender topic necessitates blurring of genre and crossing genre borders but focuses nearly exclusively on the genre of auto-/biography and transgender memoirs. In contrast, this thesis differs as two texts of different genres are chosen for analysis: the adolescent novel *Alex as well* (2013) by Alyssa Brugman and the novel *Little Fish* (2018) by Casey Plett. The findings show that the transgender characters and the transgender body images are portrayed as precarious entities and certain queer narrative elements can be identified. However, genre conventions are adhered to and the queer aspects are ultimately insufficient to queer the genre of these texts.

**Keywords:** Transgender; Genre; Genre theory; LGBTQ+; LGBT; Transgenre; Transgender in Literature; Transsexuality; Plett; Brugman; Transgender Body; Gender

### Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von den Konzepten Transgenre und Queer diskutiert die vorliegende Diplomarbeit die Beziehung zwischen Transgender und literarischem Genre. Bisherige Forschung ergibt, dass das Thema Transgender das Verschwimmen von Genre bzw. das Übertreten von Genre Grenzen erfordert, befasste sich jedoch beinahe ausschließlich mit dem Genre der Auto/Biographie und Transgender Memoiren. In direktem Kontrast dazu bietet diese Diplomarbeit einen anderen Zugang, da zwei Texte unterschiedlicher Genre für die Analyse herangezogen werden: der Jugendroman *Alex as well* (2013) von Alyssa Brugman sowie der Roman *Little Fish* (2018) von Casey Plett. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die transgender Charaktere und transgender Körper als instabil dargestellt werden und bestimmte queere erzählerische Aspekte identifiziert werden können. Letztendlich halten die Texte jedoch die genretypischen Konventionen ein und die queeren Aspekte reichen nicht aus, um das Genre des individuellen Textes in Frage zu stellen.

**Schlagworte:** Transgender; Genre; Genretheorie; LGBTQ+; LGBT; Transgenre; Transgender in Literatur; Transsexualität; Plett; Brugman; Transgender Körper; Gender