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Kiss Your Comrades

by

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

English

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KISS YOUR COMRADES

Jenn Lee Shaller

Kiss Your Comrades consists of my short story collection, *Kiss Your Comrades*, and a critical commentary, detailing both the writing and research process.

Kiss Your Comrades is a collection of linked narratives centring trans perspectives and using storytelling as a method to challenge cis-heteronormativity and explore beyond-the-binary politics. Organised around five recurring trans-queer characters who live on the margins of society, this group is connected through geography and community, with stories emphasising their intimacy and tenacity.

Kiss Your Comrades is a trans narrative imagining transness *beyond* the body. The collection presents transition as a non-linear and ongoing process and constructs transness through friendship and tactics of survival to highlight the community's muscle of resistance and to celebrate trans-queer resilience.

The commentary sets forth the context for, and the particularities of constructing a trans narrative. The first half of the commentary overviews the state of British/American trans writing; examines the *transition memoir* and the focus on surgical transition as the dominant theme within the mainstream trans narrative. It then moves into a discussion about the gender binary as an oppressive force on trans lives, setting forth the queer theory and scholarship that shaped the characters' praxis and identities. The second half of the commentary delves into the particularities of constructing a trans narrative; beginning with a discussion of the short form and establishing its shared history with marginalised practitioners, before moving into an examination of linked narratives and short story cycles as a chief structural scheme. Finally, it explores the collection's thematic depictions of trans lived experience.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, …… [please print name]

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis] ……

……

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed: ……

Date: ……

Acknowledgements

Kiss Your Comrades was nourished by the support and guidance of many who believe in the power of storytelling and representation.

I first offer my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Peter Middleton, who somehow always saw where I was headed even when my feet felt far from planted. Peter's passion for the art of writing, his keen insights, alongside his gentle guidance and encouragement, were instrumental in the completion of this collection.

I benefitted greatly from the contributions of my second supervisor, Sujala Singh, who could see good ideas in messy writing, and who challenged and encouraged me throughout this process. I give immense thanks for her warmth and wisdom.

I offer my warmest appreciation to my former supervisor, mentor, and friend, Aamer Hussein, whose talent is matched only by his kindness. Aamer opened the short form door and I stepped all the way through, nurtured by his encouragement and inspired by his wisdom. I am a better writer for knowing him, for reading his work, and will be forever grateful to him for helping me find my voice.

Before the first word was written this collection had a fan. Through nights laced with a writer's doubt and days tainted with patriarchal rage, she found me every time in the sweet violet light. She selflessly offered her wisdom, time, and impeccable eye for detail to this project because she believes so deeply in the power of art and representation. *Kiss Your Comrades* would not—could not—have been completed without the unwavering grace, boundless love, and infinite magic of my partner, the love of my life, Ronna Lee, for whom words will never be enough.

Finally, I extend my deepest gratitude and admiration for the enduring, beautiful trans and queer spirit. To our ancestors: thank you for carving these paths, for your activism, and for embedding your magic and wisdom into our veins. To my trans and queer siblings: thank you for your courage and complexity. I am forever in awe of your ability to reimagine, to think beyond, to create as much as you critique, to reclaim gender or do gender in new, colourful ways, and to build a world beyond reduction and fear. On days that the world spits you out, may you find yourself put back together through the power of queer kinship. This doctorate is dedicated to you, my comrades, with all my love, a kiss, and a fist.

KISS YOUR COMRADES

VOLUME 2: A Critical Commentary

Introduction

As introduction to an account of his own creative process, Graham Mort begins his article, 'Finding Form in Short Fiction', by warning readers of the fictional threads woven into author's accounts of their writing process:

> They are invariably fictions that tidy up and give logical form to what might otherwise be seen as an unsatisfactory and untidy process, where the subconscious eruptive impulse and the conscious organising principle are mingled.[1]

This commentary then attempts to give meaning and structure to the often non-linear and enigmatic process of creation by addressing key areas of the challenges I have faced and the research I have conducted in order to resolve them when constructing *Kiss Your Comrades.*

When I began my research for this project, I felt dissatisfaction at the mode of trans representation in literary fiction, not only finding it infrequent but often focusing on one aspect of trans living: medical transition. The central concept of my short story collection *Kiss Your Comrades* is to present a trans narrative by creatively inhabiting trans-queer perspectives through a set of linked stories; to utilise storytelling as a method to challenge cis-heteronormativity and to construct transness *beyond* bodies misidentified at birth, and transition as a singular event.[2]

Creating a trans narrative demanded an interdisciplinary approach in the creative methodology; therefore, three elements have been identified as the pillars of this collection—queer and transgender theory, the short form as a vehicle, and trans lived experience. It is the synergetic effort of these elements that gave way to the creation of *Kiss Your Comrades* and is woven together in this commentary. Each chapter will focus on an identified element of constructing a trans narrative and explore both the particularities and challenges of that aspect, how other creative writers and queer thinkers address these particularities, as well as how I have dealt with them in *Kiss Your Comrades*.

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[1] Graham Mort, 'Finding Form in Short Fiction', in Vanessa Gebbie, (ed.), *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story* (London: Salt Publishing, 2013), p. 32.

[2] A merging of the terms heteronormativity and cis-normativity.

'Defining a Trans Narrative' will be an overview of British/American trans writing and covers the process of reading *queerly,* defined for this commentary as teasing out transness where it may not be formally recognised or intended. To discuss trans narratives, it is first necessary to examine what constitutes a trans narrative, and so the chapter will open with a discussion of *identification* and *designation*. I will then examine notable examples of the *transition memoir*, arguably the most commonly recognised form of trans writing, including Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* and Jan Morris' *Conundrum*, and then contrast them with non-trans authors Carole Maso and Eileen Myles, to demonstrate a queered treatment of gender and sexuality in fiction that is not *designated* trans but is relatable to trans experience through its mutability. Finally, I will articulate my own desire to move beyond the isolation of the *transition memoir* toward a community-based narrative.

Through queer theory and scholarship, the second chapter, 'Queer Theory: The Undisciplined Discipline', will focus its discussion on transgenderism and the gender binary to illuminate the politics embodied by the collection's characters. In this chapter, I will set forth a working definition of *trans-queers* for both my collection and this commentary. Using Judith Butler's critique of gender as construct/sex as biological destiny, and *intersexuality,* I will examine the instability of binary sex and the mutability of sex characteristics in bodies. I will then move into a discussion of aspects of trans lived experience including *passing* and *transition* and the detrimental effects of cissexism on trans lives. Finally, I will examine Alyson Escalante's *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto* in order to explore a way of conceptualising gender that I apply throughout the collection.

The third chapter, 'Constructing a Trans Narrative', will consist of two parts. The first part, 'Form and Structure', will focus on my decision to work within the short form, and specifically my choice to employ a recurring cast of characters to create a set of linked narratives; drawing on the guidance of short fiction writers Amy Bloom and Elizabeth Strout. This chapter will also explore how a recurrent cast aided in the construction of a trans narrative: first, the characters' trans status would be (fairly) established through a series of linked stories via their recurrence, and second, their recurrence would allow for the reader to peek into their lives at various points on their

timeline, understanding transition as an ongoing and non-linear process rather than a one-time event.

The second part of the chapter, 'Expressions of Transness', will demonstrate how I attempted to construct transness *beyond the body*, that is to say, beyond medical transition and trauma. Wanting to move away from the isolation of the *transition memoir* discussed in the first chapter, I created a cast of characters living on the margins of capitalism and cis-heteronormativity, connected through geography and community, with an emphasis on their intimacy and tenacity. Through elements including gender bending and mental illness/caregiving, I attempted to create a collection which both highlights the violence of the cis-heteronormative dominant and celebrates the beauty of trans/queer resilience and friendship. Here, I will also explore one of the collections' major themes, mental illness; examining the overlap between neurodivergence and the LGBT community, as well as turn a critical eye towards the medical-industrial complex and the difficulty in accessing affordable and sensitive healthcare. Additionally, I will discuss queer intimacy, particularly the role of caregiver, highlighting the bond of trans-queer people resulting from various forms of trauma stemming from gender-based violence.

As a trans-queer writer, my objective is to integrate trans-queer politics with art as a form of activism, using the short story as a space to creatively inhabit trans-queer perspectives and intersectional, beyond-the-binary politics. *Kiss Your Comrades* is a collection which seeks to fuse the personal with the political; a manifesto of trans legacy and love to celebrate trans-queer bodies, friendships, and our passionate, plural politics.

1. Defining a Trans Narrative

At the start of this doctorate, as I set out to survey relevant literature, I found classifying the trans narrative a complex task. I was ultimately faced with the question: what constitutes a trans narrative? Classifying a narrative as trans based on its author seemed unviable, given a trans author might create content that does not deal with transgenderism (though, one might argue that whatever the content, trans authorship is an act of trans storytelling). While more obvious expressions of transness might include a character's declarative statement: 'I am trans' or be alerted through the presence of transition, what of transness constructed beyond the body? Must a character declare themselves trans to be recognised as such? How do we reduce and erase transness by a demand it be explicit or by the cis-normative assumption that a character is cisgender unless stated otherwise? How do we survey a category (trans narrative) when the identifier (transness) is mutable? When it is subject to multiple interpretations and expressions, observable and not, explicitly stated and otherwise?

By overviewing the state of British/American trans writing, as well as contemplating what constitutes a trans narrative through a process I call *reading queerly*, this chapter explores how trans narratives have been constructed as well as how transness can be found or expressed in text without designation as a trans narrative.[3] I then reflect on the *transition memoir* and medical transition as a dominant theme, pointing to a pattern within mainstream publishing to pluck the most 'palatable' of trans experience (white, middle class, binary) and publish that story repeatedly. For this commentary then, I define *designated trans narratives* as narratives which have been claimed and/or classified as trans; that is, narratives which have been declared trans by the author and/or marketed as a trans narrative, or as having a trans character.

As a non-binary trans reader, I have always struggled to find representations of my identity (and community) in literary fiction. When I did find it, the narrative often seemed to fetishise or sensationalise trans identities. I could locate my community as metaphor for puberty and change in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, or as local colour—

[3] Applying Marilyn R. Farwell's idea, discussed on the following page, *reading queerly* is defined for this commentary as teasing out transness where it may not be formally recognised or intended; or reading outside of cis-normative structure or convention

e.g., sex workers in the work of Tennessee Williams—but it was much more difficult to find complex trans characters that were central to the stories.

The process of locating *designated* trans protagonists was so arduous that when I attempted to pull statistics on trans representation in literary fiction, I could not find a list dedicated solely to trans people, but rather only a broader inclusion within the LGBT category. By cross-referencing lists compiled by Lambda Literary Foundation and Goodreads, I counted nine short stories and twenty-three novels with a trans character, including Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*.[4] [5] It should be noted, however, that the modernist lesbian classic *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes with a cast of androgynous and unsexed characters was not included among any list as having trans/genderqueer characters. The exclusion of *Nightwood* alerted me to the fact that trans characters can exist on the page without being acknowledged in any official capacity; meaning, unless these characters are in a state of transition, or their transness is explicitly stated, they might not make compiled lists.

In 'Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives', Marilyn R. Farwell asks us how we would even attempt to accurately classify LGBT literature if we are constantly reading texts within the confines of the heteronormative structure. Farwell argues that we run the risk of attributing qualities to the narrative or character that do not pertain to the art itself, but rather to the convention. For example, a lesbian character who is perhaps timid is still, despite any qualities to the contrary, seen as 'rebellious' due to her 'unconventional' (lesbian) lifestyle.[6]

A similar risk prevents me from accessing a comprehensive bibliography of trans narratives. If we only identify trans narratives as those in which the character's transness is either explicitly stated, or through the presence of transition, then we reduce transness to a single act and declarative statement. But if transness is mutable, if it is a deviation from the cisgender line, if it is a questioning of gender categories and birth assignment and binarism, then the presence of, or at least the potential for trans characters increases.

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[4] 'Lambda Literary', in 'lambdaliterary.org', <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/>, [accessed 3 July 2015].

[5] 'Listopia: LGBT Book Lists', in 'goodreads.com', <https://www.goodreads.com/list/tag/lgbt>, [accessed 18 January 2015].

[6] Marilyn R. Farwell, 'Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives', in Mary Eagleton, (ed.), *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

Consequently, while the work of LGB authors like Carole Maso and Eileen Myles is not explicitly trans, nor do its authors (to our knowledge) identify as trans, they have created content that resonated with parts of my trans experience more than many designated trans narratives. It surprised me, for example, as a fan of Eugenides, that his representation of intersexuality in *Middlesex* didn't sit well with me. Julia Serano articulated my misgivings, stating that Eugenides' approach to intersexuality 'gives the book an extraordinarily objectifying and voyeuristic feel to someone who is actually familiar with the subject.'[7] Indeed, I found a gender more like my own in Myles' *Chelsea Girls* or in the erotic dream sequence *Pussycat Fever* by Kathy Acker than in many designated trans narratives. The task then became twofold: to seek designated trans writing and to read queerly far and wide, to tease out transness where it may not be formally recognised, or perhaps even intended

One example of my attempt to tease out transness can be found in Carole Maso's piece 'The Women Wash Lentils' which describes sapphic lovemaking:

> I want you in the liminal stage. In the in-between place. It means in a doorway, in a dawn. When the lights go out, but before the performance begins. In the most vulnerable, in the most tentative. In the place where one thing is about to change into another.[8]

Lesbian intimacy is created and described throughout the piece through colour, sound, food, and literature. Maso constructs bodies and bodily acts outside of the biological, drawing on liminality and with a focus on the *in-between*, and could indeed be describing *any* two women, trans or cis.

In her novel *Chelsea Girls*, Myles seems to articulate a sort of dysphoria when she writes: 'I have always been afraid I would vanish, would cease to be, if I ever stopped trying to decide who I was, how I looked.'[9] In both examples, the writers draw on liminality and occupying space. For Myles, a fear of being invisible, of being overlooked or unseen, and for Maso, how deep attraction opens a series of doors, to step through, or linger in, all of which felt relatable to trans experience, *tangibly* trans.

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[7] Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), p. 200.

[8] Carole Maso, *Aureole* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1996), p. 3.

[9] Eileen Myles, *Chelsea Girls* (New York: Harpers Collins Publishers, 1994), p. 174.

While an attempt to categorically define trans literature then is imprudent and will likely be reductive, in examining the existing state of designated trans writing we can identify patterns and gaps so we might develop trans bibliographies into a diverse collection of narratives across style, genre, and experience. Representation is incredibly powerful for marginalised communities who struggle to see themselves reflected.

In 'Reading for It: Lesbian Readers Constructing Culture and Identity through Textual Experience', Shelia Liming writes: 'gays and lesbians continue to have a difficult time gaining access to reading materials that relate to their own lives.' From a poll among lesbians aged 18-24 in the United States, Liming found that the three most popular lesbian narratives were *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown, *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters, and *Annie on My Mind*, a YA novel by Nancy Garden. Many of the women reported a preference for Young Adult novels citing a desire to avoid literary fiction with representations of sexuality that were contradictory to their own experiences.[10]

The sentiments of Liming's gay and lesbian participants are echoed within the trans community. In 'Writing Trans Characters', American journalist and self-proclaimed 'trans degenerate' Alex DiFrancesco discusses seeking out trans representations in media as a young adult. They note Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, but state that:

> […] because these books and films and songs were largely written by cis (non-trans) people, there was never anything about the day to day of these characters included. They were tragic, or glamorous, or both, but they were certainly not real to me.'[11]

DiFrancesco contrasts this with trans author Casey Plett's debut collection of short fiction, *A Safe Girl to Love*, a collection that prompted me to marvel at the firsts I encountered while reading it. Rarely have I experienced reading narrative fiction with more than one trans character in a scene, seeing trans jargon like 'low dysphoria' or reading explicit discussion of trans fetishisation. DiFrancesco states that the characters

[10] Sheila Liming, '"Reading for It": Lesbian Readers Constructing Culture and Identity through Textual Experience', in Thomas Peele, (ed.), *Queer Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), p. 85-103.

[11] Alex DiFrancesco, 'Writing Trans Characters', *Brevity*, 49 (2015) <http://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/writing-trans-characters/>, [accessed 25 September 2017].

in Plett's collection 'are bound by their transness, but it is not the entirety of who they are.'[12] While Plett's character's casually discuss community tokenisation at a diner, I became stunned with how infrequently literature passes any kind of 'trans Bechdel test', which would perhaps be defined as two trans characters in a scene talking to one another about something other than their transition or status. *A Safe Girl to Love* is a collection which sought to dive into both the sorrow and humdrum of trans feminine experience.

DiFrancesco's frustration with a lack of diverse trans representation mirrors my own. Medical transition especially seems the dominant theme of the trans narrative, signalling the fascination of readers with Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS)—the overwhelming presence and interest of which is what British journalist and trans author Juliet Jacques aptly refers to as the *transition memoir*.

In 2009, Jacques herself was approached by the Guardian to write a three-year column documenting her own transition, which later led to a memoir. Her reflections on her experiences with both publications were covered by fellow trans author and journalist Scott Esposito. Although initially hesitant, as the project didn't fully align with her interests as a writer, Jacques eventually agreed, wanting to prove the potential power of varied trans writing after being told that 'people weren't interested' in trans politics and they would only accept first-person 'journey' narratives.'[13] When, after the column's success, Jacques was approached to write a memoir (which she described as being pressured into) she'd agreed only when it became clear agents weren't interested in her writing anything else.[14]

Jacques discusses the phenomenon of the transition memoir in her 2017 essay, 'Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing' and identifies two key issues with the genre. First, '[…] they created an impression of people being focused more on themselves than any wider community.' Second, it seems to imply medical transition is the only worthwhile aspect of trans lived experience.[15]

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[12] DiFrancesco.

[13] Scott Esposito, 'Beyond the Trans Memoir', *Literary Hub*, (Grove Atlantic and Electric Literature, 2015), <http://lithub.com/beyond-the-trans-memoir/>, 14 September 2015, [accessed 2 November 2017].

[17] *Ibid.*

[15] Juliet Jacques 'Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing', *Life Writing*, 14.3 (2017), 357-370, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2017.1328301>.

Indeed, the presence of the isolated *I* and the absence of community is tangible in many transition memoirs, notable examples being Jan Morris's *Conundrum* and Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*, which I will briefly overview below.

Conundrum, published in 1974 by Welsh travel writer Jan Morris details her ten-year transition as she serves in the British military as a closeted trans woman, and eventually returns to the same village where she grew up, post-transition. It should be noted that the gender politics are antiquated (even by the standards of the seventies) and privileged, Morris being part of a distinct upper class; indeed, in her new introduction, Morris herself acknowledges 'this book is already a period piece' and 'the world has greatly changed since then, and conceptions of sexual identity, which is the ostensible subject of the book, have changed more than anything.'[16] The isolation I reference in relation to *Conundrum* is the absence of trans community. Morris details the relative ease with which her status was accepted and even states that the friends she made in the military *would have* accepted her status if they knew her truth. While Morris' reassurance that the cisgender community is tolerant may reflect a certain trans reality, in my collection I aimed to create trans space and dynamics and decentre cisgender opinion on trans lives.

The articulation of the I in *Conundrum* echoes a similar isolation in trans author Brigid Brophy's heroi-cyclic novel *In Transit*, published in 1969. Brophy sets her tale in an airport, as an unsexed passenger who decides to remain in the lounge rather than board or depart, putting herself through a series of tests to determine her gender, drawing a link and reflecting on the liminality of both airports and transness. While Brophy's story is far less gender normative than *Conundrum*, and indeed addresses the mutability of sex and gender, the story is largely focused on the I, a lone traveller trying to find themselves.

By the nineties, a shift away from the transition memoir emerged and a new trans writing appeared, fuelled in part by a shifting trans-feminist landscape with work like 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto' published by Sandy Stone in 1987. This new trans writing was far less gender normative than the transition memoir of the late sixties and seventies—it sought to express the blurred expanse of gender

[16] Jan Morris, *Conundrum*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. ix.

expression and experience. In her 1994 article 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage', Susan Stryker writes: 'my body can't do that [give birth]; I can't even bleed without a wound, and yet I claim to be a woman… I can never be a woman like other women, but I could never be a man.'[17] And in 1994, notorious genderqueer author Kate Bornstein published xir seminal work *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, part coming of age story, part radical manifesto declaring space for all gender deviants.[18] As Jacques puts it, these books 'concentrated on exploring spaces between male and female, trying to create a language to convey their ideas about gender, along with a sense of community and shared politics.'[19]

While trans writing took a decidedly different approach in the nineties, it's interesting to hear the transition memoir described as a thing of the past. With little effort, I could find the story of a trans woman and her version of 'feeling different' as a child, transitioning, and emerging on the other side of her 'journey'. But as black trans memoirist and activist Janet Mock wrote in her 2013 article 'Not All Memoirs Are Created Equal: The Gatekeeping of Trans Women of Colour's Stories', there is a systematic exclusion and overwhelming lack of representation of trans people of colour.[20] While in recent years, we've seen Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* published with much commercial success in 2017, and *My Life is No Accident* by trans author of colour Tenika Watson in 2014, trans narratives remain dominated by white, binary trans women, typically older and of middle class means. Mock explains that not all people—especially trans women of colour—have equal access to writing, sharing, and publishing their stories, defining necessary resources as: sitting space and time, pen, paper, computer, Wi-Fi, internet,

[17] Susan Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage', *GLQ*, 1.3 (1994) <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>.

[18] Bornstein identifies as genderqueer and has expressed identification with the gender-neutral pronouns *xe/xir*, therefore those are the pronouns used in this commentary.

[19] Esposito.

[20] Janet Mock, 'Not All Memoirs Are Created Equal: The Gatekeeping of Trans Women of Colour Stories', in 'janetmock.com', <https://janetmock.com/2013/06/05/memoir-trans-women-of-color/>, 5 June 1015, [accessed 14 November 2017].

editor, publishers.[21] Mock concludes her article by illuminating the power and necessity of media representation:

> Many trans folks have been able to hear their story told through other trans folk in literature who have represented them and resonated in some way. Yet the stories that have dominated this genre have nothing to do with me. I, a young, poor-raised, multi-racial trans woman, did not have access to stories because the stories I craved did not exist, and the ones that did exist are consistently being erased. And because I didn't have examples of women like me who made it through it was difficult to imagine a future beyond what I was living.[22]

Publishing agencies have plucked the most privileged of trans experiences and published that story over and over, yet many transition memoirs only made me, a non-binary person, feel more alienated. They seemed to suggest my transness should have a fixed beginning and end. Those of us born and/or identifying outside the gender binary give birth to ourselves over and over, with transition, too, being an ongoing process of trial and error, discovery and embracement.

Tired of the reductive focus on transition and tragedy within trans life writing, I sought to create a piece of literary fiction which centres non-binary *and* binary trans people to explore the intricacy of trans life—our friendships and tactics of survival—perhaps there, highlighting the muscle of resistance and broadening the scope of trans literature by exploring transness as mutable and transition as a non-linear and on-going process. Rather than create a piece of genre fiction, it became evident to me that I wished to create a crossbreed of literary fiction with trans life writing, creating a collection which could be enjoyed by trans readers seeking representation but also by admirers of literary fiction.

As this project is a fusion of the creative (short fiction) with the political (beyond-the-binary politics through a queer intersectional lens) the following chapter 'Queer Theory: The Undisciplined Discipline', offers examination of binary gender as an oppressive force on transgender lives and sets forth the politics embedded within the collection.

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[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*

2. Queer Theory: The Undisciplined Discipline

Queer is not monolithic; it is multiple, mutable, and I find it fitting that the term can't be singularly defined.[23] For this commentary, I offer a definition in three parts: first, that it identifies people with non-heterosexual orientations and/or non-cisgender identities; second, that it references an 'otherness' in relation to a Euro-American colonial conceptualisation of gender; and third, that it is political.[24]

This chapter focuses its discussion on transgenderism and the gender binary, using queer theory and scholarship to illuminate the expressions of transness in *Kiss Your Comrades*. For this commentary, I define *transgender* as having your sex misidentified at birth—as this renders the term inclusive regardless of whether trans people medically transition or not.

This chapter will first examine the *trans-queer* identity embodied by the characters in *Kiss Your Comrades* as a political identity which positions itself as being anti-kyriarchy. The chapter moves into a discussion of the gender binary using Butler's critique of gender as construct and sex as biological destiny before examining intersexuality in order to challenge the binary categorisation of bodies. It then examines tenets of trans experience, including the concepts of *transition* and *passing* to illuminate particularities of trans existence in safe (queer) versus public space. It concludes with the formative work of trans academic Alyson Escalante introducing *nihilist gender abolitionist trans feminism*, which sets forth a radical politics of negation seeking to abolish Western binary gender as oppressive framework, advocating instead for bodily autonomy and self-determination.

[23] It should be noted that *queer* is a reclaimed slur, and though it is used for this commentary, it should not be imposed as an identity.

[24] In her crucial work, 'The Coloniality of Gender,' María Lugones examines the connection between binary gender and colonialism and specifically, the intersections of forced racialisation and gendering upon indigenous women and women of colour. Lugones offers 'decolonial feminism' as concept to begin undoing colonial practice and philosophy.

Trans activist Eli Erlick wrote the following about their own experience with having transness defined for them, feelings that resonate with the trans-queer identity expressed in *Kiss Your Comrades,* so I offer it here:

> Trans people are expected to feel like we're 'born in the wrong body.' In reality, many of us recognise that we were instead 'born in the wrong society.' […] Instead, we must imagine trans people as redoing gender in new, 'right' ways: gender that is not assigned to sex, roles, or norms. We aren't always correcting a mistake of our bodies but the mistakes of a cissexist society.[25]

As LGBT people exist across every identity category, trans-queers feel that any approach to social justice must practice fervent intersectionality, prioritise the most vulnerable at the forefront of our movements and demand a politics of plurality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is a model for understanding the myriad ways identities may intersect and produce unique experiences with oppression.[26] For example, the misogyny that trans women face intersects with transphobia, resulting in a unique form of oppression called *transmisogyny,* as coined by trans writer and biologist Julia Serano.[27] It follows then that every intersection is an articulation of the self in relation to power dynamics and privilege. Trans-queer politic sees systems—i.e., gender, white supremacy, capitalism—as interconnected and inherently flawed, favouring a politics of negation that would dismantle them.

'The personal is political', a slogan of second wave feminist activism in the 1960s, has become a mantra for trans-queers who not only identify as LGBT, but perhaps, just as significantly, reject the 'homonationalist' political agenda of Euro-American mainstream LGBT movement(s). Coined by Gender Studies scholar, Jasbir K. Puar, *homonationalism* describes the favourable association between nationalist ideology and LGBT/Intersex people and their rights. Puar warns us of the dangers of movements built around a single identity:

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[25] Eli Erlick, 'Trans people are expected to feel like […]' [Facebook post], 11 January 2018 <https://www.facebook.com/eli.erlick/posts/735625113298801>, [accessed 15 January 2018].

[26] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989.8 (1989).

[27] Julia Serano, 'There Is No Perfect Word: A Transgender Glossary of Sorts', in 'juliaserano.com', <http://www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html>, 2016, [accessed July 2015].

> We know that any single-axis identity politics is invariably going to coagulate around the most conservative, normative construction of that identity, foreclosing the complexities of class, citizenship status, gender, nation, and religion.[28]

Mainstream LGBT movements tend to prioritise the most privileged among the community—e.g. white, cisgender, middle-class gay men—and favour assimilationist politics, i.e. focusing on equality within the dominant cis-heteropatriarchal culture. Counter queer movements favour an intersectional politics that prioritise the most marginalised in LGBT communities at the forefront—trans women of colour, for example—asserting that institutions should be questioned and criticised.

Gender is a point of focus within the trans-queer politic because the binarist categorisation of sex characteristics and the rigid gender roles they enforce contribute to all forms of queerphobia which stem from misogyny. Sex is often regarded as natural, meaning that it is widely believed that sex references something ontological and innate, something essential which cannot be changed, while gender is typically considered a social construct. Judith Butler addresses the popular feminist position of sex as biological destiny and gender as social construct, suggesting instead that binary sex, too, is a gendered category:

> What is sex anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such 'facts' for us? […] Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.[29]

The assignment of sex is immediate. A baby is born and their sex is determined based on the presentation of their genitals. In her book, *Lessons from the Intersexed*,

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[28] Jasbir K. Puar, interviewed by Ben Pitcher and Henriette Gunkel, Darkmatter, 2 May 2008, in 'darkamtter101.com', <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/05/02/qa-with-jasbir-puar/>, [accessed 4 December 2016].

[29] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 9.

American social psychologist Suzanne Kessler addresses the medical standards for classifying genitals. These standards state that if an infant's genitals are shorter than ⅜ of an inch, they are declared girl, while if they exceed 1 inch, they are declared boy. The space between ⅜ of an inch and 1 inch is considered ambiguous and infants often undergo unnecessary (and often without parental consent) surgeries to 'normalise' their genitals.[30] [31]

Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural bodily variations which may be genital, hormonal, chromosomal, or a combination thereof. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights describes intersexuality as 'people born with sex characteristics […] that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.' According to their findings, intersex people make up about 1-1.7% of the population, or are about as common as red haired people.[32]

Intersex people destabilise notions of binary sex generally taught as a simple classification of all bodies into two distinct categories: male and female. Under this classification, male refers to a person with a penis and testes, XY chromosomes; while female refers to a person with breasts, a vulva and ovaries, XX chromosomes. But as trans activist and educator Asher Bauer points out in 'Not Your Mom's Trans 101', bodies occupy multiple combinations of sex characteristics extending beyond binarist categorisation:

> Sex is no more an immutable binary than gender. There are intersex people who are born with non-binary genitalia. There are people with hormonal anomalies. In fact, hormone levels vary wildly within the categories of cis male and cis female. Chromosomes, too, vary.[33]

The concept of binary sex, based on the principle that multiple sex characteristics are fixed and must always appear together, ignores that these traits appear in bodies in a

[30] Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 43.

[31] 'What do doctors do now when they encounter a patient with intersex?', in 'ISNA.org', <http://www.isna.org/faq/standard_of_care>, 2008, [accessed November 2016].

[32] Michael Van Gelderen, 'Fact Sheet: Intersex', United Nations Human Rights, in 'UNFE.org', <https://www.unfe.org/system/unfe-65-Intersex_Factsheet_ENGLISH.pdf>, 2015, [accessed October 2015].

[33] Asher Bauer, 'Not Your Mom's Trans 101', in 'tranarchism.com', <http://www.tranarchism.com/2010/11/26/not-your-moms-trans-101/index.html>, 26 November 2010, [accessed July 2013].

plethora of combinations and are often irrelevant in prepubescent and postmenopausal bodies, further establishing bodies as fragile entities prone to change.[34] Trans-queer identity then rejects categorical assignment and instead advocates for self-determination.

In recent years, as trans identities gain more visibility, trans women continue to have difficulty accessing some feminist spaces. Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) refers to a brand of 'feminism' which describes itself as gender critical and equates trans women with men who want 'undeserved' access to womanhood. These feminists, Germaine Greer among them, will tend to agree that toys, clothes, haircuts, professions and hobbies shouldn't be gendered but uphold the essentialist belief that being *male* or *female* is natural, innate, and immutable. Greer has publicly equated trans women with the popular media trope of 'men in dresses': 'Just because you lop off your d**k and then wear a dress doesn't make you a f***ing woman.'[35] As a notable feminist, her comments have the power to shape opinion. In this case, her comments perpetuate transmisogyny and further marginalise an already disproportionately vulnerable group of women:

> According to statistics provided by Planet Transgender, a trans woman is killed internationally every 29 hours. Transgender Europe published a record of 226 trans murders between October 2013 and September 2014. Currently, the rate of murder by a cis person against a trans woman is 1 in 12, and for trans women of colour that rate rises to 1 in 8. Furthermore, the average life expectancy of a trans woman of colour is 35 years.[36]

Greer's brand of trans-exclusionary feminism quickly reveals itself as hypocritical. While she calls trans women 'men with a sickness', she extends solidarity to trans men, assumedly because they were assigned female at birth, thus conflating *women* with vulvas and wombs. Greer does not seem to be aware that by positioning trans men as

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[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Nick Duffy, 'Germaine Greer: Lopping off your d**k and wearing a dress doesn't make you a f***ing woman', *PinkNews*, 26 October 2015, in 'pinkews.co.uk', <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/10/26/germaine-greer-lopping-off-your-dk-and-wearing-a-dress-doesnt-make-you-a-fing-woman/>, [accessed October 2015].

[36] Addison Rose Vincent, 'State of Emergency Continues for Trans Women of Color', *Huffington Post*, 13 August 2015, in 'huffingtonpost.com', <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/addison-rose-vincent/the-state-of-emergency-co_b_7981580.html>, [accessed August 2015].

women she dismisses their identities. Indeed, perhaps the greatest deficiency of TERFs is their inability to recognise the violence that is perpetuated against trans women as misogyny, and secondly, that the violence they (TERFs) enact as gatekeepers of what constitutes *womanhood* is also a form of (cis)sexism. A catcaller does not stop to interrogate a trans woman on what her chromosomal makeup is before harassing her, ceasing misogynistic language and behaviour when he discovers her trans status.

After coming under criticism from many trans activists, Greer backpedalled with the statement: 'I'm very interested in intersex. Far from being transphobic, I actually think intersex is an important state of life and should be allowed to exist.'[37] Many intersex activists pointed out the irony of Greer not realising her own *gender entitlement* by believing she had any authority to make a claim over whether groups of people should exist or not. Julia Serano defines gender entitlement as follows:

> When we non-consensually project our own assumptions, expectations, values, judgements, and beliefs about sex, gender, and/or sexuality onto other people, and favour such interpretations over the way those individuals understand themselves.[38]

Serano argues cisgender entitlement has led to the gatekeeping of transgender identities where cis feminists and/or cis scholars in fields of medicine, psychology, and psychiatry are thought to understand transgenderism better than trans people themselves.

In 'Pathological Science: Debunking Sexological and Sociological Models of Transgenderism', Serano examines transgenderism as a focal point of sexological study and how '[…] this body of research, though presented as "scientific" and "objective," reveals more about the researcher's biases than it does about the transgender population.'[39]

Transsexuality and transgenderism became a popular area of research within sexology—an area of research that, inevitably, required human subjects. The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA) is an American organisation that sets the standards of gender identity disorders stating (until 1998) that: 'Any and all recommendations for sex reassignment surgery and hormone therapy

[37] Duffy.

[38] Serano, p. 116

[39] *Ibid.*

should be made only by clinical behavioural scientists.' This relationship elevated cisgender sexologists into a position of power via gatekeeping: determining who was and was not allowed to medically and legally transition. [40]

Many of the standards sexologists set forth to determine who was 'really' trans and thus allowed to transition were formulated through a lens of cisgender bias. One of the harmful standards among the criteria is the concept of *passing*, or the idea that trans people perform their gender well, that is to say, in accordance with cisgender standards of femininity or masculinity.

Sexual desirability was established (and still lingers today) as part of the criteria for whether trans people would be allowed to transition. In 1974, during a panel hosted by the American Psychological Association, clinicians stated using desirability as a marker for authenticity:

> He was more convinced of the femaleness of a male-to-female transsexual if she was particularly beautiful and was capable of evoking in him those feelings that beautiful women generally do. Another clinician told us that he uses his own sexual interest as a criterion for deciding whether a transsexual is really the gender he/she claims.[41]

Still now, trans women advise one another to 'femme it up' even if they are a butch woman or closeted (or merely don't like wearing makeup) to improve their probability of being granted access to treatment. The emphasis on the ability to pass and perform in accordance with cisgender standards of beauty centres cisgender performance positioning it as superior. This however leads to the erasure of a plethora of trans identities and false equation of passing with gender 'success', further stigmatising those trans people who do not easily pass or simply don't care to (including non-feminine trans women, non-masculine trans men, gender nonconforming folks, and especially CAMAB trans femmes).[42]

This glorification of cisgender performance and traditional femininity and masculinity, as well as the concept of passing, has sparked intercommunity tension among trans people and has created its own form of policing and gatekeeping within

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Serano, p. 136.

[42] Coercively assigned male at birth.

trans communities. Much of this inter-community policing is directed towards non-binary identities, especially trans femmes of colour. Some within the trans community believe the act of passing normalises their bodies and helps them gain acceptance from the cisgender community, while others have no interest in gaining recognition or acceptance from cis or mainstream LGBT communities and see gender as a fluid and/or meaningless construct. It is understandable that binary trans people feel invalidated when non-binary trans people make claims that gender isn't real, given their emotional and financial investment towards transitioning. However, it's also unsurprising non-binary trans people feel invalidated when binary trans people insist they must pick one gender, perform it in accordance with traditional gender roles, and pass. But perhaps rather than police one another, we as trans community could find a politics of plurality and inclusion, one that celebrates all gender identities and presentations and affords protection and agency for all bodies, cisgender and transgender alike.

Alyson Escalante, author of 'Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto', upholds what she has coined as *nihilist gender abolitionist trans feminism* as the plural politics trans-queers have been searching for. She opens her anti-manifesto: 'We are at an impasse', arguing that the positive politics of broadening categorisation and incremental change have done little to alleviate the gender violence that both cisgender and trans women/people face as a result of institutional sexism, favouring instead a radical politics of negation.[43] *Nihilist gender abolitionist trans feminism* believes that both sex and gender are social constructs that reference no ontological truth—gender is merely imposed at birth against our will. Escalante believes that *the self* is a convergence of power and discourse, and gender is the inescapable positioning of ourselves within a society which upholds sex and gender as divisive categories.

Escalante states that the categories *man* and *woman* reference social classes; that gender is a set of norms implemented through socialisation, normalised and legitimised through the production of knowledge (e.g. medical, psychological) and motivated by the sexual division of labour. She argues that *innate gender* as a concept exists to naturalise men's exploitation of women.[44]

[43] Alyson Escalante, 'Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto', in 'libcom.org', <https://libcom.org/library/gender-nihilism-anti-manifesto>, 22 June 2016, [accessed June 2016].

[44] *Ibid.*

> We see gender as a specific set of discourses embodied in medicine, psychiatry, the social sciences, religion, and our daily interactions with others. We do not see gender as a 'feature of our true selves,' but as a whole order of meaning and intelligibility which we find ourselves operating in. We do not look at gender as a thing which a stable self can possess. On the contrary we say that gender is done and participated in, and that this doing is a creative act by which the self is constructed and given social significance and meaning.[45]

Escalante is cautious to remain sensitive to the trans community, of which she is a part. She says trans people 'are not at fault for gender,' but rather that the trans community needs to critique its own reliance on gender essentialism, consider the limitations of current trans politics, and theorise a way forward that leaves none of our siblings behind. She imagines a world where bodies are rendered unintelligible; where mannerisms, voices, clothes, and hobbies would be free from gender—thus freeing all forms of performance and presentation of expectation and instead offering self-determination and safety.[46]

Gender is historically, culturally, and geographically contingent and something we all, cisgender and transgender people alike, participate in, and do. As Escalante states:

> We look at the transmisogyny we have faced in our own lives, the gendered violence that our comrades, both trans and cis have faced, and we realize that the apparatus itself makes such violence inevitable. We have had enough.[47]

In one sense, this is what my use of the quote: 'the personal is political' is meant to denote. Trans-queers are not desensitised to gender violence because we experience this violence every day. This violence exists on a spectrum with *micro-aggressions* (being misgendered, for example) on one end and hate crimes on the other, with a whole slew of transphobic acts in between. The horror of assault, rape, and murder translate to any context and are easily understood. But micro-aggressions, though 'benign' in comparison, are not occasional for many of us, and the frequency of these acts not only exhaust but accumulate—so a seemingly small act, such as having to select male or female on an application as a non-binary person, can some days feel immense. Indeed,

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] *Ibid.*

in a world where we are made to feel sick and invisible, some days just surviving is a tremendous act of resistance.

The trans feminism and queer theory I outlined in this chapter informs what I call the praxis of the collection: intersectional, beyond-the-binary politics. My hope in attaching a 'praxis' to my work is twofold. First, that it addresses my privileges (racial, educational) and internalised biases as an author, acknowledging that there is no single way to be trans. By exercising a beyond-the-binary approach to gender, which favours both binary and non-binary trans people, the collection recognises the community's diversity and hopefully will encourage readers to seek out other trans narratives. Second, as an author and activist I could not divorce the collection from the current socio-political context of transphobia, cissexism, erasure, and violence. It would be an impossible task to include every kind of trans experience and what is considered normative will always be relative to cultural and geographic context, but within the context of Euro-American trans politics where I find myself situated, I wanted the collection to present itself as accomplice and comrade, hence the collection's title.

Drawing on the trans feminism and queer scholarship discussed here, the next chapter, split into two parts, will explore how I constructed a trans narrative. The first part, 'Form and Structure' focuses on my decision to work within the short form and my use of linked narratives as chief structural scheme, while the second, 'Expressions of Transness', will focus on thematic expressions of otherness, to examine how I integrated these tenets into a coherent, meaningful piece of trans writing.

3. Constructing a Trans Narrative

3.1. Form and Structure

This chapter will concentrate on how I constructed a trans narrative, beginning with my choice to work within the short form, followed by a discussion of structure including my decisions to use short story cycles as an organisational scheme through a linked cast.

As part of the research process, and reflected in the bibliography, I immersed myself in a wide variety of short story collections across genre and style. I drew inspiration from Tessa Hadley and her presentation of memory as fickle entity in 'Matrilineal', from Carmen Machado's explicit and raw representations of female/queer sexuality in *Her Body and Other Parties*, and was encouraged by Margaret Atwood's non-linear character sketch of Nell in *Moral Disorder*. Ultimately, however, due to constraints of length, this chapter focuses on short story writers Amy Bloom and Elizabeth Strout who provided pivotal guidance on structural organisation and the practical art of linking stories.

As a writer existing at the intersection of multiple identities I found an easy home in the short form which embodies its own kind of otherness, both through a shared history with marginalised writers and through facets of the form itself, with elusive tenets like non-closured endings and an extreme variation of length.

It's useful to consider the short story and its conduciveness to a certain writer. In 'The Short Story as Feminist Forum', Miriam Lopez-Rodriguez outlines four elements of the short form as 'practical genre' for Louisa May Alcott, who made her living as a writer. Rodriguez cites the length of the short as accommodating to Alcott's domestic duties as well as accessible and appealing to her audience—women—who would buy the magazines where the stories were published.[48] In this way, the short story functioned practically, as a form which was conducive to women writers' double shift. Like Alcott, the short form functioned practically for my needs as a disabled writer and ongoing target of cissexist and patriarchal violence (both of which have their own disruptive

[48] Miriam López-Rodríguez, 'The Short Story as Feminist Forum: Louisa May Alcott's "Pauline's Passion and Punishment"', in Ellen Burton Harrington, (ed.), *Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form: Approaches by American and British Women Writers*, (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing 2008), p. 39.

effect on daily life and therefore the writing process) as well as favours my intended audience, who may find the brevity of the short form more accessible.

Irish author Frank O'Connor examines the short story and its association with the alienated practitioner in his meditation on the short form *The Lonely Voice:*

> I am suggesting strongly that we can see in it an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time—tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and spoiled priests. The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilised society… but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.[49]

O'Connor suggests that in many cases the novel thrives on *normalcy,* depending on the connection between character and reader, whereas the short story gives the 'sense of outlawed figures wandering around the fringes of society.'[50]

In 'Women Writers and the Outlaw Form of the Short Story', Ellen Burton Harrington encourages us to apply O'Connor's model beyond the masculine, Western literary tradition and consider the alienated practitioner as it pertains to other marginalised groups—such as women or black South African writers under Apartheid.[51] Literary scholar Clare Hanson also designates the short form as a site of resistance for marginalised writers:

> The short story has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks—writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative' or epistemological/experiential framework of their society.'[52]

Vanessa Holford Diana discusses this connection in relation to indigenous writing, citing the work of Native American writer Zitkala-Sa, whose collection *American Indian Stories* was written under a period of U.S. reform policies which sought to silence dissenting voices:

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[49] Frank O'Connor, 'The Lonely Voice', in Charles E. May, (ed.), *Short Story Theories*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), p. 88.

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] Ellen Burton Harrington, 'Introduction: Women Writers and the Outlaw Form of the Short Story', in Ellen Burton Harrington, (ed.), *Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form: Approaches by American and British Women Writers*, (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing 2008), p. 7.

[52] Clare Hanson, cited in Julie Brown, (ed.), *American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (London: Routledge, 2013) p. xx.

> Any attempts on the part of Native Americans to preserve their cultural practices, beliefs, or community and kinship structures was viewed from a mainstream perspective as a stubborn persistence of un-American savagery.[53]

The novel often exists as a privileged space compared with the refuge the short story can offer writers on the margins. First, the brevity of short fiction in contrast to the novel is more accommodating to writers who are writing as their double (or triple) shift. Second, publishing a novel requires entry into a certain literary sphere—via editors, agents, and publishing houses—whereas short stories can find homes in magazines, especially magazines run by and for the community of which the writer is a part.

While the short story could serve my practical writing needs, the decision to work within the form was not one based merely on function but also one of aptitude and desire. Something intuitive propelled me toward the short form, something instilled not just through the mystical Judaism of my childhood, but perhaps something embedded through intergenerational trauma. My grandmother would often tell me that storytelling is not merely means of preservation—our histories and practices—but that its power lies in endurance. Stories, she told me, are pieces of ancestral legacy that can't be stolen. Saturday nights during Havdalah, my grandmother and I would jangle tambourines and regale stories of the women who came before us—women who had crafted stories as poems, each line corresponding to a letter in the Hebrew alphabet so they were easily memorised, as well as stories of our prophetesses: such as Miriam dancing through the desert teaching Torah to the women.[54] It was always made clear to me that these were not mere folk tales but manifestos of survival and perseverance.

Perhaps these rhythmic childhood rituals are partly why my treatment of short fiction mimics song writing. I have always envisioned the short story as song; an intro which hooks, verses which extrapolate, a chorus which repeats, and an outro which concludes. Short story writer Vanessa Gebbie discusses the significance of the opening line in short fiction in her article 'Leaving the Door Ajar' claiming that alongside title the opening line serves as hook to convince a reader to invest in your story:

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[53] Vanessa Holford Diana, 'Zitkala-Ša and Sui Sin Far's Sketch Collections: Communal Characterization as Resistance Writing Tool', in Ellen Burton Harrington, (ed.), *Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form: Approaches by American and British Women Writers*, (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing 2008), p. 99.

[54] Jewish ceremony which concludes the observance of the Sabbath each week.

> Will the prose itself be any good? Your wobbling reader needs to begin to feel confident. That investing his time in your work will be worth it.[55]

Once the reader is hooked, I imagine the bulk of narrative as equivalent to a song's verse, some semblance of assemblage moving the reader from one point to another. Symbolically, I envision the chorus as something which repeats or resounds in the narrative, an image or motif or a recurring thought, techniques employed to imbue the story with layers. In my short 'Tuesday Curse' it is the recurring line: 'Tilly went missing on a Tuesday.' Finally, the short must come to an end; and while a song might end with an intentional and structured outro, it might just fade out instead, offering a close but not an ending, or rather, in the case of short fiction: a non-closured ending.

For nearly every definition that has been set forth for the short form—definitions which focus on brevity or the single effect—another short has been published which defies it.[56] Short fiction as song is the intuitive approach I honed to create my collection, while a cast of linked characters suited my desire to express the interconnectedness of trans-queer communities, an intentional shift away from the alienation and isolation of the transition memoir.

In her article, *Art Breathes from Containment*, Tania Hershman loosely defines the short form as '[…] a piece of writing where every word counts, whose length is no more and no less than the story deserves.'[57] This is showcased in the great variety in length within the medium, but indeed, whether a story is flash fiction like Kafka's 'A Little Fable', or one of Alice Munro's pieces spanning years, is the exact length it needs to be to achieve whatever it set out to do, with each word gingerly placed for effect towards cohesion. It is this definition of the form that resonated with me and this definition which I worked within to create the stories.

Kiss Your Comrades is a set of linked narratives organised around five recurring characters—Ty (a non-binary trans person who uses the pronouns they/them and is the collection's central character), Sadie, Vero, Sofi, and Tallulah (all lovers or friends of

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[55] Vanessa Gebbie, 'Leaving the Door Ajar', in Vanessa Gebbie, (ed.), *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, (London: Salt Publishing, 2013), p. 16.

[56] James Cooper Lawrence, 'A Theory of the Short Story', *The North American Review* 205.735 (University of Northern Iowa, 1917), p. 274-86.

[57] Tania Hershman, 'Art Breathes from Containment', Vanessa Gebbie, (ed.), *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, (London: Salt Publishing, 2013), p. 169.

Ty, abstractly referencing the 'small world' phenomenon often present in queer communities). It navigates this group and their lives, drawing on Forrest Ingram's definition of short story cycles as a structural device to explore link and connection:

> The term 'short story cycle' implies, above all, a principle of organisation, a structural scheme for the working out of an idea, characters, or themes, even a circular disposition, in which the constituent narratives are simultaneously independent and interdependent. A central aspect of the working of the short story cycle is the interaction, the tension that exists between the individual stories and the overall effect of the patterning of the collection.[58]

The notion of stories functioning as both independent and interdependent encouraged me to view the collection as a small pocket of trans-queers, living on the outside of capitalism and cis-normativity, connected by geography and identity. The function of independence and interdependence felt critical to the creative construction of identity, because being marginalised often requires having many selves to navigate different spaces (public versus queer space, for example). With the particularities of wanting to create a collection in which the characters are openly trans but not bound by their transness, a set of linked narratives provided solution in the continued establishment of the character's trans status. Because the stories exist independently, each story refers to their trans status if relevant, but as a set of linked narratives, the transness of each character is continually established.

Amy Bloom and her collection *Come to Me: Stories* was my introduction to the short story cycle. In her cycle 'Three Stories', Bloom creates a multi-generational mediation on family secrets centred around four characters—husband and wife Galen and David, and their two daughters Rose and Violet. The first story, 'Hyacinths*',* explores a traumatic event in David's childhood. The second story, 'The Sight of You', details Galen's affair with a man called Henry. The third story, 'Silver Water', deals with David and Galen's daughter Rose who suffers with depressive psychosis as well as the family's attempts to get Rose proper treatment. Bloom then creates a second cycle 'Henry and Marie' to examine loneliness and desirability centring Galen's former lover

[58] Rocío G. Davis, 'Identity in Community in Ethnic Short Story Cycles: Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club, Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine, Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place' in Julie Brown, (ed.), *Ethinicity and the American Short Story* (London: Garland Publishing 1997), p. 4.

Henry and his wife that she encouraged him to stay with. In this cycle, 'Faultiness' attempts to highlight the strain the unspoken affair had on their marriage through an awkward dinner party, while 'Only You' is Marie's rediscovery of her own sexuality.

The structural organisation of *Come to Me* seemed to reflect life's simultaneous connectedness and disjunction. Each of Bloom's stories stand alone as a snapshot, but the collection comes together resembling an album. Short story theorist W. J. Dawson wrote: 'Life consists both of prolonged sequences and flashing episodes. The first affords the material of the novelist, the second of the short story writer.'[59] Creating a collection of snapshots following a small circle of characters would afford the characters' various timelines (linear and spatial) and spaces (safe and public) enabling evolvement and devolvement consistent with the often-erratic process of navigating multiple marginalised identities.

Elizabeth Strout provided guidance on the technical aspects of implementing a linked cast. Her collection of interconnected stories, *Anything is Possible,* features characters of Amgash, Illinois, the hometown of Lucy Barton; a now famous writer living in New York. Lucy herself only makes one appearance in 'Sister', when she visits her two siblings Pete and Vicky in their hometown. Despite only appearing in one story, Lucy and her book are referenced repeatedly throughout the remaining stories, drawing an obvious link of connection between the characters.

Strout draws further connections between the stories through links of siblings, neighbours, and lovers. 'The Hit Thumb Theory' details veteran Charlie Macauley's restless night in a bed and breakfast watching TV beside the owner, Dottie, who is Lucy's second cousin. Later, in 'Dottie's Bed and Breakfast', we revisit Dottie, the story ending with her reminiscing on the night Charlie spent in front of the television.[60] In the story 'Cracked', we learn the main character Linda has changed her surname from Nicely to Peterson-Cornel, drawing a link that Strout uses frequently in this collection—the Nicely family who had three daughters known around town as the *pretty Nicely girls* when they were young.

Strout uses surnames and familial connection, as well as signifiers in her setting, to alert the reader to the interconnectedness. For example, the Nicely girls' father managed

[59] W. J. Dawson, 'The Modern Short Story', *The North American Review*, 190.649 (1909), p. 805.

[60] Elizabeth Strout, *Anything is Possible*, (Great Britain: Viking, 2017), p. 208.

a corn farm and the fields are referenced by residents in various stories as they are passing by the fields on their way somewhere. This encouraged me to embed small cues in my collection, which would echo one another and alert the reader to the interconnectedness of the narrative, drawing broader conclusions beyond the plots of the independent shorts. 'The T' (Massachusetts public transportation) is frequently referenced in *Kiss Your Comrades* to remind readers of geographic link and class status.

While *Kiss Your Comrades* is (mostly) set in Boston and uses the T and other landmarks to alert readers to city living, the setting is also connected to transness. As Chika Unigwe observes, 'Setting is not just the time and the place of a story, but also the mental landscape of the characters who inhabit a particular narrative. It is therefore often linked to mood or meaning.'[61]

Weather is a major function of setting in *Kiss Your Comrades.* In fact, the very first line of the collection is 'There is no suitable weather for gender.' While weather/seasons can help situate readers in an otherwise non-linear set of linked narratives, weather is intentionally used in relation to the characters' trans bodies and functions on two levels through a queer reading of the text. For example, it's reasonable that in winter, Sadie would feel cold in her apartment, however those familiar with estrogenic replacements know they can cause the skin to thin, leading trans women to frequently experience feeling cold.

Kiss Your Comrades not only queers setting but also proximity/(space), as the characters' proximity to one another not only establishes physical closeness, but signals emotional intimacy, and not only intimacy, but trans bond built through societal alienation and bodily dissonance and nurtured with gender validation and celebration. In 'The Trans Witch' Tallulah offers holistic healing to assuage Ty's dysphoria, while their lover, Vero, sits by their side. Vero again appears *beside* Ty as they inject themselves for the first time with testosterone. The proximity of the characters to one another during what might be considered private moments became an important function within the collection to signal intimacy and connection. Vero is *beside* Ty, Ty kneels *before* Sadie when she begins to cry about having to perform a masculine identity, Sadie and Ty sit in the bath together 'passing time and cigarettes.' Kinship is

[61] Chika Unigwe, 'Setting', in Vanessa Gebbie, (ed.), *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story* (London: Salt Publishing, 2013), p. 53.

continuously explored throughout the collection not only though their interactions but through their proximity to one another. I define trans kinship as a bond built through a rejection of gender essentialism and as an active space to navigate gender dysphoria and euphoria, as well as to give and receive support throughout the ongoing navigation of trans identity.[62]

Employing a recurrent cast stimulated exploration of queer kinship as the characters protect and offer emotional support to one another. This kind of kinship built through bond of familial rejection and alienation often comes to resemble family: a place of unconditional love, support, guidance, and sharing of resources. Friendship and community are central to *Kiss Your Comrades* because friendship does not merely denote people who have things in common and enjoy one another's company, but rather creates an active space where the characters may examine and engage with their gender identities and orientations, unpack social constructs, and offer one another emotional support.

Creating a set of linked narratives with recurrent characters allowed for extended perspectives and multiple opportunities to explore the intersections of their identities, as well as how they function inside and outside of their communities. Their recurrence also allowed me to move freely along their timelines and explore their childhoods. Constructing a trans person's childhood is complicated, and cisgender creators have been criticised heavily for handling it carelessly in the past, i.e., via dead-naming and misgendering. My solution to this was to honour their trans status in childhood and use other signifiers to highlight the dissonance. For example, in 'Little Wolf', during a flashback, Madalena asks Sofi: 'Why can't you ever play the prince?' and hearing Sadie's mother call her 'son' in 'Masquerade' is intentionally jarring.[63] [64] Rather than use what would become her dead-name, Sofi's grandmother has a nickname for her, Little Wolf, that she gave her in childhood. If we queer the concept of a nickname, in 'Little Wolf', it is not just a pet name, but the earliest act of solidarity offered to Sofi.

[62] Julia Serano defines gender dysphoria in her Trans Glossary as: 'a psychiatric term that has been used (to varying degrees) since the 1970s to describe the discomfort and/or distress that trans people experience when they are unable to live as members of the gender/sex that they identify as or desire to be.' Serano also offers 'gender sadness' as a non-pathologising alternative.

[63] *Kiss Your Comrades*, vol. 1, 'Little Wolf', p. 155.

[64] *Kiss Your Comrades*, vol. 1, 'Masquerade', p. 24.

Finally, a group of recurring characters enabled exploration of power dynamics and privilege within the friend group and more pointedly how they rise (or fail) to enact meaningful praxis and sensitive inclusion within their interactions. Perhaps the most poignant example of this intersectionality and ally-ship is expressed through the friendship of Sadie, a black trans woman, and Ty, a Jewish non-binary tomboy. In 'Trans Nationals', while Sadie performs survival sex work, Ty acts as a protector, waiting in the next room with a metal bat. The bat becomes a recurring symbol in the collection, not only emblematic of smashing oppressive power structures, but also symbolic of what is a necessary alliance between white trans people and trans people of colour. Ty's willingness to pick up and use the bat is not meant to warrant praise, but rather display the necessary wielding of any social capital with the intention to and for the sake of protecting and prioritising the most marginalised among the community. The presence of the bat and the utilisation of Ty as a protector also alerts readers to the predicament that many marginalised communities find themselves in: having to take matters of protection and justice into their own hands.

By discussing the trans narrative as one which centre trans perspective, as well as by examining my decision to work within the short form and make use of a linked cast, I have been exploring how these choices encourage the aims of the collection's creative endeavour, which is to extend itself as a nuanced depiction of trans lived experience. I have also attempted to articulate the somewhat mystifying process of creation, drawing on more intuitive aspects like my mystical Jewish childhood and a legacy of rhythmic storytelling, intellectual pursuits which draw from the trans/queer theory delineated in the second chapter, as well as engagement with short story writers who have employed linked narratives in their writing.

In the next section, 'Expressions of Transness', I will explore thematic depictions of trans lived experience—specifically, gender and mental illness—and set forth how I have attempted to construct those aspects of marginalised identity with authenticity and nuance in narrative fiction.

3.2. Expressions of Transness

In the previous section, I explored my construction of a trans narrative through the technical decision to work within the short form focusing on my use of a recurring cast as structural scheme to create a set of linked narratives. This section will concentrate on how I attempted to construct transness beyond the body, that is to say, beyond medical transition and bodily trauma.

Constructing a trans narrative presented the challenge of speculating what constitutes transness beyond bodies, transition (as a linear, one-time event), and trauma, and then how those tenets of trans lived experience could be creatively expressed in the collection. In a desire to move away from the isolation of the transition memoir discussed in the first chapter, and to shift the focus to the complexity of trans identity, I identified five aspects of trans experience—gender bending, mental illness/caregiving, kinship, trans feminist politics, and trans desirability—to construct trans identities beyond bodies and trauma. In this chapter, I will explore two of these aspects—gender bending and mental illness—drawing on the creative fiction that provided guidance as well as the queer theory that informed them, to examine how transness is expressed throughout the collection.

I define *gender bending* as an act of disruption toward conceptualisations of Euro-American binary gender and the rigid roles they enforce. Christopher Lonc describes gender bending as an act which rejects assimilation and 'normalcy':

> I want to criticize and poke fun at the roles of women and of men too. I want to try to show how not-normal I can be. I want to ridicule and destroy the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identification.[65]

Author Kate Bornstein, in response to being asked *who* is transsexual, set forth a definition we might apply to gender bending to understand it as a political act seeking to question the constructs of sex and gender:

[65] Christopher Lonc, 'Genderfuck and Its Delights', in Winston Leyland, (ed.), *Gay Roots: Twenty Years of Gay Sunshine : An Anthology of Gay History, Sex, Politics, and Culture* (United States: Gay Sunshine Press, 1991), p. 223-226.

> One answer to the question […] might well be: anyone who admits it. A more political answer might be anyone whose performance of gender calls into question the construct of gender itself.[66]

Perhaps the most obvious example of gender bending in *Kiss Your Comrades* is illuminated through the decision to cast Ty, a non-binary trans-queer who uses the gender-neutral pronouns they/them, as the collection's central character. The use of singular *they* pronouns throughout the collection provides a continuous mode of disruption toward binary gender, reminding the reader that the collection is not only a trans text, but is supportive of non-binary people. While I wanted to shift focus away from transition, it felt inauthentic to exclude it entirely. Therefore, I explore Ty's relationship with HRT—as opposed to a binary trans character—to dispel the stereotype that only binary people access these types of treatment and to support the idea that non-binary people, whether they access HRT or not, transition.

In *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg addresses non-binary dysphoria when xe wrote: 'I've seen about it on TV. I don't feel like a man trapped in a woman's body. I just feel trapped.'[67] This is mirrored in 'Black Market Hormones', which concludes with Ty making a similar statement, expressing the common frustration of being non-binary—feeling too trans and simultaneously not trans enough: '"Nothing feels wrong," they said, yanking the string free from the hem. "It's just that nothing feels right either."'[68] While the idea that binary trans people medically transition while non-binary trans people do not is prevalent, the act of transition is unique to each trans person, and both 'camps'—binary and non-binary—undergo various degrees of transition, ranging from personal and social (choosing a different name or pronouns) to medical (HRT, SRS, mastectomy) and including anything in-between (wearing a binder, packing). Using Ty's transition centred a less commonly shared transition tale within the collection.

Gender bending also takes form through playful use of gendered language by the characters as they navigate and express their identities. This was in part influenced by

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[66] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, And the Rest of Us* (London: Routlege, 1994), p. 121.

[67] Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (New York: Alyson Books, 2004), p. 158-159.

[68] 'Black Market Hormones', p. 46.

the work of Eileen Myles, who has been outspoken about the complexities of gender in her personal life as well as in her writing. Both in writing and interviews, Myles has expressed wanting to be a boy as a child and hoping to grow up into a man, but states: 'I'm happy complicating what being a woman, a dyke is, I'm the gender of Eileen,' echoing a sort of loose concept of gender as a spectrum full of diverse possibilities.[69]

In 'Creature of the Night', I attempted to define this loose concept of gender as a vast space of diverse possibility through Holly, as she reflects on how times have changed since she was a young lesbian:

> Ty's generation seemed to want to take gender and fuck it into oblivion. […] 'We pretty much think gender is dead. We're not born this way but constructed to be othered. Meaning, everyone is trans! If cis people loosened up they'd realise they're not fully "men" or "women" the way they believe they are.'[70]

In her novel, *Chelsea Girls*, Myles meanders between genders as it suits her narrative. At various times throughout the novel, she identifies herself as a boy, a girl, bisexual, queer, a lesbian, and a dyke. The ease with which she shifts identities often has to do with the women (or men) she is sleeping with at the time and how they perceive her, or what they need from her. About her lover, Mary, she writes: 'I was Mary's boyfriend. I had always wanted to be a boy. To have women love me, to have extra rooms to go into, to be free.'[71] In this way, she attaches gender to the social rather than her body, to the dynamics she shares with her lover, as well as to an idea of 'boy' as 'free', read: with privilege.

This playfulness with gendered language is reminiscent of a common trend among gender benders to meander between gender, calling themselves 'boys' and 'girls' as it pertains to the actions being undertaken in a single situation and how those actions relate to traditional modes of gender. For example, while baking, a non-binary person might joke about 'what a good wife' they are, but in the same day, while raking leaves, they might express themselves as 'butch' or a 'good husband'. This playfulness with

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[69] Ariel Levy, 'Dolls and Feelings', *New Yorker*, 14 December 2015, in 'newyorker.com', <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/14/dolls-and-feelings>, [accessed 21 September 2017].

[70] *Kiss Your Comrades*, vol. 1, 'Creature of the Night', p. 72.

[71] Myles, p. 175.

language is less about identifying as a 'man' or 'woman' in those moments as much as it is about poking fun at binary gender as an unstable entity.

Ty makes use of this playful language several times throughout the collection. In 'Kiss Your Comrades', Luciana makes a comment about how many tacos Ty has eaten, to which they respond: 'I'm a growing boy.'[72] Similarly, in 'Masquerade', this playfulness is used by Sadie to lessen tension as the pair of friends prepare to appear as a cis, straight couple for Sadie's mother:

> 'Do you even have hips?' Sadie bent down to Ty's crotch and unzipped their jeans. As she pulled them down, she fell back in mock horror. 'You're a little boy!'[73]

This exchange demonstrates one of the ways in which trans people validate one another. Being misgendered as a non-binary person is a daily occurrence—Sadie's comment is less a critique of Ty's body (their narrow hips) and more an act of validation, authenticating Ty as non-woman in an uneasy moment.

The second aspect of trans experience expressed throughout the collection is mental illness, and by extension the act of caregiving that occurs within the trans community. Given the correlation between the trans community and mental illness, as well as my own status as a disabled trans-queer, neurodivergence was a concept I felt compelled to explore in my effort to create authentic representations of trans-queer identities. *Kiss Your Comrades* explores mental illness through myriad technical elements including plot and characterisation as seen in 'Tuesday Curse', and through voice and setting in 'Nine Postcards.' Neurodivergence is expressed through a spectrum of experiences ranging in intensity and particularities. According to the LGBT Foundation:

> […] LGBT people are three times more likely to suffer from depression and twice as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to attempt suicide. One in four LGBT people have experienced a homophobic hate crime or incident.[74]

The realities of these statistics are often worse than presented because many in our communities do not or cannot report their experiences. Mentally ill LGBT people have

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[72] *Kiss Your Comrades*, vol. 1, 'Kiss Your Comrades', p. 118.

[73] *Kiss Your Comrades*, vol. 1, 'Masquerade', p. 19.

[74] 'Facts and figures', in 'lgbt.foundation', <http://lgbt.foundation/About-us/media/facts-and-figures/>, 2016, [accessed 14 December 2016].

a difficult time accessing care, because approaches and treatments are often formulated through a neurotypical, cis-heteronormative lens, and do not necessarily accurately describe our experiences, nor present viable solutions (which are often dependant on possessing a good support network, often assumed to be familial; a certain degree of stability in life; or access to resources through financial security). Trans people are often met with a pathologisation of their experiences. Julia Serano draws the following comparisons on the subject:

> While sociological models of transsexuality and transgenderism have not had as direct an impact on the lives of trans people as sexological models have, both models foster the false impression that cissexual 'experts' (whether academic or clinical) are capable of understanding transsexuality better than transsexuals themselves—an idea that is as problematic as suggesting that male 'experts' can understand womanhood better than women, or that heterosexual 'experts' can understand homosexuality better than gays and lesbians.[75]

While cisgender people have surgeries on their breasts (enlargement, reduction, mastectomies), their genitals (penis enlargement, vaginal rejuvenation, labiaplasty), and access hormonal replacement therapies to enhance fertility or ease menopausal symptoms, these same treatments and surgeries are sensationalised (read: pathologised) when accessed by trans people. It is not to suggest that no trans people suffer from gender dysphoria, but the approach to understanding transgender experience has an alarmingly cissexist history produced through a largely cisgender lens. This causes many in the trans community to instead seek treatment, care, and support from others like them who can understand and validate their experiences. It is thus a common occurrence within trans-queer communities that in addition to lover or friend, many assume caregiving roles. I knew I wanted to address trauma and mental illness as facets of trans experience, while not reducing my characters to their tragedy. One solution to this was to present mentally ill characters alongside their queer caregivers which would display the presence of mental illness in trans communities, while simultaneously exploring and in some sense celebrating the compassion and love of caregiving and the queer kinship at its foundation.

[75] Serano, p. 140.

Another issue to contend with was what kind of mental illness I would present in the collection. Mental illness encompasses a wide spectrum of diagnoses and conditions—while some forms of it, situational depression for example—might follow a (mostly) linear path of pain and healing, chronic mental illness can follow a non-linear path; a seemingly erratic progression and regression of symptoms that can be affected by outside forces and triggers, but also rear its head without any glaring exterior forces at play. It is this form of chronic mental illness that the collection explores with the intention to present mental illness in the most authentic way I knew how: relative to time, space, treatment, and people; and subject to change and/or activation based on triggers, micro-aggressions, queerphobia, and gender violence.

Despite a personal lifelong struggle with mental illness, portraying an authentic expression of neurodivergence initially evaded me. It was difficult to ascertain which narrative viewpoint would allow for more nuanced exploration of illness. First person narrative seemed troubling, as the narrator would likely be classed unreliable, whether they were intended as such or not, and would require a certain finesse in creating a character who lacked a certain self-awareness, while still affording them agency. Third person presented issues of ableism and proximity. Would third person narration put distance between the humanity of the mentally ill and objectify them for their illness? Short fiction writer Amy Bloom offered insight and technical guidance for creating stories centring neurodivergent characters, behaviours, and themes.

Amy Bloom's short story 'Silver Water' tells the story of a family devastated by mental illness, bound by their sorrow and loyalty to each other. Each member contends with their own inadequacy in being able to 'save' Rose, the eldest of two daughters. David, a psychologist, relies on his expertise and others in his field for answers, while the mother, Galen, seems to know Rose's fate—suicide— early on, but of course tries to save her child anyway. Rose's sister, Violet, tries to remember who Rose is outside of mental illness, her sister 'underneath' the Thorazine and psychosis.

Bloom sets the story in third person, casting Violet as the protagonist. The sisters' proximity is a pivotal ingredient allowing Bloom to offset objectification and permitting a more nuanced regaling of Rose as more than just the sum of her symptoms. Violet actually articulates this, echoing my own desire in portraying mental illness, when she

states: '[…] and that's the story I told to all of her therapists. I wanted them to know her, to know that who they saw was not all there was to see.'[76]

In 'Tuesday Curse', I made the decision to cast Ty as the protagonist, a character who is in close emotional proximity to the mentally ill character, Tilly. The pair of friends have a history outside of their dynamic in the short, which casts Ty as a caregiver. I also took direction from Bloom's display of how the barometer of social acceptability may shift for those of us contending with neurodivergent loved ones. In 'Silver Water', while the family is in a therapy session with Rose, they all laugh when she starts massaging her breasts. The therapist asks the family why they are entertained by Rose's inappropriate behaviour and Violet responds: 'Maybe she is trying to get you to stop talking about her in third person.'[77]

This scene promotes Rose's humanity, as well as challenges the notion that mentally ill people are 'weird' and 'scary', instead insinuating that they might use different methods of communication to express an otherwise rational idea—in this case, being annoyed by being spoken about in the third person while in the room. Violet's explanation of her sister's behaviour highlights a certain grace therapist may lack when dealing with mentally ill patients and affords Rose rationality and cheek as well as showcasing her family's adoration and ally-ship.

I, too, chose to play with the barometer of social acceptability in 'Tuesday Curse.' One example is the scene where Tilly holds a knife to her neck threatening to hurt herself.[78] What would perhaps be an alarming situation to most does not produce much of a reaction from Ty, subtly alluding to the frequency with which Tilly makes use of these threats. This foreknowledge assuages Ty's alarm and indicates that Ty has their own internal barometer for Tilly's behaviour that has different points of 'sanity' and 'distress.'

Bloom also addresses the physicality of neurodivergence when she describes one of Rose's 'bad' days: 'She knelt down and began banging her head on the kitchen floor with rhythmic intensity, throwing all her weight behind each attack.'[79] This physicality

[76] Bloom, p. 87.

[77] Bloom, p. 90.

[78] *Kiss Your Comrades*, vol. 1, 'Tuesday Curse', p. 56.

[79] Bloom, p. 95.

demonstrates an inability to communicate verbally in a distressed state and highlights the helplessness caregivers can feel trying to calm loved ones in these moments: 'My mother put her arms around Rose's waist and tried to hold her back. Rose shook her off, not even looking around to see what was slowing her down.'[80]

'Tuesday Curse' addresses physicality and the subsequent emotional strain when Tilly knocks her medication out of Ty's hands and then proceeds to speak in nonsensical rhymes. As a twenty-something year old with no training, Ty's only qualification is their own experience with mental illness as well as compassion. In fact, the first time a neurotypical peer read this story, they asked me: 'But who would put up with that?' It seemed to reflect the naïve idea that professional help is easy to access, affordable, and reliably sensitive to marginalised communities. It also subtly insinuates that mentally ill people are unmanageable, or not worth loving and taking care of.

Ty states the particularities of this dilemma while on the phone to Vero, who has her own concerns regarding Tilly's stability and Ty's ability to handle the situation; but whether Ty is equipped to handle Tilly's mental illness seems moot—what is relevant is the reality of marginalised people feeling trapped by ableism and cissexism, afraid to access treatment, or unable to due to finances (in America, where the stories are set, there is no national healthcare coverage). Though Ty feels as though they've failed Tilly and it would be easy to point fingers as such, the short is ultimately about the failure of mental health services and the intersections of transgenderism, class, and orientation that prohibit people from accessing affordable and sensitive healthcare.

While 'Tuesday Curse' deals with mental illness most explicitly, other stories in the collection like 'Clock and Roll', 'Nine Postcards', and 'The Ruah Girls' embrace a more implicit approach through characters who aren't in 'crisis', but are rather managing their daily symptoms. Sofi, has Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) resulting in an unstable sense of self, as well as a drug addiction that induces psychosis and catatonia.

The reader experiences several versions of Sofi contingent on her sobriety and lucidity. In 'Clock and Roll', Sofi's character is conceived mostly through Ty's perception, as the absence of Sofi in her own story comes to dominate the text as

[80] *Ibid.*

metaphorical of her emotional absence. This is in stark contrast to 'Nine Postcards', a series of unanswered notes written to Ty after Sofi gets clean from heroin.

The short was structurally inspired by Aamer Hussein's short story 'Nine Postcards from Sanlucar de Barrameda', which consists of nine beautiful reflections by the protagonist, Murad, during a trip to Spain to celebrate his Spanish sister's birthday.

Despite Sofi's sobriety, I still felt it important that Sofi's BPD be apparent, and the structure of the short was integral in expressing her chameleon-like quality. For this reason, her voice shifts throughout each of the nine postcards, which have been sent over an indeterminate period of time from various cities as she travels. Here, setting and character merge, the cities and Sofi are one and the same. Because there is no single Sofi, her sense of self is established through the cities, and the cities are constructed through her mutability.[81] This is called *mirroring*, and is one of the most prominent symptoms of BPD that Sofi presents. Mirroring is described as follows:

> [This is] a core feature of borderline personality disorder (BPD) referred to as identity disturbance. It is one of the nine diagnostic signs of the disorder. [...] Individuals with BPD can suddenly and dramatically shift their values and goals, the essence of who they are, based upon with whom they interact. Individuals with BPD lack a fundamental sense of their true selves.[82]

Kiss Your Comrades draws attention to the difficulty of accessing care as marginalised patients, as shown in 'Black Market Hormones', when Ty is turned away from a doctor who conflates their dysphoria with their depression. The collection also attempts to highlight the hidden resilience persisting through these struggles, often ignored for emphasis on symptoms and management. In 'The Trans Witch', we experience Ty's dysphoria being soothed for the first time as Tallulah rubs marigold on their rash and fixes them valerian tea. In 'Tuesday Curse' we see love and compassion as Ty stands by Tilly as her symptoms worsen and intensify.

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[81] Aamer Hussein, 'Nine Postcards from Sanlucar de Barrameda', *Insomnia* (London: Telegram Books, 2007).

[82] Kristina Randle, 'Are Borderlines Chameleon's Who Are Afraid to Be Themselves So They Change Depending on the People They Are With?', in 'psychcentral.com', <https://psychcentral.com/ask-the-therapist/2014/06/06/are-borderlines-chameleons-who-are-afraid-to-be-themselves-so-they-change-depending-on-the-people-they-are-with/>, 3 June 2014, [accessed 16 October 2017].

Each exploration of neurodivergence attempts to offer reprieve, in the form of non-normative healing or friendship, to assuage, in some ways, the more menacing aspects of the theme. Each story engages with a different aspect of mental illness or caregiving, offering insight into the complex nature of how being marginalised by society contributes to mental illness.

It is my hope that this collection recognises suffering, the plight of symptom management, and the ongoing battle faced by those of us with chronic conditions. *Kiss Your Comrades* makes space for the complexity and nuance of neurodivergent experiences, attempting to centre mentally ill voices, reveal their emotional wisdom and the compassion of their caregivers, and pay homage to the extraordinary act of surviving under such circumstances.

In this chapter, I have been exploring how to construct transness beyond the body. This was achieved through the employment of gender-neutral pronouns, playful use of gendered language and nuanced exploration of mental illness. *Kiss Your Comrades* was created through a queer lens centring trans people—binary and non-binary alike—so they can exist beyond their bodies and transitions, and to celebrate the trans-queer spirt for its emotional wisdom, depth, complexity, and endurance.

Conclusion

In her essay 'Rupture, Verge, and Precipice, Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not', Carole Maso sings a battle cry criticising the fragility of privilege and the resistance to embrace creative writing outside of convention. She envisions instead a future of plurality, of femininity, of *otherness*, one that centres diverse perspectives and encourages experimentation. She summarises my desires for this collection with two wishes and a dream:

> Wish list: that homogeneity will end. That the mainstream come to acknowledge, for starters, the thousand refracted, disparate beauties out there. Wish: that forms other than those you've invented or sanctioned through your thousands of years of privilege might arise and be celebrated. Dream: that this new tolerance might set a tone, give an example. This openness in acceptance of texts, of forms, this freedom, this embrace will serve as models for how to live. Will be the model for a new world order – in my dream. A way to live together better—in my dream.[83]

At the start of this project, I sought to create a collection of stories which would give visibility and afford complexity to trans/queer identities often absent from literary fiction. By considering some of the hardships trans-queers experience existing on the margins, I hope the necessity for and power of diverse trans literary representation is clear – for some of us, fictional characters are where we find our first face. For some of us, fictional characters are our only comrades.

Blogger Maggie James offered her insight on the necessity of representation succinctly when she said: 'Stories kill stereotypes. The more we share, the more the outliers become part of the cultural narrative.'[84] The same week I began writing this conclusion, Huffington Post published an article with the headline: 'Britain is no longer considered a safe part of the world for trans people to live in', referencing the latest Stonewall research stating that in the last twelve months, two in five trans people have

[83] Carole Maso, 'Rupture, Verge, and Precipice, Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not', *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, and Moments of Desire* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 170-175.

[84] 'Why Diversity and Representation Matter in Business and Media', in 'createcultivate.com', <http://www.createcultivate.com/blog/2016/10/21/inspiring-quotes-on-diversity-representation-from-gigi-gorgeous-and-nicolette-mason>, 21 October 2016, [accessed 18 October 2017].

experienced a hate crime or incident.[85] In the same week, Donald Trump made a joke about his Vice President Mike Pence wanting to 'hang gays'.

While this kind of anti-LGBT bigotry is hardly new, it underlines the pressing need for marginalised people to continue the radical act of speaking out and sharing stories. Indeed, writing this collection was a political act, drawing on the belief that stories hold immense power to elicit compassion, stir intrigue, and introduce readers to paths they otherwise might not cross. It's my belief that stories bind us together. With experiences so vast and distinct, storytelling weaves us closer to one another by reminding us of the ways in which we are the same.

As the creative methodology of *Kiss Your Comrades* is comprised of interdisciplinary elements, this commentary has been attempting to weave those elements together to provide context and present an account of the creative process. By examining British/American trans writing, I was alerted to both the gaps in trans literature (non-binary representation, for example) as well as the tendency to seek out and publish the *transition memoir* to the seeming exclusion of other trans narratives. By reading queerly—teasing out transness or creatively imposing transness where the mutability of the prose allowed—I began to reflect on the ability of prose to reconceptualise transness beyond bodies and transition, citing Maso's use of colour and food in lieu of body parts and sex acts, or how Myles expresses (seemingly) unintentional dysphoria through a fear of being invisible.

Invisibility drove my desire to create this collection; to offer visibility to a group of people who struggle to find themselves on the page. Ultimately, I envision the space of trans narrative fiction as diverse and expansive as the community itself—not as a negation of the transition memoir or of the work of trans authors who came before me, but rather as an acknowledgment of how much more space trans authors should take up, and how many more trans narratives there are to share.

From the beginning, I viewed this project as a fusion of art and politics and therefore included the chapter 'Queer Theory: The Undisciplined Discipline', to illuminate the theory and scholarship that inform both the praxis of the collection and

[85] Ruth Hunt, 'Britain is No Longer Considered a Safe Part of the World for Trans People to Live In', *Huffington Post*, in 'huffingtonpost.co.uk', <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruth-hunt/britain-is-no-longer-cons_b_18321060.html>, 19 October 2017, [accessed 20 October 2017].

the identities of the characters. The chapter specifically focuses itself on the gender binary as an oppressive force on trans lives to highlight the circumstances of this group of characters.

Finally, I addressed the particularities of constructing a trans narrative through form and structure and then by thematic expressions of otherness. Weaving the contributing influences together by drawing on the techniques of short fiction writers—especially those dealing with linked narratives—as well as LGBT writers dealing with presentations of non-normative identities. Finally, I tied it all together with the personal influence of my own lived experience as a disabled, trans, queer, Jew.

In 'Form and Structure', I established the short form as conducive to the construction of marginalised identity, including the multiple opportunities a collection afforded me to explore characters at various intersections of their identities, as well as across both linear and spatial timelines. In 'Expressions of Transness', I dealt with the particularities of constructing transness beyond the body, in the case of *Kiss Your Comrades* through queering space and proximity, and contending with consequences of marginalised identity like mental illness and transphobia while also celebrating the community so central to the collection.

For a community like ours, some days, existence is resistance, and so, this collection emerges as a love letter to my kin, and myself; reminding us that we are not singular, tragic, or the punchline of a joke—we are diverse, powerful, and resilient. It is my greatest hope that trans and cis audiences alike will fall in love with, laugh at, and identify with the eclectic group of characters I've come to know as comrades, who, in a world that attempts to shame and erase them, refuse to be silent or still.

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