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RE-IMAGINING TRANS*

A Baradian close reading of *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*

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Bachelor Thesis

GNVK03 Spring 2020

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Abstract

In this thesis Baradian theory is applied to a close reading of the novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*. The aim of the thesis is to examine how the novel can be read as a re-imagining of trans* becoming. The close reading of the novel is guided by an examination of the relationship between Paul's affects and his corporal transformations, as well as an examination of two memory sequences. Through the analysis normative assumptions of an essentially confined fixed sex/gender binary is undone. Moreover trans* becoming is understood as an intra-action of material-discursive and affective processes. Memories are examined as spacetimes that constantly reconfigure who we are and what we become through the act of re-remembering. In conclusion trans* becoming can be re-imagined as process, in which corporality, discourse, and affect equally come to matter, as they are inseparable intra-acting entities. Freeing trans* becoming from fixed notions of linear and binary sex/gender transitions, has the potential to envision a queer spacetime in which the material-discursive and affective properties of the body and mind are not separated or limited by an essentialist binary sex/gender system or cisheterosexist norms that assume a specific location of sex/gendered embodiment.

Keywords:

Trans* becoming, Karen Barad, Agential Realism, Material-discursive and Affective Intra-action, Spacetimemattering.

Nyckelord:

Trans* Vardande, Karen Barad, Agential Realism, Materiel-diskursiv och Affectiv Intra-aktion, Spacetimemattering.

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Introduction

Background

During my time as a student of Gender Studies I have often felt that transness was presented only as evidence for gender as something entirely socially constructed or performative, leaving a certain feeling of dissatisfaction, a sense that there was something not quite real about trans* experiences. I have often come to feel that fleshly accounts of transness as something materially real and located somewhere inside the body, were rendered unreal and deconstructed in a system of gendered discourses. While reading an assigned text for an *Introduction to Transgender Studies* class, I came upon this introduction to "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality" by Judith Butler in *The Transgender Studies Reader* edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle,

Butler's insistence that gender is always ultimately about something else devalues their [transgender reader's] experience of gender identity's profound ontological claim—that it is precisely about the realness and inalienability of that identity, rather than about anything else. This article contributes to an understanding of the limitations of identity, but it begs another question; if gender is not real, how real can its oppression be? (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 183).

I felt that Stryker and Whittle articulated something that I kept feeling in my engagement with academic texts, but which I had been unable to express, namely the lack of legitimacy granted to the experience of transness as something material and real. The first part of the question posed here by Stryker and Whittle "if gender is not real" was what triggered my emergence into the field of Transgender Studies, in the first place. I wanted to find an account of gender, specifically of trans* experiences of gender, that served to legitimize its realness, rather than to serve as proof for the construction and performativity of anything else. I became interested in the ways in which trans* experiences come to matter through and in matter. I sought theory which would not argue realness through essentialist, determined, and fixed binary gender/sex categories, nor one that would understand trans* as merely being a discursive account of gendered performativity.

Aim and Research Question

My aim with this thesis is to examine how transness becomes real. In order to do so, I will explore trans* becoming in the novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* through an application of Baradian theory.

The material I have chosen to use for this analysis is the novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* written by the non-binary author Andrea Lawlor in 2017. The novel tells the story of Paul, who has the ability to change the shape of his body, and thereby change in accordance with the gender he wishes to be read as and/or embody at any given time. Set in the early 1990s in the USA, we follow Paul as he moves across the country and across a variety queer spaces, all the while constantly assuming different gendered embodiments.

I have decided to conduct my examination of trans* becoming on a work of fiction because fiction has the ability to create a version of the world, which does not exist in the here and now, but which might yet come to be. By changing the rules of what can be considered real, fiction has the ability to create a space wherein alternative understandings and perceptions of the world we inhabit can be unfolded and explored. This world-making potential is what makes fiction a worthy object of study within the field of Gender Studies, because it can imagine and thereby present the potential for a space of utopian narratives, liberated from oppressive forces, for and about marginalized people. Not restricted by the laws of reality governing the world I inhabit, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* creates a new world in which transness becomes freed from the boundaries and limitations of body materialization. Analyzing transness in a world different from my own has the radical potential to envision what can come to exist if notions of transness were to be released from the idea of a linear progressive transition from one fixed gendered embodiment to another and if gender/sex was to be released from binary essentialist categories.

In my research on the field of trans* becoming and my reading of *Paul takes the form of a mortal girl*, certain elements of the process of trans* becoming stood out to me. I found the intra-active relationship between corporal¹ transformation and affects to be a recurring theme. Moreover, while diving into Baradian theory I became curious of how trans* becoming can be understood through the spacetime-mattering of memories and the practice of re-membering. I will therefore conduct a close reading of the novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* guided by these elements, in order to examine how they enable a re-imagining of trans* becoming.

¹ Corporality, is defined in the online dictionary Merriam-Webster as “the quality or state of being or having a body or a material or physical existence” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

My research question is:

- In what ways can *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* be read as a re-imagining of trans* becoming?

To answer this question, I have developed some secondary research questions in order to narrow the scope of my study to the elements of trans* becoming, which I have chosen to focus on.

- How can an examination of the intra-active relationship between Paul's affects and his corporal transformations effect how we understand trans* becoming?
- In what way can Paul's memories be explored as spacetimes that enable trans* becoming?

Research Field

In this section I will begin with a short introduction to the field of Transgender Studies, thereafter I will present studies that examine fictionalized and non-fictionalized trans* representations in works of fiction, music, film, art, and video. Finally, I will introduce studies that examine the entanglement of matter, discourse, affect, and, in two cases, memories, as fundamental aspects for the process of trans* becoming.

Trans* phenomenon has been an object for study across academic fields for decades. Historically the study of trans* people has been conducted by white, hetero, cis men, within the medical and psychiatric fields, which has resulted in highly pathologizing and dehumanizing understandings of transness (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, pp. 1-15). Contemporary Transgender Studies emerged as a field of interdisciplinary studies predominantly by and for trans* people in the early 1990s (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 221). The aim was to reclaim the field of study, from the domain of cis-scholarship, relocating transness as subject rather than object (Stryker, 2017, p. 216).

In the book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) renowned trans* and queer scholar Jack Halberstam explores the significance of the transgender body in an examination of its representation in fictionalized and non-fictionalized works, including pieces of art, fiction, film, and video. In *Time Binds Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), Elizabeth Freeman explores the experience and representation of time in queer literature, film, video and art. Taking a look at the entanglement of time and sexual dissonance, Freeman uses the body as a matter through which the past can be understood. Halberstam and Freeman both argue that queer lives are temporally non-linear and cannot be understood through a normative assumption of progressive time. In the doctoral thesis *Transformationer: 1800-talets svenska translitteratur genom Lasse-Maja, C.J.L. Almqvist och Aurora Ljungstedt*, Sam Holmqvist (2017) examines transgressions of assigned sex in 19th century Swedish literature, as part of a larger project of mapping Swedish trans* literature and forming new trans* readings and interpretations of works of fiction.

These three studies all deal with trans* representations in literature, among other media, in a broad historical context. They seek to map a historical account of trans* representation, through specific trans* readings. The novel I am analyzing is set in a particular historized queer time and space, namely the 1990s USA. This particular space and time has become historically

significant for the LGBTQAI+ movement and the rise of queer theory. My analysis will not, like Halberstam, Freeman and Holmqvist, be a broad historical analysis of the implications of the queer time in which it is set or in which it was written. Rather, my examination of trans* becoming will be located on a far more particular level. My analysis and understanding of time, though in line with the non-linear and transgressive tendencies presented by both Halberstam and Freeman, is based in feminist quantum physics and therefore, as will become evident later in this thesis, rather different from that of Halberstam and Freeman.

Eva Hayward explores trans* becoming in her text *Spider city sex* (2010). She specifically examines “male-to-female transsexual transitioning” in an urban setting (Hayward, 2010, p. 225). Hayward poses the questions,

How might places come to matter in the changing of one’s sex? How do the intensities, energies, and forces that accompany transsexual transitions shape and reshape a neighborly self? What is the somatic sociality of trans* becoming? (2010, p. 226).

Hayward’s study of trans* becoming is done through an examination of the entanglement of the materiality, or in her own words “somatic”, of the transitioning body and the materiality of the urban landscape. Hayward transcends the assumption of trans* becoming as something located within the self in a single body, in order to understand trans* becoming as an organic relationship between a transitioning body and the material world which it inhabits (2010, p. 226). In her text *Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism* Stryker (2008), similarly explores trans* becoming in an urban setting. Stryker examines her own trans* becoming through and within memories of her embodiment in a particular spacetime of San Francisco, and a specific dungeon of sadomasochism. Stryker, like Hayward, explores how the urban setting of San Francisco, enables trans* becoming. Stryker describes her intra-active trans* becoming with these words,

I envision my body as a meeting point, a node, where external lines of force and social determination thicken into meat and circulate as movement back into the world (2008, p. 42).

Both Hayward and Stryker deal with the material flesh of the trans* body and how it is produced and reshaped within its intra-active relation with the pulsing and transforming urban city. They both argue that that trans* becoming cannot take a universal form or be categorized, but rather that it is a spatial-sensual-temporal oriented process which is particular and situated (Hayward, 2010, p. 237; Stryker, 2008, pp. 38-39). Furthermore, the physical, somatic, or

material state of the body, that is to say, how it materializes into flesh in a special-sensual-temporal process, is central to both texts.

In the essay *Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter /Realities and Queer Political Imaginings* (2015) Karen Barad explores ways to form queer and trans* alliances with nature. Barad's examination of various naturalcultural phenomena, ranging from lightning and frog embryos to an intra-active reading of Susan Stryker's famous text *My Words to Victor Frankenstein* (1994), comes to understand nature as something inherently nonessential. In the essay, Barad argues that the very nature of nature is its radically deconstructive, queer, and trans* properties (2015, p. 413). The aim of Barad's study is "creating new political imaginaries and new understandings of imagining in its materiality" (2015, p. 388). Barad, like Hayward, and Stryker, understands trans* becoming as a dynamic process which is co-constituted by the way in which it engages with and is engaged by the material world in which becoming enfolds. Furthermore, Barad, like Stryker, examines the productive properties of memories. By understanding re-membering as a reconfiguration of entanglements, trans* becoming is materialized through the of spacetimemattering of memories (Barad, 2015, pp. 406-407).

In their study *Sex, Power and Ontology: Exploring the Performativity of Hormones* (2013) Sari Irni applies Baradian theory in order to examine the phenomenon *sex hormones* and adds an affective aspect to the process of becoming. Applying Barad's theory of agential realism and material-discursive processes Irni studies how the construction of *sex hormones* is a product of material, discursive and affective processes which are entangled and intra-active. The study finds that these processes are not separate entities that exist and produce meaning independently, but rather that they are all mutually constitutive and therefore inseparable, in the creation of the phenomena *sex hormones*.

Like Hayward, Stryker, Barad, and Irni I will examine the ways in which trans* becoming is an intra-active process that is entangled with and inseparable from the world in which it happens. I will be conducting an analysis which, like Hayward, Stryker, Barad, and Irni, understands matter as a foundational part of the construction of meaning and therefore in the process of trans* becoming too. My thesis differs from the studies introduced above as it specifically examines the intra-active relationship between corporal transformation and affects, as well as the spacetime of memories, in order to examine how these aspects, enable a re-imagining of trans* becoming. Furthermore, unlike the studies of Hayward, Stryker, Barad, and Irni, the material for my examination is a work of fiction. I engage with a world in which the boundaries of materiality are different from the reality in which the studies of Hayward,

Stryker, Barad, and Irni are located. Paul's ability to transform the shape of his body frees him from the limitations of the reality I inhabit, and I am able to examine how matter co-constitutes trans* becoming in a new way. Placing my analysis in a world where transformation at will is possible, I am able to examine the possibilities of re-imagining trans* becoming when it is not materially limited by access to transformative practices.

Theory

In this chapter I will present the theoretical framework for my analysis. First, I will define the core concepts *trans** and *queer*. I will then introduce the material turn within feminist theory, followed by a presentation of key concepts, developed by Karan Barad, which are central for my analysis, *agential realism and intra-action*, *spacetime mattering*, and *material-discursive practices and onto-epistemological perspective*. I will end this section with a discussion of some of the criticism that is directed at the material turn in feminist theory. Thereafter, I will discuss the affective processes which, argued by Irni, are entangled in the intra-active production of meaning and matter. Finally, I will end my theory chapter by discussing and defining *trans* becoming* and *re-membering as trans* becoming*.

Trans*

In this study I will be using the term *trans** as an overreaching term for a person who feels a sense of dissidence with the gender they were assigned at birth, in an effort to include all noncisgender identities (Hayward & Weinstein, 2015, p. 198). I have chosen not to use the suffix *-gender* or *-sexual* as I find these problematic in various ways. First off, the insistence on using these suffixes upholds the notion of a sex/gender divide (Halberstam, 2018, p. 8). Furthermore, due to the fact that *transsexual* is predominately used in regard to people undergoing medical transitioning, and *transgender* has been used in regard to people who have not, the divide upholds the idea that the first is an embodied trans experience and the second is a mental one. Upholding a distinction between the body and the mind limits the possibilities of what transness can be, as it becomes fixated *either* in the body (*transsexual*) *or* in the mind (*transgender*). The use of the asterisk “*” symbol is taken from database and internet searches where it functions to signify the inclusion of all suffixes possible (Stryker, 2017, pp. 10-11). It is commonly used as a way of opening the category in an attempt at inclusivity of various different and changing experiences of being *trans**.

[T]he asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity (Halberstam, 2018, p. 4).

Like Halberstam I use the term *trans**, with the asterisk, to insist on transness as a non-linear, un-stable, and un-fixed phenomena. The possibility of change is and should continue to be a foundational part of the ontology of *trans**.

Queer

The term queer is commonly known as a derogatory slur for homosexuals and homosexuality. However queer was used derogatorily to label imprisoned black women before it was used to describe homosexuality and homosexuals (Halberstam, 2018, p. 51 citing black queer scholar Sarah Haley). This history of the term is often left out when the reappropriation of the term is presented. The term was reappropriated in the 1980s and early 1990s by people who fell outside the norm of white cisheterosexist expectations (Stryker, 2017, p. 30).

The re-appropriated term queer, rather than dictating a sexual orientation, implies a political orientation, a revolt *against* normative white cisheterosexist power structures (Halberstam, 2018, p. 50). Queer is often used in relation to trans*, as the phrase queerness does not conform to the binary sex/gender model nor to the homosexual/heterosexual binary, which for trans* people can be problematic to navigate (Stryker, 2017, pp. 30-31).

The Material Turn

My theoretical perspective is located in, what is considered “the material turn” within feminist theory (Van der Tuin, 2011, p. 271). The movement towards the material world is grounded in a critique of poststructuralism for understanding matter as something passive and inert, onto which meaning and substance are ascribed through discursive labels such as sex, gender, race, ability, worth, beauty etc. (Barad, 2007, pp. 132-133; Van der Tuin, 2011, p. 273). These scholars argue for a movement towards understanding matter as something “active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 9). By understanding matter as complex, dynamic, “produced and productive, generated and generative” (Barad, 2007, p. 137), we are able to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 9).

Feminist theory is a diverse and pluralistic field, and therefore it is problematic to attempt to understand its various theoretical perspectives as developing historically in a linear, progressive movement forward. The various theoretical perspectives are interconnected and relational (Irni, 2013, p. 53; Lykke, 2008, pp. 11-12). Irni argues to consider *moves* rather than *turns* within feminist theory in order to stress the fact that various theoretical perspectives are multi-faceted, multidirectional, and entangled, rather than ascribing to a representation of “feminist theory-building as turns that follow after one another and form a progressive movement ‘forward’” (2013, p. 53). Therefore, the new material movement should not be

considered a replacement of poststructuralism nor understood as a progressive step forward in the linear line of theoretical development.

Agential Realism and Intra-action

Science's understanding of the world as "composed of individuals with separately attributable properties" (Barad, 2007, p. 138) is founded in atomic theory developed by Democritus (c. 460 – c. 370 BC) (Barad, 2007, p. 137). Quantum physicist Niels Bohr (1885 – 1962) rejected this atomic theory, arguing that "things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties" (Barad, 2007, p. 138). Entities do not exist separately and independently in the world prior to their *interaction*. Rather, entities only come into existence through the co-constitutive process of *intra-action*, they are the product of the "*inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting 'agencies'*" (Barad, 2007, p. 139 original emphasis). Therefore, separate independent entities do not *interact* in the world, entities come into existence through their mutual *intra-action*. Matter is agential because it is produced and produces meaning through relational intra-action with other matter. Agency therefore is not "something someone or something can have", rather, agency is a process of "doing" or "being" in intra-active relation (Barad, 2007, p. 178). This co-constitutive property of all matter is what Barad calls *agential realism*.

Spacetime mattering

The intra-action of becoming does not happen in a fixed exterior time nor in a specific determined space. The dynamics of becoming in a process of intra-action is always entangled with space and time. Barad writes, "iterative intra-actions are the dynamics through which temporality and spatiality are produced" (2007, p. 179). Thus, space, time, and matter cannot exist as separate independent entities prior to the intra-action in which they are co-constituted, instead they should be understood as inseparable mutually constituting elements (Barad, 2007, p. 140). Barad therefore does not separate the nouns space, time, and matter but uses the phrase "spacetime mattering" to refer "to the entangled nature of what are generally taken to be separate features". Barad writes "[e]ntanglements are not the interconnectedness of things or events separated in space and time. *Entanglements are enfoldings of spacetime matterings*" (Barad, 2012, p. 41 original emphasis). Spacetime mattering, then, is the intra-active process in which space, time, and matter comes into being (Barad, 2012, p. 49).

Material-discursive Practices and an Onto-epistemological Perspective

A discourse is a dynamic process of knowledge-production, located in cultural, sociohistorical, and material conditions. It is a practice that produces “the subjects and objects of knowledge practices” (Barad, 2007, p. 147). Bohr’s theory, stating that “things” do not exist independently, but only have meaning in their mutual intra-actions, “calls into question the dualisms of object-subject, knower-known, nature-culture, and word-world” (Barad, 2007, p. 147). Discourse and matter therefore are entangled. They do not exist independently outside their relational intra-action, as Barad writes, “materiality is discursive... just as discursive practices are always already material” (2007, pp. 151-152).

Understanding the inseparability of binaries as subject-object, human-nonhuman, mind-body, matter-discourse, disrupts the notion of a dichotomous and/or hierarchical divide between ontology and epistemology. Stating that “practices of knowing and being are not isolable”, Barad presents an onto-epistemological perspective as “the study of practices of knowing in being” (Barad, 2007, p. 185). This onto-epistemological perspective begs us to understand the world as a material-discursive becoming of intra-acting agencies.

Critique of the Material Turn

New materialism, which has become the overreaching term for the material turn, has been criticized for not being as “new” as it claims to be (Ahmed, 2008; Van der Tuin, 2011). Especially Ahmed criticizes new materialism and Barad for presenting a revisionist picture of feminist theory as not having engaged with matter in the past (Ahmed, 2008, pp. 26-27). Ahmed argues that matter has always mattered in feminist theory. Ahmed writes,

You can only argue for a return to biology by forgetting the feminist work on the biological, including the work of feminists trained in the biological sciences. In other words, you can only claim that feminism has forgotten the biological if you forget this feminist work (2008, p. 27).

Davis argues that new materialism neither forgets prior feminist work on matter nor makes a claim to a linear progressive logic of feminism where “newer is somehow an advancement on, or a discarding of, past error” (2014, p. 63). Rather, Davis argues that what is “new” about new materialism is “a renewed enthusiasm for the potentials immanent to previous feminist traditions” (2014, p. 63). In the introduction to *New Materialisms*, editors Coole and Frost (2010) argue that knowing the ways in which matter has been engaged with in the past, by feminist theorists, enables and promotes new directions for thinking about materiality, and

brings it into a new and different light (pp. 2-4). Van der Tuin argues that Ahmed misses the point that “it is the *particularity* of the engagement of new feminist materialist with matter and/or biology” which is new in new materialism (2011, p. 272 original emphasis).

Affect as Co-constitutive Process

In their paper *Sex, Power and Ontology*, Irni examines the “sexing” of the so-called sex hormones” through a Baradian material-discursive approach (2013, p. 41). In addition, Irni applies Ahmed’s affect-theory, in order to explore the ways in which affective processes/responses are mutually constitutive in the formation of phenomena such as sex hormones (2013, p. 49). As part of an episode on testosterone aired on the radio program *This American Life*, the testosterone levels of several of its radio staff was tested (Irni, 2013, pp. 49-50). Listening to the discussion of the “results” of the hormone test, Irni argues that the construction of the “testosterone levels” has an affective aspect in the formation of gender (2013, p. 52).

The affective responses of the staff co-constitute how they come to think about their gendered selves. Without any somatic changes to their bodies (the participants did not take any hormones, but merely had their hormone levels tested), the participants felt a change in their feeling of gendered self (Irni, 2013, p. 51). Phenomena therefore are constituted in a process of material-discursive *and* affective intra-action.

Trans* Becoming

Above I have presented a Baradian theory of how things come into being. Applying this to the concept trans*, I come to understand trans* becoming as a constant intra-action between the body, a subject’s own perception of self and body, the gendered material-discursive processes in which the body-self is situated, and the affective responses, which accompany these factors. None of these aspects exist independently prior to their intra-action, they are mutually constitutive and constantly fluctuating. Trans* becoming is, in this framework, not understood as a linear process with a beginning and an end, nor is it a process of transitioning from one fixed gendered location to another, rather it is a constant dynamic non-linear motion. Moreover trans* becoming does not happen in a fixed time and space, but rather time and space become through their intra-action. Trans* becoming is therefore a material-discursive and affective intra-action of spacetime-mattering.

Re-membering as Trans* Becoming

As argued above, time is not an independent factor. Time is not a linear process and therefore neither the past nor the future are determinately given (Barad, 2012, p. 44). Past and future are a continuous and repeated practice of spacetime-mattering, that is “reconfigured and enfolded through the world’s ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2012, p. 44). In this theoretical framework of time, the spacetime-mattering of memories must be understood as a continued process of material-discursive and affective intra-action. Memories are therefore not stable images fixed in a concluded past. Barad writes,

Remembering is not a process of recollection, of the reproduction of what was, of assembling and ordering events like puzzle pieces fit together by fixing where each has its place. Rather, it is a matter of re-membering, of tracing entanglements, responding to yearnings for connection, materialized into fields of longing/belonging, of regenerating what never was but might yet have been (Barad, 2015, pp. 406-407).

Reading this quote, we find that memories are constructed in the intra-active relationship between material-discursive and affective processes. Moreover, we come to understand re-membering as a practice of becoming through spacetime-mattering by reconfiguring entanglements, and therefore changes in time become possible. Although changes to the past are possible, prior intra-actions are imprinted onto the flesh, as Barad writes, “[c]hanges to the past don’t erase marks on bodies; the sedimenting material effects of these very reconfigurings – memories/re-memberings – are written into the flesh of the world” (2012, p. 47). As time is not an independent linear movement forward and memories are not fixed in the past, they have the potential to be reconfigured, however the marks left by them are carried by the body in the present, written onto its flesh.

Methodology

I will be conducting a close reading of the novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* written by Andrea Lawlor, first published in 2017.² A close reading is a reading method within literary scholarship developed by New Criticism in the 1920s. The purpose of this method was to turn attention away from the context surrounding a text and onto the text itself. Prior to the 1920s literary critics had been more engaged with the meaning of sociology and biography than the meaning of a specific text itself (Lentricchia & DuBois, 2003, pp. 3-4). Therefore, this new method of reading was intended to engage carefully and closely with the text. By engaging closely with a text, any meaning derived from it, must be located within the language of the text itself (Lentricchia & DuBois, 2003, p. 2). This engagement with the text can be linked to a Baradian notion of agential realism, arguing that the text is not an inanimate passive object. The text has agential properties and becomes meaningful through the intra-active process in which it is engaged.

Furthermore, following my theoretical perspective that there is no objective or true understanding of a context in which a text is produced. Any text must be understood not as a mirror of a specific fixed time and space, but rather as a result of a dynamic material-discursive intra-action in which meaning, time, and space are mutually constituted in a process of spacetime-mattering.

In their text *Feminist Perspectives on Close Reading* (2011) Lukic and Espinoza introduce a feminist re-appropriation of close reading and discuss why it is relevant for contemporary feminist methodology. They argue that, conducting a close reading of a text cannot and should not attempt to claim any universal truth, but rather that reading closely and with transparency of your politically charged aim and questions can produce a variety of different interpretations (Lukić & Espinosa, 2011, p. 106). Therefore, depending on how a reader engages with a text “points to the inherent instability of the meaning and opens the text for all kinds of subversive readings” (Lukić & Espinosa, 2011, p. 109). Thus, the way in which a close reading is conducted, that is, what meaning is being derived, is based on how one approaches the text. The political aim of the reading guides how and what is being read, subsequently the meaning which is being deduced is facilitated by the method of closely reading (Lukić & Espinosa, 2011, pp. 109-110).

My aim is not to attempt to find something that can be said to be a true or universal interpretation of the novel. I conduct a close reading of the text with my specific aim at

² My copy of the novel is from 2019.

deducting certain meaning, that is, in what ways *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* can be read as a re-imagining of trans* becoming. The specific questions regarding how the intra-active relationship between corporal transformations and affects, as well as how spacetimes of memories enable Paul's trans* becoming guide my close reading. Trans* becoming is something that happens constantly in various intra-actions in different spacetimemattering constellations. Therefore, I will closely read the book with my research question and theory in mind, searching for specific sequences of the text, where the relationship between corporality and affect, as well as sequences of memories, are found especially significant to Paul's trans* becoming.

Ethics

In Barad's agential realist perspective, all matter is materialized through the continued process of the world's intra-active becoming (Barad, 2007, p. 392). Matter comes to matter as the imaginings of the world's intra-active becoming. Thus, as "things" are not divided by fixed boundaries but entangled in their intra-active becoming, as argued above, difference is not an exterior property. Differentiating happens through an always already entanglement in co-constitutive becoming. "*Intra-actions* enact cuts that cut (things) together-apart (one move)" (Barad, 2015, p. 406 original emphasis). This understanding of the world's becoming means that one cannot come to know the properties of separate independent bodies (not merely human ones) because these do not exist outside their relational intra-action. Therefore, that which one can come to know is the "relations of responsibility" (Barad, 2012, p. 46). This understanding of difference influences how one comes to consider ethics. Because if difference is co-constitutive of becoming and if that which is "other" is not separated from the "self" by fixed boundaries, but part of the co-constitution of self *and* other as they mutually become through intra-action, then "[w]e (but not only 'we humans') are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled" (Barad, 2007, p. 393). Therefore ethics is "not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively *relationalities* of becoming of which we are a part." (Barad, 2007, p. 393 my emphasis). As entities do not exist individually, understanding what is materialized and what is excluded from materialization and what is then constructed as "other", is not an easy matter because one cannot single out individual entities and assign them sole responsibility or blame (Barad, 2012, p. 46). When ethics comes to be understood as relationalities, then the aim of "accountability is an ethico-onto-epistemological commitment to understand how different

cuts matter in the reiterative intra-activity of worlding, that is, of the entanglements of spacetime-matterings” (Barad, 2012, pp. 46-47).

This understanding of ethics means that my responsibility lies in my politically engaged intra-active relation with the world around me. What is materialized and what it not, is determined by the relation of intra-active becoming, of which I am part of and therefore have responsibility for. My work here is therefore not a reaction or response to something exterior, that is, transness as subject or object of study. I am not an objective bystander making observations and claims about something apart from myself. On the contrary, I must hold myself accountable and responsible for the relationality in which this work comes into being. My position as a queer and trans* embodied student affects the relationality of the becoming of this thesis. It is what attracted me to the novel and to the theoretical perspective in the first place. My engagement with trans* issues is political at its core as it is driven by a determination to productively reconfigure normative notions of what transness can be.

In addition, my whiteness, educational background being a student at the university, and ethnocultural heritage are all aspects that come to matter through my intra-action with the novel. How I read and the meaning that I derive from my reading is product of and simultaneously producing my specific situated position. What I find important, that is, the sequences that I choose to analyze, are products of how I become in, and intra-act with, the world around me.

Material

Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl is a novel about the queer young adult Paul, who has the ability to change the shape of his body into whatever form he wishes. Throughout the book, Paul is referred to by the narrator with the pronouns “he/him/his” and with the name Paul. Therefore, I will use “he/him/his” pronouns and “Paul” in reference to the character, regardless of the gendered expression or corporal figure he assumes in the sequences I discuss. Beginning in Iowa City in the early 1990s USA, we meet Paul, who studies film and queer theory at the university. Paul works the bar at the only gay bar in town and spends most of his time planning his next hook-up and hanging out with his dyke best friend Jane. We come to follow Paul travel across the country to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he, as a lesbian, settles into small-town lesbian life, with his girlfriend Diane, whom he has met while attending Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival has been a controversial topic in the LGBTQAI+ community due to its history of being highly transphobic in its admission policies (Halberstam, 2018, p. 109). After being dumped by Diane, Paul travels to San Francisco, takes up a job at a gay bookstore and settles into the gay scene of the Castro district. Throughout the novel Paul changes his body regularly in order to fit into the space he wishes to occupy.

The story of Paul is disrupted by short fable-like narratives, which enhance the sense of the novel being a kind of queer fairy tale. Paul’s queer being, especially his ability to transform his body, becomes less un-natural and more real and plausible, against the backdrop of these fables.

Set in a historically significant period for the LGBTQIA+ movement and the expansion of queer theory, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* contains references to queer culture central to the time. From New York City activism a decade into the AIDS epidemic, to the transphobia of Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, through lesbian safe-haven Provincetown across to the queer counterculture of San Francisco.

There is much which would be interesting to analyze about the period the book is set in, and the period in which it is written. In accordance to Barad’s notion of spacetime mattering, the novel is not only product of a time, but it produces this current spacetime of trans* awareness. The depiction of the spacetime of the queer scene in the 1990s could be analyzed as a collective American queer becoming in the present, through re-membering the past. My analysis however will be focused on Paul’s own trans* becoming.

Research Section

“No political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real,” said Paul.
“Seriously?” said Jane³
(Lawlor, 2019, p. 74).

In this chapter I will conduct my analysis of *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* in order to answer my research question;

- In what ways can *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* be read as a re-imagining of trans* becoming?

Trans* becoming happens constantly throughout the novel. As I argue above in my theory section, trans* becoming should not be understood as a fixed linear process with a beginning and an end, but rather as a dynamic ongoing and constantly reoccurring practice of spacetime-mattering in a material-discursive and affective intra-action. In my close reading of the novel, I have specifically sought out memories and sequences of re-remembering, and I have paid close attention to the intra-active relationship between corporal transformations and affects. Although these aspects are entangled and inseparable, I have structured my analysis so that I begin with an examination of the first of my secondary research questions;

- How can an examination of the intra-active relationship between Paul’s affects and his corporal transformations effect how we understand trans* becoming?

In order to answer this question, I will analyze how the changes to Paul’s corporal figure intra-actively affects how and who Paul is able to become in the world, that is, how the relationship between corporal transformations and affects enables Paul’s trans* becoming.

Thereafter I will examine my second secondary research question;

³ “No political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real” is a quote from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* which was first published in 1990. However, this particular quote is from the preface (p.xxiv) to the 1999 edition of the novel, with is included in later prints like my copy from 2007. As far as I have been able to detect, this is the only discrepancy in the spacetime of the novel (1993) as this quote is from the future (1999).

- In what way can Paul’s memories be explored as spacetimes that enable trans* becoming?

In order to answer this question, I will analyze two sequences of the book, that I have selected, in which longer acts of re-remembering takes place.⁴ I singled out these two memory sequences because they are the only two of their kind that occur throughout the course of the novel. Being the only two sequences of their kind in the novel, I wanted to use them as locations from which I conduct my analysis. These two sequences of memories can be examined as processes of spacetime-mattering through the act of re-remembering. The two sequences are simultaneously part of and outside of the main text. The entrance into the memory spacetime is, in both cases, illustrated by a dash (—) entering the spacetime of memories and a dash (—) exiting it. In both cases, the spacetime of memories is marked by every sentence beginning with “Paul remembered ...”. The two memory spacetimes are fragmented, non-linear, and incohesive, and therefore there is no processive relationship between the consecutive sentences “Paul remembered ...”. Upon return to the main narrative, no time seems to have passed. I will trace meaning found throughout the novel and thread it back through each spacetime memory, in order to make room for a re-imagining of trans* becoming to materialize from this intra-action.

In both my analyzes of the two memory sequences, the intra-active relationship between affects and corporal transformations, which are explored in the first section of this analysis, are important for the construction of meaning. Therefore, although I have separated them in this analysis, the two secondary research questions overlap and entangle.

⁴ See appendix for full transcription of the two chosen scenes.

Intra-active Relationship Between Affect and Corporal Transformation

Not everything is possible given a particular intra-action, but an infinite number of possibilities exist
(Barad, 2015, p. 399).

He couldn't get much bigger physically — he still hadn't eaten properly and couldn't just imagine himself bigger — so he put up his hood and tried to walk “like a man”
(Lawlor, 2019, p. 205).

While reading *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*, it becomes clear that matter matters in regard to the construction of self. How a body is materialized in the flesh, within a material-discursive process, matters for the affective responses it can have and hold. Corporality and affects are not independent entities, they are mutually constitutive and productive materialized through a material-discursive *and* affective intra-action. Different corporal states allow for the embodiment of different senses of self. Affective responses are corporally limited, determined, and defined because affective responses are produced differently dependent on the material-discursive process of intra-action, which construct the body as a material object (i.e. the construction of the body divided into categories such as, but not limited to, gender, sex, race, ability, shape, size etc.). Therefore, when Paul embodies different corporal states, he feels different because he is different, and he is different because he feels different. The excerpt below is one example of this. In this section of the novel Paul has settled into the gay scene in San Francisco embodying an assumed male form, or “rock-and-roll fairy” to use Paul's own words, fulltime. Paul has been away from the lesbian life and assumed female embodiment of Provincetown for a while, when this scene takes place at a lesbian house party, which Paul attends with Jane, who has come from Iowa City to visit him in San Francisco.

Oh, dyke drama, Paul thought. He'd almost missed it; he'd settled so easily into his rock-and-roll fairy life here. No one had made him talk about feelings in months (Lawlor, 2019, p. 288).

Thus, while Paul embodies “rock-and-roll fairy”, he is not expected to talk about his feelings, and his feelings therefore are materialized differently from when he was lesbian embodied, in which corporal figure, he experiences “girl-feelings”.

This was a strange experience for him, for whom all were prey, and he located the feeling in his new body. He was now having girl-feelings. Weird (Lawlor, 2019, p. 79).

This excerpt is from the first time in the novel where Paul has been assumed female embodied for a longer period of time, while attending Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. These two excerpts reveal how the experience of gender cannot be located *either* in the flesh of the body *or* within the mind. Rather, Baradian theory of agential realism argues, that there is no mind-body divide, because one only exists in the intra-action with the other. The mutually constitutive intra-action of affect and corporality co-constitute an experience of gender. Being a girl *feels different*, and as the quote above indicates "girl-feelings" are located inside the body, affectively part of the becoming of a self. It is, however, crucial not to mistake this for an essentialist argument. Because to understand gender/sex as the product of a material-discursive and affective intra-action is to understand that gender/sex essentialism cannot not exist. Feelings of gender are located inside the body and are part of its flesh as much as its mind, but the matter of the body and the mind are not confined to any fixed essentially binary gender/sex system (Barad, 2015, p. 401). As Barad argues "matter in its "essence" ... is a massive overlaying of perversities: an infinity of infinities" (2015, p. 400). Thereby, transness is not a deviation from nature or essential binary categories, rather nature is trans* in its essence (Barad, 2015, p. 413).

Trans* becoming is not determined by a specific bodily change - for instance medical transition or, in the case of Paul, transition at will. Rather, a disruptive spacetime-mattering of normative assumptions of material-discursive binary gendered categories affectively changes how one comes to feel about gendered embodiment. Trans* becoming is therefore not a process of changing from one static and fixed gendered/sexed body to another through a kind of transition, and gender/sex is not essentially located in a particular essentially constructed body. On the contrary, matter, that which constitutes the embodiment of gender, is already inherently trans*. Barad writes,

Demonstrating nature's queerness, its trans*-embodiment, exposing the monstrous face of nature itself in the undoing of naturalness holds significant political potential (Barad, 2015, pp. 412-413).

The intra-active relationship between Paul's affects and his corporal transformations effect how we understand the political potential of Paul's trans* becoming. Paul's trans* nature, the dynamic relationship between his corporal transformations and affects which intra-actively enables his trans* becoming, is constantly undoing the normative assumption of a naturalized and essentialist binary sex/gender order (Barad, 2015, p. 412). Paul's trans* becoming creates the possibility of re-imagining a queer spacetime wherein the body is not gendered from an

assumption of a binary sex/gender system, and where bodies can be liberated, indeterminately becoming bodies threaded through with infinite feelings, which in turn are not bound or fixed to any assumed gendered location.

Sequence #1

“You always smell the same,” said Diane. “You smelled the same last night when I first saw you
as you do now.”

The waitress approached, smiling the smile of liberal tolerance, and showed them to a booth,
where they sat across from each other holding hands.
“Really? I smell the same?” Paul said, nodding his desire for coffee to the waitress. “Don’t I smell
somewhat less like smoke and beer after that shower?”

“No,” said Diane. “I mean you smell like a girl all the time. You didn’t smell like a boy before.
You can’t fake pheromones. I think you’re really female. Like, chemically or something.”

“That’s cool,” said Paul. “I think that must be true.”

“Did you always know you were a girl?” Diane asked.

The waitress came back, took their order, and left.

Paul thought. Had he always been a girl?—

(Lawlor, 2019, pp. 119-120).

There are only two memory spacetime sequences in the entire novel like the two I will be analyzing. In this section I will analyze the first one. This first memory spacetime sequence occurs about one third of the way into the novel. At this time, we have come to know Paul and his transformative abilities. We have followed Paul on various sexual adventures, and at this point he has been to Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, where he, embodying an assumed female form, met and fell in love with Diane. Paul has been back in Iowa City for a while now, where he longs for Diane and spends a lot of time pondering, how he can become her girlfriend. One night Diane shows up, unannounced, at the gay bar where Paul works, and finds him embodying what she assumes to be a male form. They spend the night together, and Paul comes out to Diane revealing his transformative abilities. The next day they go for breakfast at a diner in another part of town, so that Paul can embody an assumed female form, without meeting anyone he knows. It is in this diner, triggered by the question posed by Diane “Did you always know you were a girl?”, that we enter the first memory spacetime.

This re-remembering sequence is full of childhood and early adolescent memories of girlhood.

—Paul remembered watching *Bad News Bears*, feeling like Tatum O’Neal in the face of his gym teacher’s surprise he could hit the ball.

Paul remembered a girl in kindergarten who wore a tee shirt that said “Anything boys can do, girls can do better!” and he remembered coveting that shirt (Lawlor, 2019, p. 120).

The memories are framed as a knowing feeling of truth, located somewhere inside the body, but not obvious on the outside of it. As argued above, memories are not located somewhere fixed in the past, they are products of the specific spacetime in which they are intra-actively being re-membered (Barad, 2007, p. 74). Therefore, the memories of girlhood in this sequence come into existence through Paul's act of re-membering of them. Paul's memory of always having been a girl materializes intra-actively on the page before us, triggered by his affective response to the question he is posed. Paul becomes, in this process of spacetime-mattering, someone who has always been a girl.

Paul remembered seeing a picture of Patti Smith for the first time, that flash of recognition when he first came across the Mapplethorpe postcard at the gay bookstore in Binghamton, thinking that's what he looked like on the inside, taping that postcard up in every room he'd lived in since (Lawlor, 2019, p. 121).

Paul's corporal figure, his assumed female embodiment, matters in this sequence because it is what has enabled him to be with Diane in the first place. Without the ability to embody an assumed female form he would not have gained access to the festival, and he would not have been considered, by Diane, as a potential lover. Paul's affective response to Diane, falling in love with her, is, therefore, enabled by his ability to transform his corporal figure. Thus, this particular sequence of re-membering is triggered and conditioned by the intra-active relationship between Paul's affects and his corporal transformations.

Taking a closer look at Barad's definition of re-membering, which is introduced in the theory section above, in relation to this sequence of the novel, we can trace Paul's feelings for Diane as "yearnings for connection", which are "materialized into fields of longing/belonging" in this particular spacetime-mattering of re-membering (Barad, 2015, pp. 406-407). Paul's "yearning for connection" affects his affirming answer "Paul was pretty, darling, a girl, yes—" (Lawlor, 2019, p. 123). Being a girl becomes "materialized into fields of longing/belonging" because his answer will determine if he is able to long-for/belong-with Diane, whose fixed lesbian identity dictates that she can love only women.

Paul remembered Stevie Nicks's voice, how his voice should sound, and the promise of her name, a secret way around the problem of what to be called.

Paul remembered Halloween (Lawlor, 2019, p. 121).

Paul remembered the dollar theater which showed movies like *Some Like It Hot* and *Cabaret* on Saturday afternoons, and telling Kostas he wanted to be a filmmaker.

Paul remembered Stanley's department store downtown, buying the smallest bottle of Chanel No. 5 with his snow-shoveling money one year, "for my mother." (Lawlor, 2019, p. 122).

A picture of Patti Smith, Stevie Nicks' voice, Halloween, *Some Like It Hot*, *Cabaret*, and Chanel No. 5, do not determine girlhood independently. Rather they are vessels, through which material-discursive and affective processes are threaded, entangled, and traced in order to form a meaning, in this case the becoming of girlhood. The material-discursive and affective process through which these memories are being re-membered are, therefore, intra-actively creating girlhood – in this process of spacetime-mattering Paul's present self is materialized, as someone who had always been a girl.

The specific relationship between material-discursive and affective properties create a knowing, in the act of intra-active becoming, that Paul always knew he was a girl. This remembering is not exclusively a materialization of always having been a girl. It is simultaneously an act of trans* becoming through re-membering. The evidence for Paul's claim to having always known, that he was a girl, is found in the transgression of the expectations of his gender expression determined by his birth assigned gender.

Paul remembered playing house with his Star Wars action figures and knowing not to admit it (Lawlor, 2019, p. 120).

Paul remembered Kostas's face when he took away Paul's flea-market Barbie, the socked-away Barbie boa and shimmery evening gown Paul kept in his Hot Wheels suitcase, under the bottom layer of Toreros and Karmann Ghias—girl cars! (Lawlor, 2019, p. 122).

As exemplified in these excerpts, as well as the ones above, the evidence that Paul has always been a girl, is located in his transgression of gendered expectations. All of the sentences in this memory spacetime deal with the underlying notion that, that which is true, his girlhood, is not what is evident to everyone else. Hiding, secrets, and knowing not to reveal his true feelings are the dominating themes in which his memories are framed. The need for Paul to keep his girlhood hidden and a secret is dictated by normative assumptions of an essentially binary sex/gender system. I have defined trans* as "an overreaching term for a person who feels a sense of dissidence with the gender they were assigned at birth" (this paper, p. 9). The gender dissidence and transgression, which is re-membered by Paul in this spacetime of memories, becomes evidence for him having always been a girl *and* having always been trans*.

Barad argues that the very essence of nature is its radically deconstructive, queer, and trans* properties (2015, p. 413) and this sequence supports this argument. In the spacetime-mattering

of this sequence the assumption that transness is determined by a transition from one gender to another within a fixed binary system, is undone. The undoing happens in Paul's constant and repetitive dynamic process of transgressing gendered expectation.

This re-membering sequence enables a spacetime-mattering of trans* becoming, through the intra-active relationship between corporal transformation and affective response, that retrace entanglements, creating anew a trans* becoming, which was always already there and might still become – enfolded in time. In this sequence Paul's trans* becoming, is materialized in the process of coming to know that he has always been a girl, through re-membering. He becomes trans* because he has always been and will always be dissidence in regard to normative gendered expectations, due to his constant affective and corporal transformations that disrupt normative assumptions of an essentially binary sex/gender system.

Mixtape - Interlude

Paul considered a tape Tony Pinto had made him, so long ago. Two years ago. Was it entirely ethical to copy a song, or multiple songs, from a mixtape someone else had made you? What if you changed the order? What if the person who made you the mix had copied at least half the songs from *Just Say Yes, Volume III: Just Say Mao*, which you later discovered while looking through their CDs? What if the person who made you the mixtape was in love with you and you had been in love with them, maybe, but you weren't anymore? Was it really even okay to copy *any* songs from a mixtape? Paul decided it was okay if the tape had been given to you in the spirit of true love and had then become part of who you were. It was not just okay; it was in fact *crucial*, then, to share this with your new love, so they could understand you (Lawlor, 2019, pp. 108-109 original emphasis).

This excerpt occurs after Paul has returned from Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. He is making a mixtape for Diane and while doing so he thinks of his former lover Tony Pinot. The first memory spacetime, which I have analyzed above, revolves around Diane. The second memory spacetime, which I will analyze below, revolves around Tony Pinto. This excerpt, though happening before either of the two memory spacetime sequences, is significant to both of them. In this excerpt we come to understand that Diane, who, at this point in time, will become Paul's girlfriend in the future, is tied to Tony Pinto, who, at this point in time, is Paul's lover from the past. The two lovers though seemingly separated in time and space, are in fact entangled, because they are both intra-actively part of Paul's trans* becoming. In this excerpt we can see how past, present, and future, are not independent and separate but entangled entities. Both Diane and Tony Pinto are part of Paul, they become part of who he is, and therefore they are inseparable from him, as they are all becoming through their intra-active relationship.

Sequence #2

Paul remembered the working group he joined because Tony Pinto was joining, meeting at an apartment of a much older gay man with a job and a leather couch and crudité in the living room while they made plans to die in the street
(Lawlor, 2019, p. 276).

This second memory spacetime occurs toward the end of the novel. At this point in time we have followed Paul in various encounters embodying several corporal figures. After a period of about six months of blissful lesbian co-habitation, Paul has left the small town of Provincetown heartbroken, after Diane has broken up with him. Paul has now travelled across the country to San Francisco, where he has taken up a job at a gay bookstore and settled into an assumed male figure, appropriate for the gay scene of the Castro district. Although he is well-adjusted with a stable living situation and income Paul finds himself growing lonely. He yearns for Diane still heartbroken over her, as he starts to think more and more about his former lover Tony Pinto. Paul was with Tony Pinto before he moved to Iowa City, before the beginning of the novel. Tony Pinto materializes in the book through his missed phone calls to Paul, which appear from the very beginning of the novel and continue through it until Tony Pinto's death. Tony Pinto also materializes through Paul's memories of him, that consistently pop-up throughout the course of the novel. Tony Pinto's missed calls increase in frequency up until this point in time where we enter the second memory spacetime. Paul believes that Tony Pinto is calling because he wants to get back together with him. In his lonely state of mind Paul has decided that things were better before Diane, before the beginning of the novel, when he was with Tony Pinto in New York City. Paul therefore, finally builds up the strength to call Tony Pinto back, to get back together, only to reach his mother, who informs Paul that Tony Pinto has died that previous evening. In a state of drunken grief Paul is alone in the living room of his shared apartment. Upon seeing the cover of Sandra Bernhard's *Without You I'm Nothing* concert album we enter the second and final memory spacetime.

Then he saw the Sandra Bernhard *Without You I'm Nothing* concert album—

×

—Paul remembered staking out the Cubbyhole with Tony Pinto because Madonna and Sandra Bernhard had once had a date there in 1987, or kissed, or something (Lawlor, 2019, pp. 273-274).

Where the first memory sequence dealt with Paul's relation to girlhood, which in turn was entangled with Paul's relation to Diane. This second one deals with Paul's relation to Tony Pinto, the gay scene of New York City in which they lived, and the AIDS epidemic, all three of which are entangled and inseparable entities.

Paul remembered the Christopher Street pier at night, fourteen-year-old queers in tube tops and short-shorts, cigarette cherries reflected in the oily water (Lawlor, 2019, p. 275).

Set in the USA in the early 1990s, this novel begins a decade into the AIDS epidemic, at a point in time where death had become a constant presence in queer spaces, especially in urban settings. Death is a constant presence in the novel, as well, and is materialized by the haunting presence of Tony Pinto, who exists outside of the narrative, only entering it through missed phone call messages and in Paul's memories.

Paul remembered the men lined up in green plastic chairs at the Center, young men with canes and liver spots (Lawlor, 2019, p. 276).

Paul left New York, and subsequently Tony Pinto, out of fear of dying. In the attempt to flee from the inevitability of being eaten up by New York, Paul flees what he believes to be the certainty of death, and Tony Pinto, whom Paul leaves behind, is then somehow consequently left to die (Lawlor, 2019, p. 143). Being left to be devoured by the city, Tony Pinto becomes a lingering threat of death long before he actually dies. When Paul leaves New York, something that has happened before the beginning of the novel, he attempts to leave death and Tony Pinto in the past. However, he is unsuccessful as Tony Pinto continues to haunt Paul throughout the course of the novel. Seemingly, Paul never engages with Tony Pinto in his present time, because Tony Pinto is only ever someone who exists in Paul's past, and outside of the spacetime of the novel. However, if we understand time in Baradian terms, past, present, and future are not separate entities but constantly entangled and inseparable. The past, present, and future are threaded through the entanglement of becoming in a process of spacetime-mattering (Barad, 2012, p. 44). Therefore, Tony Pinto is not located in the past and cannot be fixed there. Tony Pinto's presence in the spacetime of memories is constantly threaded through the spacetime-mattering of Paul's continued becoming, intra-actively constituting who he is and who he will become. Throughout the novel, it is through and onto Tony Pinto that new experiences and feelings are measured and assigned meaning. This becomes clear in the excerpt above, where Paul is making a mixtape for Diane, before he becomes her girlfriend. He wonders if it is okay to copy a song, or multiple songs, from a

mixtape given to him by Tony Pinto two years previously. Paul comes to the conclusion that, it is not only okay but crucial in order to be able to understand him, because Tony Pinto has become a part himself (Lawlor, 2019, pp. 108-109).

In this way, Tony Pinto can be said to enable Paul's becoming, which above is stated as a continuous trans* becoming. Paul re-members being and belonging with Tony Pinto. Tony Pinto, like Diane, is Paul's past, present, and future. He is not fixed in any time or space, rather he *is* spacetime, he co-constitutes space and time in the spacetimemattering of Paul's constant intra-active becoming. Tony Pinto is not independent from Paul, but rather they are mutually constitutive and therefore come into being in their relational connection.

Paul remembered the sunburn Tony got at Pride that year, how their older friends carried sunblock, Tony's wounded red-brown chest and back, like a soldier wearing pukka beads, some older lesbian with a crew cut and a squeeze-tube of aloe vera, sitting in the shade on the steps of a church which was really a bar, far enough away from the fray, in the shade, laying Tony across his lap so he could think *Tony lay across my lap like a pieta* (Lawlor, 2019, pp. 275-276 original emphasis).

This sequence of re-membering is materialized by Paul seeing the Sandra Bernhard *Without You I'm Nothing* concert album. Triggered by Tony Pinto's death, Paul re-members how being with Tony Pinto was being in the constant presence of death – the lingering threat of nothingness.

—Paul remembered asking Jimmy Battelli where he'd been, why he'd missed some meeting and Jimmy shrugging, oh another memorial service darling you know, Jimmy turning away from Paul kindly even in his despair, Paul's relief to be so young, his nineteenth year a talisman, the word containing the word teen itself protection from what the older guys, those memorial-weary men in their twenties, thirties, forties, what they were losing— (Lawlor, 2019, p. 278).

In their reading of Susan Stryker's famous text *My Words to Victor Frankenstein* (1994) in *Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter /Realities and Queer Political Imaginings*, Barad dives into the question of trans* becoming (2015). Barad examines how queer beings, like nature, emerge “from a self-birthed womb fashioned out of raging nothingness” (2015, p. 393). The haunting presence of death, which is materialized through Tony Pinto, is the raging nothingness that fashions a self-birthing womb, from which Paul's trans* being becomes. In this very sequence, Tony Pinto and Paul both come into being through their mutually constitutive intra-active relationship, a process of spacetimemattering through re-membering, from the raging

nothingness of death. In this sequence Tony Pinto, enables Paul's trans* becoming through his proximity to and promise of nothingness.

Paul remembered the smell of orange medicine soap, sulfur and sweet, the gash on his palm from a fruit-salad can lid—how was it possible to get a fruit-salad injury?—wanting the sliced cherry, glimmer of fear in the eyes of the receptionist at the Center who sent him to the free clinic, fear of his blood, now contaminating the can (Lawlor, 2019, pp. 276-277).

As argued above in the theory section, memories, though subject to change and reconfiguration, leave ineradicable marks on the body, inscribed onto the flesh (Barad, 2012, p. 47). Dead or alive Tony Pinto cannot be disentangled from Paul, because he is part of him, inscribed onto his flesh. No matter what corporal form Paul assumes throughout the novel, Tony Pinto is written onto it, because he is always present in the memories of him. Tony Pinto co-constitutes Paul's corporal embodiment transcending any assumption of gender as a physical presentation. Tony Pinto has left his mark inscribed onto Paul's flesh, but the flesh of the body is not confined by any essential notion of what it is assumed to be.

In this sequence Paul's trans* becoming, his trans* nature, "emerges from a self-birthing womb fashioned out of raging nothingness" (Barad, 2015, p. 393). Tony Pinto, materialized in the novel as the constant presence of death, is that with which Paul intra-actively becomes in this sequence. In this act of re-membering they both become in a process of intra-active spacetime-mattering. Tony Pinto transforms Paul's corporality as his memories are imprinted onto it. Tony Pinto therefore co-constitutes Paul's corporal figure through inscription, all the while not fixating the corporal figure in any particular or constant state or form.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have applied Barad's theory to my close reading of the novel *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*. I have analyzed the intra-active relationship between Paul's affects and his corporal transformations, as well as two spacetimes of memories in order to answer my research question;

- In what ways can *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* be read as a re-imagining of trans* becoming?

By examining the relationship between Paul's affects and his corporal transformations, I found grounds to reject the normative understanding of an essentially fixed and binary sex/gender system, in favor of an understanding of nature as essentially queer and trans* embodied. Thus, trans* becoming is not a deviation from some natural order of things. Rather, I come to understand trans* becoming as an undoing of the hegemonic oppression of what is considered the natural order. Through this re-imagining of trans* becoming I come to understand that feelings of gender are located inside the body as well as the mind, because these are not separate independent entities but mutually constitutive through intra-action. However, although feelings of gender are located within the mind as well as the flesh of the body, neither are determinately nor essentially fixed by binary sex/gender systems.

In my analysis of the two spacetimes of memories I found that the material-discursive and affective process through which memories are being re-membered intra-actively enable trans* becoming. I come to understand that memories are not bygone events that are fixed in the past, on the contrary they come into existence in a process of spacetime-mattering through the act of re-membering. Memories are spacetimes that constantly reconfigure who we are and what we become, depending on how the process of re-membering is intra-actively engaged with the world. Although memories are reconfigurations of past, present, and future, and therefore never fixed but always dynamically coming into being, previous intra-actions with the world leave marks. All intra-acting bodies, rather past, present, or future, dead or alive, are relational and entangled. In my analysis of the two memory sequences I find that Tony Pinto and Diane cannot be disentangled from Paul. Tony Pinto and Diane are part of Paul's trans* becoming through their intra-active engagement with him, and therefore they are inscribed onto his flesh.

As things only come into being through an intra-active entanglement with the world, I found that trans* becoming is not a stable, determined or linear transformation of one

independent body. Therefore, Paul's sense of self, his feelings for and towards others, and his physical embodiment cannot be understood separately or independently, they are all entangled entities, which in turn are entangled with the world around him.

I found that Paul becomes trans* through his intra-active relationship with the world around him. His constant dissidence with cisheterosexist norms and his rejection, both mentally and physically, of any notion of essentialist binary sex/gender systems, has material-discursive and affective effects on him – enabling his trans* becoming.

In this analysis of *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* trans* becoming can be re-imagined as process, in which corporality, discourse, and affect equally come to matter as they all are mutually constitutive in their intra-action. By freeing trans* becoming from fixed notions of linear, progressive, and binary sex/gender transitions, I come to understanding transness as the essence of nature's becoming. This re-imagining of trans* becoming has the potential to envision a queer spacetime in which the material-discursive and affective properties of the body and mind are not limited by an essentialist binary sex/gender system or cisheterosexist norms that assume a specific location of sex/gendered embodiment.

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Appendix

Sequence #1 Transcript

“Did you always know you were a girl?” Diane asked.

The waitress came back, took their order, and left.

Paul thought. Had he always been a girl?—

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—Paul remembered watching *Bad News Bears*, feeling like Tatum O’Neal in the face of his gym teacher’s surprise he could hit the ball.

Paul remembered a girl in kindergarten who wore a tee shirt that said “Anything boys can do, girls can do better!” and he remembered coveting that shirt.

Paul remembered dressing up in his mom’s maroon-and-lime-green paisley pantsuit.

Paul remembered babysitting his high-school math teacher’s kids, cleaning the kitchen after they went to bed, but pretending he’d spent the night watching baseball.

Paul remembered playing house with his *Star Wars* action figures and knowing not to admit it.

Paul remembered always wanting to be the medic when the neighbor kids played war.

Paul remembered Stevie Nicks’s voice, how his voice *should* sound, and the promise of her name, a secret way around the problem of what to be called.

Paul remembered Halloween.

Paul remembered the pink extra blanket, huddling underneath and making sparks with his legs.

Paul remembered letting his family call him Pauly well into high school, and discouraging the practice only after the appearance of Pauly Shore, “the Weasel.”

Paul remembered Boy George. And Marilyn.

Paul remembered the split second in *Tootsie* where Jessica Lange thinks Dustin Hoffman is a lesbian and *considers* it.

Paul remembered *Rocky Horror*.

Paul remembered turning the channel to *Bosom Buddies* when no one else was in the rec room.

Paul remembered feeling excited during certain parts of *Freebie and the Bean*, the second *Back to the Future*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Victor/Victoria*—perhaps especially *Victor/Victoria*.

Paul remembered seeing a picture of Patti Smith for the first time, that flash of recognition when he first came across the Mapplethorpe postcard at the gay bookstore in Binghamton, thinking that’s what he looked like on the inside, taping that postcard up in every room he’d lived in since.

Paul remembered alibis and secret victories: he remembered dressing up as one of the guys from KISS to wear makeup; he remembered pretending to like punk rock in order to pierce his ears; he remembered New Wave eyeliner.

Paul remembered watching a foreign movie he now knew to be *Fanny and Alexander* on public television one Sunday afternoon and when Kostas and his mom walked in saying he “liked history.”

Paul remembered the dollar theater which showed movies like *Some Like It Hot* and *Cabaret* on Saturday afternoons, and telling Kostas he wanted to be a filmmaker.

Paul remembered Stanley’s department store downtown, buying the smallest bottle of Chanel No. 5 with his snow-shoveling money one year, “for my mother.”

Paul remembered how he kept the bottle in the stomach of his Trojan horse bank, taking it out only if no one else was home.

Paul remembered that paper on being a feminist man he wrote for his first women’s studies class; he remembered faking it; he remembered his undeserved A.

Paul remembered Kostas’s face when he took away Paul’s flea-market Barbie, the socked-away Barbie boa and shimmering evening gown Paul kept in his Hot Wheels suitcase, under the bottom layer of Toreros and Karmann Ghias—girl cars!

Paul remembered the time he had sex with Heather Federson, how jealous he was she got to feel a dick inside her, how she got to feel hands on her breasts.

Paul remembered reading about British public school boys, and how they had to act the girl parts in their school plays, and how it was no big deal.

Paul remembered playing Puck his freshman year of high school, tights and glitter and the pancake makeup hiding his lack of facial hair.

Paul remembered the day in sixth grade the substitute yelled at him for being in the boys’ line for recess, and her mean face apologizing. And the other sixth graders’ looks of shame at knowing Paul.

And farthest back in the recesses of time—the first recess, the first freedom!—Paul remembered Paphos, barely, remembered running down the beach in his tie-dyed tee shirt with his long salty hair his mom hadn't cut until they moved back in with his grandparents, and all the old Greek ladies pinching his mom's pretty little darling; Paul was pretty, darling, a girl, yes—

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—“Yes,” said Paul. “Did *you*?”

Lawlor (2019, pp. 120-123)

Sequence #2 Transcript

Then he saw the Sandra Bernhard *Without You I'm Nothing* concert album—

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—Paul remembered staking out the Cubbyhole with Tony Pinto because Madonna and Sandra Bernhard had once had a date there in 1987, or kissed, or something.

Paul remembered staying up late to watch Madonna on David Letterman, never daring to believe anything gay would happen on *television*.

Paul remembered Hudson Street in the rain.

Paul remembered the porn store on the corner, looking at vintage physique magazines, those long-gone men in leopard skins and posing jocks.

Paul remembered Tony Pinto making muscles to distract the shopkeeper while Paul stuffed an old *Drummer* down his pants.

Paul remembered three-packs of old gay porn mags, the good ones on the outside and the crappy third stuffed inside like a grab bag, the newsprint stories and letters signed A Reader in San Diego or Horny Midshipman.

Paul remembered *Blueboy*, *Numbers*, *Honcho*, *Freshman*.

Paul remembered the case of the tape Tony Pinto made for him, the second time they met, Tony's scratchy handwriting marking out the song titles, original artists in parentheses when the song was a cover. Who said gay men always had beautiful handwriting? Tony Pinto had spent his boyhood rolling six-sided dice and sketching elves, and it showed.

Paul remembered "Bizarre Love Triangle" and "A Little Respect" and "TMT ♥ TBMG."

Paul remembered the first Saturday of the month dances at Columbia, crashing the Ivy League, being early, walking around the block ten times, the Greek diner in Morningside Heights, cheap bad coffee.

Paul remembered coffee breath.

Paul remembered C. Howard's "violent mints."

Paul remembered the night he met Tony Pinto, smoking on the steps of Earl Hall, trying to tell who belonged, Tony Pinto stretching his Gumby arms in a terrible imitation of a voguer.

Paul remembered lights up, finding his stashed coat.

Paul remembered the Meatpacking District, clubs which changed sex according to the night (Clit Club Fridays, Meat Saturdays, or Jackie 60?), same cinderblock walls painted black.

Paul remembered 4 AM bagels with bright pink lox-flavored cream cheese at the bakery on the corner.

Paul remembered the Christopher Street pier at night, fourteen-year-old queers in tube tops and short-shorts, cigarette cherries reflected in the oily water.

Paul remembered saying, “How fast they grow up,” and Tony Pinto shaking his head ruefully and saying, “Kids, what’re you going to do?”

Paul remembered drinking at Max Fish with Tony’s straight goth friends from Fordham, walking west for miles with Tony until they hit the water, sitting on a broken concrete pylon and kissing for hours, hands down each other’s pants even though Tony had a serious boyfriend of two months.

Paul remembered the sunburn Tony got at Pride that year, how their older friends carried sunblock, Tony’s wounded red-brown chest and back, like a soldier wearing pukka beads, some older lesbian with a crew cut and a squeeze-tube of aloe vera, sitting in the shade on the steps of a church which was really a bar, far enough away from the fray, in the shade, laying Tony across his lap so he could think *Tony lay across my lap like a pieta*. And Tony’s serious boyfriend of two months rounding the corner laughing.

Paul remembered giving Tony back.

Paul remembered sharing grilled cheese sandwiches with Tony and that girl, what was her name? Glynis? Yes, Glynis with the gay mom. From the rap group for gay teens at the Center, the three of them college kids, older and not from the city, maybe a little too old to be in a rap group but officially still teens, still youth.

Paul remembered the working group he joined because Tony Pinto was joining, meeting at an apartment of a much older gay man with a job and a leather couch and crudité in the living room while they made plans to die in the street.

Paul remembered the aching hall of the Center, those Monday night meetings in the belly of the whale, the incomprehensible reports from the Treatment Action Group and the meeting’s incomprehensible response, what Tony Pinto called “the grown-ups fighting.”

Paul remembered carrying store-bought frozen soup to a man he didn’t know, with Rina, somewhere in Gramercy, one of those high-rises that made him feel like he was in 1970s Poland, leaving the soup on the dusty kitchen island, feeding the man’s tropical fish while Rina changed the sheets on his hospital bed, all the while *Days of Our Lives* continued as if nothing were different.

Paul remembered the men lined up in green plastic chairs at the Center, young men with canes and liver spots.

Paul remembered the cheery rattle of day-of-the-week pillbox compartments.

Paul remembered the smell of orange medicine soap, sulfur and sweet, the gash on his palm from a fruit-salad can lid—how was it possible to get a fruit-salad injury?—wanting the sliced cherry, glimmer of fear in the eyes of the receptionist at the Center who sent him to the free clinic, fear of his blood, now contaminating the can.

Paul remembered colored condoms.

Paul remembered a condom stretching over him like a balloon animal, unlubricated, Tony squeezing out two free packets of Probe.

Paul remembered Tony's pockets, his backpack, always full of giveaways and liberated rolls of toilet paper from restaurant bathrooms, Tony stopping in the foyer of every bar to fill up, the top of the cigarette machine, wherever they kept the bowl, Tony collecting condoms in all flavors and brands and colors like baseball cards, his shock and horror at the condom stapled into the *Bimbox* page "Straight-Acting Straight-Looking WM Seeks Same" not because he didn't agree that self-hating homosexuals should fuck off and die but because that exact condom was wasted, and some proud and out queer might need it.

Paul remembered flannel shirts with the sleeves cut off.

Paul remembered Tony's black leather motorcycle jacket with its rectangular stickers bragging FREQUENTLY FEMME and BASICALLY BUTCH and SAFE SEX STUD in neon green, his black hair shagging over the collar like a Portuguese Lief Garrett, how was anything ever so smooth as Tony's just slightly too-long hair?

Paul remembered Tony's serious boyfriend of two months, then three, four, five—David, unsuitable David, the WASPy Jewish guy who'd played lacrosse at Andover and loved John Cheever, older but recognizable to Paul, his easy law-school ways, his embarrassing obsession with any dark-skinned man, how he'd settled for Tony Pinto who was not dark enough, how he'd cheated on Tony Pinto over and over again, how he'd once at a demo outside St. Patrick's run his index finger down Paul's chest, down to his navel, dipping then turning away from Paul, who was enraged, flattered, humiliated, and never mentioned it to Tony.

Paul remembered asking his friend Jimmy—how proud he felt to say his friend Jimmy about Jimmy Battelli, the kindest and most handsome man in ACT UP, an older man who preferred older men and that he'd allowed himself to be befriended by Paul was a miracle—Paul remembered asking Jimmy Battelli where he'd been, why he'd missed some meeting and Jimmy shrugging, *oh another memorial service darling you know*, Jimmy turning away from Paul kindly even in his despair, Paul's relief to be so young, his nineteenth year a talisman, the

word containing the word *teen* itself protection from what the older guys, those memorial-weary men in their twenties, thirties, forties, what they were losing—

×

—and then the phone rang, as it will.

Lawlor (2019, pp. 273-278)