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(eds.)

# The Human Body in Contemporary Literatures in English

Cultural and Political Implications

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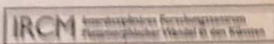
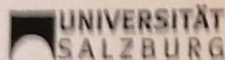


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## Contents

SABINE COELSCH-FOISNER AND MARTA FERNÁNDEZ MORALES

Introduction: The Human Body in Contemporary Literatures in English ..... 1

MILADA FRANKOVÁ

An Icon and a Burden:

The Postmodern Obsession with the Body in British Fiction ..... 7

### Part I: Diseased Bodies

ELLEN GRÜNKEMEIER

"I am not dying of AIDS. I am living with AIDS."

Representations of the Body and HIV/AIDS in South African Literature ..... 19

ILANA SHILOH

The Body as Obsession:

Starving, Writing and the Sign of Endless Deferral..... 33

ALEJANDRA MORENO ÁLVAREZ

The Other Voice of the Anorectics:

Examples from Contemporary British Fiction ..... 47

### Part II: Invented Bodies

SARAH HERBE

The Genetic Perspective of the Human Body in British Science Fiction ..... 59

ARNOLD LEITNER

Designing Geeks: Liberal Eugenics and Life Plans ..... 71

PIERPAOLO MARTINO

The Body and the Machine: Hari Kunzru's "Bodywork" ..... 85

### Part III: Gendered and Transgender Bodies

PALOMA FRESNO-CALLEJA

"Creatures of Water": Dis/embodying Racialised and Gendered Identities in Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child* ..... 97

JULIA ROUND

Mutilation and Monsters:

Transcending the Human in Garth Ennis/Steve Dillon's *Preacher* ..... 109

ANNA KÉRCHY

Bodies That Do Not Fit: Sexual Metamorphoses, Re-embodyed Identities and Cultural Crisis in Contemporary Transgender Memoirs ..... 129

### Part IV: Fragmented and Mutilated Bodies

LAURA MONRÓS GASPÀR

Speaking Bodies: The Myth of Echo in Contemporary Literature ..... 153

MARIA SOFIA PIMENTEL BISCAIA

"I am just myself – myself separately":

the Gogolian Construction of Masculinity in Hanif Kureishi's

"The Penis" and Katherine Vaz's "The Journey of the Eyeball" ..... 167

ANDREEA ȘERBAN

Eye-in' the Body: Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and

*The Handmaid's Tale*, and Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo* ..... 187

List of Contributors ..... 197

# **Bodies That Do Not Fit: Sexual Metamorphoses, Re-embodied Identities and Cultural Crisis in Contemporary Transgender Memoirs**

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The major fantasy of our postmodern societies of spectacular simulacra<sup>1</sup> consists of imagining the shape-shifting and identity-morphing body as an ambiguous site of power struggles and self-expression, a screen equally displaying ideologically-invested cultural prescriptions and politically subversive counter-narratives or even transdiscursive, corporeally-charged material motives. The multitude of metamorphosing bodies surrounding us, the cosmetic surgically modified, 'face-lifted' body, the muscle-addict's forever-fit, outworked, 'built' body, the 'beauty-myth-conform'<sup>2</sup> supermodel's vocational bulimic body, or the internet-avatar's virtual, matrix-framed body-double all popularize the "construction of life as plastic possibility [either as trendy] weightless choice"<sup>3</sup> or as triumph of individual will. Apparently these redesigned bodies in excess challenge the socially interpellated subject's neutralized, 'politely decorporealized', disciplined embodiments. They do not fit the mandatory scenarios conforming normative expectations of class, race, gender and age as propagated by the Foucauldian biopower's ideological technologies of bodily control and surveillance.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite the postmodernist project of destabilization of bodies recognized as socially constructed, thus open to deconstruction, some fundamental frontiers of the re-embodied identity strangely remain unproblematized. The "skin-ego"<sup>5</sup> never becomes transgressed. Our looksist,<sup>6</sup> spectacle-centred society emphatically identifies the self with the superficial body-image, the visible, outer, stylizable surface of the body, while the inner, abjectified corporeal experience is split off from the ego, repressed in the realm of taboo. My study proposes to argue that the immense curiosity and anxiety provoked by the transgender or transsexual body and identity can be attributed precisely to its difference from the aforementioned, similarly 'unfitting bodies'. In the case of transgender, the tension between the identity's inner physical, mental, spiritual experience and its mismatching outer corpus labelled a "wrong body"<sup>7</sup> prevails due to the irresolvable and constantly re-negotiable clash between the 'original', biologically-given bodily form and the re-made, performed ('dragged' or surgically enhanced) bodily style, the 'stagnation' in an unaccomplished, transitory 'body-in-becoming' for good (ie. male-to-female transsexual). I shall analyse the limits and potentials of the transgender revision

of the identity-experience-body triad, as well as the performative, narrative, and identity- or body-political significance of the trans-embodied self's insistence on "gender trouble"<sup>8</sup> in a society governed by hierarchical dualisms and sexual taboos generated by the patriarchal, heteronormative reproductive economy. I study how the trans/postmodernist cultural crisis is reflected by the transitions surfacing in the subversive corporeal and textual performances enacted by contemporary transgender memoirs' self-reconstructions.

I wish to provide a comparative interface of three queer narratives with the aim to tackle both the (counter)discursive and the (re)embodied aspects of the transgender identity. I analyze an imaginary diary by a male-to-female sex-changed, aspiring American actress designating heterosexual machos as prime targets of her voracious and dominatrix sexual appetites in Gore Vidal's satirical *Myra Breckinridge* (1968). I study a fictional retrospective reminiscence by an ineradicably misogynist macho English teacher surgically transformed by revengeful militant feminists into the ultimate perfection of sensual and submissive femininity in Angela Carter's magical realist picaresque *The Passion of New Eve* (1978). Finally, I interpret a non-fictional, truthful personal narrative in transsexual Brenda Ellen Make's post-operative autobiography entitled *Saving Throw* (2004). I scrutinize Sandy Stone's thought-provoking claim on the enabling theoretical opportunities of "the transsexual as a text" that allows us "to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries"<sup>9</sup>. I examine whether the relativization of gender binaries can ever result in the suspension of categories of sex, of the sexed subject, of identity's predestination by biology, or of taboos related to sexualized corporeality which are paradoxically preserved in our increasingly hedonistic societies. Throughout an overview of contemporary theories of transgender subjectivity and an in-depth analysis of fictional reformulations of transgender being, my ultimate focus concentrates on the transgender textual/sexual chaos' contributions to an ethical reconsideration of the cultural process of 'othering'. I reveal how transgenderism leads to the re-examination of the concepts of 'difference', 'otherness' and 'alterity' in favour of a non-sacrificial, non-marginalizing, relational and caring model of self-identity. This trans-identity might not guarantee happy endings in the conventional sense of the term, yet might set us off in an exciting journey towards the enriching heterogenization of ourselves.

### **Contemporary Theories of the Transgender Body**

Transgender is an umbrella term applied to a variety of individuals whose psychosexual sex as lived gender identity, as 'internally felt' body- and ego-

image diverges from their innate biological sex and the normatively assigned gender role determined by it, so that the non-conforming difference between the outer physique and the inner psyche results in the tension of dis-identification, and a desire for harmonization through re-stylizations of the body and re-embodiments (surgery, cross-dressing, drag). The category of transgender can refer to: 1. An individual who identifies with the other sex/gender without undergoing a sex-change operation; 2. A transsexual who completed or is at a certain stage of the complex, multi-stage sex/gender reassignment surgical process;<sup>10</sup> 3. A transvestite, cross-dresser, or drag-king/queen who periodically and voluntarily wears clothing associated with the opposite gender;<sup>11</sup> 4. All "cross-identifying",<sup>12</sup> gender-complex subjects who define themselves starting out from their experience as intersexual, androgynous, genderqueer or third-sex persons<sup>13</sup> dissatisfied with heteronormative scenarios of sex-based identity. Transgender is an extremely heterogeneous label regarding embodiment, identification and sexual orientation alike. A transgender person may be homosexual/lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual or attracted to other transgender persons.<sup>14</sup> Her/his body may be sex-changed, in transition, cross-dressed or stylized, spectacularly ambiguous or passing as unmarked. (S)he may identify her/himself as male-to-female (M2F), female-to-male (F2M), or in-between, as someone who gained mastery of an accomplished, coherent identity (via a surgically-enhanced change that re-established the "normal" state) or as a fundamentally nomadic, instable, transitory genderqueer person moving from one identity-in-process towards an other heterogeneous one. (S)he may be interpreted as a strictly third-sex individual beyond binary categories or as a solidarious member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community/movement. Not all transvestites enact a spectacularly exaggerated parodical and political gender-performance *à la* Judith Butler, and not all transsexuals wish to pass as original and normal, merging into the system utterly invisibly.

Illustrating the basic tenet of Gender Studies on the personal being political, the most significant theoreticians of transgender studies are transgender persons themselves (Sandy Stone, Judith Halberstam, Susan Stryker). Yet gender trouble proves to be a constant object of fascination for professionals and laymen of a more 'conventional' gender identity, while the transgender body recurs as a theme of academic conferences and a topos of popular cultural artworks more and more frequently. However, as Susan Stryker argues in her article tellingly entitled "Transgender Feminism" the dilemmas emerging in transgender experience and theory are not simply *interesting* but also *important* from the perspective of current streams of Gender Studies, especially those focusing on potentials redefinitions of identity. Transgender

sheds a new light on identity as a socially constructed (disciplined, normativized, engendered), compulsively repeated yet deconstructable entity. It highlights identity's performative, narrative, citational, and relational aspect. Identity becomes communally meaningful via norm-setting, truth-producing repetitions and conformist re-enactments, yet it can be restaged, misread, rewritten in alternative ways, re-imagining the ego not in terms of oppositions but in enabling bonds. Most importantly, transempodiment stresses the significance of our corporeal experience and our embodied selves in affecting the formation of our identities, our experience of the world, our knowledge of reality. Yet the transgender identity's emphasis on the body, instead of signifying a return to conventional biologism,<sup>15</sup> proposes a thought-provoking destabilization of the psyche and soma divide. The "natural", innate and inherently socialized-engendered body is coined a 'wrong body' to become the subject of refashioning self-stylizations or of radical surgical corrections in order to fit the felt, lived, chosen psychosexual gender's alternative corporeal/narrative text(ure), weaving an other body and an other story. A biologically male, psychosexually female transgender person is not a man suffering from psychic disorders, but a woman born with a *bodily* deformation that can be corrected through a surgery referred to as the "operation of the *soul*".<sup>16</sup> The "prison of the body" is re-articulated as a complex, malleable and shifting space with diffuse borders where ideological inscriptions, normative cultural narratives and alternative, embodied material practices clash. Sexualities, genders and embodiments are revealed as styles rather than lifestyles, as fictions rather than facts of life, as potentialities rather than as fixed identities.<sup>17</sup>

Transgender's questioning of dualisms, hierarchies, and centers and the reconception of meaning, identity and body as a social construct and dynamic act coincides with the major projects of poststructuralist cultural critical investigations. Therefore, it is small wonder that from the 1990s transgender turns into the very metaphor of subversion for contemporary social theory. In Jean Baudrillard's view the transsexual playfully undermining reality and surgically or semiotically manipulating its body into a simulacrum of spectacular signs embodies the disillusioned postmodern subject revelling in a posttraumatic state after the loss of authenticity. Rita Felski hails the transgender person beyond traditional gender binaries as the harbinger of the end of history, great metanarratives and of western positivist, teleological myths of development. According to Judith Butler, the parodic drag performance bears a political potential able to defamiliarize and denaturalize gender by virtue of the showy, over-theatricalized re-enactment of its stereotypes. Sandy Stone's groundbreaking "Posttranssexual Manifesto" interprets the transsexual as a dissonant text(ure) vibrated by unexpected geometries and alternative



organizations which invite to the productive subversion of structured sexuality and the ordinary spectrum of desire.<sup>18</sup>

However, as numerous transgender theoreticians claim, postmodern metaphorizations or idealizations of the transgender body are problematic in so far as they locate transgressive value in those most spectacular performative acts of norm-violation which make the transgender subject's life most unsafe.<sup>19</sup> The visibility of otherness risks stigmatization, and the transgender experience likely involves in place of limitless play a constant confrontation with negative discrimination as misogyny, homophobia, racism, looksism, disability, medical colonization, coercive psychiatrization, undocumented labour, border control, state surveillance, population profiling, prison industrial complex, employment- or housing discrimination, lack of health care, denial of access to social services, and violent hate crimes.<sup>20</sup>

Transgender frequently functions as a pathological term. Its medical definition, gender identity disorder (GID) or gender dysphoria, implies that the deviation from the socially prescribed, comprehensible identity-scheme/body-image is cured by the patient's normativization and redirection into the natural path outlined by the heterosexual logic thinking in terms of hierarchical gender binaries. A transgender person is eligible for sex-reassignment surgery once s/he has convincingly and enduringly proved to the consulting psychiatrist, within personality tests and during the one/two-year Real Life Test<sup>21</sup> that s/he 'naturally' belongs to the other gender: s/he does not suffer from personality, mental or chromosomal disorders but can be labelled a transgender person whose psychic troubles can be cured by surgically-implemented physical modification of the 'wrong body'. Paradoxically, the transgender individual can gain a socially naturalized status by virtue of his/her performativity, through authentically reproducing the stereotypical feminine/masculine gender roles fostered by our patriarchal heteronormative society. Accordingly, an overwhelmingly feminine behaviour and outlook (pretty dress, make-up, fainting at the sight of blood) guarantees a truthful feminine ego/psyche and thus justifies the sex-change surgery. Ironically – as Sandy Stone recalls – at Stanford clinic pioneering in gender dysphoria research and sex reconstruction surgery in the 1960s the sex-change candidates' behavioural profiles matched up perfectly the medical textbook criteria of the homogenized diagnostical category and 'deviant norm' of transgenderism simply because the candidates conscientiously learnt (to meet) the contents of the very medical textbook passed clandestine from hand to hand within the transsexual community.<sup>22</sup> By now, professional gender-coaches train post- and pre-operation transgender persons helping them to acquire the 'authentic' attributes, behavioural patterns, body-management, discursive strategies of the chosen gender, enabling them to pass as real. Conforming to the

pathologizing, normalizing, medical understanding of transgender the ultimate aim of transition is to pass as real, as unmarked, belonging to one of the existing gender categories, and decisively doing away with any marks of difference.

However, this passing has its disabling aspects. As Caroline-Anne Tyler suggests, "the mark of passing successfully is the lack of a mark of passing, of a signifier of some difference from what one seems to be", passing is an "activity whose agent is obscured, immersed in the mainstream, instead of swimming against the tide", invisible to the predatory eye in search of its mark, and very likely unheard, unremarkable, silent and indifferent due to its mimicry of the over-represented, thus invisible norm.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, the obedient reproduction of heterosexist gender clichés, the illusory self-homogenization, the unproblematic transition from the wrong (fe)male body to natural (wo)manhood, and the willing re-integration into the normative system can be criticized from various perspectives.

Janice Radway became a spokesperson of the "transphobic"<sup>24</sup> second-wave feminism with her 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* that condemned transsexuals as constructs of an evil phallogocratic empire involved in immoral acts of appropriating women's powers and invading women's spaces, "raping real womanhood" and devaluing original femininity by reducing it to artifice through deceptive travesty.<sup>25</sup>

The lesbian critique of transgenderism focuses on the supposed radical discontinuity between the pre-operative and post-operative identity, arguing that if we presume that a transgender person arrives immediately and naturally right after the sex-change operation from one pole of gendered experience into the other conforming to the conventional heterosexual dualism, then the intermediate space in the sexuality continuum will remain invisible. The idea of "pure gender identity" and the "denial of potentialities of mixture"<sup>26</sup> are further problematized claiming that sudden gendered-identity change (brought about by the sex-change) is highly dubitable since the embodied ego can be interpreted only in terms of its historicity, the present and future can only build upon the past. Besides its potentially innovative, radically revolutionary performative aspect, identity has a strictly temporal narrative dimension, whereby during the textual self-re-constructions one can de/reconstruct or mis-remember but never fully forget who one used to be, while corporeal memory does not cease to persist either.

While lesbian and feminist criticism recently succeeded in exploring the positive potentials of heterogeneous identity, the popular discourse of the media influenced by heteronormative ideology still tends to make use of 'othering' clichés whenever referring to the transgender phenomenon. As Judith Halberstam remarks in relation with transgender biographies written by non-

transgender authors, the motivations of stereotyping misrepresentations may include: 1. A project of stabilization by establishing the transgender narrative as strange, uncharacteristic and even pathological; 2. A project of rationalization by trying to find reasonable explanations for outrageous behaviour "returning the temporarily transgender subject to the comforting and seemingly inevitable matrix of hetero-domesticity;" or 3. A project of trivialization dismissing the transgender life as non-representative and inconsequential.<sup>27</sup> Conforming to the popular stereotypes transgender persons are both ridiculous and dangerous, self-mis-representing fools and enemies; they are clever players, histrionic actors, aggressive conspirators, sexually immature or degenerate plot-makers determined to hide the shameful truth under a deceiving disguise.<sup>28</sup> Tellingly, comic imitation, artistic effort, and especially playback singing, this voiceless, mute gawping familiar from transvestite karaoke performances becomes a generalizing personality-marker of transgender persons who presumably live off of travesty, of the copy of the original, lacking a voice of their own. According to Heather L. Johnson the over-identification with the established (feminine) gender role also re-emerges in post-operative male-to-female transgender autobiographies characterized by an over-effeminately loquacious, emotional, superficial narrative voice/style.<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting to consider the kinds of counter-narratives the postmodernist concept of transgender identity generates despite/against its common homogenization, stereotypes, heteronormativization and silencing. In Halberstam's view,

We are all transsexuals except that the referent of the *trans* becomes less and less clear (and more and more queer). We are all cross-dressers but where are we crossing from and to what? There is no other side, no opposite sex, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing. We all pass or we don't, we all wear our drag, and we all derive a different degree of pleasure – sexual or otherwise – from our costumes. It is just that for some of our costumes are made of fabric or material, while for others they are made of skin; for some an outfit can be changed; for others skin must be re-sewn. There are no transsexuals.<sup>30</sup>

Halberstam proposes to call all elective body alterations (be they postcancer, postaccident or gender dysphoric) "cosmetic surgery", and to abandon the term "sex-change" since it invokes traditional gender binaries, presuming that there is a shift from one to the other.<sup>31</sup> For Stryker the relation between biological sex and social gender is not so much mimetic, but is a category much closer to citizenship: it can be attained by non-native residents of a particular location by following certain procedures<sup>32</sup> to finally enrich the nation's diversity. In my opinion, the flexible, radically unfixed, self-destabilizing category of transgender matches most clearly cosmopolitan

identity's self-proclaimed heterogeneity. According to the 2003 UN proposal of ILGA-Europe,<sup>33</sup> besides the free choice of sexual orientation the free expression of gender identity is a basic human right and liberty related to the right of human dignity, self-identity, self-governance, freedom of action and of private property control.

A postmodernist conception of transgender holds bodily, identity-political,<sup>34</sup> ethical and epistemological strategies which bear the potential to challenge the compulsory, body-taming, identity-controlling textures prescribed by the heteronormative, hegemonic patriarchy. The sex-based gender offers itself as a guarantee of a meaningful identity in order to cover its functioning as a technology of ideological discipline and social surveillance of the embodied subject. Nevertheless, once we learn to interpret identity as a variable performance, a re-writable text or flexible fiction, we shall be able to recognize the viability of an exciting, dynamic whole (de/re)composed of conventionally incompatible parts, a conception of the self not as a stagnated in-between, but as a series of trans-formations. A trans-identity builds upon transition instead of fixity. Performativity, metamorphosis and transformability as bases of self-identity have an ethically invested identity-political significance since they help to discover the other in the self, to explore the similarity of the familiar same and the unusual different. Our inherent heterogeneity makes the category of exclusion meaningless and unnecessary. The narrative aspect of trans-identity also proves to be of a considerable significance: since the innate biological sex and the socially conditioned gender coinciding with it contradict the chosen, alternative gender identity, a sex-change operation or a cross-dressing self-stylization attempt to harmonize this contradiction, yet the initial/inherent tension cannot be fully done away with, there is no amnesiac deletion of the past self or body. The history of the self, the discursively constructed identity includes the pre-operative, (non)normative self and the post-operative, deconstructed, recreated, 'de-normativized' self circumscribing a narrative in which events follow each other in a non-sequential,<sup>35</sup> inconsequential, conventionally illogic manner, narrating a self who was, has become, and will remain different, unfinished and changing. The understanding of this experience may expand the cultural limits of the acceptability of change/transition.

It is noteworthy that transgender identity-change and body-transformation never takes place isolated. The Obligatory Transsexual File containing newspaper articles, media reportage, "bits of forbidden diary entries about inappropriate gender behaviour"<sup>36</sup> and own trans experience fulfils a key role in transgender person's life, facilitating the comprehension and acceptance of the self through understanding others. Transgender identity is constituted in terms of solidarious relations, bonds with others sharing the similarly differing

experience of dis/re/embodiment. The constitution of trans self-identity has nothing to do with dualisms, hierarchization and exclusion or the unveiling of a secret truth, a real ego. The epistemology outlined by transgender identity suggests that the whole can be appreciated for its heterogeneity, for being more than a sum of its parts, that the other is not so much a problem to solve but an unknown yet potentially enriching possibility hidden in the ego.

The following fictional transgender self-writings to be analysed can be regarded as parts of a Transsexual File. They are fragments which together make up a heterogeneous body, texts whose comparative interfacing may facilitate our comprehension of the transgender body and identity. Moreover, they prove to be par excellence enactments of the Foucauldian "technologies of the self", taking the forms of self-re-stylizing corporeal performances and non-self-corrective autobiographical ego-narratives which challenge the body-disciplining, discursively containing technologies of power through "permit[ting] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thought, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness".<sup>37</sup> The question my essay attempts to tackle is whether these alternative joys can ever reach beyond the frames of conventional (self)representation, body-organization, meaning-formation and social structure.

### **Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968)<sup>38</sup>**

The narrator-heroine of Gore Vidal's satire, Myra Breckinridge, experiences a multiple transgendering process, a chronologically troubled succession of un/en-gendering sex-transitions. Myra introduces herself as perfect embodiment of *femme fatale*-ish femininity rebelling against the passive gender role socially assigned to her, and turns out to have been a male-to-female, sex-changed transsexual plot-maker only towards the end of the novel when, due to a car accident, s/he is surgically re-transformed back into a man who surprisingly seems willing to enact the conformist scenario of normative masculinity this time.

In the beginning, Myra appears as an extremely attractive young woman, widow of film critic Myron Breckinridge, a specialist in the Golden Age of Hollywood movies, who suddenly arrives to the acting academy owned by her ex-husband's uncle, Buck Loner with aim to persuade uncle Buck with strategies as various as coquetterie and blackmail to let her embark on the formation of youth that would enable her to change the world. For Myra teaching her regular classes (Posture and Empathy) allows her to fulfil her mission, 'a part of the hidden curriculum': female domination, a revenge on machismo, and a liberatory re-creation of sexes beyond the essentially binary, heteronormative, reproductive

sexual economy. Myra prophetically proclaims herself to be the New Woman "whom no man will ever possess...though she will possess men, in her own good time and in ways convenient to her tyrannious lust" (18). In Myra's diary the ultimate token of her identity is her eroticized, hyper-feminized, seductress-dominatrix-castratrix body modelled on Hollywood sex symbols. Yet beyond her visible, radically feminist gestures, her very mission of destabilizing gender roles makes her trans-sexual, androgynous. Forsaking the familiar she promises to "cease altogether to be human and become legend like Jesus, Buddha, Cybele" (9). The hidden secret of her transsexuality, the invisible past history of his body helps Myra to denaturalize embodiment as an 'unreal', performative act, and to recognize gender as illusion based on a repetition lacking a primary referent. Myron/Myra's knowledge of his/her other self, of his/her modified body's ambiguity, and his/her recognition of humans' misrecognition in engendered subjectivity is interpreted by her/him as a supreme knowledge, a power attributed to the *Übermensch*, a divine, superhuman creature who is also supplied with self-irony and a libertine playfulness. The *trans* prefix in transgender implies her exceeding the human race, while a mocking imagery reminiscent of a M2F sex-reassignment surgery, "the phallus cracks, the uterus opens" (9) serves to describe her divinity, her mission as a Goddess ready to reveal that there is life beyond our heterosexualized, engendered, biologically assigned bodies. Myra enacts the classic libertine in so far as she utterly disregards socially sanctioned morals, norms and behaviour and revels in sado-masochism, nihilism and free love. Her individual purpose is to work out in life all one's fantasies unpunished and become entirely whole (65). Yet beyond self-realization her mock-didactic, mock-democratizing, self-satirically humanist project aims at a communal sexual-liberation by enlightening people about the need to "destroy the last vestigial traces of traditional [gender] in the race to realign the sexes, thus reducing population while increasing human happiness and preparing humanity for its next stage" (38).

Arguing that the relation between the sexes is governed by a struggle for power, Myra reinterprets on a micro-dynamic level Foucault's paranoid vision of omnipresent power-machines and their subtle ideological control over the subject. Ironically, technologies of power (aiming at the constant disciplining of others via covered-contained strategies enticing all with illusory safety) are identified precisely with the technologies of the self (aiming at individual happiness via the management of one's own body). Heterosexuality's over-romanticized master-myth of the Platonian half-beings united by love into a perfect whole is demythologized claiming that our interpersonal exchanges are governed by the desire to achieve control over the other, and what keeps our relations going is only the private fantasy of each concerned party to be in

power. Moreover, all transgression is contained, since even acts coded as deviant from a (hetero)normative perspective are involved in the microdynamics of the fight for domination:

The sailor who stands against the wall, looking down at the bobbing head of the gobbling queen regards himself as master of the situation; yet it is the queen (does not that derisive epithet suggest primacy and dominion?) who has won the day, extracting from the flesh of the sailor his posterity, the one element in every man which is eternal...the ultimate elixir of victory, that which was not meant for him but for the sailor's wife or girl or simply Woman. (80)

With a cunning autobiographical strategy doubling, deviating, deconstructing the self, Myra remembers Myron as her mirror-image and soul-mate, yet challenging the reader's expectations he turns out to be not her deceased ex-husband but her pre-operative, biologically male, but spiritually transgender, old self. As we learn from Myra's narrative, Myron has been a polymorphous perverse being with an evenly balanced sadomasochistic proportion. He was driven both by the desire to fully surrender to his nature's feminine side (embodied by Myra) and the socially masculinized aggressive will to achieve power over both sexes, and even over life itself, gaining ecstasy from the transgression of the forbidden. The self-made, re-embodied Myra's aim is to accomplish Myron's goal, to fulfil the basic "Dionysian necessity in our lives" (92).

Myra/Myron's recognition on the coexistence of law and transgression, on human being's inherent urge to perversity and discipline, on the impossibility of a place beyond the workings of power, is far from being pan-hedonistic and can be easily problematized from an ethical perspective given that pleasures are by far not distributed evenly. Myron/Myra relativizes the pain caused to the others, and remains carefully in a dominatrix power position, identifying her/himself with a messiah, an experimenter, an anthropologist lamenting over the peculiar human fate to touch or kill all things we touch (cf. 122). In the novel's most climactic scene, Myra punishes the most handsome stud of the acting academy, Rusty Godowsky, for his powerful machismo by humiliating and sodomizing him with a strapped-on dildo in the infirmary, persuading him to thank her the efforts she has made for the sake of his education. Actually Rusty's only guilt is his ultimate desirability, and his anachronistic insistence on outdated heterosexual values as faithful, monogamous relationship, marriage and having children. In the end Myra's plot takes ironic twists. Rusty becomes a misogynist, sadistic macho causing extreme pleasures to the aging, horny, masochist talent-seeker Letitia Van Allen and then matures into a happy homosexual. Myra herself, hospitalized after a car accident, deprived of the necessary hormone injections and forced to have her silicone breasts removed, is transformed back

into Myron to settle in an absurdly cheerful and conformist family life as a Christian Scientist working on Planned Parenthood with Mary-Ann, Rusty's ex-girlfriend, whom she failed to seduce as Myra, but ends up marrying as Myron.

Paradoxically, by the end Myra/Myron promises to enact the conventionally engendered plot-line designed by patriarchy. His heteronormative master-narrative proposes to contain or tame the multiplicity of past transformations of his/her M2F-F2M body. Nevertheless readers remain uncertain about the transgender body's ceasing to challenge his final gender conformity. Vidal's novel is radical at the time of its publication since it illustrates the fluidity of gender continuum, narrating the enactment of non-heterosexual, non-reproduction-oriented desires, suggesting that a post-operative M2F transsexual is not necessarily limited to womanly pleasures experienced with men. During the ominous infirmary rape-scene Myra equipped with a strapped-on dildo transforms her body into a hermaphrodite body simultaneously realizing female domination, maternal mystery ("to make the wound and then to heal it" [188]) and her past self's, Myron's sadistic homoerotic drives ("to destroy the adored destroyer" [152]). Later, even after having regained her/his male body s/he acts as a gentle, caring lesbian with Mary-Ann. Pleasure dwells in the in-between.

Vidal attempts at the trans-gendering of the text, of the narrative voice via various rhetorical, stylistic, narrative strategies. Myra's diary clearly uses the rhetoric of pornography. With seducing sentences like "my immediate task is to impress upon you how disturbingly beautiful I am with large breasts hanging free, for I am wearing nothing but black mesh panties in this overheated room" (9) the narrator directly addresses readers inviting them to a traditionally masculinized voyeuristic position. Yet the story of the female dominatrix conquering men and women alike denies the classic pleasure of the male gaze, and points towards feminist joys conventionally incompatible with the porn genre. The first person singular narrative increasingly interpellating readers to identification also adds to the confusion, since our sexy heroine, Myra Breckinridge, created by the male author Gore Vidal, turns out to be a bisexual, lesbian, feminist domina, who had been a homosexual masochist male, and will be a male incorporated by the heterosexual reproductive economy. Ironically, the implied reader of the text is psychoanalyst Dr. Montag, who co-authored with Myron a book entitled *Sexual Roles* that Myra undertakes to both actualize and subvert.

Moreover, the novel is made up of variously gendered narrative voices. Myra's diary-entries written with the therapeutic purpose of fully knowing her newly re-embodied self are complemented by her/his apparently retrospective, metatextual comments on the impossibility of the truthful representation of an



authentic self and an unspeakable corporeality. Besides Myra/Myron's sarcastic and rational, thus rather 'masculine', metatextual, retrospective remarks, a different perspective is granted by the chapters containing transcriptions of Uncle Buck's Dictaphone recordings which mockingly recall an *écriture féminine* due to their fragmentation, orality, rhythmic repetitiveness, italicization, lack of punctuation and capitalization, and the *jouissant*, material body's intrusion in the text. The ex-Western star, macho Uncle Buck produces stream-of-consciousness-like monologues worthy of Molly Bloom, as he records his views on Myra/Myron while excitedly planning or receiving erotic massage or hungrily thinking of his wife's cooking, and making lists of food to buy, of the type "don't forget to pick up sour cream for Bobbies beef Stroganoff" (97) or:

*Rusty seemed upset by this I guess because he thinks Myra will tell Mary Ann well its no business of mine and thats for sure Milly you are the best ever and if you keep up theres a big surprise coming your way strike that period paragraph Myra asked permission to use the infirmary tonight God knows why I suppose she is mixing up some poison which is my prayer she takes Jesus Milly don't stop Milly Jesus Milly. (130)*

Myra/Myron's diary writing is driven by a psycho-therapeutical purpose, an act of liberation, a perverse pleasure of telling the truth while knowing that the communication of the real is impossible. Moreover, it is motivated by the intention to create a masterpiece in much the same way she created herself. The New Woman's "astonishing history [...] a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife-sharp realities" (8) aims at a dissection and a re-membering of the body, a re-presentation of her/his re-embodiment, a semioticization of the body and a somatization of the text, presenting readers with an exact, literal sense of "what it is like to possess superbly shaped breasts reminiscent of those sported by Jean Harlow" and "perfect thighs resembling that archetypal mandolin from which the male principle draws forth music" (8). The narrative referred to as a "common voyage to my interior" (9) is identified with an anatomical act, while aware that "there are no words to describe for you exactly what my body is like" (13). As Attila Kiss demonstrates in his analysis of proto-modern and post-modern cultural practices, the body's spectacularization, anatomical penetration, and the opening up of corporeal surface can be regarded as the emblem of epistemological crisis, when our communal interpretive methods and models for knowing the world suddenly seem insufficient.<sup>39</sup> *Myra Breckinridge* is a novel of the 1960s in so far as it applies a camp irony, exaggeration, and bad taste as a means of social criticism, sexual liberation, and a defence of the non-conventional, low, popular cultural forms. Yet it is also a typical postmodernist opus by virtue of staging the anxieties resulting from the relativization of hierarchies, the destabilization of systems of values and morals and the challenging of categories of self, text and body experienced as heterogeneous

process in crisis, open to deconstruction, fictionalization, self-stylization and re-writing. No matter how empowering the transgression of limits may be, the lack of an alternative order leaves us uncertain, dissatisfied, curious, charged with the burden of the insupportable lightness of being (in crisis), cast in metamorphic bodies, fluid genders, performative identities. Myra/Myron, the postmodern self-writer feels unique as a result of her self-knowledge ("I know what I want, and I know what I am, a creation of my own will"), but her/his question remains the same as the traditional autobiographer's, "But who am I? What do I feel? Do I exist at all?" – and knowing that these questions are fundamentally unanswerable, s/he continues to sway in-between, "apprehensive, obscurely excited", "aware that something strange is about to happen" (117).

### **Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1978)<sup>40</sup>**

*The Passion of New Eve* occupies a confusing, in-between position in Angela Carter's oeuvre as a turning point, a symbolical milestone of a significant authorial shift from a static gloomy realism to a dynamic picaresque magical realism, from ruthless heroes to witty heroines, from obsession with patriarchs to the celebration of daughters.<sup>41</sup> Most significantly, this in-between novel also symbolically transgresses genders by re-enacting a crucial turn in Carter's literary career, her transformation from what she calls "a male impersonator" into a politically self-conscious woman-writer.<sup>42</sup> The novel can be regarded as a transitional text of the corpus for various other reasons: it simultaneously discloses gendered embodiment as spectacular performance and painful entrapment, and it traces a picaresque journey that returns disillusioned to its stagnant point of origin, while its sadistic masculine hero also proves to be its suffering feminine heroine. Despite its unanimous feminist celebration, the novel is "a bitter and quite uncomfortable book to read," or at most a "piece of black comedy",<sup>43</sup> a dark vision completely lacking the triumphant tone of Carter's subsequent feminist novels.

The novel is a fictional retrospective reminiscence narrated by Evelyn, an ineradicably misogynist macho English teacher surgically transformed and psychologically conditioned by the revengeful, militant feminist to become New Eve, the perfect embodiment of the sensual and submissive femininity. Sex-change operation is used as part of a utopian feminist project to deconstruct patriarchal, phallogocentric myths, hierarchies and privileges, the binary essentialism of gender-representation. The mad-scientist and self-proclaimed goddess nicknamed Mother plans to turn Eve/lyn into the New Messiah of Antithesis by surgically changing his sex and impregnating her newly gained female body with his own semen. Although Eve/lyn escapes from this techno-feminist plot, s/he must undergo all trials and tribulations of 'becoming women'.

During her passion-like journey through apocalyptic landscapes s/he is abused physically, psychically and overall sexually by self-masculinizing yet unmanly figures as the Nietzschean tyrant-poet, the infertile Zero or the immature child-crusader boys.

The scene most widely celebrated for overturning limiting narratives of engendered embodied identity is when the male-to-female sex-changed Eve/lyn copulates with his boyhood-idol, the movie star Tristessa, who turns out to be a biologically male transvestite performer convincingly enacting classic icons of suffering, sexualized femininity impersonating Desdemona, Cathy Earnshaw and the Camelia Lady alike. At the peak of gender trouble, Eve/lyn and Tristessa perform a freakish parody of a wedding ceremony. The originally male, masculine Evelyn, surgically transformed into hyper-feminine Eve, is cross-dressed as a bridegroom, and thus becomes "a boy disguised as a girl and now disguised as a boy again" (132), who under the masculine mask wears another, irremovable mask of femininity hiding his authentic maleness. The transvestite Tristessa – whose performance of femininity as a cross-dresser's disguise becomes her nature – is stripped of the accessories of his faked femininity, to be exposed as biologically male, and, adding one more twist to gender bender, he is dressed in the drag of a bride. Both (de-, re-)gendered, (un)masked partners fuse bride and groom into one in a multiple *mise-en-abyme*, and destabilize identities via the confusion of personal pronouns, evolving from 'he', 'she', to 'we', and 'it'. Yet, their subversive 'gender trouble' takes place with the mad poet Zero pointing his gun at them, "*forc[ing] them*] out of the selves into which [they] had been born", *forcing* them to enter the realm of negation, to become echoes of clichés, copies of spectacular fictions (136), disembodying no-bodies. The forced marriage is followed by Eve/lyn's and Tristessa's coerced, unpleasurable copulation, a 'double rape' directed by the revengeful Zero, who cruelly humiliates and violates both of the newly weds. The bound Tristessa and the sodomized Eve/lyn, these broken and bleeding bodies, these lost beings definitely fail to evoke the liberatory subversive potential of transgendered being.

In Carter's sceptic view, the gender-troubling body modifications of trans-identities function as social critiques only in so far as they illustrate our inability to escape from the grasp of ideology reduplicating heterosexual fantasies (such as the trope of the eternal fight between the sexes). The transgender body designed as a feminist revenge on patriarchal body control (aestheticization, idealization, pathologization, sexualization of female bodies) finally ends up in fulfilling the most sadistic fantasies of male domination, inflicting pain on women and depriving impotent men of pleasure. No wonder, at the end of the novel Eve/lyn throws away the portable mini-refrigerator containing her

amputated penis, and she sails away into nowhere, disillusioned, presumably pregnant but with no expectations left. Ironically, she disappears from the readers' view floating away on the ocean she calls a "mother of mysteries", thus she mockingly re-feminizes a conventionally masculine entity, and transgenders space marked by an infinity she knows to be illusory.

Heather L. Johnson's original reading of the novel argues that the surgically sex-changed Eve/lyn's retrospective autobiographical reminiscences highly resemble non-fictional accounts of transgender experience. The questioning of the gender status of the 'I' in the text – due to the collision between the pre- and post-operative states, the old male sense of the self and the new female appearance – results in the reconstruction of gendered identity as a performance, an identification with drag queens, a fetishization of one's own body, and an overplayed effeminate transvestite style. In the long run, this could either contribute to the endorsement of the normatively hierarchical gender relations, or on the contrary, to the camp re-reading of heterosexual physicality in a parodic narrative style, deferring seriously fixed statements on self and sex, and underscoring issues of gender artifice. Despite these ambiguous narrative potentials outlined, Johnson comfortably celebrates in *The Passion of New Eve* the transgender deconstructive potential fuelled by the "dissonance", "disruption" and "fragmentation" hailed in Sandy Stone's manifesto.<sup>44</sup> However, the trans body/text's potential is highly problematic once one recognizes that the iconic images of transsexual transgression are consequently associated with suffering: Tristessa's "pool of gender fluidity" is a pool of glass tears, the "parodic waxwork figures" are cruelly dismembered puppets, and the "transgender hermaphroditic union in the desert" is a desperate and futile attempt at survival, a last instinctive enactment of the Freudian pleasure drive.

Although Eve/lyn's narrative questions the gender identity of the autobiographically narrated self, and reflects post-operative antagonisms, yet it never succeeds in providing a triumphantly feminist (sub)version of prevailing gender dichotomies and narrative frames. Instead of offering alternatives through a liberatory polyphony of harmoniously complementary or interchangeable voices, Carter's transgender being remains stuck within a textual/sexual chaos. A cacophonous duo of dissonant voices from the radically stereotyped gender poles, the extremely effeminate transvestite's and the ineradicably masculinist, cross-dresser-like M2F transsexual's narrative voices constantly interrupt, violate, castrate or abort each other within Eve/lyn's narrative, painfully shattering it into pieces. Instead of tracing a pleasantly enabling transgender alternative, antagonistically gendered voices disrupt each other in a ventriloquous manner. On the one hand, Evelyn's 'original' hyper-masculine voice never ceases to give his misogynist macho comments on her

own painful womanly adventures. After the sex-change operation the hero/ine sees herself with his own old male gaze as a stirring, "cock-twitching" *Playboy* centrefold, and comments her own rape distanced and disinterested with the words "Poor Eve! She's being screwed again!" (91). On the other hand, New Eve(lyn)'s 'newly gained' over-effeminate identity's female voice destabilizes the misogynist narrative via a cutting (self)irony always already complementing the retrospective narrative. At his own surgical castration he thinks to himself "Oh, the dreadful symbolism of that knife! To be castrated with a phallic symbol!" (70) In the end, Eve/lyn's questioning of her/his stable identity coincides with the destabilization of her status as a reliable autobiographer, complemented by the experience of disembodiment, of the alienation of the embodied identity reflected in the lines: "Even my memories no longer fitted me, they were old clothes belonging to somebody else no longer living" (92).

The gender status of the 'I' is doubly destabilized in the text as the post-operative transsexual writing subject's gender trouble is echoed in the 'natural-born' transvestite's incorporated narrative of the self. Yet the designation of the embodied self tellingly switches from "woman", "man", "she", "he" to arrive at "it" a distanced third person pronoun, that strangely seems adequate to define the confusingly de-, re- and de-gendered selves. 'It', as a personal pronoun, is associated with an alienated thing, an empty sign, a nothing that provokes a feeling of dissolution, confusion, regret and painful loss, instead of triumphantly liberatory heterogeneous subjectivities generated by the availability of multiple identity-, gender-, narrative categories. As the transsexual Eve/lyn says of the Tiresias-like, transvestite Tristessa:

... I crept up to *him* and kissed *her* pitiful, bare feet with *their* fine ankles and high ballerina's arches. I could not think of *him* as a man, my confusion was perfect—as perfect as the exemplary confusion of the proud solitary *heroine* who now underwent the unimaginable ordeal of a confrontation with the essential aspect of *its* being *it* had so grandly abandoned, the implicit *maleness* *it* had never been able to assimilate into *itself*.  
(128, *my emphasis*)

The transgender narrative is decomposed by contrarily gendered voices merely to reflect a nervously narrated neurotic, 'neither/nor' body, tormented by a gradual disembodiment. The disinterested alienation from one's own body results from the 'perpetual vanishing' of the solid subjectivity. The novel's transgender figures instead of enjoying playful polyphony or subversive gender bendings seem to be traumatized by the inaccessibility of a safely homogenized, closed, self-sufficient identity. As the post-operative Eve/lyn declares, disillusioned: "I know nothing. I am a tabula rasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape. Not a woman, no: both more and less than a real woman" (83). Instead of

the immaculate harmony of the Platonic hermaphroditic union, the fusion of multiply gendered bodies reinforces the inevitable fragmentation of the heterogeneous subject. Even the evocation of androgyny – through Tristessa's identification with Tiresias – implies the insupportable sorrow of the autonomous self doomed to disruption. Eve/lyn and Tristessa are like Balzac's Zambinella or Foucault's Herculine Barbin,<sup>45</sup> whose fractured hybrid bodies signify impossibility, madness or melancholy exactly via embodying the disruptive potential shattering the homogenized, engendered, interpellated subject. Despite Johnson's proposition, in Carter the transgendered self remains impossible. 'Either-or' ('feminine' versus 'masculine') gender dichotomies are confused only to produce 'neither/nor' no-bodies, disillusioned no-ones painfully disintegrating the text.

In this sense, instead of Judith Butler's playfully gender-troubling, parodically political transvestite performance, Carter's text recalls Jean Baudrillard's sceptic interpretation of the postmodern subject as transsexual transvestite being characterized by a disillusioned play with the non-difference of genders, a disinterest towards sexuality as a source of pleasure, and a surgical or semiotic manipulation of the body turned into a hyper-real prosthesis, an artificial androgyne. Baudrillard's 'post-transsexual' subject is distinguished by a disbelief in authentic identity that is displayed through the over-theatricalization, the elusive performance of one's self-simulating image(s), surfacing in an ambiguous, ephemeral, changing look.<sup>46</sup> Eve/lyn and Tristessa prophetically foreshadow Baudrillard's contemporary gender-bending fugitives, these genetically baroque beings with non-identifiable identities, these unreliable simulacra, reflecting, from a pessimistic, paranoid perspective, a postmodern *Zeitgeist* of radical agnosticism, uncertainty, anxiety and chaos. Moreover, the emblematic meeting place of the Carterian transgender beings is the American desert, which is a symbolic landscape in Baudrillard's philosophy,<sup>47</sup> as this dystopian space symbolizes irreferentiality and disconnection, ending up in the desireless immobility of an immanent, 'solar' neutrality.

From a cultural critical perspective, the story of the misogynist macho surgically transformed by militant feminists into a perfect woman emblemizes the paradoxical and problematic aspects of the process how feminism had to "carve out its own identity from the unisex mould of 1960s radical politics and counterculture movements".<sup>48</sup> It also illustrates how the sixties' human rights movements in general uncompromisingly took 'difference' as a symbol of the fight for equality, and thus kept the idealized, homogenized, essentialized, disembodied 'other' within the frames of the violent hierarchy of binary oppositions. Therefore, via a reversed logic, the 'different' became primarily a super-signifier transcending above the 'same', as a propaganda slogan of the

universal struggle for the abolition of difference.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the grotesque transgender body-text illustrates that "if within patriarchal culture, the female 'other' represents a repressed version of the patriarchal self, then within feminist culture, the 'other' woman is the lesbian, the prostitute, the hag, the fury",<sup>50</sup> or the transgender person, embodying those freakish dimensions of femininity that the 1960s' and 70s' politics of equality repressed so as to validate the Feminine experience and expression.

However, *PNE*'s painful, textual/corporeal self-decomposition hides traces of a feminist ethics. The ruthlessly un/re-gendered characters can discover in each other mirror-images of them(selves) as other (very far from the unified body's ideal image of the Lacanian mirror-stage). During her passion Eve/lyn is faced with a multiplicity of mirrors. S/he is repeatedly defaced in his narcissistic lover's boudoir mirrors, in the medical gaze of her operating room's looking glass, in the troublingly kaleidoscopic reflections of Tristessa's glass-castle. Thus, she realizes that we are all 'someone else' insofar as the 'image', reflected by the mirror or imposed upon us by the society, is experienced as separate from us, and insofar as the varying context dependent on our relations, our (his)stories shapes the reflected 'reality(s)'. Thus, Evelyn matures into Eve then Eve/lyn in the sense that (s)he succeeds in understanding subjectivity as a picaresque- or passion-like process, as well as in realising identity as a relational entity.

### **Brenda Ellen Make's *Saving Throw* (2004)<sup>51</sup>**

*Saving Throw* is a non-fictional, truthfully sincere, retrospective autobiographical narrative by post-operative transsexual Brenda Ellen Make. The online text written between 1991 and 2004 is composed of two parts. *Subjective Rhetorics* contains personal and political comments related to transsexuality, while the second part, a memoir entitled *Path*, is designed to raise awareness and tolerance leading to solidarity, to provoke heterosexual readers into seeking information on the unknown otherness, and to help fellow norm-breakers in recognizing their transgender being as an individual yet collectively shared experience, to learn the solutions offered by sex reassignment surgery, or to reinterpret difference not as disabling degeneration but as enabling alterity, potentially leading to happiness.

However, the primordial aim seems to be to set the episodes of Brian/Brenda Make's life into a coherent, nearly teleological narrative marked by the development of personality, a fulfilment of the identity theme, a balancing of the imbalanced, gender dysphoric, self-dis/re-embodying self. The series of deviations and antagonisms, the regressions and revolts characterizing the pre- and post-operative transgender existence are (re)read into a meaningful path, a positivistic *Bildungsroman*-like story, where the *père-versive* curves

abandoning the conventional life-narrative's chronologically ordered, evolutionary linearity – prescribed by heteronormative, reproductive, sexist and repressive patriarchy – are reinterpreted as desperate attempts or alternative means of self-realization, all resulting from the decisive experience of transgendered embodiment. The text functions as an objectivity-oriented yet emotionally-invested documentary reassuring readers that the self and the body inflicted by past traumas can be healed, that the disembodied ego can be safely re-embodied. There seems to be a way out by virtue of a body-modification enabling besides gender-transition a total re-identification and a new, more liveable life allowing for self-fulfilment. Of a child tormented by sexual abuse, a teenager troubled by violence and drug abuse, and decades of self-loathing, humiliation and rejection, Brian matures into Brenda, a daring, self-conscious person, leader of a transgender support group, a creative artist, programmer of computer games and author of the very text we are reading.

The transgender self's non-normative heterogeneity is an indubitably significant personality marker. The male-to-female sex-changed narrator prefers the personal pronoun 'Sh-he' or even 'they' as a non-gendered third-person singular denotation. S/he traces her/his desires on a larger spectrum of the sexual continuum, designating her/his sexual orientation as bisexual, lesbian/homosexual, and attracted to other trans persons, and s/he also often claims to enjoy her/his androgyny as an "androgynous-to-male-to-female-to-androgynous-person". S/he identifies herself "as a female who was raised as a male" (13), considering herself legally as a woman (deprived of certain rights as that of marrying another person with similar female genitalia) who is occasionally socially misread as a biologically male queer individual. S/he insists on her/his ambiguity, mocking stereotypes and converting conventional discourse into free poetry:

I am the man with the feminine face.  
 I am the woman with facial hair.  
 I am the woman who likes motorcycles.  
 I am the man who likes flowers.  
 I am the woman with big arms.  
 I am the man who is slight.  
 I was the woman at the construction site.  
 I was the man in the dress.  
 I am a man with breasts.  
 I am a woman with a flat chest.  
 I look like what you may think a gay man looks like.  
 I look like what you may think a gay woman looks like. (15)



In the transgender autobiographer's reinterpretation of gender, the question is not so much whether it is pink or blue, playing with dolls or toy soldiers, being a firefighter or a nurse, raising a child or fixing a car, but rather "Why do we have a favourite colour, why does this smell or taste good to me, but bad to another person?...Why can't we agree even on what colour blue this is?" (17) The emphasis is put on relativized views, partial perspectives, and ironically (for a person insisting on the need for body modification) on the self's being more than simply the body in which it is cast.

Nevertheless – unlike in the cases of the fictional Eve/lyn and Myra/Myron – the limits of metamorphosis, the drawbacks of the cross-gendered ego are effaced as Brian-to-Brenda matures from pre-operative, self-alienating, traumatizing disembodiment to post-operative re-embodiment, and acquires an increasing awareness of corporeal-means to perform the self. The sex change operation is regarded as a reconstructive surgery in so far as it re-establishes the natural bodily state, harmonizing it with the gender identity felt from the very childhood when the narrator has already been dissatisfied with the "dreaded poker-thing" between his legs and dreamt of becoming a girl, being "pretty like a flower" down there (38, 47, 101). In Brian/Brenda's private mythology the sex change surgery becomes the 'saving throw', a roll of dice in role-playing games, used to represent the character's ability to avoid or resist a threat. Thus, the pre-operative, 'wrong body' is identified with a trap or a monster to struggle with and triumph over, while the body-modifying operation works as a magic potion enabling a transition to a superior level of existence. Sex change is a saviour, a solution, a therapeutic transformation that becomes effective only by being accomplished, finished. In Brenda's view, since the term transgender implies movement, it is no longer applicable to a repaired, re-formed post-operative person who strives for a socially passing, stable subjectivity. As soon as the body is fixed, the sex-changed person aims at a fix(ed) identity: s/he is exchanged for she. She insists on being called by her new name, Brenda, has M transcribed to F in her ID, and even argues for the instant feminization of her writing style, calling attention to her frequent use of questions, labelled a typical feminine rhetorical strategy resulting of the biological fact of females' physical weakness forcing them to use a means of communication relying on negotiation instead of force. Paradoxically, the sex change operation is simultaneously demystified, compared to corporeal stylization (tattoo, piercing) or cosmetic surgery on demand (tummy-tuck, nose-job), leaving the essential self unaffected, yet it also immediately enhances the modification of the personal style, promising to find one's authentic voice or even true self. The cacophony characterising the fictional reformulations of transgender experience cannot prevail in the real-life account. Here, even fictionalizations of the self such as

imaginary (re)constructions of cause-effect relations, retrospectively attributing special significance to the life's events in the formation of the ego aim at the stabilization of identity through tracing a homogenized, coherent, purposeful self-narrative.

Brenda is a dynamic "work of art, a work in progress" (21) only in so far as her desires, her body-management, her narrative self-reformulations and her relational identity-model are concerned. Her desires constitute a non(hetero)normative, polymorphously perverse flow. Her post-operative body is in need of repeated reconstructions (lifelong hormone therapy and additional surgical corrections resisting aging and maintaining the chosen sex). Her life narrative (open by virtue of the very genre of autobiography) must cope with past traumas to ensure the self's unforeseeable future's happy endings. Her identity is constructed in a relational, intertextual manner based on connections with others, anonymous helper and antagonist characters co-authoring and re-interpreting the malleable textures of her life, self and body. However, as the post-operative M2F Brenda Make's primary wish is to be respected by society as a whole person with full rights, internal consistence surfacing in gendered homogeneity is a matter of integrity, a matter of politics.

### **In Place of Conclusion**

The popular media coverage of transgenderism is often criticized for the reproduction of stereotypes, for mystification or trivialization, universalization or marginalization, for the association of trans experience with excitement or threat, and for the trans figures being played by heterosexual actors. Nevertheless, recent artistic representations seem to have done justice to the transgender phenomenon, highlighting its instructive complexity as regards the narrative and corporeal re-embodiments of the performative self. Jenny Saville's transgender nudes, Del LaGrace Volcano's photos of drag-kings, JA Nicholls's paintings of border-crossing, dis-appearing trans-bodies, all challenge the homogenizing invisibility of passing as well as exoticizing over-representation to introduce a counter-spectacularity, enabling new ways of perceiving others in/and ourselves. A recent film entitled *Transamerica*<sup>52</sup> (2005) tellingly begins with the feminizing voice training of pre-operative, M2F, female-impersonating, biologically male transsexual Bree (ironically played by one of the *Desperate Housewives*, Felicity Huffman) and ends with her finding her own voice and her newly-born womanly self not so much by virtue of the sex change surgery, but rather through accepting the past belonging to his old self, and becoming a mothering caretaker to the son he begot as a man. The taglines of the movie are also quite pertinent, proclaiming Life to be more than a sum of its parts, and inviting all to bring an open mind to the journey called Life. The classic, 1992

Oscar-winning movie *Crying Game*<sup>53</sup> advertised by the slogan "Play at your own risk" associates gender subversion with fatal political acts through focusing on the multiply marginalized intimate relation of an IRA terrorist Fergus and a beautiful transsexual Dil whose secret (origin) remains hidden for the unknowing. The mythical persona of the *femme fatale* is transgendered in exciting ways. Dil resists attempts at her hetero-normativization, she fights Fergus who wants to cut her hair and dress her in male clothing in order to save her by an incognito granted through her re-established masculinity. Dil's insistence on the impossibility to change one's nature is illustrated with the final scene where she appears again as a beautiful woman visiting Fergus imprisoned (in jail and in gender-stereotypes alike) to tell him half-coquettishly, half-mysteriously a fable on the scorpion unable to resist the urge to sting, regardless of causing pain to kind others or of risking her own life. The ambiguity of trans experience becomes audible, whenever Dill's polyphony and performative playfulness – constituting exact opposites of essentialist embodiment – are vocally stressed in the title song, "The Crying Game" that is repeatedly presented in various male, female, and transgender voices (of the diva Dil, of Dave Berry and Boy George) during crucial episodes, voicing differing variations of the same identity theme. One of the most esteemed trans movies raised to an iconic status is *Boys Don't Cry*,<sup>54</sup> a 1999 LGBT independent drama film narrating "the true story of finding the courage to be yourself", based on the real-life story of Brandon Teena, a young transman who was brutally raped and murdered after her biological sex's (female genitalia) disharmony with his gender identity (Teena enacting Brandon) was discovered by his male friends, jealous of his success amongst women and revengeful for being duped by his performance of masculinity. Despite the fact that the fictionalized documentary *hommage* occasionally distorts real past events, the movie has been unanimously praised. On the one hand, it places the individual crime case in a larger sociopolitical context (the film's trailer begins with the lines: "in 1993 7587 hate crimes were committed in America"), and on the other it invites to solidarity and to the recognition that the "search for love, a sense of self-worth and a place to call home"<sup>55</sup> are universally shared, common human values – regardless of sex, gender or sexuality.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On simulacra see Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), pp. 1-43.
- <sup>2</sup> On the beauty-myth see Naomi Wolf, *A szépség kultusza [The Beauty Myth]*, trans. Follárdt Natália (Debrecen: Csokonai, 1999).

- <sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: California UP, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).
- <sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> The term "looksist" refers to contemporary society's characteristic of judging people, especially women, on the basis of physical appearance.
- <sup>7</sup> Takács Judit, ed., *A lélek műtétéi [Operations of the Soul]* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2006). e-text: <<http://www.policy.hu/takacs/books/isbn9639609196/index.php#content>>, 44.
- <sup>8</sup> I use the term "gender trouble" in Judith Butler's sense. See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- <sup>9</sup> Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back. A Posttranssexual Manifesto", in *Writing on the Body. Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), pp. 337-59.
- <sup>10</sup> A multi-stage male-to-female sex/gender reassignment surgical procedure involves the removal of testes, vaginoplasty, breast augmentation with silicone implants, rhinoplasty, electrolysis (permanent hair removal), voice therapy, etc.
- <sup>11</sup> Transvestites are usually biological male persons for whom dressing up in hyper-feminine costumes is coupled with a (sometimes fetishistic) sexual arousal and a showy overidentification with the feminine gender role as a part of a theatrical/musical performance or a temporary attempt at passing as member of the opposite gender role (with or without identifying oneself as a woman). Genetically female transvestites are often referred to as drag-kings belonging to the LGBT movement. Cross-dressers are male-bodied, male-identified, heterosexual individuals who enjoy wearing women's clothes at times.
- <sup>12</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York UP, 2005), p. 49.
- <sup>13</sup> Third gender persons are beyond the dualisms of the heterosexual matrix, they are 'neither male nor female' in relation to the individual's sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. "Intersexual" is a politically correct term for a hermaphrodite whose sex chromosomes, genitalia and/or secondary sexual characteristics are neither exclusively male or female. An "androgynous" or "genderqueer person" fuses features of both genders to reject a clearly gendered identification.
- <sup>14</sup> A post-operative F2M (or M2F) transgender person may wish to live after the sex-change surgery as a homosexual (or lesbian) individual. As Judith Halberstam suggests, "Pleasure might be sex with a woman who looks like a boy; pleasure might be a woman going in disguise as a man to a gay bar in order to pick up a gay man. Pleasure might be two naked woman; pleasure might be masturbation watched by a stranger; pleasure might be a man and a woman; but pleasure seems to be precise." In Judith Halberstam, (1994) "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity", in *Feminist Theory and The Body*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 125-33, p. 127.
- <sup>15</sup> Biologism means the use of biological principles in explaining human especially social behavior.
- <sup>16</sup> See the title of Takács Judit's study on transsexuality: *Operations of the Soul*.

- <sup>17</sup> Halberstam, *F2M*, p. 125.
- <sup>18</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *A rossz transzparenciája (La Transparence du Mal)*, trans. Á. Klimó (Budapest: Balassi, 1997), pp. 23-8; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990); Rita Felski, "Fin de siècle, Fin de sexe: Transsexuality, Postmodernism, and the Death of History", *New Literary History. Problems of Otherness: Historical and Contemporary Issue* 27:2 (Spring 1996), pp. 337-51; Stone p. 337-59.
- <sup>19</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) in Halberstam, *Queer*, p. 51.
- <sup>20</sup> Susan Stryker, "Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question", in *Third Wave Feminism. A Critical Exploration*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 59-71, p. 66.
- <sup>21</sup> During the Real Life Test the pre-operation transgender person lives conforming to his/her chosen gender (contrary to his/her biological sex) 24 hours a day. (see *Transzszexualizmus – útikalauz. Nemváltoztatás a gyakorlatban. Elektronikus könyv transzszexuálisok részére*, ed. Sandra – *TSONline*, 2006. <<http://tsonline.uw.hu/>>, p. 6)
- <sup>22</sup> Stone, p. 347.
- <sup>23</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler, "Passing: Narcissism, Identity and Difference", *differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies. More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory Issue* (Summer-Fall 1994), pp. 212-49.
- <sup>24</sup> Stryker, p. 61.; Halberstam, *F2M*, p. 127.
- <sup>25</sup> Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon, 1979) quoted in Stone, p. 340.
- <sup>26</sup> Stone, p. 345.
- <sup>27</sup> Halberstam, *Queer*, pp. 54-5.
- <sup>28</sup> Tóth Noémi, "Travi-ata. Egy este az Acapellában", *Prae. Összművészeti Internetes Portál*. <[http://prae.hu/prae/articles\\_ny.php?aid=443](http://prae.hu/prae/articles_ny.php?aid=443)> (1.04.2007)
- <sup>29</sup> Heather L. Johnson, "Unexpected Geometries: Transgressive Symbolism and the Transsexual Subject in *The Passion of New Eve*," in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 166-84.
- <sup>30</sup> Halberstam, *F2M*, p. 126-7.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- <sup>32</sup> Stryker, p. 60.
- <sup>33</sup> ILGA-Europe is the European Region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association and works for equality and human rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Europe. See <<http://www.theparliament.com/EN/Forums/ILGA-Europe/>>, see Takács, p. 9.
- <sup>34</sup> "Identity politics has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestoes, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination."

- "Identity Politics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>> (11.2.2007).
- <sup>35</sup> The Freudian sequential scenario of psychosexual development tending teleologically towards a mature, normatively engendered, sexually-repressed identity turns meaningless in the case of transgender, as for example what would be the meaning of the Freudian castration complex for a F2M sex-changed transgender person, or of penis envy for a M2F sex-changed transgender person? (see Halberstam *F2M*, p. 129).
- <sup>36</sup> Stone, p. 342.
- <sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. L. Mortimer et al. (London: Tavistock, 1988), pp. 16-49.
- <sup>38</sup> Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter are to this edition: Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge* (1968; London: Panther, 1976).
- <sup>39</sup> Attila Atilla Kiss, *Betűrés. Posztzemiótikai írások* (Szeged: Ictus, 1999).
- <sup>40</sup> Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter are to this edition: Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (1978; London: Virago, 1982).
- <sup>41</sup> Paulina Palmer, "From Coded Mannequin to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight," in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. Sue Roe (Sussex: Harvester, 1987), pp. 179-205.
- <sup>42</sup> Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line," in *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983), pp. 69-77, p. 70.
- <sup>43</sup> John Haffenden, "An Interview with Angela Carter," in *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 76-96, p. 86.
- <sup>44</sup> Heather L. Johnson, "Unexpected Geometries: Transgressive Symbolism and the Transsexual Subject in *The Passion of New Eve*," in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, eds. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 166-84, p. 176; Stone 1998.
- <sup>45</sup> On androgyns see Plato, *Symposium* (Budapest: Helikon, 1961), on hermaphrodites see Michel Foucault, ed. *Herculine Barbin, más néven Alexina B*, trans. Zsuzsa Lóránt (Budapest: Józsoveg, 1997) and Balzac's hero/ine Zambinella in "Sarassine" widely discussed in Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Budapest: Osiris, 1997).
- <sup>46</sup> Baudrillard 1997, pp. 23-8.
- <sup>47</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Amerika, (Amérique)*, trans. Tótfalusi Ágnes (Budapest: Magvető, 1996), pp. 7-19.
- <sup>48</sup> Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (London: Northcote House, 1994), p. 35.
- <sup>49</sup> Like the anti-racist slogan: "Black is beautiful."
- <sup>50</sup> See: Shirley Peterson, "Freaking Feminism: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *Nights at the Circus* as Narrative Freak Shows," in *Freakery. Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemary Garland Thomson (New York: New York UP, 1996), pp. 291-301.
- <sup>51</sup> Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter are to the e-text: Brenda Ellen Make, *Saving Throw* <[http://www.brendamake.com/genderrain/saving\\_throw.html](http://www.brendamake.com/genderrain/saving_throw.html)> (21.10.2004).
- <sup>52</sup> Duncan Tucker dir, *Transamerica*, Belladonna Productions, 2006.
- <sup>53</sup> Neil Jordan dir, *The Crying Game*, British Screen Productions, 1992.
- <sup>54</sup> Kimberly Peirce dir, *Boys Don't Cry*, Hart-Sharp Entertainment, 1999.
- <sup>55</sup> Emanuel Levy, "Boys Don't Cry. Film Review", *Variety*, (2.9.1999).  
<<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117752076.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&p=0>>