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Considering the Body: Sexual Agency and Material Selfhood in Alex as Well

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CONSIDERING THE BODY: SEXUAL AGENCY AND
MATERIAL SELFHOOD IN *ALEX AS WELL*

Karlie Rodriguez

57 Pages

In this thesis, I examine the tensions between intersex embodiment and trans* identity, intersex children and their parents, and the intimacies that come out of these relationships – which, I argue, are ultimately queer. Using queer, trans*, and intersex theory, as well as feminist new materialisms, I highlight the ways in which the imbrications of the material and the symbolic are presented in Alyssa Brugman’s contemporary Young Adult novel, *Alex as Well*. The goal of this analysis is to encourage a separation from binary thinking and explore the possibility of nonbinary identifications in literature – more specifically, literature with intersex representation.

KEYWORDS: Intersex, Trans*, Queer, Nonbinary, Young Adult Literature, Alex As Well, Alyssa Brugman

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Rethinking Intersex: History, Language, and Materiality

The human body has many layers—more commonly, the material and the symbolic. The material body speaks to its composition and dimension (what is like anatomically) while the symbolic body refers to the constructs it embodies (what is like culturally and politically). The material and the symbolic are not opposed in a binary fashion and they in fact entwine. While it is important to think about these two components as working together, it is also important not to conflate them into one single category. What I mean is that it is crucial to recognize the difference between the material qualities of the body—its physiognomy, its elasticity, its innate capabilities—versus the way we socialize the body—the language we use to define it, the spaces in which we situate it, the performance we expected it to put forth. It is important to make this distinction because it is easy to fall into the kind of pernicious rhetoric that privileges one body over another, making it impossible for specific types of material bodies to fit into the social sphere. Because a defining factor of Western society is its eagerness to categorize all individuals under a heteropatriarchal structure, which promotes body dimorphism, intersex individuals, those whose sexed bodies fall outside of the male-female binary, have a harder time attuning their material body to societal expectations. Because of this, individuals with more ambiguous bodies are subject to a range of sexual violence throughout their life, which can ultimately lead to a fragile state of mind.

Language is gendered. In fact, so much of language as we understand it today has its *root* in maleness—and therein lies a major problem: we continue to use *male* as a basis for the creation of ideology, which in itself is rooted in language. Sex, as Judith Butler has affirmed in the past, “is in itself a gendered category” (*Gender Trouble* 10) and hence, closely ligated to

immaterial notions of the body. To assume sex a construct could open doors to new possibilities—it could alleviate pressures and constraints. Yet, to think of sex as socially constructed also complicates our understanding of the body, or rather, it creates a sense of ambiguity—it raises questions about our existence and our purpose in the world. Hence, to define sex simply as a construct is not completely accurate, but neither it is to limit it to only two possibilities.

Gender is fluid. In truth, so much of our gendered experience as humans stems from either embracing or rejecting the body as defined at birth—or from having others do that for us. As Elizabeth Reis established in *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex*, “To be human is to be physically sexed and culturally gendered” (ix). What this means is that while humans have a defined set of anatomical characteristics that are relatively constant, gender per se is socially constructed (and as Butler maintains, performative). While it is commonly understood that the majority of humans fall into the category of “male” and “female”, where does that leave those who are born intersex? Are they then not human?

In *Senses of the Subject*, Judith Butler takes the example of “the line between the sexes” (Butler 18) in order to elucidate the complicated relationship between language and the body. The argument is that “there are certain conventions that govern how and where the line [between male and female] ought or ought not to be drawn” (19). The line lets us know what and which sex is. She also complicates the notion of the line by explaining that conventions “change through time and produce a sense of anxiety and of unknowingness precisely at the moment in which we are compelled to draw a line in reference to the sexes” (19). Where is intersex in relation to this line? If, according to Butler, “the line works as a regulatory ideal” (19), is the line, then, what is keeping intersex outside of sex? Building off Irigaray, Butler establishes that

sexual difference is in itself fabricated by language. In view of this, the humanness of the intersex body is in question because its non-binary existence is outside of language.

It is important to note that sex and gender are interdependent. It does not matter how hard we try to define them as distinct entities, they inevitably interlace. To be born a female is to be raised as a woman and to do feminine things the same way that to be born male suggests that you are a man and engage in masculine practices. This poses a problem for people who are born intersex because to inhabit a more ambiguous space makes it much harder to determine subject positionality. If the intersex person is diagnosed at birth, doctors and parents will be in charge of determining the individual's probability to succeed as either male or female and the possibility for a non-binary identity is never discussed. Parents, as the ones in charge of their child's upbringing, will do what they think is best and choose a category—because it is commonly understood that the most important thing is to raise children normatively. Other times, the intersex person will not discover they are intersex until they are much older and have a defined sense of gender (likely influenced by their predominant body structure). This could lead to body dysphoria and create a dissonance between the body as perceived, the body as it is (materially), and the gendered activities the individual is expected to perform.

If gender and sex are social constructions, then what is there to worry about? After all, anything that has been constructed can be dismantled. However, it is never that easy. For example, in 1886, in Belgium, a woman known as Sophie V went to a clinic because her husband had failed, time and time again, to engage in sexual intercourse with her. It is not that he did not want to have sex with his wife, but that every time he tried to penetrate her, he failed. Sophie was then assisted by Professor Michaux, who noticed Sophie's vagina, despite everything she had been previously told, was in fact a penis. Sophie had been raised as a woman and strongly

identified as such; she did not want to call herself a man because she did not perceive herself as one, and the fact that she now had a penis and testicles was not enough to undo years of existing and performing within the gendered space of domesticity and femininity. She was not a man and, furthermore, did not want to become a man. However, for Professor Michaux, “the issue was not one of becoming a man” (Dreger 3) for she had always been one. What Professor Michaux failed to understand is that Sophie could not undo a lifetime of systematic behaviors in one day—why should she in the first place? Furthermore, while Sophie’s genitals were closer to a male’s, other aspects of her anatomy more closely resembled the female body. Why, instead of choosing to redefine sex, did Michaux expect Sophie to redefine her entire life? Neither Sophie nor her husband cared about the news so why did Michaux? The human body is infinitely diverse, and to try and police it the way Michaux did often means to ignore and even extirpate the material in order to keep alive the illusion of normativity.

The language we use to define the body has always been restrictive and oppressive. Simone de Beauvoir maintained in *The Second Sex* that “sometimes words are taken in their narrowest meaning” and other times they are “infinitely broadened” (49). In this instance, she was referring to the word “phallus” and how the significance of the word is shaped for the benefit of something or someone. In précis, the context of words is always either left open to be interpreted more freely or immediately constrained to convey a specific message. Either way, the word shifts to meet the benefit of its user rather than to convey any “real” individual. There is slippage between how the word “phallus” is deployed and the bodies from which the word originated is defined in the context that better serves the purpose of its user—in this case, de Beauvoir was referring to men, and even more specifically to Freud.

Whether through language or through theory, we learn to assess our interpersonal relationships based on the spaces we believe we deserve to inhabit, and we evaluate our worthiness according to our understanding of our bodies and desires. The language we use to define our own genders and sexes—man or woman, male or female—all have a situated symbolic intent. These conclusions create or disallow the possibility for copulation upon establishing new human connections. Because the goal is to be heterosexual and to engage in heterosexual behaviors, to know the sex of others without a shadow of a doubt is pivotal, and it ultimately defines the way we choose to move in the world. The category of intersex complicates these notions because not only does it blur the idea of “sex” as a binary, it complicates the way we see ourselves in relations to it.

Intersex: A Genealogy

The way we understand intersex has changed with time. What started out as “true” or “pseudo” hermaphroditism has grown into a spectrum of diverse body composition that goes from the visible sexual ambiguity of the body to that which is imperceptible to the naked eye. Prior to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the intersex body was perceived as monstrous. You would expect the birth of modern medicine to put an end to this, but unfortunately—and even though medicine did remove some of the spectacular and magical aspects of intersex—it perpetuated these atypical bodies as in need of fixing. What did happen, as science grew in authority, was that it took “sex” under its wing—it removed the supernatural notions attached to it and it naturalized it. Unfortunately, alongside this knowledge “came the authority to declare that certain bodies were abnormal and in need of correction” (Fausto-Sterling 36) because “the social and legal structures remained fixed around a two-sex system” (36). These cultural beliefs set up the way in which people practiced science, and in turn, science reified the idea that people

must always be either male or female, and if human bodies in any way defied this, they had to be corrected. The idea of sex was not wrong, the bodies were. In turn, the practice of medicine existed to perpetuate language as opposed to defy it. This is not so different to contemporary times. Medicine is the science that deals directly with the materiality of the body, and yet, it barely listens to it. Instead, medicine often seeks to impose ideology onto the body regardless of how much the body may resist it.

Herculine Barbin is the memoir of a French woman¹ born in 1838 who was forcefully resexed 22 years later after doctors discovered that she possessed a partially male anatomy. Barbin was forced to embrace her “true sex. Same as in Sophie V’s case, nobody sat down to have arguments about how doing that could be potentially harmful. Instead, they deemed her body hermaphroditic and made a choice for her. Abel Barbin, formally known as Adelaide-Herculine Barbin, committed suicide. While I would like to attribute this fact that to the grave injustice committed against her, I will refrain from doing so—after all, the memoir is in fact incomplete. Regardless, there is no question that the trauma she suffered as a consequence of being resexed contributed to Barbin’s fragile mental state.

There is a common belief that if something is not present in history, it never happened. But even when aspects of history, particularly those related to the *other*, have been erased, there are always footprints leading to a different truth. In the “Introduction” to *Herculine Barbin*, Michel Foucault asserted that while modern Western societies subscribed to notions of a “true sex”, “For centuries, it was quite simply agreed that hermaphrodites had two” (Foucault vii). While one could certainly read about historical instances in which sexual discrimination lead to

¹ I use “woman” as Barbin’s gendered identifier because that seems to be what she identified as throughout her life, and I want to honor that.

an execution, in the Middle Ages, hermaphrodites were commonly assigned a sex by their godparents, and later in life, were given the agency to decide if they wanted to keep the sex assigned to them or change it (para. Foucault viii). While this sounds like a compassionate deed, there is a downfall to it: the individual was *ordered to choose* a sex (and in turn, a gender). While the claim is that it was understood that hermaphrodites possessed two sexes, in order to keep the social order and avoid being labeled a sodomite, they had to choose a sex/gender and stick with it until their deaths. This certainly created an illusion of agency and empowerment while still putting into question the materiality of the hermaphrodite body. It is, then, possible that the requirement of a unitary sex in the Middle Ages helped create the modern views of the human body as an either female or male entity. And with the advances in medicine, to alter the body in order to “fix” it became part of the equation. According to Irina Metzler, author of “Hermaphroditism in the western Middle Ages: Physicians, Lawyers and the Intersexed Person,” “[...] the hermaphrodite is situated in a liminal sexual territory” (Metzler 29). Even though this liminality is constantly being acknowledge, to exists in this liminal space—to live a non-binary life—means to challenge heteronormative power. In turn, modern medicine attempted to correct this ambiguity.

Reis claims that “the early modern definition of a hermaphrodite (one person with perfect sets of both male and female genital organs) effectively preclude anyone from fitting the category” (Reis 1-2). What did exist, she argues, were bodies that demonstrated certain characteristics of both male and female—individuals with “ambiguous genitalia or with body parts that allowed them flexibility in living variously as male and as female” (2). Because of their non-dimorphic nature, these sexually divergent, human bodies were equated to monsters—or, to mirror the religious, patriarchal, anti-women thought of the time, they were simply women

who, as punishment for the sins of their parents, were born with large clitorises that enabled them to penetrate other women (para. Reis 2). The ideology of the time deemed these effectively natural bodies non-normative, and by the nineteenth century, they moved from the realm of the mythical to the realm of science. The hermaphrodite body, once situated within normative medical discourses, became an illness in need of a cure.

While the myths surrounding hermaphrodites began to dissipate after the nineteenth century, “until the middle of the 20th century medical intervention in hermaphroditism (later known as intersexuality) remained relatively uncommon” (Karkazis 32). In large part, this hindrance in research can be attributed to an absence of material resources such as adequate technology. Furthermore, the pervasive ideological position of the male-female binary has remained socially, and often medically, accepted as a universal truth “despite evidence from human and animal biology calling this distinction into question” (Karkazis 32). These two obstacles have only now begun to fall apart as technological developments have led to medical breakthroughs that strongly challenge the more antiquated Aristotelian sex model—which establishes that there are only two sexes. In addition, impassioned and informed activism from progressive organizations—such as the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)²—have helped push these advances forward with more ease.

Intersex is an umbrella terms that encompasses a wide variety of conditions, all of which are in some way related to sexually ambiguous anatomies. Commonly, the appearance of the intersex body “doesn’t match its karyotype or its sex assignment; external genitalia or gonads are not distinctively male or female; or sex chromosomes are atypical in some fashion” (Feder 65).

² It is important to note that ISNA was disbanded in 2008; however, isna.org remains online as a historical archive of early intersex activism.

This definition allows us to move from viewing sex as binary and static, to viewing it as something that is much more fluid. While the definition attached to “hermaphrodite” was limited to visible aspects of the body, intersex expands the parameters by including the non-visible materiality of the body (down to hormones and chromosomes). Changing the name and expanding the definition does not only mean demystifying the intersex body, but it also means that it might not be as rare an occurrence as one might have originally assumed. Unfortunately, any veritable medical records prior to the nineteenth century are unavailable, and hence, in order to properly historicize intersex, one must expand the search to other fields such as the law and literature.

Intersex in Literature and Theory

History only “narrates the lives of the victorious and powerful from their perspective, whereas literature tends to side with the vanquished and powerless, recounting their version” (Nealon and Giroux 117). This is why it is important to turn to other texts and documents—such as the diary of Herculine Barbin—to get closer to the truth. Literary texts are among the sources in which alternative realities can be found. Perhaps the most famous piece of literature with an intersex main character is Jeffrey Eugenides’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Middlesex*. While not the oldest, and certainly not the only valuable recounting of the human experience of an individual with a non-binary embodiment, *Middlesex* certainly is a canonical piece of intersex literature. That said, many intersex activists frown upon Eugenides representation of intersex as it in many ways favors the antiquated term of “hermaphrodite” versus the much more contemporary and accepted “intersex” (para. Hsu 95). This is problematic because the term hermaphrodite is both medically inaccurate and carries a pejorative connotation that alludes to the mysticisms previously attached to socially atypical bodies.

In order to normalize unconventional bodies as entities that are inherently “normal” regardless of their material composition, one must be careful not to romanticize diversity. Individuals with atypical bodies must face real struggles and the goal should be to understand those struggles, not to invalidate, fetishize, or even capitalize from them. As leading intersex scholar and activist Alice Dreger claimed in her latest book, *Galileo’s Middle Finger*, she (as well as friend, colleague, and founder of ISNA, Cheryl Chase) would be perfectly happy if “sex anomalies became so accepted that there simply was no intersex identity” (44). To them, Dreger and Chase, a life of normality and justice is worth more than a defining label based on qualities that are considered anomalous. Not all intersex individuals, activists, and scholars necessarily share this hope—given that it can be construed as promoting the erasure of difference—but the general desire to feel welcomed and accepted in social spaces is not an unnatural one. In the “Introduction” to *Herculine Barbin*, Foucault affirms that, “They [Modern Western societies] have obstinately brought into place the question of a “true sex” in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasure” (vii). Dreger’s and Chase’s desire for “normality” is a call for contemporary society to start listening to the material body: the integrity of the intersex body must be acknowledged and respected, especially when it poses no real threat to liveness. Having said that, the intersex body is often tied to health complications, and as a material reality, one must also be aware of this. In fact, these health risks are perhaps what validate the use of DSD³ terminology more strongly.

While the body itself has elastic qualities to it, there are aspects of it that are very much resistant. This means that you can alter your body only to the extent that it allows you to do so. Surgeons can try to mold the intersex body to fit the standard of sex established by society, but in

³ Disorders of Sexual Development.

trying, irreparable physical and psychological damage can be done. In *Insistence of the Material*, Christopher Breu establishes a distinction between the material body as *is* and the *ideal* body. He asserts that “The disjunction between the ideal male body posited by my surgeons and the recalcitrant flesh of the body they attempted to correct provided the context in which I began to think about the disjunction between language and other forms of materiality” (“Origin Story” vii). His body’s refusal to meet the expectation of his surgeons, based on the dominant social ideology surrounding masculinity, despite fifteen surgeries to “correct” it led him to conclude that there are other factors, material factors, at play (meaning that there are material limitations to what language defines as possible). On top of everything, what the surgeons were trying to correct was in fact the damage they themselves had done when they tried to fix Breu’s body the first time they cut it open. Again, medicine seems to be more concerned with shaping the intersex body to fit language as opposed to use its direct contact with the material body to shape the discourse that surrounds it.

While it certainly would be easy to justify the shaping of language by privileging the material, this would entail falling back into a similar pattern. By classifying everything as material, “we would not posit the difference and challenge that forms of materiality make to theorizing culture and subjectivity” (Breu 6). We would, yet again, be classifying one category as essential and another, in this case language and culture, as suspect. In thinking about subjectivity, “we understand the ‘subject’ as anything but unique or untouched by social factors” (Nealon and Giroux 37), meaning that we understand that to refer to ourselves as “subjects” entails we have been subjected to *something*. In pinning the material against the immaterial, we would be subjecting ourselves to yet another unnecessary binary (which in turn would lead to privileging one end or the other). In consequence, it would be easier to use the idea of the

material, not to destroy language and culture as factors in the development of our “self”, but rather to further complicate our understanding of it by adding yet another layer to our existence. To claim that *everything* is material is yet another one-way street to hegemony—in essence, replacing the dominant paradigm for another. To do this, would be to limit ourselves and our understanding of the world yet again.

The same way our material bodies limits our embodied experience, language limits our appreciation for our bodies as they *are*. Language is limited in its inclusion of intersex, so much so that when writing about the intersex body we must either spell it out (as there is no pronoun equivalent) or as Fausto-Sterling asserts, we have to “invent conventions—S/he and his/her—to denote someone who is clearly neither male nor female or who is perhaps both sexes at once” (“The Five Sexes” 20). That is how deeply connected we are to the Aristotelian sex model. Even though the evidence is there to prove that sex is not limited to just male and female, we continue to fiercely ignore the facts and cling to the idea that intersex individuals need to be *fixed*. It is one thing to want to improve the way of life of intersex individuals, and another very different one to mutilate their body in order to fit the social constructions we consciously and unconsciously privilege. This brings us back to how the way we *appear* to others affects the relationships we establish with them, and why society is so adamant to implement rules that attempt to regulate our identities and behaviors to the point of removing an individual’s right to choose.

The question of choice should not be a question. While the parents of intersex children are only doing what they think is best for the child (based on what they have been told is right), it is important to advocate for the individual’s right to choose if they want to alter their bodies. Choice should always lie with the individual. Even if it were possible to tell with exactitude what the dominant sexual anatomy of an intersex child is, there is no way to know how their psyche

will develop. Intersex children deserves for their⁴ parents to wait until they have the power to understand their body and decide how they want to present it to the world: intersex individuals should get to choose their own embodiment.

As a society, we are far more concerned with sex than we should be. As Irigaray declared, “Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age” (Irigaray 5). She made this claim sometime in the 1980s, when the linguistic and cultural turns were at “their greatest ascendancy” (Breu 4). In fact, embracing sexual difference in its infinite diversity and accepting it as legitimate seems to be the real issue. Not just determining that there is difference, but acknowledging that there is and understanding that its fluidity should not in fact be an issue. The intersex body does not need fixing unless there are life-threatening risks involved (as is the case with all bodies). However, medicine is still not doing a proper job of improving the life of intersex individuals, but instead, dictating how they ought to move in the social sphere, medicine continues to perpetuate binaries and social constructs. As previously discussed, language alone is also too limiting—it is limiting because we relinquish all of our power to it, and in turn, it takes the form of an oppressor who keeps us from seeing beyond what we have been told to see. If we are ever to get to a truth, any truth, then we must learn to understand both the material and the immaterial as forces that coexist, and are in turn, equally legitimate.

Alex as Well

Alex as Well by Alyssa Brugman is a contemporary Young Adult novel about a teenager who is transitioning from living as a boy to living as a girl. The narrative is complicated by Alex’s intersex embodiment, which ultimately produces a psychic split that is portrayed in the

⁴ I am using singular they/them/their in order to denote non-binary possibilities.

novel by alluding to Alex as a dual character—Alex as *she* and Alex as *he*⁵. As Alex’s embodied experience transgresses gendered boundaries, the unity of sex, gender, and sexuality collapses and we are left with three individual categories that must be redefined and worked through in relation to one another. This text is complex in its exploration of the material and the symbolic body as they converge to form and give depth to the character of Alex.

In this project, I analyze the character of Alex through different theoretical lenses with the purpose of exploring the ways in which categories previously perceived as binary—such as sex, gender, and sexuality—are collapsed and redefined (or rather, resignified) as much more encompassing. I look at the ways in which intersex is addressed in the novel by both adolescents and adults; how gender is constantly being renegotiated; and at how these constant renegotiations ultimately affects the way the intersex child perceives herself in relation to not just others, but to herself. My aim is to theorize the way in which *Alex as Well*, as a contemporary Young Adult novel, is achieving something that adult novels are failing to do in a similar scale: it is highlighting grave issues regarding the treatment of intersex children and how such treatment is essentially producing queer and trans* identities. The irony is striking given that the normalizing procedures that intersex children undergo are intended to prevent trans* identity yet instead they are producing them. There is still a lot of work to do in order to provide a better quality of life for intersex children, but contemporary YA novels are certainly doing their part of instructing their readers in compassionate ways. *Alex as Well* is a unique and important text because it does this

⁵ For the purposes of this thesis, I will be using “she” and “he” pronouns to refer to Alex’s gendered split self—she, for Alex the girl, which is the active voice in the narrative, and he, for Alex the boy, the part of her psyche she is actively trying to repress.

very thing: it addresses issues of embodiment and identity with compassion and care by providing young readers with a non-binary possibility.

In Chapter 2, “Intersex Embodiment and Trans* Identity,” I examine the ways in which sex as a category is associated with prohibition, regulation, and shame. Because the intersex body is an inherently disruptive entity, it becomes a source of confusion and shame. These feelings of confusion and shame are rooted in homophobia and they ultimately produce the regulatory ideals that end up producing trans* identities.

In “Queer carnalities: Adolescent sexuality as queer sexuality,” Lydia Kokkola invokes Patricia L. Daniel and Vicki J. McEntire by asserting that “the problem lies not in the adolescent’s sexual orientation but rather in the homophobia they will already have absorbed from society” by the time they realize their queerness (Kokkola 95). Daniel and McEntire have provided evidence to support that queer adolescents are two to three times more likely to commit suicide. In view of this, Kokkola maintains, “Literature written for teens frequently attempts to provide some kind of antidote for this frightening consequence of homophobia” (96). *Alex as Well* is the perfect example of how adolescent novels elucidate the problems of homophobia—and how homophobia inadvertently contributes to the production of trans* identities.

In order to support my claims, I turn to Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal*, and Ellen Feder’s *Making Sense of Intersex*—particularly what she has deemed “The Imperative of Normality.” I also invoke Lauren Berlant’s work on intimacy in order to better segue into the following chapter.

In Chapter 3, “Queer Intimacies and Sexual Violence in *Alex as Well*,” I highlight the variety of non-normative intimacies depicted in the text, the spaces in which these intimacies

take place, and the objects through which these intimacies are mediated. More specifically, I look at motherhood, online communities, and subject-object relationships between food, personal care products, and hormones. I also explore the instances in which intimacies—both the intimacies with share with others as well as ourselves—can collapse into instances of sexual violence. I use Lauren Berlant’s work on intimacy, Sarah Ahmed’s and Mel Y. Chen’s new materialisms, and Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to work through the complicated relationship between subjects, objects, and the self.

Lastly, I also address the novel’s powerful ending in which Alex comes to the realization that gender can be a fluid category. The ending of *Alex as Well* is powerful because it suggests that while individuals may choose one gender or the other, or might prefer one embodiment over another, there is also the possibility of socializing yourself into a non-binary role. As Brugman suggests, you can look at yourself (through a mirror or a photograph) and choose to be the “I” that is “dressed like a girl dressed like a boy” (*Alex* 214).

In my conclusion, I explore the ramifications of the claims I made in Chapters 2 and 3. I will consider the work this novel does to deconstruct and collapse the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality while also dissembling conventional notions of intimacy and sexual violence, and redefining the boundaries of masturbation and rape. I will follow that by emphasizing the importance of finding representations of intersex embodiments that exist separate from gender identity and sexual desire. Ultimately, this chapter will be a summation of the ways in which this text depicts the complexities of identity, destroys stereotypes, and redefines boundaries.

It is Karen Barad who argues that “language has been granted too much power” (120). This is true. Granted, there is no question that language is important—as David Valentine maintained in *Imagining Transgender*, “words, language, and categories do more than describe

the world—they create it” (233). There is no question that language is powerful, my argument is that it might be time to stop delineating such strict borders around socially constructed categories that can be flexible, subjective, and ultimately more inclusive.

CHAPTER II: INTERSEX EMBODIMENT AND TRANS* IDENTITY

Sexual Panic: Regulation, Shame, and Homophobia

“The time has come to think about sex.”⁶ So begins Gayle Rubin’s essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in which she maintains that sexuality is something that needs to be talked about because it is tied to structures of power that privilege certain groups of people while criminalizing and oppressing others. While Rubin focuses on sexual practices, sex as a cultural signifier must also be taken into consideration because the *possibility* of the act hinges on the knowability of the signifier. The necessity to *know* the sex of others is connected to the necessity to conform to heteronormative notions of coupling, or what Michael Warner refers to in *The Trouble with Normal* as “heterosexual world domination” (Warner 6). To exist outside of heteronormativity is to violate what seems to be the primordial rule of sexual life: to reproduce. Thus, in order to maintain the heteronormative order of things, people must control, not just their sexual lives, but the sexual lives of others. In fact, “...controlling the sex of others, far from being unethical, is where morality begins” (Warner 1). In turn, sex as a category becomes associated with prohibition, regulation, and shame.

In Western societies, sex is regulated because it is inherently dangerous. As Rubin asserts in “Thinking Sex, Christian tradition is rooted in the belief that sex is sinful and that genitalia is considered inferior to other parts of the body (para. Rubin 148). These religious ideologies ultimately help produce the regulatory discourses that shape heteronormativity—which Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner define as,

⁶ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke, 2011).

... more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. (“Sex in Public” 2606)

In itself, the intersex body violates the heteronormative order of things. Sex, as a signifier, is typically understood to be either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and many other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions.⁷ By existing outside of the regulatory ideal of what it means *to be* a sex, the intersex body is, inherently, a disruptive entity, and in turn, a source of confusion and shame.

Intersex is an umbrella terms that encompasses a wide variety of conditions, all of which are somehow related to sexually ambiguous anatomies. Commonly, the appearance of the intersex body “doesn’t match its karyotype or its sex assignment; external genitalia or gonads are not distinctively male or female; or sex chromosomes are atypical in some fashion” (Feder 65). This definition allows us to understand sex as spectral instead of as a binary category. Not unlike intersex, transgender is “an umbrella term for describing a range of gender-variant identities and communities within the United States” (Williams 232). Trans* also facilitates the contextualization of gender as spectral. Intersex and trans* refer to embodiments and gendered identifications that distort the conditions of intelligibility set in place by heteronormative discourses because they highlight the limitations of language by demanding new words—new words that might invalidate old words—to describe the sentient experiential realities of non-normative bodies and desires. Warner stresses that “when a given sexual norm has such deep

⁷ As defined by *The New Oxford American Dictionary*

layers of sediment, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can be enormous” (6). In turn, this demand for new language to describe these new identifications and embodiments inevitably faces backlash.

When it comes to sex and gender, people are accustomed to distinguishing between male and female, man and woman, upon meeting someone for the first time. In fact, society conditions people to make this initial gendered distinction, and an inability to do so contributes to the feelings of confusion and shame that help produce sexual panics. As explained in the previous chapter, the understandings of ourselves and others ultimately allow us to establish the possibility for “fucking,” and hence, reproduction, upon establishing new human connections. However, the category of intersex complicates heteronormative notions because not only does it blur the idea of “sex” as a binary but it affects the way we see ourselves in relation to it. In turn, the rejection of the intersex body, and the necessity to correct it, is ultimately connected to a fear of queerness: to homophobia. 1

Homophobia encompasses a range of negative prejudices and violence against people perceived to be queer and trans*⁸ groups. Even though homophobia suggests a fear of homosexuality,

Transgender people subjected to violence, in a range of cultural contexts, frequently report that transphobic violence is expressed in homophobic terms. The tendency to translate violence against a trans person to homophobia reflects the role of gender in attribution of homosexuality as well as the fact that hostility

⁸ More recently, homophobia has been replaced by transphobia when referring to transgender individuals.

connected to homosexuality is often associated with the perpetrators' prejudices about particular gender practices and their visibility. (Spijkerboer 122)

Trans* individuals who either fully embrace an identity and gender performance typically associate with the opposite sex (as assigned at birth)—such as male-to-female or female-to-male trans identities—or those whose gender performance is non-binary can generate confusion in others. This confusion is connected to the inability to properly assess the possibility for an intimate, romantic and/or sexual connection. Furthermore, in the event that romantic or sexual desire are present, the possibility of queerness that stems from such confusion produces shame. The fear is not of the individuals themselves, but the idea that desires could exist outside of heteronormativity—the idea that one could be queer and what that means in a larger sense: culturally, politically, economically, and personally. In many ways, homophobia is a fear, not of what others feel and do, but what they have the ability to make you feel or do. This does not mean that everybody is inherently queer—though such a possibility is not exactly unconceivable—but that everybody has the potential to embrace and perform an identity (and to do so well enough) that they are able to disrupt heteronormative power. Homophobia comes out of that disruption, and it can manifest itself in different ways: internalized homophobia, social homophobia, rationalized homophobia, and others. In view of this, the assortment of anxieties produced by the intersex body or by a trans*-identified individual is connected to homophobia as the very existence of these bodies and performances can disrupt the order of things. These categories open the door to possibilities that are not wanted because they violate the heteronormative pact set in place, which ensures a two-sex model that enables human reproduction as the one and only possibility. In the eye of a heteropatriarchal society, queerness

looks bad not just for those who are queer but for those who are, through kinship or through friendship, related to them.

Parental Figures and the Imperative of Normality

In *Making Sense of Intersex*, Elle K. Feder talks about “The Imperative of Normality” and how parents’ wishes to have normal children are a part of the structure of sexual difference—which, according to Feder, is the structure that helps us “make sense of us, that is, to place us in the world in ways that render the positions we occupy [...] intelligible” (46). The fear parents experience at the idea that their children might find themselves displaced in a world that is ruled by structures of sexual differentiation ultimately drives them to make hasty decisions regarding normalizing surgeries; these surgeries would ultimately allow them to socialize their children into a specific gender. Such a scenario is depicted vividly in Alysia Brugman’s *Alex as Well*. In the novel, Alex’s mother, who is portrayed as a villainous figure, is constantly rejecting Alex because of her decision to stop treatment and transition to living her life as a girl. What is interesting, however, is that it is later revealed in the novel that the doctors had originally sexed Alex as “girl” (*Alex* 161) and that it had been her parents who had later annulled her birth certificate and resexed her as “boy” (161). In framing the relationship between Alex and her parents this way, Brugman has chosen to depict the categories of sex and gender in a normative fashion. While the novel is strong in its intent to destabilize these very categories, it also reifies the essentialist notion that Alex is not in fact transitioning into her desired gender but suggests instead that her desired gender has always been in harmony with her assigned sex. While there is nothing wrong with sex and gender coexisting in normative harmony, this twist in the narrative *de-queers* the novel. In consequence, Brugman is falling back onto socially prescriptive notions

that enforce the idea that females are supposed to be girls and males are supposed to be boys—in short, that gender is ultimately dictated by biology.

Judith Butler claims that “one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professionals to negotiate what may well feel like the unrecognizability of one’s gender and, hence, one’s personhood” (Butler 622). We turn to biology and to medicine for answers, yet we fail to recognize that science is not exempt from the power of ideology and heteronormativity. In fact, Rubin claims that “medicine and psychiatry multiplied the categories of sexual misconduct” (150). What this means is that science, or rather medicine and psychiatry, made it possible for certain types of material bodies—such as intersex body—to be perceived as deviant or in need of fixing.

Karen Barad, much like Foucault, maintains that “discursive practices produce, rather than merely describe, the “subjects” and “objects” of knowledge practices” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 137). While the material realities of intersex bodies are concrete, the possibility for their atypical existence is a direct consequence of sexual discourses. That is to say, without a binary sex, there is no intersex, and without the regulatory ideals that define what it means to *be* a sex, there also would not be a liminal category—we would simply have bodies. I am not arguing that we must ignore bodily diversity or erase difference in any way, but that, as Barad asserts, “Matter is always already an ongoing historicity” (139). Bodies are perceived as male, female, or intersex because we have ascribed a specific meaning to those bodies—what they look like, what they can do, what they can be.

Rubin also claims that, “popular culture is permeated with ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, depraved, and a menace to everything from small children to national security” (“Thinking Sex” 150). She asserts that popular sexual ideology is associated with a social stigma

that links non-normative sexuality to sin and even witchcraft (para. Rubin 150). The wide reach of popular culture can help construct oppressive ideologies as much as it can help to undo them. Having said that, the dominant sexual ideology is still rooted in heteronormativity. In view of this, parents, understandably, develop a fear that their children could in any way deviate from the sexual norm. While parental fear that children will be different in a more general sense, sexual difference is particularly repulsive because of what Rubin has termed the fallacy of misplaced scale—“a corollary of sexual negativity” (149). The fallacy of misplaced scale establishes that sex transgressions are punished more harshly than any other offence. Rubin associates this with the religious ideologies that inspire sexual laws. These laws establish that heretical sex is the most heinous crime an individual can commit, and in turn, it must be punished as such. Rubin provides the example of sodomy and how in both Europe and America, “a single act of consensual anal penetration was grounds for sexual execution” (149). However, rape during biblical times was sometimes encouraged, and even today it carries a very minimal sentence.

To determine who is punished the harshest, Rubin theorizes a hierarchical system of sexual value in which heterosexuals are positioned by society at the top of the pyramid and unmarried monogamous heterosexuals who subscribe to the couple form (and most other types of heterosexuals) are right below it. While masturbation is situated somewhere in a liminal space—as something that is neither celebrated yet not fully condemned—Rubin argues that currently, at the very bottom of the pyramid, are “transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries” (149). These deviants are the lowest of the lowest—the most despised sexual caste. In fact, she identifies long-term monogamous lesbian and gay couples, and even bar dykes and promiscuous gay men, as garnering more

respect than these more transgressive others. While intersex is not mentioned in the pyramid (or at least it is not explicitly addressed as being a part of the pyramid by Rubin), an intersex individual with a trans* (i.e. non-binary) gender identity would. That is not to say that intersex embodiments are not perceived in negative ways, but rather that intersex individuals whose gender identity mirrors normativity tend to be more accepted than those who choose a more nonbinary or queer label. In turn, Alex is perceived by her parents as existing within this inferior, and even dangerous, sexual group, because of her desire to transition into a nonbinary existence. While Alex's intersex embodiment was already a source of anxiety for her parents, the fact that she was now choosing to transition from a privileged position—as a middle-class, white, heterosexual male—and into trans* femininity was unbearable. As narrated by Alex's mother in one of her many online posts,

And then last night Alex said to us, sitting there at dinner, "I'm a girl." Just like that. Three words. And my husband explodes at me. I couldn't stop crying. My husband packs up a suitcase and he walks out. He's gone to his borhters [sic] place. I'm still crying now. I can't handle it. I look at Alex and I don't think I love him. I know that if we had a normal child our lives would be so much better. (20)

Not only can she not bear the thought that her child is now a girl, but the fact that Alex is so cavalier about coming out—like it does not matter that her choice to transition will affect her family—devastates her. Or at least that is how Brugman has chosen to portray Alex's coming out in the narrative. Heather, Alex's mother, truly believes that her child is the one that is destroying whatever sense of normality was left after her intersex diagnosis. Now, with her husband gone, her family is starting to fall apart and Heather is forced to deal with Alex's transition by herself. It is the realization that Alex is different, and that Alex is embracing that difference, which truly

pushes Heather over the edge. It is after this moment that homophobia (and/or transphobia) starts to manifest within the narrative.

As stated before, Heather is depicted as villainous throughout the entire novel. Even though she has moment of empathy and compassion in which she claims to be trying to be supportive and understanding, she always regresses into hostility and rejection. In fact, many of her online appearances narrate the ways in which she feels victimized by her own child and even goes as far as acting like a victim of an elaborate crime in which her husband and child are only trying to torture her. While it is true that it is unfair that her husband is the one that gets to move out while she is expected to stay home and take care of her child—Brugman is very clearly referring to sexist societal biases—it is negligent on her part to blame her child for her husband's actions instead of blaming society for making it possible for men to believe that they can take a vacation from parenthood. In this respect, I believe Brugman could have pushed harder to make a distinction between the issues that Heather is facing as a mother and the issues that Alex is facing as an intersex, transgender youth. In turn, Heather is depicted as envious of her husband for having the privilege to run away from their life together as an issue of sexism instead of problematizing the fact that she, herself, also wanted to take a vacation from her life and renounce her child in similar ways. Having said that, this is one of the many ways in which homophobia is being represented through Heather—who admits to not loving her child, and to wanting to leave her child, because her child is not normal and only a normal child could make her life bearable.

Alex's intersex embodiment and transgender transition preclude Heather's fantasies of heteronormative futurity from taking place. From the very first online post she writes, in which she asserts that she knew there was something wrong with her baby (18), she is constantly

exemplifying the ways in which Alex is not normal—and trying to get to the root of the difference. For example, in chapter eleven, Heather post in the online forum is about Alex’s choice to wear girl’s clothes. She writes,

He came downstairs this morning in a girl’s school uniform. He looked straight at me so defiant, like a challenge. Another mother told me once, “Only engage in the battles you think you can win,” and that was the best advice I ever got when he was small. A lot of problems resolved themselves when he stopped trying to pick fights with me. Well, he still used to challenge me all the time, but I stopped taking the bait. (49)

Heather is oftentimes assuming that Alex’s transition relates to her status as an adolescent by calling Alex’s actions—such as the action to wear a girl’s school uniform—an act of defiance. Heather is assuming that Alex’s choices are merely in tune with typical behaviors and interactions between parents and their children. This is one of the ways in which she both holds on to a sense of normalcy and is able to justify the ways in which her child is different. Heather has to believe that Alex is transitioning to spite her, otherwise her interactions with her daughter become unbearable and she cannot cope. By refusing to refer to Alex as “her,” Heather also engages in a form of counterdefiance, in which she responds to her child’s resistance with more resistance. While Alex is indeed challenging her mother, she is not doing so for the sake of defying her. In fact, Alex is simply trying to establish a sense of self and a sense of agency.

Alex’s and Heather’s acts of defiance and “counterdefiance” are reminiscent to the way Berlant and Warner conceptualize counterpublics. How relationships are conceptualized as either valid or not is ultimately related to normativity or normality. For example, Berlant and Warner are concerned with the way heteronormativity shifts the blame for larger society issues to the

individual—as relationships and intimacies that fail to reproduce the demands of dominant discourses will lead to a failure to obtain social membership—and this blame is ultimately placed in the individual who was ultimately too queer. Alex’s transition and what comes with it—her rejection of boy’s clothes and male pronouns, and even her rejection of her phallus—are in fact larger societal issues that are tied to the ways in which body dimorphism and a unified sex and gender are promoted as the only acceptable options. However, Heather (and the mother she is getting advice from) ultimately tie it to issues of parenthood—as if a failure to parent appropriately had generated Alex’s desire to live her life as a girl. Heather also ties it to the construction of an adolescent figure by assuming that teenagers are inherently defiant. Alex’s and Heather’s failure to have a good relationship is really an example of heteronormative power at work, but rather than acknowledge the flaws in the system, Heather keeps trying to shift the blame to smaller factors—such as parenthood and adolescence—because she is unable to recognize that Alex is simply trying to belong in her skin as opposed to trying to make her miserable because that is what adolescents are supposed to do to their parents.

Alex’s father, David, also attempts hold on to a sense of normalcy by assuming that Alex’s transition is part of the natural exploration of gender that adolescents go through. As readers, we find out through Heather, who posts about this in her blog. She writes, “David said that Alex is exploring his world. He is exploring his gender. That’s a really normal thing to at this age” (67). Both David and Heather at looking at Alex’s transition as a natural progression—as a phase, or something to grow out of. However, this is not the case—the reality is much more nuanced.

Sexual Agency

One of the greatest disservices anyone can do to a child is to make them believe they do not have agency over their own bodies. Yet, a common trope of intersex narratives is the ubiquitous adult voice that dictates what is right for the child. In “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality,” Judith Butler postulates the difficulties of doing justice to intersex individuals when all that is available is fractured knowledge. She maintains that she has been given “fragments of the person, linguistic fragments of something called a person” and in turn, how can she properly assess the situation? The same thing happens in *Alex as Well* except it is Alex who has fragmented knowledge of herself and her body. In fact, large part of the novel focuses on Alex’s struggle to figure out her identity based on the limited knowledge she has about her intersex variation. In large part, the silence around an intersex diagnosis is ultimately about power. How can Alex understand herself, and defend herself and her autonomy, if she has no idea about the capabilities of her body? When she has no idea of the possibilities she can access?

In *The Trouble with Normal*, Warner asks: “shouldn’t it be possible to allow everyone sexual autonomy?” (1). In reality, the idea that sexual autonomy is possible is fairly utopian, in large part because the politics of shame—which Warner defines as “the overt and deliberate shaming produced by moralists” (7)—make sexual autonomy impossible because,

Sexual autonomy requires more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them. (Warner 7)

Sexual autonomy would entail embracing ambiguity, and people do not like ambiguity—and in turn, they do not like possibility. People want to be told what to feel and what to want because

they know that what they feel and want will be shamed by others. In turn, to achieve sexual autonomy is to renounce shame—to be proud of one’s desires, especially when those desires are not harmful to others. Heather and David were unable to do this, and in turn, she renounced to her desire to have more children because she was afraid that the child would be intersex. In fact, David went as far as to have a vasectomy. Ultimately, this is a consequence of the politics of shame, heteronormative power, and homophobia.

As write and activist Eli Clare maintains, it is time for a change—time to push toward a politics that “delves into the lived experience of our bodies, that questions the idea of normal and the notion of cure, that values self-determination, that resists shame and the medicalization of identity—a politics that will help all of us come home to our bodies” (Clare 265). And that is what Heather and David do not understand: Alex is not trying to torture them, or trying to rebel—she is only trying to come home to her body.

CHAPTER III: QUEER INTIMACIES

Intimacy

Lauren Berlant declares that “intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relations” (“Intimacy” 282). What this means is that intimacy defines the kinds of relationships we have with people—and in turn, to be, or fail to be, intimate with others ultimately dictates your positionality in relationship to them. Berlant maintains that,

Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress “a life” seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability. Even from this small cluster of examples it becomes clear that virtually nobody knows how to do intimacy; that everyone feels expert about it (at least about other people’s disasters); and that mass fascination with the aggression, incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence at the scene of desire somehow escalates the demand for the traditional promise of intimate happiness to be fulfilled in everyone’s everyday life. (282)

There are institutions, such as marriage and family (especially parenthood), that hinge on the promise of eternal and unconditional intimacy and love in order to be successful. Failure to uphold this predetermined intimacy pact⁹ destabilizes the relationship you have with one another, with yourself, and with the ideologies surrounding these institutions. This failure also puts the individual in a position of vulnerability that corrodes the ideals and fantasies previously attached to these relationships. For example, Alex’s relationship with her mother, Heather, became destructive in large part because of Heather’s inability to imagine a future in which Alex was

⁹ I am referring to the unspoken arrangement of “trust” people enter when they are in a relationship as the intimacy pact.

anything but a boy. Because of Heather’s reluctance to reshape the way in which she engaged with her child, all intimacy was lost. This not only produced a relationship of hostility, but one that crossed over into acts of sexual violence against Alex.

It is not so much that people do not understand how to better engage intimately with others, and more that there are certain expectations regarding intimacy. In précis, part of an individual’s cultural indoctrination relies on understanding and practicing intimacy in a normative way. This type of normative intimacy becomes ingrained in the culture and destroys—or to the very least attempts to destroy—the possibility of queer intimacies.

In thinking about queer intimacies, I imagine the kind of intimacy that shatters day-to-day expectations of how closeness and familiarity are performed; by who and in relationship to whom they are performed; and how those performances make us feel. I think about it as violating that intimacy pact—the one that promises an ongoing, reproducible kind of intimacy between individuals—by redefining the contexts and the spaces in which we are intimate with others.

Berlant asserts that, “People consent to trust their desire for “a life” to institutions of intimacy; and it is hoped that the relations formed within those frames will turn out beautifully, lasting over the long duration, perhaps across generations” (281). The problem with expecting relationships to be intimate in specific ways is that the individuals cannot seem to see past this dissonance, and instead of approaching intimacy differently, they disconnect from the possibility that they could still have a relationship with those *others*. To return to Heather and Alex, unable to imagine what it would be like to have a child whose embodiment and gender identification is non-binary, Heather ends up hurting Alex by violating not just the pact of intimacy that parents have with their children, but by sexually abusing her child.

In this chapter, I explore the nuances of intimacy between two individuals, the spaces in which these intimacies take place, as well as the objects through which intimacies are sometimes mediated. More specifically, I look at motherhood, online communities, and even intimate relationships between people and food, personal care products, and hormones. Lastly, I address issues of sexual violence as they relate to sex, the signifier, as opposed to sex, the act.

Motherhood and Online Biosocial Communities

Intersex activism truly began online. In 1993, Cheryl Chase, inspired by Fausto-Sterling's "The Five Sexes," founded the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA). Even though ISNA disbanded in 2008, the website remains online as a historical artifact that illustrates the trajectory of what was "at one time the world's largest intersex advocacy and support group" (Davis 31). The Internet played an important role in the proliferation of intersex activism and advocacy because it provided intersex individuals and their families with a community-building platform that allowed them to connect with one another remotely—it allowed them to "form a unique biosocial community" (Davis 33). Since ISNA, many more educational, support, and activist groups have taken up the role of connecting people together through the Internet, producing what Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas termed digital bio-citizenship. In "Biological Citizenship," Rose and Novas introduce the concept of informational bio-citizenship, which involves "the usual forms of activism such as campaigning for better treatment, ending stigma, gaining access to services and the like," however, digital bio-citizenship involves "new ways of making citizenship by incorporation into communities linked electronically by e-mail lists and websites" (6). These online support groups serve as a way to not only exchange knowledge and information, but also to build interpersonal relationships that can indeed lead to friendships, romantic relationships, and in more broadly, different forms of intimacy through bio-social media.

An important component of these online biosocial communities is their focus on illnesses and medicine—their direct connection to biology and the body. As defined by Rose and Novas, the primary functions of these groups is “to spread information about those affected by the illness; to develop a set of techniques for the everyday management of the condition; to seek alternative forms of treatment; and to demand their own say in the development and deployment of medical expertise” (“Biological Citizenship” 18). These communities are spaces in which people share intimate details pertaining health care—and ultimately, they share their experiences of trauma, illness, death, and recovery that bond together the individuals who participate in these discussion boards. The powerful relationships that can form in these online spaces in which individuals come together to discuss the body and the materiality of illness is meaningful and intimate regardless of its initial anonymity—as oftentimes, those who participate in online discussion forums do so under pseudonyms. It is in these pseudonyms that participants find safety in their anonymity and are able to share the most personal parts of themselves and their journeys as either those who are directly affected by trauma, or as members of their immediate social circle (such as family and close friends).

While the anonymous nature in which these online spheres operate can be helpful, it does come with its own set of complications; anonymity, too, can be harmful. For example, many online forums are plagued by the presence of internet trolls who use their anonymity to start controversy and even bully those who are simply trying to find help and support. While websites who seek to capitalize from their users are typically more heavily moderated, sites designed for activism and advocacy are typically underfunded, and in turn, regulations pertaining the moderation of online trolling might be scarce, turning these “safe” spaces into ones of discomfort and self-censorship.

Motherhoodshared.com is a fictional discussion forum that Heather, Alex’s mother, uses throughout the novel to communicate her feelings toward Alex, Alex’s transition, and vent about other personal issues—such as her broken relationship with both her child and her husband—which she ultimately blames on Alex’s refusal to be “normal.” This website is not specific to discussions of illness and trauma, but given the demands of motherhood, it certainly falls into the category of an online biosocial community because it deals with the many hurdles parents have to go through with their children—many of which are connected to health care and ethics of care more generally. Motherhoodshared.com seems to be modeled after real-life, popular forums such as thebump.com and mothering.com. These websites are much more expansive than just discussion forums—as they focus on advertisements, events, columns, and articles pertaining to parenthood—yet the structure of the threads¹⁰ posted by Heather are very similar to the ones posted in these other websites.

Brugman wrote *Alex as Well* in such a way that there are alternating chapters that focus on Heather’s threads as she posts them onto motherhoodshared.com. Stylistically, this is important to the narrative because it gives the reader the opportunity to visualize how these online communities work, down to misspellings of words in threads posted during times of heightened distress. Not only can the reader see Heather’s post, but also the responses that other community members post to her threads. This is how the reader accesses her point of view as well, as the chapters that are not in discussion-forum form are narrated by Alex.

¹⁰ Here, I am referring to online threads, which are defined by *The New Oxford American Dictionary* as “a group of linked messages posted on an Internet forum that share a common subject or theme.”

Heather's first thread appears on chapter four, where she opens up by saying: "This is my first post" (Brugman 18). This chapter is crucial to the development of the narrative as whole as well as Heather as a character. In this thread, Heather shares the story of how the doctors told her and her husband that their child was "sexually ambiguous" (18). Heather's words are poignant in the way she addresses the interactions with doctors, her thought process pertaining the naming of the baby, and what ultimately led her and her husband, as parents, to make the decision they made. It is also touching because in the thread, Heather also narrates the story of how Alex came out to her as a girl: "'I'm a girl.'" Just like that. Three words. And my husband exploded. And I couldn't stop crying" (20). This very personal exchange that is taking place in this virtual community in which this mother is falling apart over her husband and her child, both of whom she is perceiving as falling apart, is setting the tone for what feels like a desire for an intimacy that she is not getting from those around her. In telling her story, the authors wants readers to assume Heather's goal is to receive support and love—and these feelings are directly connected to a sense of closeness and familiarity—from strangers.

In the "COMMENTS" section following Heather's posts in this chapter, many important characters appear; a lot of these characters—whether they are depicted as well-intentioned commenters or internet trolls—become an important part of the larger narrative as they are the ones who are engaging in conversation with Heather and advocating for either her or Alex's well-being in passionate yet not always helpful or compassionate ways.

It is impossible to tell what online interactions between people will look like, and Brugman does a fair job at depicting different ways of engaging—she illustrates the religious forum member who is consoling and offers to pray (Cheryl); the narcissists who somehow always finds a way to make things about themselves, even if that entails posting a comment that

is completely unrelated to the subject matter (Susie); the optimist who wants everybody to look on the positive side; among others. As the novel progresses, the variety among the commenters grows, and eventually, there are people sharing similar experiences and people who ultimately side with Alex over Heather. The overall idea is that online forums are not exactly different from real-life interactions—what changes is the anonymous nature of the connection that allows individuals to share intimate details of their lives that they would otherwise keep to themselves. In sharing their stories, providing support, or even arguing about what is right or wrong, these relationships become about more than just casual conversation—these forums allow people to perform different types of intimacy.

These chapters that simulate a discussion forum, and threads posted by Heather, are also a way for Brugman to represent interrupted intimacies between parents and children. In chapter four, while narrating the story of Alex’s birth, Heather asserts that doctors kept the baby from her: “Almost fifteen years ago I had a baby, and after the birth it took them ages to let me hold it, and I was saying, what is it? A boy or a girl? But they just kind of looked at me” (18). Brugman seems to be establishing a relationship between the act of holding the baby after birth and what it would mean not to do so—in this case, she seems to be implying that failure to connect with the baby immediately can lead to crack in that intimate relationship that parents foster with their babies. This is elucidated again in the same chapter, in the same thread, when the character of “Dee Dee” (one of the forum regulars throughout the novel) comments:

I hear ya. My twins were c-section and I had blood transfusions. I didn’t see them for 12 hours after their birth. I really don’t have the same maternal connections as I do with my other children. (Brugman 22)

This seems to be one of the various developmentalist ideals Brugman subscribes to in her prose, as she assumes that a strong bond between a parent and a child can only occur if they are allowed that intimacy immediately after birth. Building from this idea that mother and child must engage in certain intimacies in order to have intimate relationships in the future, Brugman also writes about the disruption caused when Heather was not allowed to breastfeed—which in itself can be very traumatic for the mother.

Throughout the novel, Heather demonstrates an ambivalent relationship to Alex. Even though the pain she is going through as she “mourns” her child, who is no longer a representation of the future she had always fantasized about, can be construed as love, Heather verbalizes the possibility that she might not love her child. In fact, it is in chapter four, where Heather says, “I look at Alex and I don’t think I love him. I know that if we had a normal child our lives would be so much better” (Brugman 20). While she might care for Alex, and there are moments in the novel in which it seems as though she does, she is also resentful of Alex for pushing her out from within the boundaries of heteronormativity and into the queer parenthood.

Another way of interpreting Heather’s often ambivalent relationship with Alex is the interruption of motherhood, as she was unable to breastfeed her child, and even see her child, for a period after giving birth to the baby. It is possible that Heather, unable to nurse her child, was unable to recognize herself as a mother. The disruption of this intimate bond—that of breastfeeding—might have contributed to Heather’s lukewarm love-feelings for Alex. Or to the very least, they contribute to the argument that the parent-child relationship she has with Alex—or rather, the relationship she could have had—was interrupted by Alex’s intersex embodiment (rather than the medical industrial complex’s response to that embodiment). In turn, Heather’s repudiation of her own child is as connected to a rejection of Alex’s body and gender

identification, as it is a product of the intimacies she never had, and that she now so desperately craves.

Because her emotional connection with Alex is nonexistent and her marriage is falling apart, Heather is ultimately forced into this largely dematerialized space—the web—in order to find sympathy and release. Even though the connections she makes through *motherhoodshare.com* are far from perfect, they provide Heather with an outlet through which she can work through some of the problems she is facing at home. It probably would have been better for Heather to join an intersex online community; however, had Brugman taken this path, Heather would have been a completely different character—perhaps less villainous and much more supportive of her child in the end.

Food, Hormones, and other Object-Oriented Intimacies

In *Animacies*, Mel Y. Chen declares that “there is a potency and intensity to two animate or inanimate bodies passing one another, bodies that have an exchange—a potentially queer exchange—that effectively risks the implantation of injury” (Chen 206). As a necessary form of sustenance, the act of eating is not necessarily queer in itself, but the relationships between people and food can become intimately queer. Take for example the act of cooking for somebody else and/or allowing somebody else to cook for you. As a source of liveness (that which helps ensure the continuing existence of live people), to allow another person to feed you entails putting your life in their hands. Furthermore, to eat the food means to become intimate with an object as it passes through you and, in many ways, becomes you. This intimate act is rather “normal,” but recognizing it as an intimate act is what makes it queer. Sarah Ahmed maintains that “the skin connects as well as contains.... Orientations are tactile and they involve more than one skin surface: we, in approaching this or that table, are also approached by the table, which

touches us when we touch it” (qtd. in Chen). Like the table, which touches us when we touch it, food becomes animated as it travels through the body, affecting change.

In thinking intimacy, and more specifically queer intimacies, it is important to address the ways in which intimate acts can be non-consensual and, in turn, injurious. According to Berlant, intimacy demands “an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way” (“Intimacy” 281). As a consequence, this narrative takes place “within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love” (281), as well as consent. What happens, however, when these narratives encounter the unpredictability of life? What happens when our narratives, and our desires, are thwarted by the desires of others?

When Heather discovers that Alex has not been taking her medication (i.e. her male hormones), she immediately assumes that Alex’s desire to transition is a direct consequence of this negligence. Instead of addressing the issue directly with Alex, she shares her plans to force Alex to take the hormones to her audience in motherhoodshared.com. She asserts,

It really is quite good luck that he has decided to be vegetarian, because I can make him a separate meal and slip his medication in. So much of vegetarian food is just sloppy mushed up stuff anyway. It’s not ideal, but hopefully we should see it take effect in the next couple of days.

Heather is not only violating the figurative contract of trust placed on domestic intimacies but she is also enacting an act of violence by tampering with the integrity of the source of life, food, which she has animated into a weapon capable of inflicting injury. This injustice is not lost on her audience, particularly Vic, who is quick to vocalize his outrage by asking, “Don’t you think dosing up your child with testosterone without telling her is wrong? [...] Shouldn’t you sit down

and talk to Alex about what she wants?” (82). Because of the involvement of testosterone, a sex hormone, the non-consensual intimate act of feeding the child becomes an act of sexual violence that threatens to disrupt the Alex’s developing adolescent body, causing irreparable harm. In Vic’s words, “this is abuse” (83).

In thinking about queer intimacies, Chen contends that queerness and toxicity “have an affinity. They truck with negativity, marginality, and subject-object confusions; they have, arguably, an affective intensity; they challenge heteronormative understandings of intimacy” (207). That said, how does toxicity apply to food or lotion? In this case, hormones—and the consequences of the hormones entering the body—serve as the toxic element contained within the food and the lotion Heather is giving Alex. This violation of trust, this disruption in intimacy, beyond abuse, become acts of sexual violence as these products—both food and lotion—become that which is killing Alex to make room, once more, for the Other Alex. Because this resignification of sex goes against what Alex wants for herself—against the embodiment she feels comfortable in—Heather is, then, committing an act of sexual abuse against her child. This is how the text can be understood as complicating notions of not just sex, gender, and sexuality, but also as redefining the way we perceive sexual violence.

Sexual Violence: Intimacy and (Self)Rape

In the novel, Brugman uses mirrors as a means to elucidate the complexities of identity politics and to portray a rich conceptualization of the splitting of the adolescent trans* mind. In turn, through the use of Lacan, we can better understand how mirrors are a central component in the formation of Alex’s identity throughout the novel. Take for example the following passage,

I pull the skirt over my hips, and I try twirling it back and forth in front of the mirror. It’s full and short, and if I twirl fast enough, Alex can see my underwear in the mirror.

I try the halter top on, but I have nothing to fill it. I try the peasant top instead, and I undo the lace, and fluff it out so there is a suggestion that there could be breasts there.

[...]

Then I look at Alex, and I can tell what he is going to do next.

Don't you dare, I say to him, but he already has his hands down his pants. He is looking at me being a girlie girl in the mirror. He is glaring at the suggestion of where breasts could be. He is imagining big ones. He is staring at shimmery pink eyelids, but mostly it's the lip gloss that does it for him.

I hate it when he does this. It's so gross. It's a real boy thing to do. I say, you are breathing too loud.

He says, Shut up.

[...]

He looks at me and sees a hot chick—a smooth Clinique girl. I look at him and see a chimpanzee tugging on his little noodle.

His face has gone red. He says, Shut up and let me finish. So I pout a little, with the lip gloss on, so he can finish quicker and we can get out of here before the stink of him makes me throw up. (Brugman 5-6)

Several interesting occurrences manifest in this scene. Firstly, Brugman splits Alex's psyche into a male-female dichotomy in which the male is portrayed as sexually active and the female as sexually passive. In true Lacanian fashion, what Brugman has presented here is similar to the struggle between the mother and the baby as the baby tries to establish his subjective boundaries. As Karen Coats so accurately articulates, "before the child becomes a fully desiring subject, he or she is caught in the attempt to satisfy the demand of the Other" (which Alex ultimately does

when she sexualizes herself for the pleasure of the other Alex¹¹). However, the dynamics are different in this context because both Alexes inhabit the same body, and a full separation is impossible. In turn, Alex recognizes herself as existing alongside the other Alex, and since they cannot in fact exist separate from one another, she must figure out a way to coexist with him. Because Alex is intersex, and her material body exists outside of the sex binary, we must take into consideration the aspects of the narrative that are specific to gender—such as the performative act of adorning the body in a feminine fashion in order to achieve some kind of affective fulfillment. Even though Alex is described as having feminine features, enough to situate her body in the context of a dressing room and pass as female, her sexual anatomy is predominantly male (she has a small phallus and no breasts). The reason it is important to consider this is because it is unclear whether Brugman is articulating that the other Alex’s behaviors are specific to males because of who they are on a material (i.e. hormonal) level or because of the ways in which society has socialized males to behave as boys. In which turn, is Alex’s rejection of this behavior performative? Granted, materialities inform social behaviors, but in Brugman’s narrative, it is impossible to determine what her end-goal is. Because of this, what makes the most sense is that Alex’s sexual desire is manifesting as an affective response to an attraction (which is producing arousal), but her rejection of it is a consequence of her desire to situate herself in a feminine mental and physical space, which would entail a certain degree of sexual passivity that does not seem to come naturally to her. In turn, Alex’s rejection of sexual desire (the desire to masturbate) is a direct response to sexual desire (her desire to be a specific sex—female) in and of itself.

¹¹ For the purposes of this chapter, I will be referring to Alex’s male counterpart as “the other Alex.”

To focus more directly on the masturbatory act in which Alex expresses repulsion toward the other Alex—whom she describes as a chimpanzee—it is important to turn to Lacan because this is perhaps a direct allusion to his own assertions about the difference between humans and chimpanzees when encountered with their mirror image. Lacan establishes that while chimpanzees are able to identify the mirror image as their own species, they are not able to identify themselves in it (which a child would be able to do). While Alex is able to recognize that the girl in the mirror is herself, the other Alex is unable to recognize that the mirror image is *him*. In turn, the auto-erotic act of masturbation can be read as a sexual encounter between two separate individuals. The sexual encounter between Alex’s split subjectivity can also be perceived as a manifestation of Alex’s desire to be solely female—and given that later in the novel she comes out as a lesbian, it can also be read as a representation of lesbian desire.

I would also argue that there is a subtext of rape—which might sound farfetched given the absence of a second subject—but is Alex not two subjects in one? Despite masturbation being understood as an act of self-pleasure, Alex’s plural psyche enables an interpretation in which it becomes assumed that two separate selves are inhabiting the same body. Alex’s fantasies of girlhood are quickly shattered by the materiality of her body—by her small, yet visible and functional phallus, as well as her *lack* of breasts—which ultimately leads the other Alex to manifest. Typically, the other Alex appears when Alex is happiest with her appearance. In fact, after an encounter with a Clinique sales associate at a department store, Alex marvels at herself and exclaims, “... and now I am a girlie girl” (*Alex* 5). Her face, now with makeup on, feels like *her* face. She then rejoices in her first experience of *passing* as she stands in the girl’s dressing room at a Myer’s and another woman walks by her without seeming alarmed. And this

is the moment, right after Alex has tried on her new girlie clothes, that the other Alex immediately appears (and the masturbatory act takes place).

At first, Alex seems fairly unconcerned with the other Alex's presence. In fact, she is happy he is there to see her looking as she should: feminine. That quickly changes after the other Alex becomes aroused. This makes Alex very uncomfortable; she asks him to stop—he tells her to shut up. This interaction is not dissimilar to a conventional narrative of heterosexual rape in which the female is saying no but the male is moving forward without consent. That said, the fact that this act is taking place in one body—arguably even just one consciousness—blurs the lines between what masturbation, sex, and rape ultimately signify. Again, the novel is taking three seemingly reified concepts and collapsing them. As Dean Spade establishes in *Normal Life*, there are “modes of administrative governance [that] produce what we come to think of as natural or pre-existing identities” (11). What this text does is take these collectively recognized categories and complicates them. And in collapsing notions of rape, the narrative both solidifies and abstracts notions of sex, gender, and sexuality as well. The narrative demands the reader understand that things are always much more nuanced than they initially appear to be.

While the psychic split between the Alexes is a representation of her own ambiguous embodiment, Alex's interpretations of specific situations are rooted on stereotypical gender constructions. As previously indicated, the other Alex is presented as predatory and overly-sexual. In turn, Alex herself is portrayed as devoid of sexual desire and reduced to simply being concerned with herself and her appearance. In turn, the text is establishing an explicit connection between sex and gender by presenting the character of Alex as embodying both female and male, and in turn, having to perform accordingly as both girl and boy. While this could be interpreted as a flaw in the narrative, and ultimately as problematic, it could also be perceived as way of

criticizing the way in which bodies are socialized according to gender. Once more, and whether she intended for it or not, Brugman is bringing to light the ways in which we are limited by traditional identifications, particularly in relation to intersex—as well as the pernicious ways in which these limitations negatively impact the life, and ultimately mental health, of intersex adolescents such as Alex who are unable to come to terms with their embodiment because they are too concerned with the gender they have to present to the world in order to feel accepted, and ultimately accept themselves.

In *Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*, Jafari Allen asserts that “Sexuality is a much more inclusive a concept than the limited reading of sexuality as ‘sexual orientation,’ or the conflation of sexuality with homosexuality” (58). This assertion is important because it is easy to use the word “sexuality” in an exclusive “gay and lesbian” way without considering all the different ways in which non-heteronormative sexual practices can be non-homosexual. Also, this logic can be directly applied to the ways in which people perceive notions of sex and the ways in which they often either conflate it with or divorce it (as the uniform notion of sex as heterosexual *and* essentially just penetrative) from queer sexual practices (such as masturbation). It is then important to bring the focus back to what is perhaps the most shocking scene in the entire novel, the other Alex masturbating to Alex, and the moment in which Brugman, perhaps even unknowingly, does her best writing: *the moment in which Alex rapes Alex*. Is reducing Alex’s sexual exploration of herself to rape accurate in any capacity? Or is such an act simply mirroring rape dynamics while still holding a different significance?

When Alex looks at herself in the mirror, she sees the self she truly wants to see.

According to Lacan, desire has very little to do with materiality and is in fact rooted in the

social—which means that desire is not as essential as it is constructed by outside factors (para. “III: On Desire”). Alex’s desire to look female could have manifested in sexual arousal the minute she saw herself in the mirror, but because complying with her desire to masturbate to her own self was unacceptable, she was forced to split her consciousness into two—the female and the male—and by turning the other Alex into the pervert, she simply ascribed *sexuality* to the acceptable social identifier (since, and as previously asserted, females are not supposed to be sexually active beings). In writing about sex, gender, and sexuality this way, Brugman’s narrative is in a constant state of destructing, reconstructing, and deconstructing these categories until they simply collapse.

To return to Lacan one last time, in the mirror stage, the child is presented with “an ideal image of him- or herself that does not correspond with the infant’s present experiential reality” (“Lacan: The Mirror Stage”). By essentially opening her novel by portraying Alex unwittingly masturbating to herself in front of a mirror while imagining she has larger breasts, Brugman is establishing a direct relationship between the body as is and the body as Alex desires it to be. The intimate act, which re-occurs several times throughout the novel (and is a continuous depiction of the other Alex as animal), is a representation of the “connection” Alex has to the ideal image of herself and her journey toward achieving the Ideal-I (the “I” we believe we should be, the I we desire to both perceive ourselves as and be perceived as). Lacan does establish that this is a lifelong journey that could never be accomplished because the Ideal-I is synonymous with unattainable perfection, but Alex does manage to find some resolve when she discards mirrors and, instead, starts looking at herself through pictures.

A consistent trope in contemporary Young Adult fiction with intersex representation is the battle between embodied selfhood and desired selfhood. The embodied self is a

representation of the material body while the desired self represents the idealized body. Even though Young Adult contemporaries advocate for the individual's bodily autonomy and typically depict "corrective" surgery as unnecessary, the narratives tend to end in the complete extirpation of one of the sexes. This "castration" or expunging of a sex is necessary in order for the characters to succeed in the social world. Alex's repulsion of her phallus, which she refers to as "his small noodle" (denoting this way that it does not belong to her), is what Karen Coats describes as "the passage from the Real to the Symbolic" (137). She maintains, "Crucial to this passage is the formation of a coherent sense of a potential self through the Imaginary—that is, the child uses fictional small others to mirror back to him his own possibilities for identity construction" (137). As an adolescent, this passage is "re-formative rather than formative" (137) as Alex is redefining her body and assessing her possibilities for a "girl" social identity in relation to her intersex embodiment. In this case, Alex's penis is keeping her from fitting into the self she wants to present to the world. Even though Alex is consistently depicted as hating this part of her anatomy, Brugman never actually castrates her. This is unlike any other Young Adult contemporary novel in which the authors typically resort to surgery as a means of preserving the mental health of their characters. In fact, the end of *Alex as Well*, while somewhat reduced to gendered clichés, is rather powerful. As Alex walks out of her school, she encounters a giant billboard of herself in which she is "arching [her] eyebrows, [wearing] a bowler hat, with [a] drawn-on mustache, blowing a kiss" (214). Alex laughs as she recognizes herself and says, "It's me up there, dressed like a girl dressed like a boy" (214). What is most intriguing about the way in which Brugman has phrased this is the fact that Alex has recognized herself not as a girl dressed like a boy, but as someone who is "dressed like a girl dressed like a boy" (214). This line solidifies gender as a construction and as performative as opposed to an essential, material

quality within the novel. In view of this, the novel's representation of sex, gender, and sexuality, while at times inconsistent, certainly are in tune the conception that these categories can be flexible and even subjective. This realization falls in tune with Dean Spade's argument for a transformative approach to the way the category of trans* is understood. Granted, Spade's claims are particular to the legal field, but as they transcend into the social world, the way Brugman has chosen to write the character of Alex is ultimately transformative as it attempts to challenge a heteropatriarchal existence. In this novel, the main character has been successfully queered.

Regardless of Brugman's binary allusions (such as consistently presenting the other Alex as hypersexual and Alex herself as repulsed by sexual desire) the narrative is powerful in its representation of intersex and trans* identity as annexed experiences that destabilize the signification of sexuality—in fact, this representation turns sexuality into a flexible category that is determined as much by the body as it is by the meaning ascribed to it. It *transforms* these categories; it *queers* them. The link between intersex and trans* in this particular narrative is also compelling because intersex children are typically forced into a sex at birth (Alex was socialized as a “boy” prior to self-identifying as “girl”) which then produces a *necessity* for transitioning into the gender that best matches the individual's psychological identity. I am not in any way suggesting that it *legitimizes* the transition, for all transitions are legitimate regardless of embodiment, and often necessary in order to preserve the social and mental stability of an individual, but I am simply reaffirming that it can be incredibly traumatic to sex, or *desex* a body, without consent.

While it could be easily argued that gender is fluid, so much of our gendered experience as humans stems from either embracing or rejecting the body as defined by language upon birth—or from having others do that for us. Gender is ultimately a social identity. This idea is

what makes the ending of *Alex as Well* so powerful—because the ending suggests that while individuals may choose one gender or the other, or might prefer one embodiment over another (whether said gender/embodiment is the one that’s been assigned), there is also the possibility of socializing yourself into a non-binary role—you can look at yourself (through a mirror or a photograph) and choose to be the “I” that is dressed as a boy dressed as a girl.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault extensively explored “the way in which sex is “put into discourse”” (11). In fact, a large part of his exploration focused on “the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world” (11). This is what Brugman explores in *Alex As Well* also when she writes about the ways in which power, knowledge (or the lack thereof), and pleasure interact and influence identity-construction. Alex, as a character, embodies the ways in which “biological existence [is] reflected in political existence” (142). Furthermore, this text, despite the simplicity of the language, is political because it attempts to elucidate the realities of the invisible, the marginalized, and the abject by placing them front and center and allowing them to transform the collective.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Building New Worlds

During the production of this thesis, I struggled with separating myself from binary thinking. I realized that even for me, someone who is constantly engaging with works that challenge those binaries, is hard. This is why Young Adult novels such as *Alex as Well* are important—because they reach their intended audience at an age in which individuals, more specifically teenagers, are only beginning to understand themselves and the world. Young Adult novels with queer and trans* representation have given me an opportunity to rethink my understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality, and to reassemble myself within those new understandings, but they just might be giving teenagers an opportunity to *build* themselves in new and exciting ways.

It is Roberta Trites who establishes that “Young Adult novels are about power” (3). More specifically, these novels are about how adolescents “learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death” (3). *Alex as Well* focuses on more than just Alex’s negotiation with her intersex embodiment, her gender identity, and her sexuality, and it moves toward the recognition that even as an adolescent, she has agency and can be in control of herself, her desires, and her future. This is particularly resonant because Alex comes to recognize that she does not have to tolerate her mother’s insidious forms of abuse and can, as she does, leave home. While I must point out that leaving home is not always an option, and that the very act of leaving is a tell for Alex’s privileged position within society, the novel still does a good job of advocating for a child’s right to bodily autonomy. And even more, the novel pushes us to expand our

understandings of gender to include a possibility for a non-binary identification. The novel tries to teach adolescents to be like Alex, who sees herself up in the billboard, dressed like a girl dressed like a boy, and laughs. To echo Alex one last time, “I laughed because people are always going to give me a hard time... But there are worse things that people you don’t care about not liking you” (214).

The novel also deals with the raw realities of parenting an intersex child. While Heather is intended to represent one of the institutions of power—the family—Alex exists within, and this effectively turns her into the villain of the story, Heather is a character worthy of empathy. She, like many adults who grew up in a less accepting world, is struggling to understand and accept Alex’s new identifications, which inevitably alter her own reality. This is why she disappears into the web, a space where she can talk about her problems with individuals who might be able to help her yet do not exist within her physical social sphere.

As I previously established in chapter 3, the internet has been a great tool for activism and community-building since the beginning of intersex advocacy in the early 1990s. Interestingly enough, it is not Alex but Heather who finds solace in online spaces. This might be representative of a reversal of roles in which queer and trans* voices are able to move through the world more loudly and it is, in fact, those who reject these new identities that must find shelter in the anonymity of a screenname. Having said that, the very act of building intimate relationships through a computer screen is one of the many ways in which non-normative forms of intimacy are present in the text.

The ways in which intimacy is queered in the novel is actually the main reason why I chose to work with this text. It is easy to assume that the bonds we establish with people will, in many ways, be intimate—but *Alex as Well* pushed me to think about the ways in which we

establish intimate relationships with ourselves, and with inanimate objects. However, are these objects truly ever inanimate or are do they seem that way because of how we conceptualize animacies? Food and lotion, particularly in the context of the novel, are hardly lifeless. These objects are not sentient or alive in the same way humans are, but they certainly have the power to alter the bodies they come in contact with—in this case, Alex’s body. While food is typically used for nourishment, and lotion serves its own aesthetic and even healing purpose, in the context of *Alex as Well*, these “good” things were animated as weapons. Food might not be capable of forcing its way into ours mouths, but once inside our bodies, it has power—transformative power. In this case, it was the hormones in the food that threatened the life—and the body—Alex was so carefully trying to construct for herself. Had Alex continued to live at home and consume her mother’s food, she might have lost the ability to transition altogether—or at least transition into femaleness in the way she wanted to do it.

Erin Durban-Albrecht maintains that “there is an endless variety of the transing effects of these interventions that temporarily or permanently remove the ability to achieve normative, or at least desired, masculine and feminine embodiments” (201). While Durban-Albrecht is speaking to the medicalized interventions that took place in a post-earthquake Haiti, the same rule applies to intersex children whose bodies have been altered by their parents without consent. This is why Young Adult novels, and other medias, with intersex representations, as well as theories that grapple with embodiment rather than just identity matter. Intersex children should always be consulted before any kind of aesthetic surgery is forced onto their bodies. I do understand and acknowledge the importance, and even necessity, of interventions that are intended to improve the quality of life of the child, but not when the quality of life is being measured against heteronormative conceptions of sex and gender.

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