

**GROUNDING THEOLOGY IN QUOTIDIAN  
EXPERIENCES OF COMPLEX GENDER:  
A FEMINIST APPROACH**

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By

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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February 2013

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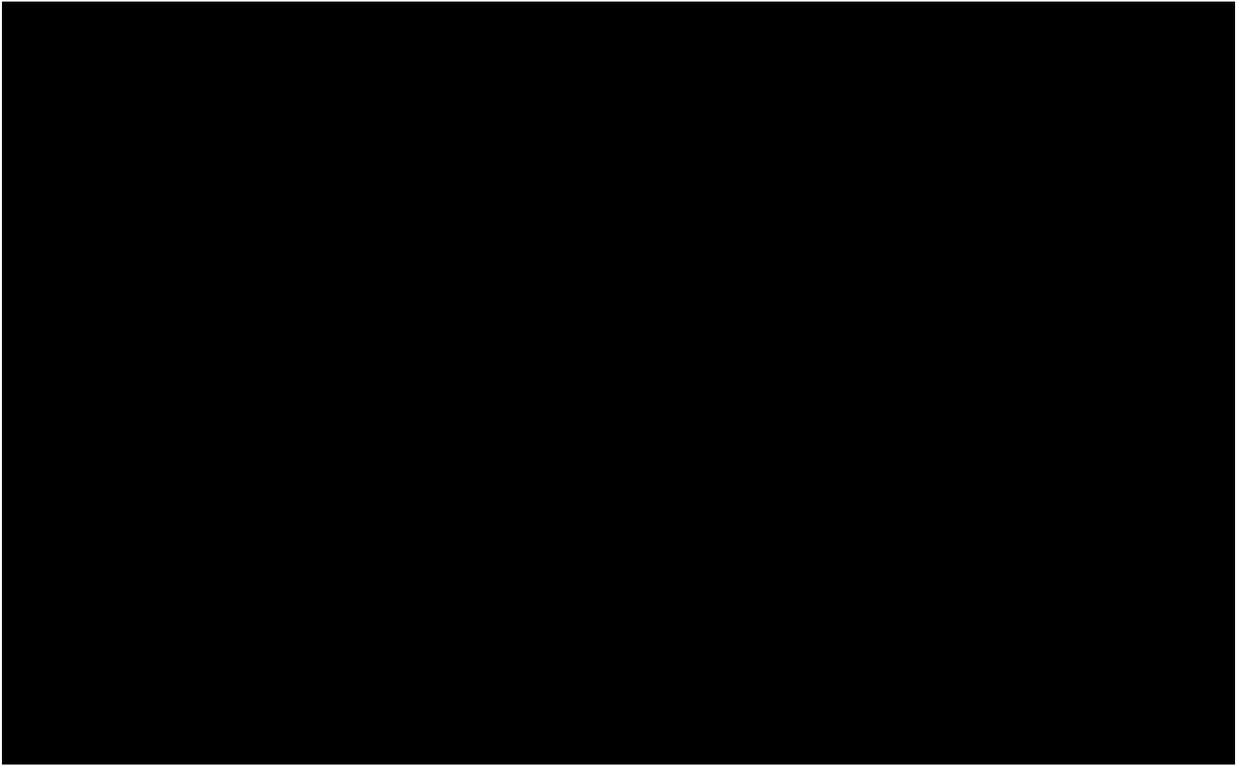
## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that theorising about the phantasmatic nature of binary gender, by commentators such as Judith Butler, provides fruitful openings for the formation of new metaphorical models for Divine-human relationship. I am concerned with what it means, at the level of each specific human life, to be *imago Dei*, particularly as this relates to genders that are ambiguous, fluid or otherwise complex. Expanding the feminist theological rubric of 'experience' to include the individual and the quotidian, I apply the qualitative research method of grounded theory to data gathered from transgendered people, to develop a methodology of silent waiting: Grounded Theology. I analyse the experiences of each of three narrators as *imago Dei*, and generate three metaphors with which to discuss the nature of both genderedness and the Divine: Thinness, or numinous insubstantiality; Proteanism, or ceaseless mutability; and Opacity, or transcendent unknowability. I contend that a renunciation of attachment to binary gender is necessary for the establishment of justice for those rendered unintelligible by binary norms. I conclude that theologies that draw metaphorical models, whether androcentric or gynocentric, from binary gender alone are not wholly adequate either as descriptions of human gendered experiences or as satisfactory signposts to the Divine.

The thesis is dedicated to Marguerite Elizabeth Barnsley.  
Thanks for everything.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Profound thanks are due to all those who have helped with the process of wrangling this thesis into coherence: the eleven patient, thoughtful and generous people who gave up their time to be interviewed; my equally patient, thoughtful, and generous supervisors, Pam Lunn and Ben Pink Dandelion; my mom, Marguerite Elizabeth Barnsley; my many friends, in particular Sharon Jones, Claire Penketh, Jenni Woodward, Peter Wright, Angela Galley and Anne Slater; friends, colleagues and fellow students at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre; my much-valued community at Othona Burton Bradstock; Mari Hughes-Edwards and Elke Weissmann and the Gender and Sexuality Research Group (GenSex) at Edge Hill University; and finally, and always, my Best Beloved, Roy Bayfield.



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# FOREWORD

## SPECIALIST TERMINOLOGY DISCUSSED

### *Introduction*

In writing this thesis, in which I claim that binary gender is but one metaphor among many possibilities to describe our experiences of genderedness, I find it necessary to deploy a number of unfamiliar word coinages. Some of these I have devised myself; others are adopted and adapted from existing usage. In this foreword, I discuss the use of pronouns in relation to a deconstruction of gender, explaining my decision to use a gender-neutral or ‘epicene’ pronoun set throughout this text. I then outline the language I use for the Divine and the material, explain terms I deploy in relation to feminist theology specifically, and detail some of the issues around the terminologies of gender variance, and the language choices I make to describe gender variant people.

### *Epicene Pronouns*

#### **Epicene Pronoun Use Defined**

This thesis begins with a thought experiment: what if there were no gender binary? In order to think into existence a world in which binary gender roles have no meaning we might start with words to reconfigure the gender landscape. As part of this thought experiment therefore I propose to employ a set of gender-neutral or

‘epicene’ pronouns in place of the binary of ‘she’ and ‘he’. Although a number of epicene options already exist in English—the ‘singular they’; ‘s/he’ or ‘he/she’; the ‘animate it’; ‘one’; and the ‘universal he’—all are problematic<sup>1</sup>, with the last the most problematic of all. Feminist commentators have long since pointed out that this he is in no sense universal; ‘he’ produces in the mind’s eye the image of a binary-compliant male, regardless of the intentions of the author<sup>2</sup>. Devoting a whole chapter of *Grammar and Gender* (1986, 190-216; see also Livia 2001, 134-159) to alternative epicene neologisms, Dennis Baron states that ‘in all more than eighty...have been proposed since the eighteenth century’<sup>3</sup> (ibid 190). It was not until the 1970s, however, that the epicene project became the concern of feminisms.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of ‘they/them/their/theirs’ as singular pronoun works well when we are referring to a somewhat indeterminate or hypothetical third person, someone who may be a singular representative of a plurality. However, when applied to a singular person representing only self, the effect is clumsy and prone to ambiguity. The inclusive language options ‘s/he’ or ‘he/she’ fail on the grounds that they account only for binary-compliant people. The ‘animate it’ is not an attractive option since it is heavily laden culturally with inanimacy. ‘One’, like singular they, works well when the person in question is a singular representative of a plurality, more hypothetical than real, but the inherent ambiguity of singular they is not avoided when one is applied to an individual.

<sup>2</sup> A telling demonstration of this occurs in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1992 [1969]) a science fiction novel which posits the existence of an alien race of gender-free beings. In describing these beings, Le Guin chose to use the universal he because, she said in a later essay, ‘I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for ‘he/she’...‘He’ is the generic pronoun, damn it, in English’ (1989, 15). By the late 1970s, however, she had come to recognise that this had been a mistake, since the effect of the generic he was to render all her supposedly gender-free characters incontrovertibly male (ibid, 16).

<sup>3</sup> It is clear from Baron’s extensive review that the reasons for such coinages have varied over time. While seventeenth and eighteenth century neologisers had been concerned with logic and rationality, Victorian supporters of the epicene pronoun were moved more by issues of grammatical correctness and even commercial concerns: ‘since time is money, communications must be rapid as well as grammatically correct’ (Baron 1986, 200).

Since feminist intentions are generally to create pronouns that undermine the universality of ‘he’ by including ‘she’, the binary construction of gender is not necessarily thereby problematised. Some recent neologisms, however, have been coined to allow for the expression of gender beyond the binary. A number of these have been taken up, at least as discussion points if not as actual used or even useable words, by gender-variant<sup>4</sup> communities seeking words to express their non-binary gender choices<sup>5</sup>; the epicene pronoun ‘ze/hir’ (see Table in footnote 5) has become somewhat normative in such circumstances.

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<sup>4</sup> Although I use the term ‘gender variant’ from time to time, I do this recognising that it is a problematic term for someone arguing that binary gender is merely one metaphor among many, since variant implies some opposing norm against which to vary. Unfortunately, binary oppositions obtrude into this text no matter how I try to prevent them.

<sup>5</sup> Some contemporary epicene pronoun sets:

Binary	she/he	her/his	hers/his	Her/himself
Spivak	e	em	eirs	emself
Spivak (alt)	ey	em	eirs	eirself
Splat	*e	h*	h*s	h*self
Ze/Sie	Ze/sie	hir	hirs	hirself
Zie	zie	zir	zirs	zirself

(Spivak and Splat pronouns were developed for online gamers wanting to play non- or third-gender characters)

All of these are serviceable systems for written communication, though not without problems when spoken. Splat pronouns, for example, are obviously inarticulate in speech. Transgender activist Nat Titman’s online guide to epicene pronouns for gender-variant people (Titman [n.d.]) states that ‘ze/hir’ has gained popularity in the trans community. It is, for instance, Kate Bornstein’s epicene set of choice in *My Gender Workbook* (1998) and is used routinely in gender-variant online forums (Titman [n.d.]). In spoken form ‘ze’ (and ‘zie’) are however problematic in that they have a tendency to sound like a comedic idea of a French speaker’s English, asserts Titman. Likewise ‘hir/hirself’ sound too much like ‘her/herself’ to be successful in creating in the hearer’s mind a gender-neutral image. The Spivak pronouns have none of these disadvantages, and after due consideration Titman declares these to be the most serviceable for gender-variant people, although in practice ze retains its popularity.

The main problem with such epicene pronouns as ‘zie/hir’ from the point of view of this study is that, taken up by gender-variant communities alone they become markers of gender variance rather than universals, and so are not a substitute for but an addition to standard binary pronouns. Many commentators (e.g. Feinberg 1998; O’Keefe 1999; Wilchins 2002b; Dittman 2003; Pratt 2005) call for additional pronouns better to represent ‘richly gendered experiences and identities’ (Scott-Dixon 2006a, 26) but, as Alexander Pershai points out, this might serve only to mark a user out as different from the norm, and as subordinate in a hierarchy of acceptable gender options (2006, 48-49), thus forming one half of a binary opposition of normal/variant.

### **Epicene Pronouns for This Thesis**

Seeking words to express non-binary gender in relation to *all* embodiments, I therefore turn to Marge Piercy’s science fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979) and in particular, her epicene pronoun set based on the word ‘person’—person/per/pers/perself—which she deploys to create an unsettling sense of ambiguity<sup>6</sup> around the inhabitants of the future utopian community of Mattapoissett. The strength of Piercy’s creation, to which I return briefly in Chapter 1, is that it

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<sup>6</sup> Livia asserts that the value of such pronoun usage in fiction lies in that it obliges the reader ‘to grapple with the ideological motivation behind these terms’, to ask why Piercy chooses to unsettle the binary in this way and thence to question our own gender certainties (2001, 138). At first meeting the reader is not sure whether a character is male, female or something else. Since the novel’s point-of-view character, Connie Ramos, is a woman of the present who still sees people in binary terms, the sense of ambiguity never lasts long, but it is powerful enough to suggest exciting possibilities.

convincingly delineates a world in which sexual difference still exists—people are still born with sexed bodies—but socially-constructed gender roles have no meaning and cannot therefore render the sexed body unintelligible through its failure to conform.

### **The Effects of Epicene Pronoun Use**

Of course the existence of epicene pronouns in a language is no absolute guarantee of gender-neutral thinking among the speakers of that language<sup>7</sup>. Finnish has only one third-person singular pronoun form, *hän*. In an email correspondence with several Finnish speakers I asked the question:

Does the absence of gender specificity mean that you keep an open mind on the person's gender until you have evidence to point to one gender or another—do you have a kind of ‘gender-free space’ in your head?

One respondent stated that she thought

Finnish speakers...would be as ‘curious’ as the speakers of any other language to know the person's...gender. It usually comes up soon, as his/her name is mentioned.

This suggests that the gender-neutrality of the pronoun is compensated for in other ways, such as personal name or context, and that therefore a gender-free space in the Finnish psyche is not sustained. However a second respondent, bilingual in

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<sup>7</sup> Speaking of her native language Chinese, for example, an acquaintance opined that the existence of the apparently gender-free third person singular had done nothing to undermine the deeply patriarchal nature of Chinese society. Despite its appearance of gender neutrality, the pronoun is in fact effectively a universal he.

Swedish and Finnish, thought differently. Speaking particularly about reading the Bible, she stated:

I realized when I gave it a thought...that maybe one of the reasons...I still have a very good relationship to religious language in Finnish could be the linguistic absence of that male God I was fighting so hard in Swedish.... Within the Finnish *hän*...I managed to find a Motherly God, or a Sisterly Holy Spirit, or a ReBirthing Christ, images life saving to me at the time.... When I...read feminist theologians and their struggle with a He and She...maybe one of the reasons I look so lightly upon that 'fight'...was I had access to a space in thought where I could try all these theories and make them match and make them mine—effortlessly, since it was already there within the structures of language?

Though both correspondents attest to the highly patriarchal nature of Finnish culture, it is clear from the second response that a degree of gender-free thinking is possible as a result of the gender-neutral *hän*, particularly if one is already predisposed to think about gender issues. Thus I assert that an experiment with epicene pronouns is worthwhile in the context of this study. While Livia argues that 'It does not make sense to behave as though we are living in a nongendered utopia because we desire one' (2001, 37), I contend that, on the contrary, change can only come from imagining that existence be different and from acting out that imagining.

### **Epicene Pronoun Use as Thought Experiment**

From this point onwards, therefore, person/per/pers/perself will be the only pronoun set to appear in this text outside of direct quotes. Person speaks to the erasure of gender but not the erasure of morphological differences, in a way that

aligns with my overall intentions and reflects my desire to render intelligible all genders, both within and outside the current binary, without creating a new divide of binaried/nonbinaried human beings, as I discuss in Chapter 1. Furthermore, since *per* sounds very similar to *her*, this might offset a tendency to read this epicene pronoun as merely an *ersatz* of the universal *he*, whilst being sufficiently different not to be unequivocally read as universal *she*. And, since we are without doubt all persons, *person* is an apposite epicene pronoun to deploy. It is my hope that the thought experiment of writing in gender neutral language will help somewhat to reconfigure the intelligibility of the gender landscape.

## ***GOD/DE-Language***

### **The term 'GOD/DE' Explained**

Rather than 'God', I use the term 'GODDE', deploying this spelling to indicate that, while I conceive of Divinity in broadly monotheistic terms, I write both outside Christianity and outside feminist spiritualities' concepts of The Goddess. Throughout this study, however, I use not GODDE but 'GOD/DE' to indicate that I am speaking both/either of my own conceptualising and/or the God/dess-concepts of other writers. This has proved more readable than my differentiating between those times when I am speaking of my ideas of GODDE and those times when I am speaking of others' God/dess(es). The word 'God' appears in this text only in direct quotes.

## Pronouns and GOD/DE

An issue my second Finnish correspondent above also raises, of course, is that of pronouns for GOD/DE. Since central to my argument is an understanding that GOD/DE is utterly beyond our creaturely, idolatrous concerns with gender then, of course, no creaturely pronoun such as He, She or It is in any way appropriate. But I do not, therefore, chose to apply Piercy's epicene pronoun to the Divine and refer to GOD/DE as Person, for the simple reason that I wish to preserve a sense of GOD/DE's being no thing in the world of things. Since GOD/DE is not a material person, but One who transcends all matter, I instead employ a set of pronouns specific to ÆR<sup>8</sup> alone, using the ligature 'Æ' to represent ÆR as Creator and Sustainer conjointly of All matter in its entirety and of Each and Every material thing in its specificity. And in my deployment of capitalisation, I seek to signify that GOD/DE exceeds both my thinking and this text in infinite degree.

In terms of pronunciation, Æ/ÆR retain some trace of the binary, since Æ, pronounced *ay*, sounds a little like he and ÆR, pronounced *air*, is similar to her. However, this is a better alternative, I assert, either than using existing human pronouns, or the not-uncommon practice of using 'God' as a pronoun, as in this example: 'God simply wants to reinstate God's people to full communion with God and this is what God tells God's people to do in such cases' (Tanner 2004, 49). This

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<sup>8</sup> Since coining this terminology in 2004, I have learned that an early work of science fiction/fantasy (Lindsay [1920], 172) uses the epicene 'aer/aerself' (without ligature or capitalisation) to refer to third- or non-gender characters.

latter, I contend, produces inelegant and disharmonious language in which the repeated syllable *God* draws the reader/hearer's attention to it alone and away from the entirety of the text. Furthermore, when a proper name is repeated in this way, it creates a lack of grammatical cohesion since 'it may be assumed to refer to another person with the same name' (Livia 2001, 42) in GOD/DE's case, creating a confusing impression of more than one GOD/DE entering the scene. And in the coinage *ÆR*, the similarity of its sound to that of her might, like *per*, offset a tendency to read an ungendered GOD/DE-pronoun as an *ersatz* of a universal God-He.

### ***Other Theological Terminology***

#### **The World**

I use the term 'the World' to refer to all of material creation as distinct from GOD/DE who is all that is uncreated. I take this usage from George Fox's injunction to Quakers to 'walk cheerfully over the World, answering that of God in every one [*sic*]' (Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain 1995, 19.32), where walking 'over the World' means disregarding the material in favour of the spiritual. In Chapter 1, I discuss the importance of Fox's 'that of God' to this text; here I assert the importance of walking cheerfully over the material, of asserting that the World is as nothing compared with GOD/DE.

## Dominology

I use the term 'dominology' in preference to alternatives such as 'patriarchy', 'kyriarchy', 'heteronormativity', etc, since it combines the essential characteristic of all these, which is their imposition of hierarchical structures of power-over<sup>9</sup> in the World. The word dominology is taken from Catherine Keller's *The Face of the Deep* where person defines it as the 'Christian imaginary of mastery...its logos of lordship' (2004, 1.187<sup>10</sup>).

## Thea/ologies

I contend that issues of binary gender<sup>11</sup> are similarly, although by no means homogeneously, treated across multiform western feminist, largely Anglo-American, theologies and spiritualities<sup>12</sup>, and it is this that I seek to convey in utilising a portmanteau term 'thea/ologies' to indicate that it is these traditions of which I write. Here I am observing the convention that feminist theologies are largely concerned with feminist critique of an established religion (in theologies' Western modes most often, but not exclusively, Christianity), while the feminist Goddess spiritualities theorised by thealogy are focused on the (re)establishment of

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of power-over is taken from Starhawk's discussion of feminist (re)conceptualisations of power (1990, 9-10).

<sup>10</sup> Since this is a Kindle edition, references are to location rather than page numbers, in line with *The Chicago Manual of Style* recommended practice for eBooks (2010, 14.154).

<sup>11</sup> A detailed examination of the treatment of binary gender across feminist theologies and spiritualities is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>12</sup> I concur with Jone Salomonsen's analysis that Goddess spirituality is 'deeply rooted in European Protestantism and has arisen *as a response* to an increasing dissatisfaction with Christianity... [It] is not a new religion but a new reformation' (2002, 5).

matriarchal/matrifocal spiritual practices. Although theology is, strictly speaking, the academic study of Goddess spiritualities and not those spiritualities themselves, 'thea/ologies' as a term nevertheless constitutes a not unsuitable encapsulation of these diverse movements and traditions.

### **'Sibs' and 'We'**

Throughout this thesis I refer to the rest of the human race as 'sibs', or blood relations, in acknowledgement of our ultimate interrelatedness. Similarly, I use the convention employed by many feminist theorists and theologians (e.g. Butler 1990; McFague 1993; Mollenkott 2001; Hampson 2002; Muers 2004; Elliot 2010) of the personal and inclusive 'we' rather than the impersonal 'one' or, alternatively, indirect speech as the mode of address of this text.

## ***Gender Terminology***

### **Transgender**

Since the substance of my theologising is based upon interviews with transgender, or trans, people, it is appropriate to explain in some detail the specialist gender terminology I employ throughout this text. There is a popular media view of transness that tends to assume that all trans experience is transsexual, 'that all transsexuals are male-to-female..., that all trans women want to achieve stereotypical femininity' (Serano 2007, 35), and that all transsexual people feel

‘trapped in the wrong body’ (Bornstein 1995, 66). In reality, trans experience is vast and varied including, in addition to male-to-female people, people assigned-female/affirmed-male (female-to-male) as well as people who feel both male and female and neither female nor male, and people who have chosen to engage with surgical and hormonal technologies at a variety of levels as well as people who have not, never will or have yet to decide.

The notion of being born or trapped in the ‘wrong body’ is seen as highly problematic by many; Sandy Stone, for example, views this status as something one has to claim, regardless of how one actually feels, in order successfully to access clinical treatment<sup>13</sup> (2006, 231). The terms male-to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) are not universally embraced, since some transsexuals ‘do not see this as a full representation of their experiences’ (O’Keefe 1999, 103); for some, for example, the first component of the designation has no reality since they never felt like their assigned gender in the first place, so there never was a female from which to become male. Similarly ‘pre-op’ and ‘post-op’<sup>14</sup> are increasingly seen as offensive (Serano 2007, 32-33) in that they needlessly draw attention to aspects of people’s physicality that should have no bearing on how we interact with one another. And Virginia

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<sup>13</sup> One of my narrators referred to this as the ‘conveyor belt’ approach; clinicians, especially surgeons, put trans people onto the conveyor belt in the ‘wrong’ body at one end and take them off at the other in the ‘right’ body.

<sup>14</sup> The terminology of surgery is likewise a contested affair, being called variously sex reassignment surgery, gender reassignment surgery and sex confirmation surgery, among other nomenclatures (Walters 2003, 61).

Mollenkott notes that some transsexual people object to being 'grouped together with transpeople, feeling that their unique experiences are erased by that grouping' (2001, 41), as the critiques of gender deconstruction by Julia Serano (2007) and Viviane Namaste (2000) in Chapter 1 highlight.

In this text I avoid terminology that I know to be offensive and approach all other terminology with due care and respect. Tucker Lieberman observes, however, that a lack of unified vocabulary for transgender experiences makes the discussion of them problematic and comments 'Probably a common language hasn't appeared yet because everyone's gender experience is unique' (2003, 109). Alexander Pershai (2006, 46) and Allen James (2002, 128) also note the difficulties inherent in 'the lack of a fully descriptive terminology' (ibid) but, Pershai argues, attempts to standardise would impose 'an artificial and unsatisfactory homogeneity' on the variety of trans experiences (2006, 46). While affirming that ultimately self-identification must be the basis for any terminology (Scott-Dixon 2006a, 15), Krista Scott-Dixon attempts this tentative definition of transgender as a category, as 'a more or less adequate term that suggests many forms of crossing gender, whether in terms of behavior, self-presentation or identity, or in terms of how such crossings are experienced or understood' (ibid 12). Kate Bornstein offers a very broad reading that includes in the

category ‘anyone who cares to admit their own gender ambiguities’<sup>15</sup> (1995, 98), while for Gary Bowen transgender refers to ‘someone who transcends traditional stereotypes of “man” and “woman”’ (1998, 63). Serano, however, dismisses the ‘umbrella’ of transgender as too suggestive of a commonality of experiences where there is none (2007, 26). Similarly, Namaste asserts that transgender serves to erase the specificities of experience within the different groups of transsexual, transvestite and transgendered (2000, 43). Serano however warns against a ‘glossary approach’ to terminology that suggests that words for transgender experiences are ‘written in stone...[and] passed down from generation to generation’ (2007, 23) and notes that as much as a term might be in regular use by some, it will still be contested by others (ibid 24).

## **Genderqueer**

‘Genderqueer’ is a relatively recent coinage adopted by people who seek actively to challenge gender norms and ‘taken-for-granted meanings about bodies and about gender’ (Elliot 2010, 34) and, as such, arguably has different political/activist connotations from transgender. Wilchins defines genderqueer broadly and inclusively, stating that in a society ‘where femininity is feared and loathed’ and

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<sup>15</sup> This, and other broad definitions, would include people like me who acknowledge the discontinuities in our gender experiences. However, I would by no means feel justified in claiming the name of transgender based on my own gender experiences, discontinuous though they undoubtedly are.

heterosexuality is compelled, all women and all gay people are genderqueer<sup>16</sup> (2002b, 11-12). However, in practice the genderqueer movement sees itself as a more radical category of people who define themselves outside the binary, 'a gender for which we have no word in the English language' (Wyss 2006, 60), a position that brings with it its own exclusionary and hierarchical problematics (Bulldagger 2006, 146; Elliot 2010, 34n33) for those who feel 'not queer enough' (Shepard 2006, 318).

### **Trans/genderqueer**

For the sake of brevity I use a portmanteau construction 'trans/genderqueer' in this text to demarcate gender variant people. In linking these terms I do not seek, however, to suggest that the agendas of all trans and genderqueer communities are homogeneous, since they are not by any means, but rather, in the context of this thesis, to demonstrate that my chosen commentators self-identify as part of either set of communities.

### **Cisgender/Cissexual**

'Cisgender' and 'cissexual' are neologisms gaining currency in trans/feminist debates<sup>17</sup>. The prefix 'cis' is defined as 'on the same side as'; thus, cissexual/cisgender

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<sup>16</sup> As with transgender (see note 15 above), this broad definition does not, I think, entitle me to claim genderqueer as an identity.

<sup>17</sup> Scott-Dixon states that person prefers 'non-trans' over cis since it makes trans the measure of the human and non-trans 'the ones who don't quite measure up' (2006, 15). I, however, believe it to be a mistake to valorise one set of characteristics over another and define people by what they are not.

signifies having assigned and affirmed genders on the same side. Serano defines cissexuals as ‘people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned’ (2007, 12) and ‘cissexism’ as the belief that such an experience is more valid and authentic than that of a transsexual person. As trans has become an acceptable contraction for transgender, as discussed below, so has cis for cisgender

## **My Choices**

Notwithstanding justifiable concerns about the erasure of specificity particularly with regard to transsexual experiences, and Serano’s caution about a glossary approach, I utilise the term ‘transgender’ as it is defined in a glossary from one of my narrators<sup>18</sup>, as a widely accepted term ‘for people [including transsexuals] who feel the gender they were assigned at birth does not match their perceived gender identity’ (*A Glossary of Terms* 2004). In line with this glossary, I use the contraction ‘trans’ when I refer to all transgender people and ‘transsexual’ when I refer specifically to people who have chosen to engage with surgery to align their bodies with their affirmed gender, noting that for some, however, this is an invidious

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<sup>18</sup> I have chosen to use the term ‘narrators’ to refer to the people I interviewed over the alternatives of ‘interviewee’ or ‘subject’, since it assigns the active role to the one who narrates rather than to the one who conducts the interview. I discuss the thinking behind this decision in far greater detail later in Chapter 2.

distinction. In my definition, trans includes cross-dressers<sup>19</sup>, though in some definitions it does not.

I have adopted from various internet forums the term 'assigned' to refer to the designation a person was given in accordance with the State's judgement of sex at birth, based on genital morphology, and 'affirmed' to refer to the gender a person asserts they are as a result of their own deeply-felt sense of gender affinity<sup>20</sup>, in those cases where a person affirms a clear distinction between these two.

Despite Wilchins' broad definition, I use genderqueer to refer specifically to people who have chosen actively to challenge gender norms as a means of effecting societal more than personal change. The portmanteau trans/genderqueer therefore includes people who experience their gender trouble either/both personally or/and politically. Cis is my word of choice for referring to people whose sex and gender are, by and large, aligned with one or other binary option. Along with the epicene pronouns person/per and the other usages discussed above, this specialist

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<sup>19</sup> 'Cross-dresser' is preferred over 'transvestite' as the term to describe people who sometimes choose to dress as 'the opposite sex'. In some definitions, there is an assumption that cross-dressing includes, to a greater or lesser extent, an element of sexual pleasure. Based on evidence from a number of sources, including one of my narrators, I reject that assumption as a gross oversimplification of crosser-dressers' experiences.

<sup>20</sup> Serano (2007, 30) also uses 'assigned' and sometimes 'birth' for gender assigned according to genital morphology at birth, and 'preferred', 'identified' or 'lived' for deeply felt sense of gender affinity, while Lesley Carter uses 'born gender' and 'felt gender' (2006, 53). 'Birth gender' is a problematic concept, however, since many trans people know that they are born their affirmed gender however their assigned gender may have been judged.

terminology delineates some of the landscape of this thesis, beginning with a discussion of the deconstruction of binary gender in the following chapter.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: THEOLOGISING AROUND THE COMPLEXITIES OF GENDER

### *Introduction*

This thesis addresses the issue of how theorising about binary gender, its insubstantial and even, perhaps, fictitious nature, by constructivist commentators such as Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, Anne Fausto-Sterling and Kate Bornstein, might provide fruitful openings for the formation of new metaphorical models of the Divine-human relationship. In this project of theologising around the complexities of gender, I am particularly concerned with the ways in which the quotidian experiences of individual human beings are expressive of what the Quaker George Fox called ‘that of God in every one [*sic*]’ (Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain 1995, 19:32); of what it might mean, at the level of each specific human life, to express ‘that of GOD/DE’ or to be *imago Dei*<sup>1</sup>; and what more ‘of GOD/DE’ we might know by addressing such experiences particularly as they relate to genders that are describable as variant, ambiguous, fluid, trans, queer or complex. In pursuit of this I have interviewed trans people, whose stories form the

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that in some Christian theologies *imago Dei* is conceptualised as processual, something that is to be achieved by right relation to GOD/DE and that, therefore, can be failed to be achieved (e.g. Tanner 2010, 126; Turner 2008, 141). In my usage, however, I conceive of the image and likeness of GOD/DE as something that exists in each human from the moment of creation, and is thus analogous to the Quaker concept of that of GOD/DE in every one.

heart of this text. From their words I have theologised around the some of the complexities of gender that have troubled me since childhood.

This chapter begins with a description of my own 'gender trouble' (cf Butler 1990), expanding this into a discussion of key features in recent work on deconstruction of gender, from which I conclude that it is necessary to consider that our attachment to binary gender, as merely one metaphorical model among many that might describe gendered experiences, may be misplaced. I contend that, in theological terms, we might justifiably regard binary gender as idolatrous, as much in thea/ological expressions of GOD/DE as She as in traditional theologies' insistence upon GOD/DE as He. Thus, I argue that a renunciation of our attachment to binary gender might prove both theologically fruitful and ethically important, despite feminist fears that an abandonment of the category 'women' might restrict political action. Noting the problematisation of renunciation in thea/ologies, I nonetheless assert that arguments in its favour are strong and reclaim the notion of 'decreation' in the work of philosopher/theologian Simone Weil as a powerful example of how we might revalue renunciatory practices in general. Furthermore, I contend that the decreation of gender in particular might be seen as an ethical and political necessity for the establishment of gender justice for those sibs rendered unintelligible<sup>2</sup> by current binary norms. I conclude this chapter with a brief summary of the chapters

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<sup>2</sup> 'Unintelligibility' is the concept Butler ascribes in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and after to the process by which those sibs with non-normative genders are denied access to what it means to be human by their failure to conform to binary gender norms.

to come that have resulted from this initial premise, that binary gender norms do not serve well either as descriptions of human gendered experiences or as accurate signposts to that of GOD/DE in the World.

### *Personal Gender Background*

My mother was a frugal woman. Because of this, clothes circulated round per three children, regardless of our genders<sup>3</sup>, for as long as they remained wearable. Thus, for several years, my father's summer holiday photographs of us feature the same pair of khaki shorts, worn first by my older brother, then by me, and finally by my younger brother. Although I think it is true to say that my mother's recycling impetus had far more to do with getting the most possible wear out of any garment than it did with concepts of gender equality<sup>4</sup>, let alone gender trouble, it was certainly this practice that gave me my first glimpse of the instability of the binary.

An incident from childhood sticks in my mind (although I have probably made some of it up in retrospect, as is common with childhood memories). I am at the primary school playing fields watching a football match; I think I am 7 or 8, and I am wearing the much-photographed khaki shorts and a pair of Clarks T-bar sandals, also inherited from my older brother, R. One at a time, a group of us are sliding

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<sup>3</sup> In truth, of course, this process was not unregarding of *our* genders, since dresses and skirts were never recycled to the boys. It was merely *my* gender, I realise with hindsight, that was unregarded.

<sup>4</sup> Having said that, my parents made a pretty good job of introducing gender equality into my upbringing and I am eternally grateful to them for it. So I forgive them for the toy oven one Christmas and thank them for the chemistry set the next.

down a blue-brick<sup>5</sup> balustrade, landing clumsily in the sandy dirt at the bottom, racing up to the top and doing it all over again. It is a hot day and we are sweaty and dirty and loud. I think most of us are boys: for certain, my brother R is there, keeping an eye on me. Then one of the other children points to me and asks R: 'Is that your brother or your sister?' The shorts, the sandals, the boisterous behaviour, that's all wrong *for a girl*, but R is calling me by a girl's name. I feign outrage that they should even *think* I might be a boy, but deep down I find it all rather entertaining. I feel as though I have got away with something a bit cheeky, dangerous and daring; secretly, I feel ever-so-slightly heroic.

By my 20s, I presented as fairly androgynous. Some children in the street once asked me: 'Oy mate, are you a boy or a girl?' I said: 'What do you think?' They paused, looking over my short-back-and-sides, Doc Martens, tie and black suit trousers, then said: 'You must be a boy, cos you're only wearing one earring'. Again I had that sense of having accomplished something audacious and highly entertaining. But this was not in any way an attempt to lay claim to a trans identity. There was no sense in which I felt my assigned female gender did not belong to me, or I to it. I experienced nothing through my acts of largely sartorial rebellion that I would have designated 'gender trouble'. Quite the reverse in fact; what I was feeling was gender

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<sup>5</sup> Blue brick is a typical and ubiquitous vernacular building material in that part of the English midlands known as the Black Country, where I grew up.

entertainment. I was playing ‘Knock Down Ginger’<sup>6</sup> on the binary’s front door, demanding its attention and then running away chortling at its confusion and outrage.

In another part of the same playground, however, I was and still am experiencing a great deal of gender trouble. While my assigned gender may not conflict with my gender experiences the way it might for someone who identifies as trans, I do not feel, and have not felt for most of my life, that I comfortably fit into the groups of ‘girls’ and ‘women’. I do not read my experiences as typical of ‘women’s’ experiences; I do not feel my life to have a great deal in common with ‘women’s’ lives; I forever feel, often painfully, out of place in the company of ‘women’. Which is not to say that I feel I belong with ‘men’ either, for they are just as strange to me. I simply do not fit anywhere. Thus my experiments with gender-bending in my youth were only on one level about having fun. On another level I was entirely serious about wanting my gender to be questionable, confusing, ambiguous, strange and unreadable.

Marge Piercy’s utopian feminist science fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979) has had a profound effect on me in the 30 years since I first read it. I find per portrait of the future New England settlement of Mattapoissett utterly enthralling,

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Knock Down Ginger’ is a game children play of summoning an (adult) victim by a knock or ring on their front door and then running away before the door is answered. Jeering at the offended householder from a safe distance often ensues.

particularly for the way in which gender is handled. Using the gender-neutral pronoun set ‘person/per/perself’, as referenced in the Foreword, to mask the reader’s preconceptions, Piercy describes a culture in which gender is the last thing on people’s minds, while the whole panoply of human flourishing is the first. I wanted to live in Mattapoisett. I still do.

Back in the mid-1970s, another science fiction author, James Tiptree Jr., was the subject of some gender speculation. Tiptree had been publishing short stories since the 60s and corresponded regularly and enthusiastically with fans and other authors, but never appeared in public. Though the stories were full of the typical tropes of action science fiction, Tiptree’s portrayals of women characters were surprisingly well-rounded and sympathetic, even ‘feminist’ in tone. However, commentators of both genders insisted that Tiptree must be male, because of the action, the abstract thought and the desire for women per stories expressed. Fellow author Robert Silverberg wrote: ‘there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree’s writing’ (Phillips 2006, 3), while feminist writer Joanna Russ asserted that Tiptree expressed ideas ‘that no woman could even think, or understand, let alone assent to’ (ibid). But James Tiptree Jr. was a pseudonym; per real name was Alice B. Sheldon.

Some forty years later, Ben Barres, professor of neurobiology at Stanford University, delivered a seminar at MIT about per recent discoveries in the field of cell biology.

The presentation was widely acclaimed, with one member of the audience commenting on how much more accomplished a researcher Barres was than per sister Barbara (Begley 2012, [n.p.]). But Barbara and Ben are the same person; assigned female at birth, Ben had transitioned to per affirmed gender over the course of ten years and was presenting that day, for the first time, as male.

What these stories illustrate is the readiness with which we assign gender based on assumptions about behaviours, and behaviours based on assumptions about gender. Tiptree could only be male because of the way person wrote. Barbara Barre's work was automatically assumed to have been of a lower quality than Ben's because person was female. I must have been a boy because I only wore one earring. However, if the basis of these judgements, and others like them, is as prone to error as these examples demonstrate, how else might we decide what gender is and whence it comes?

The issue of how women acquire femaleness is a primary concern in Western feminisms, in late twentieth century debates around essentialism. The critique of essentialism begins with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1993, 281). Prior to this, femaleness had largely been defined as a natural, even GOD/DE-given, state, a transcultural and transhistorical essence thought usually, though not necessarily, to derive from women's biological

and psychological characteristics (Grosz 1995, 47). Although early feminists questioned the content of this female essence<sup>7</sup>, de Beauvoir's analysis questioned not simply its content but its very existence. To continue to theorise an unchanging and unchangeable natural essence for women is now seen to run counter to the aims of feminisms since it precludes any real possibility for women to overcome the differences that define their oppression as 'natural'; to argue for a fixed essence of 'woman' is to collude with and thus to reinforce the structures of dominology (Nicholson 1998, 293).

Even with 'essence' largely redefined as cultural and thus inessential, the sexed bodies that formed the bedrock of those cultural assumptions remained in the realm of the immutably natural, as prediscursively a-social and a-historical, even GOD/DE-given, facts of life. Cultural norms are emphatically not prediscursive and immutably natural since they change across time and place, allowing for women from one period or location to become women differently from those of another. However, biology is still destiny to the extent that physical, and especially genital, morphology dictates which set of cultural norms constitute our becoming. Furthermore that becoming remains largely situated within a binary construct of gender.

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<sup>7</sup> When Sojourner Truth made her famous speech demanding 'Ain't I am woman?' (e.g. in Harrison, 1990, p.201), for example, she challenged the definition of women as physically weak while unquestioningly accepting the category 'woman' itself.

Since the 1990s, however, constructivist philosophers like Monique Wittig (1992) and Judith Butler (1990; 1993), scientists such as Alice Dreger (1998) and Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000; 2001), sociologists like Judith Lorber (2005) and Lucy Goodison (1990), and trans and genderqueer theorist-activists including Kate Bornstein (Bornstein 1995), Riki Wilchins (2002b; 2002d; 2002e; 2002a; 2002c; 2004), Leslie Fienberg (1998) and Stephen Whittle (2006), as well as a growing output of collected analytical academic and personal testimonies (e.g. More and Whittle 1999; Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins 2002; O'Keefe and Fox 2003; Mattilda (a.k.a. Matt Bernstein Sycamore) 2006b; Scott-Dixon 2006b; Stryker and Whittle 2006) repeatedly assert not only that gender is far more complex and more mutable than the binary allows for, but also that we cannot presume that dimorphic bodies, or any straightforward one-to-one mapping between 'natural' sex and 'cultural' gender, are a firm foundation for gender theorising.

## ***Constructivist Critique of Binary Gender***

### **Monique Wittig**

Although Judith Butler's work is probably the most prominent in critiques of binary sex and gender, Monique Wittig (1992) argued as early as 1978 that the category 'women' is constructed in relation to a compulsory heterosexuality, such that I become 'woman' only inasmuch as I make my body available for heterosexual, procreational use. Asserting that we are forced to comply with compulsory

heterosexuality not only in our minds, in our cultural presentations, but also in our bodies, hitherto designated entirely and eternally natural (ibid, 9), Wittig concludes with the then startling statement that lesbians, since they refuse both mental and physical compulsion, are not women: 'A lesbian *has* to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man' (ibid, 13). Thus, person urges women to abstract themselves from patriarchal definitions (ibid, 11) and instead identify as lesbians (and men as gay (ibid, 30)), as outlaws who refuse outright to collude with the rules and conventions of compulsory heterosexuality (ibid, 40).

## **Judith Butler**

Much of Wittig's analysis derives from per critique of psychoanalytic theory which, person argues, orders that 'you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be' (1992, 28). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), and per later reconsiderations and revisions of that work in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler too offers a sustained critique of psychoanalysis<sup>8</sup>, the enforced heterosexuality it enacts, and the unintelligible, even unliveable bodies it thereby violently instates. Butler famously argues: 'There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1990, 1.683). Human beings behave the way we do because we believe there to be a set of rules or norms that prescribe

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<sup>8</sup> Both Wittig and Butler assert that psychoanalytic theory has, from its outset, been constructed around assumptions that there are two genital morphologies only, that these exist only to facilitate procreative sex, that there is a direct one-to-one mapping between sexed body and gendered performance, and that any 'deviation' from these norms is pathological.

and proscribe how bodies like ours should behave in order to be a gender. But these norms have power only because we capitulate to them, not once and for all but in a constant 'stylized repetition of acts' (ibid, 1.2366) that Butler calls performativity<sup>9</sup>. Behind these normative acts is nothing, no original patterning of gender, 'nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original' (ibid, 1.778). However, though the power behind the law of the norms is nothing more than a ruse (1993, 15), how we perform is not a matter of choice (ibid, 12-13); there is no definitive, eternally truthful, or evilly patriarchal, power behind the act, and yet we must keep acting (ibid, 9). Nevertheless, the very reiterative and citational nature of the norms does indicate that any notion of a perfect gender performance is unrealisable: 'bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled' (ibid, 2); and thus we become aware that there are fissures in gender performance that might be exploited for their transgressive potential.

The power of gender norms derives in large part from the notion that there is an eternally natural, prediscursive body to which norms can be unequivocally attached. However, the apparently natural body is as much of a construct as is its subsequent cultural gendered performance (1990, 1.2142). That which constitutes our understanding of 'nature' can only exist within language and cannot, therefore, be

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<sup>9</sup> Butler is careful to insist that performativity should not be confused with performance: while the latter is theatrical, playful and singular, the former is forced upon us and shaped by 'the forces of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death' (1993, 95).

‘singular and prediscursive’ (ibid, 1.856); concepts of nature are culturally and historically determined and, thus, so is ‘natural’ sex. Indeed gender norms, far from being produced by sexed bodies, in fact establish those bodies *as* their genders. If it is the norm that a female body must produce children, for example, those bodies that do not, regardless of their apparently ‘female’ morphology will not be ‘intelligible’ female bodies (ibid, 1.569). The culturally-constituted heterosexual matrix Butler describes requires bodies to *be* in specific ways in order for them to be read *as* bodies that matter, as intelligibly *human* beings. The claim that sex is to nature as gender is to culture no longer has any meaning; sex ‘was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all’ (ibid, 1.423). However, just because the gender norms that constitute bodies are ‘regulatory fictions’ (ibid, 1.798) and ‘phantasmatic’ ruses (ibid, 1.2371), Butler does not thus claim that bodies *per se* do not exist, but rather that there can be ‘no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formulation of that body’ (1993, 10). Bodies, with all their attendant pains and joys, do matter, and Butler’s aim is not to erase them but rather ‘to force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as “life”, lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving’ (ibid, 16).

In the very constructedness of the norms that govern our intelligibility, asserts Butler, lies the potential to subvert them, and thus to bring into being new forms of

intelligibility. The norms' power derives from reiteration, as discussed above, and by virtue of this 'gaps and fissures are opened up'; there is 'that which escapes or exceeds the norm' (1993, 10). Every reiteration contains within it an inherent instability, a 'space of ambivalence' (ibid, 124) in the arbitrary relations (1990, 1.2376) between performance and reality, that might be worked to subvert its apparent stability. Although we cannot wholly escape from being implicated in dominological power structures, even as we oppose them, nevertheless we might attempt a 'turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power..., a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure' (1993, 241).

The ethical aim of Butler's project, the rearticulation what counts as a body that matters, is to ensure that the cultural configurations of sex and gender that are currently viewed as illegitimate and unintelligible might thus become culturally intelligible, both expanding the ambit of the human and 'confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness' (1990, 1.2487). The current position is sustained through cruelty and violence (ibid, 1.181) and, furthermore, forces us into enacting violence upon ourselves (1993, 115) as we cut off bits of our gendered selves in order to fit the boxes, like Cinderella's Sister cutting off per heel to fit the glass slipper. Thus, the task of remaking gender to be less violent has no less a purpose, Butler contends, than the saving of lives, as 'we

rethink the ideal morphological constraints upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are not condemned to a death within life' (1990, 1.185). This is not a one-off task however, since new forms of unintelligibility will constantly surface, but rather a permanent process of bringing the outside in, 'a future horizon...in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome' (1993, 53).

Butler acknowledges that per work might pose a problem to feminisms if, as theorists and activists, we hold that a stable gender identity, based on a definitive category of 'women', is essential to successful political action. Person contends, however, that there might be as much to gain politically from disidentification (1993, 4), indeterminacy (1990, 1.266) and incoherence (1993, 115) as from the reverse. At the very least, those options should be considered and examined, since it would appear that there is no 'we' around which to unite that is not 'tenuous or phantasmatic' (1990, 1.2390). Feminisms cannot continue to cling, therefore, to any notion of 'women' as an exclusive, coherent, and purely natural categorisation: 'Our responsibility is not just for the purity of our souls, but for the shape of the collectively inhabited world', Butler argues (2005, 110). Since binary gender has no eternal, natural fixity, our only option is to renounce our attachment to it in favour of 'the kinds of contestatory connections that might democratize' intelligibility (1993, 115) and to learn how to speak of gender as a site of permanently

irreconcilable incoherence. Thus we might come to see ‘what new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics’ (1990, 1.296).

### **Scientific and Medical Analyses**

One of the ways in which bodies show themselves to be far more diverse than binary gender would have us believe, says Butler, is in the range of morphological differences brought together under the term ‘intersex’, an umbrella term referring to a group of physical embodiments in which there is a variation from the normative assumption of congruence between gonads, chromosomes and genital morphology. An intersex person may have testes, XY chromosomes and female external genitalia, for example, or chromosomes that are neither XX nor XY, or any other of a number of chromosomal, gonadal and/or genital variations.

Anne Fausto-Sterling asserts that in medical considerations of intersex, ‘the normal takes precedence over the natural’ (2000, 8) and every variation that does not fit into the categorisation of ‘normal’ is, even with the best and most humanitarian of intentions, pathologised, abjected and rendered unintelligible, regardless of its naturalness. Paying attention to intersex variations, currently perceived as ‘the strange, the incoherent, [and] that which “falls outside”’ (Butler 1990, 1.1915), provides us with a lens through which we might re-evaluate the ‘taken-for-granted

world of [binary] sexual categorization' (ibid). This view is supported by scientists like Fausto-Sterling and Alice Dreger, both of whom work in the field of intersex.

In per historical analysis of the medical establishments' treatments of hermaphrodites<sup>10</sup>, bioethicist Dreger concurs that the designation of a sex to a body is a spatiotemporal phenomenon (1998, 9-10), and that the markers of sex, which include not only genital morphology but also things like timbre of voice (ibid, 87), quantity of facial hair (ibid, 105), and size of feet (ibid, 132), are differently interpreted in different times and locations. Medical decisions as to what constitutes a sexed body are always political and, in the case of hermaphrodites, were aimed at 'restor[ing] order in the laboratory, the surgical clinic, in marital beds, in military barracks, on the streets' (ibid, 154) by ensuring that same-sex relationships did not 'accidentally' become legitimised and that work roles were not occupied by the 'wrong' gender through an 'error of sex' (ibid, 86). Medical agendas in the treatment of hermaphrodites were thus wholly focused on the maintenance of compulsory heterosexuality by increasingly rigidifying definitions of hermaphroditism so as to rule out as many 'pseudo hermaphrodites' as possible. However, like Butler, Dreger asserts that intersex bodies call into question our binaried assumptions that one sex equals one gender, and 'the questioned body forces us to ask what exactly it is—if anything—that makes the rest of us unquestionable' (ibid, 6).

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<sup>10</sup> Dreger is careful to note that person uses the term 'hermaphrodite' in its historical context and that 'intersex' is now the preferred term (1998, 30-1)

Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling asserts that ‘A body’s sex is simply too complex’ to support any simplistic binary labelling of Woman or Man (2000, 3). Like Butler and Dreger, Fausto-Sterling therefore concludes that the sexing of a body represents nothing eternally natural but rather reflects ‘components of our political, social, and moral struggles, literally embodied, incorporated into our very physiological being’ (ibid, 5). And compulsory heterosexuality lies at the heart of contemporary agendas for the treatment of intersex people, as it did for nineteenth century hermaphrodites (ibid, 8), a policing of gender borders that results in unintelligibility for those who do not fit the binary<sup>11</sup>. Fausto-Sterling however argues that we stand at a unique point in history where we have both the theoretical understanding and the practical power to question whether, finally, there must be only two genders (ibid, 77). Person asserts: ‘If we choose, over a period of time, to let mixed-gender bodies and altered patterns of gender-related behavior become visible, we will have, willy-nilly, chosen to change the rules of cultural intelligibility’ (ibid, 76).

## **Trans and Genderqueer Analyses**

These theoretical perspectives so chime with the lived experiences of many trans/genderqueer people that some ask, even demand, a reconsideration of our

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<sup>11</sup> Sociologist of religion Lucy Goodison points out that a binary worldview is neither universal nor immutable: ‘Worldviews can come in triangular, fourfold, or a multitude of shapes and patterns’ (1990, 36) and they can, and do, change over time (ibid, 54). What we believe to be GOD/DE-given immutables are in fact relatively arbitrary human constructs, but this only becomes clear when a symbolic system is put under pressure through constant challenges to its validity (ibid, 43).

attachment to binary gender. For many such people, activists and theorists, some notion of the importance of renouncing binary gender in the cause of gender justice is a political and ethical necessity (e.g. Bornstein 1995; Feinberg 1998; O'Keefe 1999; Mollenkott 2001; Nestle 2002; Wilchins 2002b; Pratt 2005), as is a belief that renunciation must come from the cis as well as the trans and genderqueer. Riki Wilchins is typical in her argument that a movement to disrupt binary gender is 'the civil rights movement of our time' (2002b, 17) that promotes a revisioning of gender with massive transformative potential to remove inequality and violence (2002d, 26); 'if you're not part of the problem, you're not part of the solution' (2002e, 37)., Wilchins contends.

Kate Bornstein argues that binary gender shares many of the characteristics of a cult, in that it vehemently defends its borders, demands purity of identity and unquestioning compliance of its adherents, and violently attacks its enemies (1995, 103-107). Person asks that we renounce the cult in favour of a society 'free from the constraints of non-consensual gender' (ibid, 111) by siding with the gender outsiders, or 'standing with freaks' (ibid, 81), as allies and co-revolutionaries. The current dominological system relies on our collusion with it, person states (ibid, 121), and justice will be won only when we refuse gender norms, 'calling attention to the fact that the rules are breakable' (ibid, 140) by asserting our detachment from them.

Leslie Feinberg similarly commends cis/trans alliances in the cause of ‘trans liberation’, defined as ‘the right to *choose*<sup>12</sup> between pink and blue tinted gender categories, as well as all the other hues of the palette’ (1998, 1). Person acknowledges that cis people might find it challenging, and even dangerous, to stand up for trans/genderqueer sibs (ibid, 133-134); in this respect we need to renounce not only our attachment to gender norms but also to comfort and security. As genderqueer activist Nico Dacumos puts it: ‘people [must] step out of their safe houses...in order to get shit done’ (2006, 36).

Minnie Bruce Pratt also espouses the cause of trans liberation and addresses herself specifically to potential feminist allies, asserting that ‘woman’ should not be a fortress that we have to defend, but a braided rope of lived experiences ‘that we use to pull down walls that imprison us at the borders’ (2005, 184-185) and thus create an open landscape for all our gender peregrinations. Meanwhile, genderqueer activist-author Mattilda commends the practice of renouncing the gender status quo in order to challenge dominological power through an utter refusal to pass as cis (2006a, 9-10), declaring: ‘If we eliminate the pressure to pass, what delicious and devastating opportunities for transformation might we create?’ (ibid, 19). Benjamin Shephard echoes this sentiment in per assertion that renouncing the norms of

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all emphasis is as in the original text.

gender might create a 'different kind of space [in which] to play' (2006, 335). For theologian Virginia Mollenkott such an omnigender<sup>13</sup> space would signal a just society in which all genders are equally respected as being *imago Dei* (2001, 165). As another theologian, Susannah Cornwall, asserts, to continue to maintain 'that every human being is exactly and ineluctably male or female' (2010, 13) when the embodied evidence is to the contrary neither adequately reflects GOD/DE nor engenders justice.

## ***Multiplying Gender Expressions Beyond the Binary***

### **Gender Schemas**

Many of these commentators posit schemas to illustrate the way in which various aspects or components of gender work together to construct our sense of gender identity, in order to reflect a sense that the sex/gender, nature/nurture model is too simplistic to illustrate fully the range of possible gender positions people are actually experiencing. Bornstein, for example, puts forward a schema consisting of: gender assignment at birth; one's 'inner' sense of gender identity; the gender role(s) one adopts; and the gender that is attributed or assumed by onlookers (1995, 22-23). Feinberg's schema comprises the four aspects of 'genitalia, sexual desire, gender expression, [and] identification with one sex or another' (1998, 99). Mollenkott's omnigender paradigm maintains a differentiation between sex and gender and is

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<sup>13</sup> 'Omnigender' is Mollenkott's coinage for a new, non-hierarchical gender paradigm beyond the binary (2001, 3).

based on a five-aspect schema of sex identity, sex attribution, gender identity, gender attribution, and gender role (2001, 172). A more nuanced schema is presented by O'Keefe, consisting of fifteen determining characteristics (1999, 31-35), resulting in a pan-identity model in which person details more than fifty gender identifications (ibid, 107-115).

A traditional conceptualisation of gender variability, the gender spectrum, is sometimes invoked (e.g. Mollenkott 2001, 43), but increasingly called into question on the grounds that a spectrum of gender still presupposes the existence of two poles that anchor it and thus 'turns out to be a spectrum of heterosexual norms' (Wilchins 2002d, 30; see also Bornstein 1995, 115). O'Keefe's notion of pan-identity is one way in which new non- or de-binariied gender paradigms might be envisaged through the combinations such multifaceted schemas offer. As Pratt asserts, the very many ways in which we express sex/gender will of necessity multiply gender expressions way beyond a simple binary choice (2005, 15). Fausto-Sterling therefore suggests that gender positions are not so much locations on a line strung between the two poles of Female and Male but rather moveable points mapped onto multidimensional space (2001, [n.p.]).

## A New Gender Schema

Elizabeth Grosz asserts that ‘new terms and different conceptual frameworks must...be devised to be able to talk of the body outside or in excess of binary pairs’ (1994, 24). What follows is my construction of a new gender schema, a metaphorical redrawing of the boundaries of gender, that allows me to reconceptualise it in relation this thesis. In positing this schema I am in no way proposing to create a language for trans/genderqueer people<sup>14</sup>; the schema is simply a way of setting gender straight (or queer) in the context of this study.

In per book *Am I a Woman?* religious scholar Cynthia Eller (2003) describes at length four ways that women recognise ourselves as intelligibly gendered female: because we look female; because we feel female; because we perform female; and because other people judge us to be female. This substantially mirrors Bornstein’s schema above. From these two schemas I have developed terminology for discussing gender based on four ‘gender aspects’. I abandon entirely any reference to sex, in line with the assertions of Butler, Wittig and others above. I also posit the overarching category of ‘metagender’<sup>15</sup> in order to explore the way in which the four

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<sup>14</sup> Since I assert the right of groups to name themselves, for me to attempt to create language on behalf of groups of which I am not a part would be presumptuous and arrogant. Furthermore, trans/genderqueer people already have well-developed and hotly debated terminologies for their lives and experiences, as discussed briefly in the Foreword.

<sup>15</sup> Since first presenting this schema at the 2006 FWSA (Feminist and Women's Studies Association) Conference (paper subsequently published as *Godde and the Complexities of Gender* (Barnsley 2007b)), I have discovered that, as a result of the work of Philip Andrew Bernhardt-House (2003), the term ‘metagender’ has acquired a quite different meaning in genderqueer communities from the one I have assigned it. Bernhardt-House defines ‘a metagender’ as ‘someone who identifies neither as male

gender aspects work together to produce the something that we think we mean when we talk about our own or someone else's sex/gender.

### **Gender Aspects: Looking Like a Gender**

'Looks-like' or 'l-gender'<sup>16</sup> replaces references to sex and the biological, eternally natural body. L-gender is as culturally determined as any other gender aspect, as discussed above. In early 21st century Britain the 'gold standard' for assigning l-gender at birth is external genital appearance. Birth l-gender is the assigned gender of the State as recorded on a birth certificate. It determines the gendered rights of a citizen under the law; until the Gender Recognition Act came into force in 2004 there was no legal right in Great Britain to change birth certificate l-gender.

Determination of l-gender, however, does not end at birth, as the sex testing of Olympic athletes (Warren, 2003) and the recent case of South African runner Caster Semenya (Sloop 2012) demonstrate. What we do with our bodies throughout our lives, for example using (or not using) them sexually for anything other than

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nor female, neither man nor woman, neither neuter nor feminine nor masculine' (ibid, 76) and 'a conscientious objector in the war of the sexes' (ibid, 83).

<sup>16</sup> I choose the terminology l-gender in favour of a number of alternatives. Considered and rejected were: 'biological' gender, since many trans (and other) people believe their sense of gender is dictated by the formation of their brains (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and the brain is as much a part of biology as the genitals; 'body' gender, for the same reason; and 'genital' gender, because this excludes other physiological components that contribute to the determination of l-gender.

procreation (cf Wittig and Butler above<sup>17</sup>), or physically for activities not deemed appropriate to l-gender (e.g. ballet, weight-lifting), may officially, and unofficially through personal insult and attack, call l-gender into question.

The term l-gender is apposite for talking about the embodiments of trans people, since it is as applicable to speak of the affirmed l-gender of someone who takes hormones and/or has had surgery as it is to speak of the l-gender of one whose assigned and affirmed genders appear congruent.

### **Gender Aspects: Feeling Like a Gender**

For Eller (2003, 40-65), to feel like a gender is to have the emotional behaviours of that gender, behaviours that are often described as innate, and deemed to be a product of 'brain sex'<sup>18</sup>, though they are as much a product of culture as any other gender behaviour. In this schema, however, 'feels-like' or 'f-gender' is concerned not with the emotions—these I believe are part of one's performs-like gender (see below)—but rather with what trans writer Deidre McCloskey calls 'knowing what tribe you belong to' (2000, 176). F-gender is (possibly) that thing we mean when we

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<sup>17</sup> See also Feinberg (1998, 54), who argues that 'leather people and nuns are their own gender' because of the transgressive ways in which they embody themselves.

<sup>18</sup> Debates around the validity of 'brain sex' in relation to trans people's sense of themselves as a gender are hotly contested in trans circles (e.g. Fausto-Sterling 2000, 27-28, 116-119). For example, some find affirmation in the notion that they are trans because of an innate neurological configuration, while others contend that talk of 'being born this way' offers ammunition to eugenicist opponents who would argue that trans can therefore be bred out of the population. A full consideration of such debates is, however, beyond the scope of this study.

talk about ‘self’ or ‘identity’. Many trans people talk of some kind of inward knowing of gender identity separate from physical appearance, either as the tribal identity McCloskey asserts, or as an utter absence of allegiance to one’s assigned gender, a feeling of clearly knowing what one is *not*; Kate Bornstein, for example, describes how person ‘never did feel like a girl or a woman’ but absolutely felt ‘not a boy or a man’ (1995, 24). To some (e.g. Mollenkott 2001; Sheridan 2001; Conover 2002; Schneider 2003; Tanis 2003; Tigert and Tirabassi 2004), this feeling is of a spiritual, GOD/DE-given nature<sup>19</sup>.

### **Gender Aspects: Performing Like a Gender**

‘Performs-like’<sup>20</sup> or ‘p-gender’ aligns closely with Butler’s theories of performativity and citationality above. P-gender is what in other circumstances might simply be called ‘gender’. It is the ‘drag’ we do not necessarily choose but nonetheless put on—the dress, the body-language, the emotional responses, etc.—to give ourselves the appearance of one of the two available options. Although I agree with Butler that every aspect of gender, be it ‘sex, gender, sexual practice...[or] desire’ (1990, 1.583) is performatively constructed through repeated citation of cultural norms, I have retained a separate category for performance in this schema in order to highlight its

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<sup>19</sup> For this reason I considered calling this ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ gender, but rejected both on the grounds that they may be considered inappropriately ‘religious’ by the very many trans people whom some branches of organised religion have treated very badly.

<sup>20</sup> I considered ‘drag’ gender as a possible term for this category but finally rejected it because ‘drag’ as a concept is fraught with negative associations for transsexual people particularly. I also considered and rejected ‘acts-like’ because ‘a-gender’ might be mistaken to mean genderless.

importance in an understanding of the fragility of gendered constructions. It signifies here that although gender appears to be ‘something that we *are*, gender is always a *doing* rather than a being’ (Wilchins 2002b, 12).

### **Gender Aspects: Judged as a Gender**

‘Judged-as’ or ‘j-gender’ is about how we respond to one another on the basis of our perceptions of people as ‘female’ or male’. This is not a passive act (Serano 2007, 163), since we actively construct the gender of others by our tacit policing of gender norms through a mechanism of ‘call-and-response’ (Wilchins 2002d, 24); we are as much ‘constituted-by-others’ as ‘self-constituting’ (Cornwall 2010, 92). Oftentimes this is a relatively consequence-free act, but for trans/genderqueer people especially it can have devastating results, when people insist ‘they know the truth of us better than we do’ (Pratt 2005, 174). Through the judgements of others, one can be annihilated, ‘stripped down to nothing in someone’s eyes’ (ibid, 133). Trans people talk about ‘passing’ (Mattilda (a.k.a. Matt Bernstein Sycamore) 2006a), when their j-gender is convincing, and ‘being read’ when it is not. Whether we issue a pass or a fail really matters (Cross 2006, 280); handing out the wrong judgement on someone can get them snubbed, insulted, arrested, beaten, even killed. Thus, Serano asserts: ‘The most radical thing that any of us can do is to stop projecting our beliefs about gender onto other people’s behaviours and bodies’ (2007, 193).

## **Male and Female**

I use 'female' and 'male' in relation to gender aspects to indicate those sets of characteristics which are judged in specific times and places to indicate that a person belongs to one or the other of the two available options. This does not mean that I believe the terms have any 'real' universal meaning. Thus, for example, if I describe myself as I-female, I mean only to indicate that I have certain physical characteristics which under the present circumstances in this country would get me classified as female at birth, without my subscribing to the belief that those characteristics 'really' make me female.

## **Metagender**

To indicate that all of the above work together, I coin the term metagender. In order to conform successfully to the dominological requirements of the metagender binary, the four aspects must be congruent. To convey congruence I use the capitalised terms 'Woman' and 'Man'. When I write of someone being a Woman or a Man, I mean to indicate the metagender assumption that they have, so to speak, all their gender building blocks incontestably in the same metagender box. Deviation from the standards set for any of the four gender aspects will cause metagender to be questioned. Dominological metagender does not allow for any ambiguity; in terms of intelligibility, Woman and Man are the only available divisions.

In theory, all four aspects combine to define one's metagender; this I call 'theoretical metagender'. Theoretically, dominological metagender requires full aspect congruence. In practice, however, different 'interest groups' habitually take one of the aspects to *be* metagender, valuing it over and above the other three as the defining characteristic of Woman or Man. This is the 'dominant' gender aspect and the resultant metagender might be considered an 'experiential' rather than theoretical metagender. With our experiential metagender, we either work to make one or more of the non-dominant gender aspects conform to the dominant, or ignore the non-dominant aspects and concentrate solely on the dominant. Dominology currently assigns experiential metagender by birth l-gender alone, while for many trans people, f-gender is the aspect that affirms experiential metagender.

### **Contesting Metagenders**

Across the range of human experiences, gender aspects have different weights and prominences, allowing for quite an array of gender identities, even within the limiting paradigm of the binary. Some people however wholly reject the binary and experiment with alternative metagenders, for example the performance artist Genesis P-Orridge who envisions a state called 'pandrogyny':

We, as magickal, creative, soul builders are inherently empowered to truly decide which physical, sexual, or inspirationally creative components to include or discard in order to build whatever identity

or biological container we chose, no matter how bizarre or physically unlikely, or how socially uncomfortable or disliked (2002, [n.p.]).

Even for those of us not experimenting with alternatives, metagender proves to be decidedly unstable, since few of us consistently do have all our gender building blocks in one box. As an example I offer my own story. Although I was assigned l-female at birth and have undergone some supposedly archetypal l-female experiences, such as menstruation, breast cancer and onset of menopause, I am by choice both childless and celibate, conditions which make my ongoing l-female status somewhat questionable.

As discussed above, I have never felt a particular affinity to ‘the tribe of women’<sup>21</sup>. As I age, I feel increasingly not-f-female, but would by no means describe myself as f-male. However, for as long as I can remember I have apparently behaved somewhat like a p-boy/p-man. When I was a child this seemed to just happen, but as I grew up I deliberately adopted some p-male behaviour, even cross-dressing for a brief period in my twenties, as described above. Not surprisingly at that time people often judged me to be j-male (because I only wore one earring). I am even now quite often seen as j-male by casual observers, even though I am small, slight and have long hair, traits generally thought of as l-female. While my culturally dominant l-gender has caused me to be assigned an experiential metagender of Female, I cannot

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<sup>21</sup> For me, the archetypal Women’s tribal space of the hairdresser’s painfully symbolises this feeling of abject inadequacy. Having presented this schema on numerous occasions, I have come to know that this pain is felt by very many of us and is by no means a trivial experience.

affirm categorically that I am a Woman; my metagender is a house built on sand and, though I may be called cis in the judgements of others, the best I can claim for myself is cis(ish).

Nor is it now as it was when I was in my teens and twenties. My understanding of and, therefore, relationship to my metagender has changed as I have come to understand gender differently. Metagender is thus not the fixed, once-and-for-all designation dominology would have us believe but something that shifts over a lifetime, as trans activist Dragon Xcalibur describes: 'I've lived parts of my life as a straight woman, as a butch dyke, as a man—both straight and faggot. Each was and is important...., as I get older, I become stranger' (1998, 77).

### **Purpose of the New Gender Schema**

The inflected terminology of this schema, in which gender as a category is never thought without a prefix to indicate which aspect is meant, allows me to conceive of a narrator's gender experiences, or 'genderedness', in more nuanced terms than the binary permits. The description which results both illustrates more richly the nature of genderedness and attempts to destabilise the reader's preconceptions and perceptions of such experience. The gender schema is a useful tool for highlighting the complexities and even the absurdities of the binary. It is, of course, no more 'real' a description of genderedness than is the sex-is-nature/gender-is-nurture

paradigm. The boundary of each gender aspect, for example, is not fixed or impermeable such that the content of l-gender does not bleed into f-, or j- affect p- and so on, nor is a four-aspect schema the last word in redescribing gendered experience. Every schema is merely a metaphor which both partially describes and partially obscures certain types of human experiences. This schema, however, offers me the potential for different partial descriptions of genderedness, as I demonstrate in the portraits I offer of my narrators in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

## *Renouncing Binary Gender*

### **The Possibility of Gender Renunciation**

The above suggests that our attachment to binary gender is an attachment to a chimera, an ungraspable will-o-the-wisp that can never adequately describe the range of experiences of genderedness and, in attempting such, violently renders many of our sibs unintelligible. Perhaps then we would be better to heed the calls of these sibs and renounce our attachment to the norms. But even if we believe this to be desirable, is such a renunciation a viable proposition? Cynthia Eller believes not. Even after a sustained critique of the norms (2003), person nevertheless concludes that we cannot do without them on the grounds that 'it would take some major genetic engineering or a really bizarre set of mutations to eliminate human sexual dimorphism' (ibid, 136). However, as we have seen, bodies are no more naturally binary than are the cultural norms we impose upon them; if nothing else, there is

more variation to genital morphology than the simply dimorphism of vagina and penis.

More convincingly, theologian Mayra Rivera asserts that it is not that we cannot escape our dimorphic bodies but that we cannot transcend ‘the markings that history has left in us’ (2007, 103); no matter how aware we may be of the constructedness of our gendered experiences, nevertheless those experiences continue to shape us. However, while we cannot bid the cruel World of binary gender goodbye, we can maintain a continuous critique of the structures of power and control that its norms exert over us. We should not, though, underestimate the difficulty of the task, in a climate where binary expectations are imposed even upon foetuses<sup>22</sup> (Fine 2010, 192) and every shape has a gender<sup>23</sup> (ibid, 224). As those who attempt gender-neutral parenting will attest (ibid, 217), everything around us will constantly undermine our attempts to detach ourselves from allegiance to our gender roots. The fact that the project is difficult does not, I suggest, absolve us from the responsibility to try, for the sake of justice for our otherwise unintelligible sibs. And Cornwall asserts that if renunciation of gender is to be considered a good, then the impetus must come not from the unintelligible themselves being asked to give

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<sup>22</sup> Fine cites research that suggests that both pre- and post-conception, parents express significant gender expectations for their unborn children; for example, ‘women who knew the sex of their unborn baby described the movements of sons and daughters differently’, according to a study by sociologist Barbara Rothman (Fine 2010, 192).

<sup>23</sup> Small children will unhesitatingly assign a binary gender to two-dimensional shapes such as circles, squares and triangles, according to a study by developmental psychologist Beverly Fagot (Fine 2010, 224).

up what they do not categorically have (2010, 101), but rather from the intelligibly gendered, as a 'constructive, enriching and humanizing part of...ethical action done "for the others"' (ibid, 102).

### **Against Gender Renunciation**

For some trans people, however, the notion of deconstructing the binary means very little in the face of the day-to-day challenges of living with dignity and respect. Julia Serano (2007) and Viviane Namaste (2000), for example, are highly critical of gender deconstruction theories and assert that an academic focus on 'shattering the gender binary' (Serano 2007, 359) has seriously undermined the cause of, specifically, transsexual people and their desire for a stable and secure gender home. Such critique argues that gender deconstruction privileges a specific set of 'perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of other people's genders over the way those people understand themselves' (ibid) and thus advances a damaging, unjust academic agenda that valorises concepts such as fluidity, ambiguity, complexity and mutability and demonises fixity, simplicity and certainty, to an extent that materially affects the visibility and intelligibility of transsexual people (Namaste 2000, 271). However, these views seem to me to establish a dangerous binary opposition in which fixity can only be achieved at the expense of mutability and vice versa. The justifiable desire of some for a safe and stable home should not preclude others from fulfilling a

need for a wandering life, or indeed yet others from moving between stability and mutability.

### **The Category ‘Women’ as Experiential**

Feminist responses to the deconstruction of gender are numerous<sup>24</sup>. While many (e.g. Scott-Dixon 2006b; Whittle 2006; Elliot 2010) see the forging of links between feminist and trans theory as fruitful in theorising the demise of the binary’s dominological power, some fear that to renounce our hold on the category of Women is to renounce the possibility of feminist politics altogether: ‘Is it not the very point of departure of feminist theorising that women are oppressed/exploited/discriminated/excluded *by virtue of their being women?*’ (Gunnarson 2011, 24).

Butler, as discussed above, commends the idea of embracing disidentification, indeterminacy and incoherence as politically fruitful positions but, even if we succeed in renouncing our attachment to the binary, the problem remains that existing gender structures continue to shape our lives and drive our theory and practice. Thus we need a way to conceptualise gender categories that speaks to their effect in the World without reification. A fruitful concept here is that of experiential

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<sup>24</sup> Feminist responses to transgender are equally numerous, Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) being possibly the most notoriously anti-trans. Since its publication, both pro- and anti-trans feminists have published widely. However, a review of such works is beyond the scope of this study.

metagender, or empirical gender (Salomonsen 2002, 13), which asserts that we are named Woman and Man as a result of our embodied experiences. Despite my deep misgivings around binary gender, I cannot deny that my experiences *position* me as a Woman. I may not feel with any certainty that I *am* a Woman, but the judgment of the norms forces an experiential metagender on me of necessity; ‘one is a woman...to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame’ (Butler 1990, 1.75), in however faulty a fashion.

For the purposes of political action, then, experience not essence becomes the category around which we might link arms<sup>25</sup>. As a Woman with concerns about experiences of genderedness, I join with fellow experiential Women and Men who have similar concerns, speaking of alliances and of banding together with others not only on the basis of shared experiences, but also around shared hopes, dreams, goals, viewpoints and concerns<sup>26</sup>. These can be as powerful a motivation for political action as shared experiences; experiences come from the past, but hopes and dreams might lead to Butler’s future horizon in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome.

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<sup>25</sup> Acknowledging the value of experiential metagender as a concept around which to formulate social and political action chimes with the concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Jones 200, 42-48), whereby we ‘pragmatically [value] essentialisms’ as necessary rallying points for action (ibid, 45), while maintaining ‘a healthy dose of constructivist suspicion’ as to the real universality of any essentialist position (ibid, 47).

<sup>26</sup> It was in just such a spirit, in the Peace Movement in the 1980s, that pro-life Buddhist nuns and pro-choice secular feminists found common ground in their rejection of nuclear weapons and their desires for world peace, for example.

From the necessary point of view of theorising oppression, this is still possible based on the experiential binary categories; we can still write of an experiential Woman's right to choose, whilst at the same time questioning the reality of the category Woman. We can continue to research experiential Women's and Men's experiences in order to understand how those experiences reinforce dominology, but without subscribing to a view that binary gender is anything more than a metaphorical construct, just as we can look at the metaphorical constructs we have for GOD/DE and analyse their effects on the World, without actually believing those constructs to be really real. The effects are surely really real.

### ***Expanding the Boundaries of Imago Dei***

#### **Binary Gender as Idolatry**

Wilchins observes that the problem with the binary gender system is not that we do not know it, but that we know it so well that we can envisage no alternative (2002b, 13). Gender has become reified; that which is merely one metaphorical model for describing human experiences has become solidified into a thing, *the* thing, the *real* thing. And in theological terms, gender has become a thing that we identify both as GOD/DE-given and as expressive of the image of GOD/DE. While thea/ologies may have expanded the boundaries of *imago Dei* to include the 'other' half of a binary pair, that *imago* still excludes all who are not intelligibly Female or Male. In this

respect then, I assert that it is justifiable to regard an attachment to binary gender norms as a form of idolatry<sup>27</sup>, in that it results in

the confused reduction of God to, and identification of God with, a particular creaturely reality of whatever form...wherein the divine might be presumed to be grasped, limited, contained, comprehended in thought and speech...and so brought under our control (Boesel 2010, 310).

Binary gender norms, I contend, are just such a creaturely reality, created out of a wrongful assertion that gendered embodiments come in only two types, and maintained through performative re-citation. Instead of two closed boxes, there seems to be a vast and complex set of variations and, in accepting the argument that morphological variations are just that—variations, not pathological mistakes—I also accept that that the vast and complex variations in creation serve some function as demonstrative of the image and likeness of GOD/DE; ‘to be made male and female and to be made in God’s image are not necessarily identical’ (Cornwall 2010, 73). By engaging with these variations in human experiences of genderedness as *imago Dei*, we might understand a little more of the endlessly vast and complex mystery of GOD/DE. This mystery is most certainly foreclosed by theologies that insist upon idolatrously naming GOD/DE only in the male gender. However, thea/ologies that insist upon the naming of GOD/DE as She, as the other half of a phantasmatic binary, are similarly problematic.

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<sup>27</sup> Cornwall asserts that attachment to binary gender is attachment to a ‘golden calf’ (2010, 23, 84).

## **Thea/ologies and Women**

Elizabeth Johnson asserts that 'pluriform speech' is a necessary requirement for a 'proper discourse about the mystery of God' (1992, 120). In search of such pluriformity, thea/ologies have sought to point to GOD/DE in 'symbols shaped by women's reality' (ibid 112). That this has hugely expanded thea/ologies' stock of metaphors beyond the dominological Christianate God-the-Father is unarguable. However, there is a tendency in thea/ologies to conflate Women and mothers, such that Women's experiences are often described almost exclusively in terms of maternal experiences, often synecdochally expressed as a phenomenon I have called elsewhere 'wombfulness' (Barnsley 2002, 3). Pamela Sue Anderson asserts that this creates the danger of a 'new theology of women on the basis of the mother being fundamental to all other meanings' (2000, 111-112). In restricting theological access to the category Women only to those possessed of a womb, whether or not they have actually given birth, additional layers of hierarchy, exclusion, unintelligibility and idolatry are created and sustained. Wittig notes that the valorisation of a bioessentialist matriarchalist wombfulness 'is no less heterosexual than patriarchy' since it still traps us in a binary system that defines Women as only those who have the capacity to give birth (1992, 10). Butler too warns against the idealisation of certain expressions of gender that a wombful feminist discourse supports, since this 'tends to reinforce precisely the binary, heterosexual framework that carves up

gender into masculine and feminine' (1990, 1.1277; see also Goodison 1990, 11, 25; Tavris 1992, 92; Elliot 2010, 27).

If the category Women remains uncritically accepted in thea/ologies, I contend that the idolatrous nature of the binary norms remains unchallenged. While 'wombs, sisters, daughters, mothers, teens, crones, babies, tears, laughter and menstrual bleeding' (Browne 2010a, 148), and 'mothering, breast feeding, birthing, pregnancy' (Lanzetta 2005, 57) may be honoured and celebrated, even divinised, the embodiments of our unintelligible sibs remain on the outside, un-honoured, uncelebrated, un-symbolised in/as either Women's or Men's experiences. It is therefore time to consider how a renunciation of our attachment to binary gender might fruitfully inform our thea/ologising. However, this first requires a consideration of the vexed relationship thea/ologies have with the concept of renunciation.

### ***Thea/ologies and Renunciation***

#### **Thea/ological Critique of Renunciation**

Renunciation has been considered problematic to thea/ologies from their outset. In per groundbreaking article, *The Human Situation*, Valerie Saiving (1992 [1979]) asserts that when mainstream theologians talk about the human situation, they fail to take into account the differences between men and women. The main burden of

Saiving's argument (ibid, 26) is a critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's contention that 'sin is the unjustified concern of the self for its own power and prestige'. Women do not sin pridefully; rather they have 'specifically feminine forms of sin...[that] are outgrowths of the basic feminine character' (ibid, 37). A list of extraordinarily stereotyped behaviours follows<sup>28</sup>, with the conclusion that women's sin is 'in short underdevelopment or negation of the self' (ibid). In casting 'the refusal to become selfless' as not merely bad for women, but wholly sinful (ibid, 41), Saiving thereby instates in thea/ologies a general and lasting tendency (e.g. Japinga 1999, 88; Bahr and Bahr 2001, 1235; Miles 2001, 87; Cooper 2003, 73-86; Slee 2003, 43-44; Mahoney and Pargament 2004, 482-485; Suchocki [1991], [n.p.]), whether directly attributed to per or not, to demonise renunciation as a damaging and masochistic form of servitude and valorise self-actualisation as women's highest purpose<sup>29</sup> (e.g. Daly 1979, 377-378; Christ 1989, 322; Hampson 1990b, 123; Hampson 1990a, 221-224; Loades 1990, 82; Amoah 1996, 254; Clack 1998, 200-201; Rector 2000, 87). Indeed, although Saiving casts self-renunciation as sinful, in other writings it often appears to be no sin at all, or at least not one for which the female sinner can be held responsible but, rather, one that is imposed upon per by the forces of sinful

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<sup>28</sup> These are 'triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing centre or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason' (Saiving 1992 [1979], 37). While these might read as a clumsy catalogue of stereotypes, it must be remembered that Saiving is attempting to delineate a specifically female type of *sinful* behaviour here, in order to support per justifiable argument that mainstream theology has ignored the specifics of women's lived experiences.

<sup>29</sup> Sally Munt notes a similar tendency within Queer spirituality, noting that any move towards self-renunciation is seen as antithetical to the 'urge to build, emboss and protect the individual self' (2010, 16).

dominology, as ‘women have been destructive of themselves and their potentialities’ (Hampson 1990b, 123). Reconstructing selves and potentialities thus serves the overthrow of dominology and becomes thea/ologies’ utmost good.

Criticisms of Saiving and the anti-renunciation turn in thea/ologies include consideration of: its emphasis on sin as an individual rather than a corporate responsibility (e.g. Slee 2003, 43-44; Suchocki [1991], [n.p.]); its having misconceived the notion of pride as expressed by Niebuhr (Miles 2001, 87; Cooper 2003, 33-72); and its failure to acknowledge that men too might suffer from lack of self (Bahr and Bahr 2001, 1247; Cooper 2003) or that women too might be prideful, and complicit in the structures of dominology (Miles 2001, 87). None of these, however, troubles the binary, and binary-gendered, opposition of pride and self-renunciation, or substantially challenges the view of the latter’s inefficacy as a fruitful and empowering experience regardless of gender, and none constitutes a revaluing of renunciation as a thea/ological good.

### **Sarah Coakley’s Work on Renunciation**

One marked exception to the above is *Powers and Submissions* by Sarah Coakley (2002). While noting from the outset that per work might be considered ‘outrightly offensive, disappointingly conventional, a sign of feminist “false consciousness”, or an apolitical retreat into introspective piety’, person nevertheless argues that, far

from being inimical to feminist values, ‘an inalienable surrender (“submission”) to God...must remain the secret ground of even feminist “empowerment”’ (ibid, x). Furthermore, person asserts that the binary distinction, between submissive vulnerability on the one hand and liberative empowerment on the other, forces us into a false choice (ibid, xv), and contends that it is only in practising full submission to GOD/DE that any possibility of either social or personal liberation is possible (ibid, xx). Coakley emphasises the point that it is submission to GOD/DE alone that person is commending, arguing that, in respect of Worldly power, it is our responsibility both to understand its working and to take responsibility for our complicity in it (ibid, xviii):

If our fundamental and *practised* dependency is on God, there is the fulcrum from which our (often necessary) dependencies on others may be assessed with critical discernment, and the assumed binary gender associations of such dependencies called into question (ibid, xx).

One practice Coakley commends by which to achieve this state of dependency upon GOD/DE alone is kenotic self-emptying in contemplative prayer, or silent waiting upon GOD/DE, which enables us to ‘hold vulnerability and empowerment *together*, precisely by creating a ‘space’ in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself (ibid, 5).

This practice of opening to non-coercive power, not a dominological power-over but rather a supportive and nurturing power-with in which one paradoxically loses oneself in order to find oneself, is wholly compatible not simply with thea/ological

concerns but with feminist interests as a whole (ibid, 4). The task of feminism then becomes, not to renounce renunciation as dangerous to women, but:

[to] make fine but important distinctions: between this 'right' vulnerability and mere invitations to abuse; between this contemplative 'self-effacement' and self-destruction; between the productive suffering of self-disclosure and the decentring torture of pain for pain's sake (ibid, 36).

### **Other Feminist Voices for Renunciation**

Mary Potter Engel has also reassessed the notion of self-renunciation in feminist terms (2008), with an account of per transition from one who was 'alert to sexism's submersion of women's selves in the "common" good and intent on becoming a free and empowered self' (ibid, 144) to one who finds, like Coakley, that 'in emptying, one is filled...[and] found by losing the way' (ibid, 152). And, like Coakley, Engel concludes that our task is not to reject self-renunciation out of hand but to work on discerning the difference between a 'self-naughting humility' that willing gives itself up into GOD/DE, and the destructive humiliation of self required by the forces of dominology 'who profit from keeping the other in its place' (ibid, 151). The latter renders us permanently immature and dependent; the former requires us achieve a mature fullness of self that can then decentre itself, 'step[ping] aside for the work' (ibid, 157) of transforming the World in love and justice (ibid, 154).

Beverly Lanzetta's work on feminist mysticism *Radical Wisdom* (2005) is another revaluing of the practice of renunciatory contemplation. Noting thea/ologies'

‘unfortunate tendency’ to equate the renunciative life with passivity, Worldly detachment, apolitical introspection and somatophobia (ibid, 33), person commends contemplation as a legitimate feminist practice that encourages the practitioner to experience herself as: embodied and interrelated rather than atomised, disembodied and autonomous (ibid, 32); vulnerable and exposed to a healing power beyond herself (ibid); opened to a wider understanding of the structures of dominology (ibid, 33); less under pressure to conform to group thinking and succumb to idolatry (ibid, 170); while less outwardly directed towards the comfort of others, ultimately more focused ‘on an interior solitude from which flows the richness and pleasure of all relations’ (ibid, 168).

In a similar vein, Kathryn Tanner (2004) offers a reassessment of the general notion of the purpose of sacrifice in Christianity, concluding that sacrificial self-renunciation promotes union with the Divine through service to neighbours, thus maintaining community (ibid, 51-55). Person acknowledges, however, that disinterested effort on behalf of others is not without personal cost, and that thus sacrifice is ‘a sorrowful act’ (ibid, 51).

Speaking in general of self-renunciation, Michael Sells asserts that the risk of giving up desire and will is the risk of becoming nothing (1994, 211), of losing one’s reason and descending into madness (ibid, 213). However, Terry Cooper argues that ‘we

were never meant to be the centre of our own existence' (2003, 2) and that to believe we are is to exhibit a lack of trust in GOD/DE that amounts to self-idolatry (ibid, 157). Furthermore, maintaining the self as an idol is not an adequate, realistic or effective form of self-care (ibid, 145), but rather a neglect of our real need for selfless communion with GOD/DE and others.

Thus we might reassess renunciation and feminist objections to it, revaluing the practice as personally, politically and spiritually fruitful and empowering, a practice that counters self-centredness and idolatry; promotes embodied interconnectedness and community; opens us to a reassessment of the nature of power and a critique of dominology; undermines conformity and offers a challenge to the power-over that seeks to keep us in our place; fits us to take responsibility for our being in the World and to take action for social justice; renders us both vulnerable and healed; and gives us back to ourselves so that we might then step aside for the work. Though we risk madness, we become, through a practice of self-renunciation, open to the still, small voice of GOD/DE that impels us to pay attention to the World's need for love and justice.

## *Renunciation and Decreation*

### **Simone Weil and Renunciation**

In the practice of renunciation we unsay our attachment to self in favour of submission to something greater, a purpose that transcends our small, personal concerns. Our gender is an aspect of that self that now appears to have potential for being unsaid; in this, gender might echo the unsayability of GOD/DE that lies at the heart of the apophatic or negative theological tradition, a spiritual discipline that seeks through its total commitment to the ineffability of GOD/DE to protect the World from idolatry.

There has been a ‘burgeoning of contemporary languages of the unsayable’ (Sells 1994, 5) in postmodernism, particularly in the work of Derrida, that has in turn led to a revival of interest in earlier apophatic or negative theological traditions (e.g. Sells 1994; Turner 1995; Lanzetta 2005; Rollins 2006; Rivera 2007; Boesel and Keller 2010b). I examine the nature of apophasis in greater detail in Chapter 5, but at this point I discuss not the earlier, largely mediaeval, tradition that is the focus of contemporary interest, but rather reclaim the work of twentieth-century negative theologian/philosopher Simone Weil and, in particular, the process of self-renunciation person calls ‘decreation’, for the light it casts upon the issue of renunciation of gender.

## Weil: Biographical Details

Simone Weil has been described as: ‘a politically active mystic’, negative theologian and self-starver (Macfarlane 2008, 240) ‘a woman of hunger’ who ‘yearned for God’ (Wolfteich 2001, 309); someone who ‘tilt[ed] the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium’ (Heaney in Fan 2007, 135); one who actively sought suffering as preparation for the experience of being ‘between [the] two realities’ of the immanent and the transcendent (Selles-Roney 1994, 273-274). Per life, per apparent anti-Semitism<sup>30</sup>, and, in particular, per death<sup>31</sup> are viewed as highly problematic by most commentators.

Weil herself saw it as per purpose:

To be an intermediary between the uncultivated ground and the ploughed field, between the data of a problem and the solution, between the blank page and the poem, between the starving beggar and the beggar who has been fed (2002 [1952], 46).

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<sup>30</sup> Weil refused to identify as Jewish, particularly in two letters of complaint about being banned by Vichy Government’s Statute on Jews from teaching (McLellan 1989, 163), and wrote scathingly about the nation of Israel as it is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. 2002 [1952], 159-163). Furthermore, despite per central concern with those who suffer, person failed to acknowledge the sufferings of the Nazi concentration camps: Heinz Abosch deems this to be a ‘disappointing aspect’ of Weil’s work (1994, 15). Francine Gray goes further and accuses Weil of ‘Jewish self-loathing’ which renders per ‘pitiful’ (2001, 156). The degree to which such criticism is justified is, however, beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>31</sup> In radical solidarity with the occupied French in the Second World War, Weil refused the bed-rest and hypernutrition that may have cured per TB, saying ‘I will not eat more than in Marseilles’ (Wolfteich 2001, 363) and thus died at the age of 34, judged by the coroner to have committed suicide. Weil’s ‘self-starvation’ is the most outstanding feature of per life for many commentators, according to Christopher Frost and Rebecca Bell-Metereau (1998, 23). Whether person may be considered to have been clinically anorexic is highly debatable, though Abosch (1994) and Gray (2001) consistently argue that this was the case. Frost and Bell-Metereau, on the other hand, argue that Weil’s food-refusal should be seen as a ‘symbolic, heroic act’ (1998, 24) of solidarity with all who suffer privation. Claire Wolfteich insists that Weil’s thought is too important to be read ‘entirely through per own biography (2001, 375), a view with which I concur.

In short, person was to be a conduit between Gravity and Grace, where 'Gravity' refers to the all the laws that govern the World and drag us down into the material, as opposed to the laws of Grace that govern supernatural or Godly activity: 'We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity unless there is supernatural intervention' (Weil 2002 [1952], 1). According to Robert Macfarlane, Weil gives the highest ethical importance to the attempt to renounce the pull of Gravity (2008, 240) whilst emphasising that this is an almost impossible task without the Grace of GOD/DE's intervention: 'All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception' (Weil 2002 [1952], 1).

As a Roman Catholic convert from a secular Jewish family who delved deeply into the traditions of the East, Weil positioned herself as being 'at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity' (Weil 2009 [1951], 32). Person might thus be described as a liminal person, exhibiting what Fan calls a 'precarious in-betweenness' (2007, 129), and an outsider who 'could not find a perfect fit with any specific organization, cause or thinker'. In conceiving of GOD/DE as essentially unWorldliness, silence and nothingness, Weil outlines a distinctively unorthodox, outsider negative theology. GOD/DE is inexpressible not simply because human speech is insufficient for the task, but more because GOD/DE is in no way in the

World at all; we cannot know GOD/DE but only ‘the withdrawal of God’ (Weil in Hermsen 1999, 187). GOD/DE is ineffable not because of ÆR excess, as Æ commonly is in mediaeval traditions, but because of ÆR absence; and creation reminds us not that GOD/DE is great but that GOD/DE is missing. Nonetheless, Weil advocates the renunciatory practice of decreation, a giving up of the self into the GOD/DE who may not be.

### **Decreation Defined**

Defining decreation as ‘to make something created pass into the uncreated’ (2002 [1952], 32), Weil contrasts this with destruction in which ‘something created pass[es] into nothingness’ (ibid), the vital distinction here being that ‘the uncreated’ is GOD/DE, while ‘nothingness’ is simply that. Although person acknowledges that ‘Creation is an act of love and is perpetual’, this is qualified by the assertion that, despite the loving nature of creation, GOD/DE can only love GOD/DE and that, in loving us, Æ is in truth loving ÆERSELF<sup>32</sup> (ibid). Furthermore, the full power of GOD/DE’s love, if turned upon us, would evaporate us ‘like water in the sun’ (ibid,

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<sup>32</sup> Since creation exists not because of GOD/DE’s urge to create from ÆR own substance, but as a space left by ÆR withdrawal, leaving nothing whatsoever of ÆR in the world, there is ‘an infinite distance between God and men’ (Weil in McLellan 1991, 203). We cannot therefore experience GOD/DE as a comforting presence, but only as a sense of utter abandonment (Ryan 2005, 360), and the only knowledge we can have of this absent GOD/DE is as ‘a desire for the good’ (Hermsen 1999, 186). This conceptualisation causes the poet Wallace Stevens to infer that GOD/DE is dead and that ‘the greatest truth we could hope to discover...is that man’s truth is the final resolution of everything’ (in Baker 2006, 134).

33), and so GOD/DE places the material World of necessity<sup>33</sup> between ÆRSELF and us in order to protect us. This protection notwithstanding, we must renounce ourselves, decreate our createdness and make ourselves vulnerable and open to the GOD/DE who might evaporate us, in order that the good<sup>34</sup> might come into the world.

Weil states that ‘In so far as I become nothing, God loves himself through me’ (ibid, 34). Such a renunciation is an ‘Imitation of God’s renunciation in creation. In a sense God renounced being everything. We should renounce being something. That is our only good’ (ibid, 33). Part of this good is to seek to love as impersonally as does GOD/DE, ‘as an emerald is green’ (Weil 1970, 129), loving every other human being impartially and in equal measure, attending to human need rather than seeking to consume others with our desire. Decreation thus requires that in love we free ourselves from the personal attachments that direct love only towards what we know, our cultural roots. By decreating ourselves, ‘we participate in the creation of the world’ (Weil 2002 [1952], 33) as a place into which the good might come.

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<sup>33</sup> Weil describes necessity as the arbitrary set of rules by which the World functions, a ‘blind mechanism, heedless of degrees of spiritual perfection, [that] continually tosses men about’ (2009 [1951], 73). Affliction is thus anonymous and indifferent and comes upon us by chance, because of necessity’s blind impartiality.

<sup>34</sup> Weil is insistent that nothing in the created world exhibits the goodness person means when person talks of ‘the good’: ‘The good seems to us as nothingness, since there is no thing that is good’ (2002 [1952], 13). Pure good, from GOD/DE, comes into the World only in ‘imperceptible quantities’ (Weil 1989, 287), such that its existence is effectively unknown to us. But, person goes on, the fact that the good barely exists in this world does not mean that it is unreal.

Decreation is by no means free of hazard, since not only might it attract GOD/DE's annihilating gaze, but worse, GOD/DE may not respond at all; GOD/DE's absence may be the only thing that we perceive. 'We must only wait and cry out' says Weil, 'not call upon someone, while we still do not know if there is anyone, but cry out that we are hungry and want some bread' (1974, 86). Waiting for GOD/DE is, therefore, inevitably a life of risk; we cannot know where our search will take us or what, if anything, might result. However, there is value in 'embarking on paths that lead nowhere' (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 61), since *not* to do so is also a risk, in that we might prematurely close ourselves off from experiences of inestimable value.

The decreative process does not represent subjection but freedom and empowerment; indeed it is the only liberative act we *can* undertake, since we possess nothing else that cannot be stripped from us by the arbitrary movements of necessity (2002 [1952], 26). Renunciation only liberates, however, if it is of our own choosing, 'for the "I" is not destroyed by external pressure without a violent revolt' (ibid, 27). Extreme affliction<sup>35</sup>, which brings about 'the destruction of the "I" *from* outside' (ibid, 30) is not in the least redemptive. But the self that has been decreated

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35 Weil's concern for suffering and affliction is a major focus of her work. Person draws a marked distinction between the two: suffering (*souffrance*), is the inevitable 'colour of certain events' (2009 [1951], 78) and 'a method of God's teaching' (ibid 79) that is willingly embraced by the sufferer. Affliction (*malheur*), on the other hand, is forced on the afflicted from outside: thus it is 'quite different from suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery' (Weil 2002 [1952], 68). A detailed discussion of Weil's treatment of these topics is, however, beyond the scope of this study.

by choice is then impervious to destruction by affliction 'since the "I" in him no longer exists, having completely disappeared and left the place to God' (ibid).

By renouncing 'the illusion of perspective' that places each of us at the centre of our universe, echoing Coakley, Engel, Lanzetta and Tanner above, we finally become as GOD/DE means us to be, says Weil (Howe 2008, 49-50); since as ego-centred selves we cannot love GOD/DE, our only choice is to lose ourselves in order to make access to GOD/DE's love possible (Carson 2002, 194). And this is not merely a choice but an obligation from GOD/DE that must be met with passivity and obedience (Skrimshire 2006, 291). However obedience does not consist of 'submission to a set of restriction or rules' but is rather a willing embarkation on a path towards experiencing 'the fullness of life' (Howe 2008, 60). In withdrawing ourselves from necessity as GOD/DE withdrew from creation, therefore, we become 'the most real we can be' (McLellan 1991, 231), not for ourselves alone, but so that the World itself may experience the good:

May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see.... To see a landscape as it is when I am not there.... When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart' (Weil 2002 [1952], 42).

In 'decreate[ing] the tyrannical "I"' (Fan 2007, 130) through the application of an impersonal and disinterested attention that grasps at neither GOD/DE nor hope (Ryan 2005, 360), room is made for GOD/DE's grace. Setting out thus, without

regard for results, we must first rid ourselves of our social and then of our personal roots, leaving behind all the assumed behaviours generated by class, creed, nationality, habit, preference and, most importantly for this study, gender, in order to facilitate the transition from the personal, self-centred to the impersonal, decreeted self (Hermsen 1999, 193). It is only thus that we create the accessibility to others that is inhibited by our preoccupation with our own perspective, 'exchanging opposition to people and things, which is a given of individuality, with openness and genuine attention for others' (ibid 191). By this process Weil seeks not the complete destruction of self, but rather a self and an 'impersonal "Holy"' that are in balance, such that the self acts not from selfish desire alone but also in response to the needs of others (ibid 193).

The decreeted self does not lose all sense of itself *as* a self, although it is a self that is 'never more the self than when it is not' (Baker 2006, 137). However, because this is a project without any guarantee of success, the self that remains might well be left empty and abandoned (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 60), and undefended against 'tumultuous and painful experiences' (ibid, 107). But while the undefended self may suffer, it is also permeable to positive experiences; our defences may protect us from suffering, but they also protect us from joy (ibid).

## **Decreation as Ethical Pursuit**

Whatever the effects of decreation on the self, the heart of Weil's conceptualisation, as of all per work, is ethical. Some, like Wallace Stevens, may misread its purpose as solipsistic, providing 'a path from the world of belief to the world of the individual' (in Baker 2006, 134). However, in the act of making a space to respond both to the voice of other human beings and to the still small voice of the Wholly Other (Hermsen 1999, 193), Weil's intentions are entirely selfless and focused on our obligations to the World in general and to its afflicted in particular. Loving GOD/DE unconditionally and without any hope of a return of love is a legitimate response to the absurdity of existence and an embrace of the suffering world as it really is rather than our own illusory desires, asserts Stefan Skrimshire (2006, 293). It represents an unquestionable claim of the need for roots not for ourselves but for others, and is thus a vehicle for social transformation. Decreation is an utter refusal of self-idolatry and an acknowledgement of the equal claim all humans have to be seen as fully humans (Nye 1994, 61), 'an ethics of liberation from individuality and from all power struggles connected with it' (Hermsen 1999, 195). The ethicality of decreation stems, in part, from its emphasis on the renunciation of material goods, countering a culture of consumption which 'inevitably implies competition for resources' (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 25).

Decreation is a sort of test the like of which appears in folk tales (cf Weil 2002 [1952], 40), whereby the character who chooses the least appealing course of action results in the richest reward<sup>36</sup> (Carson 2002, 194). In becoming nothing, in renouncing ourselves in order that GOD/DE might enter the world as GOD/DE renounced ÆR omnipotence in order that 'not GOD/DE' might exist, we thus become *imago Dei* (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 105). We reflect GOD/DE only inasmuch as we do not exist to obstruct ÆR (Carson 2002, 194).

Some of the ethical value of decreation lies in its ability to promote a 'yearning towards the transcendent' (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 109), 'catch[ing] a glimpse of that which exceeds the I' (Hermsen 1999, 185) getting oneself 'out of the way so as to arrive at God' (Carson 2002, 194). Rather more bleakly, but not unrealistically, Baker casts this yearning as the demonstration of 'how the individual talks to God when there is no God with whom to speak and no hope of an answer' (2006, 134). However decreation also maintains a gap between desire and fulfilment, which is an ethical refusal to accept the World unchallenged; to fall into acceptance, assert Frost and Bell-Metereau, is no neutral act, since to do nothing does not merely not make things better, it actively contributes to making things worse (1998, 109). In persistence on the removal of 'layers of cultural conditioning and shared illusions',

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<sup>36</sup> According to McLellan (1989, 217) a favourite tale of Weil's was the Celtic story of the Duke of Norrway, in which the central character, in contrast to per status-hungry sisters, asks not for a king or a prince as husband but says person will be content with the Red Bull of Norrway. After many trials person is rewarded with the transformation of the Bull into a handsome Duke, whom person marries. This is, of course, only one of a number of versions of the tale, but was the one Weil favoured.

Weil outlines an ethical quest for righteousness, not only religiously but also politically and socially (ibid). The decreation of the self loosens our grip on accepted meaning so as to 'open up other paths of significance' through which we might access something valuable that comes from beyond the norms of necessity (Roth 2008, [n.p.]). If we can achieve all that Weil hopes of decreation, we might be enabled to hear what 'the singing of the real world would sound like if the self were not in the way of our hearing the songs' (ibid, [n.p.]).

### **Feminisms and Decreation**

Sarah Pinnock asserts that 'Weil's vision of mystical self-annihilation is implicitly feminist in its concrete approach to selfhood and its ethical implications' (2010, 217) and its resistance to patriarchal power (ibid, 206). Andrea Nye similarly sees decreation's feminist value as abiding in a non-coercive way to 'be good' that refuses rather than capitulates to or colludes with dominology (1994, 105). In a World in which consumerist immoderation is touted as the highest good, decreation holds out the promise of an ethics of moderation and restraint (Rozelle-Stone 2010) and the restoration of measure and equilibrium (Estelrich 2010, 11).

Carson describes Weil as 'an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history' (2002, 203), and notes that this spiritual assertiveness disturbs and unnerves us: 'we resent [her]. We need history to be able to call saints neurotic, anorexic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake' (ibid), charges that echo feminist disquiet with

renunciatory practices. It is right to see Weil as an immoderate fanatic (Rozelle-Stone 2010, 21). However the immoderation of Weil's life is entirely different from the immoderation of a capitalist, consumerist culture; as Martin Luther King asserts 'the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be' (King 1997). Weil is an extremist of the side of the good (Rozelle-Stone 2010, 18), not a relay within an existing power network, but rather a resistance to such networks, 'disrupting, rechanneling its circulation in order to generate entirely novel social relations' (Duttenhaver and Jones 2010, 189).

Ultimately what decreation offers us is not a practice that is generally offensive to feminism, but rather one that, in line with feminist revaluations of renunciation: addresses self-centredness and promotes the value of a depersonalised love as an emerald is green, thus stimulating increased interconnectedness and a potentially broadening of community; opens us to a reassessment of the nature of power and a critique of dominology by figuring us as nodes of resistance; challenges idolatry by disrupting and rechanneling the circulation of power into entirely novel social relations; requires us to take responsibility for our being in the World and act for social justice; renders us vulnerable both to GOD/DE's power and to ÆR absence; and liberates us back to ourselves so that we might with confidence step aside for the work. Far from requiring us to disembodify ourselves, decreation promotes a self who is ethically active, fully engaged with transformation in the World. Furthermore, in requiring us to renounce being of the World, as GOD/DE

renounced being part of creation, decreation also offers us another, non-idolatrous, way of understanding *imago Dei* and of answering that of GOD/DE in other people. The decreeted self thus gives us hope that dominological networks of power might finally be reconfigured.

### **Decreation as Counterweight**

According to Gustave Thibon, ‘the idea of counterbalancing is essential to [Weil’s] conception of political and social activity’ (2002 [1952], xvii), while Leslie Fiedler states that per tendency to ‘throw the counterweight on the side of a proposition against which popular judgement is almost solidly arrayed’ is one of per ‘deliberate strategic emphases’ (2009 [1951], xxviii). Weil herself wrote: ‘If we know in what direction the scales of society are tilted we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter side’ (2002 [1952], 171). In its rejection of the greedy self-perspective and its promotion of a link to both the immanence of necessity and the transcendence of GOD/DE, decreation stands as just such a counterweight to the normative and the orthodox.

Weil contends that ‘When the whole universe weighs upon us there is no other counterweight possible but God himself’ (Weil 2002 [1952], 93). I assert that the dominological construct of gender weighs upon us in this manner, as gender injustice circumscribes the limits of human intelligibility with deadly efficiency. And it is this issue of intelligibility, of who can legitimately be read as fully human,

that the decreation of gender might address. We do not decreate for ourselves and for our own spiritual sustenance but in the ethical pursuit of gender justice, particularly for our sibs who as yet are unintelligible and cry out that they are hungry and want the bread of gender justice.

The system of gender apartheid that we espouse is manifestly out of kilter; there is little evidence to support binary gender and much to undermine it. Of all the aspects of self that are available to us to renounce, gender has seemed to be the most unrenounceable, since we have conceived of it as pertaining to our natural, even GOD/DE-given, bodies. However, if binary gender is wholly deconstructible, if it is of the World and not of GOD/DE, just one more aspect of Weil's material World of gravity, then it is as available to decreation as any other aspect of our tyrannical 'I'. By renouncing gender, by detaching from the normative and orthodox forces of materialism that it expresses, by rejecting its idolatrous apartheid, and even the names of Woman and Man, as belonging to matter and not to the Divine, we might come to make the createdness of gender pass back into the uncreatedness of GOD/DE. Thus, decreation of gender becomes a counterweight to the idolatrous norms of binary gender orthodoxy.

## *Thesis Outline*

### **An apophasis of gender?**

In 2005 I wrote in my research journal:

Are ambiguous folk saying ‘I am inexpressible as GODDE is inexpressible’—is that the ‘image and likeness’ thing—created by GODDE to be expressions of inexpressibility—bodying GODDE’s inexpressibility—walking, talking examples of negative theology? Are we all?

Three years later, Catherine Keller’s article *The Apophasis of Gender* (2008) echoed of some of my earliest thoughts. Keller begins by outlining three overlapping phases, or what person calls ‘folds’, in the development of (specifically) feminist theologies: the ‘gender fold’ (ibid, 918), which first critiqued the dominological discourses of Christianate theology; the ‘color fold’ (ibid, 920), wherein it was recognised that not all feminists are white, western and middle-class; and the ‘queer fold’ (ibid, 922) which unsays the ‘confident affirmations of feminist theology’ with regards to binary gender. Person goes on to argue for a fourth fold, the ‘manifold’ (ibid, 926), in which thea/ologians apply the insights of negative or apophatic theology to notions of gender, unsaying<sup>37</sup> the existence of the binary as a way of ushering in new and fruitful understandings of Divine-human relationships.

Noting that apophasis is concerned with the ‘exposure of theological *idols*’ (ibid, 912), Keller commends the potential of an apophasis of gender to unsay the

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<sup>37</sup> Apophasis literally means ‘un-saying or speaking away’ (Sells 1994, 2).

idolatrous ‘pet positions’ (ibid, 915) of feminist theologies, such as the wombful matriarchalism outlined above, subverting, queering and undermining our binary certainties (ibid, 918), and generating new openings to the Divine. In pursuit of just such openings, I have undertaken this study, starting from a position in **Chapter 1** that binary gender is but one metaphorical model for gendered human experience, and that it is a model that we have turned into an idol with violent results for our as-yet-unintelligible sibs. I have thus contended that a renunciation of gender, supported by a feminist revaluing of the notion of renunciation in general, and an understanding of Weil’s concept of decreation in particular, requires serious consideration as a means both to promote love and justice in the World and to widen and deepen our understanding of GOD/DE beyond simply He and She.

In **Chapter 2** I discuss the methods I have employed in this study, in collecting, analysing and theologising around interviews with trans narrators. I outline some of the methodological practices of both traditional and feminist theologies and explain my somewhat unusual decision to make use of a qualitative ethnographic methodology, Grounded Theory, in my own work. I discuss my choice to base this study on interviews with trans people as a way of taking seriously the notion of lived experience as central to a feminist theological project, and investigate theoretical and practical issues around the collection and analysis of those interviews, concluding that I have developed an innovative, possibly unique,

methodological approach that I call 'Grounded Theology'. I then return to the work of Simone Weil and discuss specifically per notion of attention as it relates to a practice of grounded theologising.

In **Chapter 3**, I introduce the first of my narrators, Leigh and, after an extended portrait of per complex gendered and spiritual experiences, address a number of themes that arise from per story. I begin by drawing analogies between Leigh's experiences and those of the mystic Julian of Norwich, both in terms of their response to the promptings of an inner 'voice' and in the role each plays as confessor/advisor to per community. I argue that Leigh may be seen as demonstrating qualities that theologian Grace Jantzen ascribes to a 'postmodern anchoress', of 'standing at an angle to the certainties and preoccupations of the world' (2000, vii) and becoming a space 'where thinking otherwise might happen' (xxi). I then discuss the notion in Celtic spirituality of the 'thin place' and link Thinness to Rudolph Otto's notion of the numinous (1958 [1923]), arguing that Leigh is more than a postmodern anchoress; in standing at an angle to the certainties of gender, person might legitimately be seen as a Thin person. I discuss Weil's concept of *metaxu*, conceived of as bridges to the Divine, and demonstrate how Weil enables us to conceive of gender as *metaxu*, such that we see *through* gender (to) something of the vast complexity of GOD/DE. I argue that conceiving of Thin embodiment as *metaxu* allows for a non-idolatrous appreciation of all embodiment,

and that Thin gender acts as a counterweight to the judgement imposed on us by gender norms, gently calling us to pay attention to the embodiment of another in a open and accepting fashion, rather than demanding conformity at any cost.

**Chapter 4** addresses the story of Robin, focusing first on themes that might be seen as relating to Thickness, in contrast to my previous discussion of Thinness. I develop the notion of thickness as occlusion productive of a mirror and, noting Robin's tendency to reflect the attributes of various groups, investigate per story in relation the mythical Narcissan mirror. I conclude that this is not an accurate metaphorical framework for Robin's experiences, though it does usefully highlight aspects of (self)idolatry in its depiction of the mirror as Weilian gravity well. I argue that Robin, in per unceasing reinvention, more resembles the shape-changing sea god Proteus. A discussion of this figure reveals that, in its benign aspects, Proteanism more accurately reflects Robin's experiences. I then use the Protean to critique dominological notions of GOD/DE as changeless and mutability as fearful, even evil, presenting Weil's concept of The Great Beast as demonstrative of that dominological tendency. I argue for a reassessment of GOD/DE as multipliciously and mutably Protean, supporting this with reference to recent works of thea/ology by Laurel C. Schneider (2008) and Marcella Althaus-Reid's (2003). I conclude with a provisional and conjectural description of the attributes of the Protean GOD/DE that we might glimpse through the *metaxu* of Robin's embodiment.

In the last of the three chapters based on interview data, **Chapter 5**, I address the story of Sol, from which I identify two themes, an experience of genderedness that person describes as a Round Trip to Hell, and an alternative account that seems to directly contradict the first. I argue that such apparent inconsistencies are both inherent to the process of narrating our lives and demonstrative of Sol as *imago Dei*. I discuss Weil's contention that contradiction is not something to be resolved or avoided but rather to be used as as 'pincers' with which we might grasp at a higher truth (2002 [1952], 121), and assert that Sol's embodiment of contradiction offers us an experience that casts light on the contradictory nature of GOD/DE as expressed, for example, in the so-called problem of evil. I go on to investigate the notion of opacity as it discussed by Judith Butler (2005) and elsewhere and, after Keller (2008; 2010), link the Butlerian conception of opacity of the self to apophasis, or negative theology. Noting the problematic relationship between thea/ologies and the transcendence of GOD/DE that the apophatic tradition espouses, I nevertheless join with commentators, in particular Mayra Rivera (2007) and Rebekah Miles (2001), who argue for a revaluing of transcendence in thea/ologies as a hedge against idolatry. Further, I argue that the Butlerian concept of opacity of the self allows us to conceive of opaquely embodied experiences such as Sol's as embodiments of GOD/DE's transcendence, asserting that we are thusly all transcendent dazzling

darknesses, ultimately unsayable, as GOD/DE is unsayable, in gender as in every other aspect of our embodiments.

In my concluding chapter, **Chapter 6**, I draw together the central concerns of this thesis, beginning with an assertion that is not enough to extend our metaphorical models of GOD/DE simply from He to She, but that gender justice for our unintelligible sibs calls us renounce the idolatry of binary gender in favour of an endlessly expanding notion of *imago Dei*. I argue that such a renunciation, or Weilian decreation, of our gendered roots affirms a yearning towards the transcendent and that which exceeds the I, towards an expansive future horizon of hope and transformation. Central to this is the recognition of the value of quotidian experiences and the theologising around these that is made possible by the application of Grounded Theology as a method of inquiry. It is out of this methodological approach of silent waiting upon data that the metaphorical models of Thinness, Proteanism and Opacity, outlined above, have arisen. Through these I address not only the cry of the unintelligible for gender justice, but also the need for those of us who are cis to forge alliances with our unintelligible sibs, to act as counterweights against a gender regime that is out of kilter, and to stand as outsiders with outsiders in order to critique the norms that limit human potentialities. In the following chapter, therefore, I address the theoretical and practical considerations

that went into developing the qualitative research practice I call Grounded  
Theology, from which this thesis results.

## CHAPTER 2

# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS AND GROUNDED THEOLOGY

### *Introduction*

This chapter addresses the methodological concerns of the thesis, beginning with a statement of my theological position and of the position of this work in relation to thea/ological disciplines and developments. I examine the methodologies of mainstream and feminist theological enquiry, as they relate to the category of experience and, specifically, to what constitutes legitimate experience for thea/ological reflection. Contending that thea/ologies dismiss too readily the quotidian as a resource for exploring the Holy (after Rudolph Otto (1958 [1923])), I propose a methodological approach that combines the ethnographic qualitative research practice of grounded theory and the more traditional literature-based theological methods with prayerful attention to narrators and the data they provide. I call the resulting approach 'Grounded Theology'. I then link Simone Weil's notion of 'attention', the 'other half' of decreation and a hedge against idolatry, to my own Grounded Theology, arguing that there is congruence between the two. Asserting that listening, or silent waiting, is central to the ethics of Grounded Theology, I go on to describe the process by which I have collected, transcribed, analysed and

reported the results of interviews with the three trans people upon whose stories I base my theologising.

## ***Background***

### **Theological Position**

Feminist theologian Daphne Hampson describes her theological position as being that of 'a Western person, living in a post-Christian age, who has taken something...from Christian thinkers, but who has rejected the Christian myth' (1997, [n.p.]). This is not unlike my own position. Although Hampson describes herself as 'post-Christian' and I describe myself as 'non-Christian', the 'Christian' part for me is highly significant. I am *non*-Christian, in that I do not feel called by Christian beliefs, but I am *non-Christian*, rather than non-Muslim, non-Jewish, non-Hindu, etc., because I have been brought up culturally Christian. And although I am a non-Christian, I am not an *anti*-Christian, finding many dissident believers and traditions within Western Christianity that speak to my condition. While Sally Munt defines 'post-Christian' as describing spiritual and religious attitudes, worldviews, ideologies that are 'no longer rooted in the languages and assumptions of Christianity' (2010b, 9), I find my non-Christian theologising to be wholly rooted in and formed by a cultural milieu that is 'Christianate', a term I have coined to refer to biblically-derived, dominological, Eurocentric Western culture. Since a Christianate worldview is the dominant paradigm in the Britain, where I was born

and brought up, it is that culture and that alone that I feel in any position to critique.

In terms of faith community I situate myself within the liberal British Quaker tradition, and as one of those Quakers who sometimes look outside as well as inside Christianity to express my inner experiences. In addition I am a member of a liberal Christian community that describes itself as 'rooted in the Christian heritage, open to the wider future' (Othona Burton Bradstock 2007). I see myself as part of that 'wider future', but with a growing appreciation of just how deeply the roots go in shaping my beliefs. Thus, the description non-Christian does not situate me outside of Christian theology, since Christianity is at the very heart of my non-Christian theologising. My theological language has, so to speak, some Christian DNA; thus, concepts such as *imago Dei* are of primary importance to my theologising.

I experience the GOD/DE of whom I write as a real and Holy presence, subscribing to Rudolph Otto's view of the Holy as being representative of something far more than mere goodness or morality (1958 [1923], 5). I believe the image of the Holy to be present in all human experiences, not just in those that exemplify the morally intelligible or acceptable. Thus, I am concerned in my theologising with understanding how human beings as *imago Dei* might be expressive of that of GOD/DE, not in exemplary 'good' or 'well-lived' lives, but in all the quotidian stuff

of each human life. From the fullness of lives, each in its specificity, I assert, we can draw metaphors to help us to understand the Holy, not because any one metaphor will correctly name  $\mathcal{A}$ E for whom there are no correct names but only approximations (Schneider 2008, 11), but, first, because every new metaphor destabilises all previous metaphors and, second, because 'God also responds to human imagination and construction...[and thus] comes into presence *in* those constructions, and sometimes embodies them' (ibid 12). To formulate metaphors from the quotidian experiences of trans/genderqueer people is not only to add to the stock of available GOD/DE-concepts as a counterbalance to idolatry, but also to call down the Holy into bodies like these, thus making the unintelligible, at least theologically, intelligible.

Philippa Willitts and Frances Ryan (2012) criticise media coverage of sporting events for disabled athletes for holding up those athletes solely as inhumanly perfected and inspirational ciphers for the edification of the 'normal' human spectator. In deploying Otto's morally-neutral conception of the Holy in relation to trans/genderqueer embodiments, I hope to avoid similarly assigning an inhumanly superior moral status to unintelligible embodiments in the way that some commentators do—by asserting, for example, that 'perhaps we will come to view

[intersex] children as especially blessed or lucky'<sup>1</sup> (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 113)—for fear that this places too heavy a burden of perfection on people already burdened by misplaced judgements. I discuss the problematics of conceptualising gender variant people as 'gender-gifted' (Mollenkott and Sheridan 2003, 32) in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### **Positioning This Thesis**

Moving from my own position, I situate this work within the thea/ological discipline with reference to Andrew Yip's assessment of developments in LGBTQI<sup>2</sup>-affirming and queer theology (2010). Yip identifies three developmental strands<sup>3</sup> (ibid, 37-41): defensive apologetics; text 'cruising'; and turning theology upside down. In defensive apologetics, or what I call 'justification', theologians take texts that have conventionally been deployed against an oppressed group, 'texts of terror' (Trible 1984) and recontextualise them as a challenge to 'the truth claims of the heteronormative dominant discourse' (Yip 2010, 37). 'Cruising', or what I call 'reclamation', looks to texts and traditions with 'confidence and creativity' for LGBTQI-affirming role models and practices 'as a spiritual guide for a religiously

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<sup>1</sup> Cornwall notes the problematics of such an approach, sating 'People with intersex/DSD conditions have sometimes been made to bear the weight of unsought connotations...being figured as a "third" or politically significant liminal figure by activists when all they want is a quiet, unremarkable life' (2010, 99)

<sup>2</sup> The acronym LGBTQI stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning and Intersex.

<sup>3</sup> In a similar assessment of thea/ological developments, Pamela Young identifies two stages: first, a critique of existing dominological texts and traditions; and second, reconstruction religious and spiritual practices in the light of women's experience (2000b, 12; see also Hogan 1995, 9).

sanctioned way' of living contra heteronormativity (ibid, 39). Turning theology upside down or, as I call it, 'expansion', seeks to 'fundamentally overhaul theology' through a prioritisation of 'embodiment and experience' over existing texts and traditions (ibid, 40), seeking to expand the stock of metaphorical GOD/DE language in innovative and imaginative directions.

Within the field Yip surveys, a there is a growing number of works loosely categorised as 'trans theology', beginning with Victoria Kolakowski's article *Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons* (1997), and extending to monographs such as *Omnigender* (Mollenkott 2001), *Crossing Over* (Sheridan 2001), *Transgender Good News* (Conover 2002), *Transgendered* (Tanis 2003), *Transgender Journeys* (Mollenkott and Sheridan 2003), *Transgendering Faith* (Tigert and Tirabassi 2004) and *Trans/Formations* (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2009), mainly written from within Christianity, more often than not from a US perspective, and largely falling into Yip's categories of defensive apologetics and text-cruising. Since I am writing from neither a Christian nor a trans perspective, and seeking neither to justify trans existence nor to reclaim affirming Christian texts and traditions, this thesis is situated in Yip's last category, turning theology upside down, in that my intention is to expand the stock of GOD/DE language that is drawn directly from trans embodiments and experiences, as a hedge against idolatry, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Weil warns: 'We must be careful about the level on which we place the infinite. If we place it on the level which is only suitable for the finite it will matter very little what name we give it' (2002 [1952], 55). However, the finite is all we have when we speak of GOD/DE; 'all the linguistic stock in trade is creaturely in its reference' asserts Denys Turner (2002, 17). To do justice to GOD/DE, speaking of *Æ* who is unspeakable calls for an 'excess of babble' and an embarrassing prolixity of creaturely references, until we talk ourselves to a standstill (ibid, 18). Rather than not talk at all, theology should start by talking too much. However, as Turner later contends, 'the contemporary diet of theological metaphor [is] a very thin gruel indeed' (1995, 23); we have forgotten that since GOD/DE created all things, *all* things, not just the good, the beautiful, the intelligible, may be names for GOD/DE. Butler talks of bringing back 'what has been foreclosed and banished from the proper domain of "sex"...as a troubling return...[and] a radical rearticulation of...which bodies come to matter' (Butler 1993, 23). I argue that, by insisting on the intelligibility of embodiments outside of binary gender, we instate a troubling return not just of bodies that matter but also of that which has been foreclosed and banished for the proper domain of GOD/DE. In talking of 'ways that count as "life", lives worth protecting..., saving...[and] grieving' (ibid, 16) we are also talking of lives worth theologising.

It is for this reason that I have taken the somewhat unusual step of basing my theological metaphorising on a grounded theory approach to individual stories drawn from face-to-face interviews with trans people. With its focus on creating new metaphorical models for the Divine/human relationship, my work stands in the tradition of metaphorical theology begun by Sallie McFague (1982; 1993) that expands into works such as: Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine* (1998), which examines a metaphor of flourishing; *Indecent Theology* (2000) and *The Queer God* (2003), developing theology around ideas of indecency and queerness respectively; Laurel Schneider's exploration of the idea of multiplicity in *Beyond Monotheism* (2008); and the tehomic<sup>4</sup> theology of the waters on the *Face of the Deep* that Catherine Keller describes (2004).

In preparing for the task of theologising around the complexities of gender, I have studied widely around the subject of gender complexity and variability at its broadest, not only in academic texts (e.g. Lewins 1995; Ekins 1997; Whittle 2000; Bloom 2003; Chiland 2005; Gherovici 2010), but also in literary fiction (e.g. Durrell 1982; Woolf 1995; Eugenides 2003; Winter 2011), science fiction (e.g. Russ 1975; Delany 1976; Sturgeon 1978; Gentle 1983; Scott 1995), biography and autobiography (e.g. County and Smith 1995; Summerscale 1997; Morris 2002; Boyd 2003; Beard 2008; Hillman 2008), ethnography and history (e.g. Wheelwright 1989; Young

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<sup>4</sup> *Tehom* is the Hebrew word for primal oceanic chaos, which is translated in the King James Bible as 'the deep' (Genesis 1:2).

2000a; Collis 2001), films (e.g. Berliner and Stappen 1997; Almodovar 1999; Peirce 1999; Tucker 2005) and TV and radio programmes (e.g. *My Transsexual Summer* 2011; *The Sex Test* 2011; Baker 2011). More importantly for my specific understanding of trans/genderqueer people as individuals, are the interviews with eleven trans people, the stories of three of whom are the basis for my subsequent detailed theologising.

## ***Theological Methods***

### **Theology and Experience**

In deploying an ethnographic methodology, grounded theory, in pursuit of a theological enquiry, I have to some extent started from the ‘wrong’ place, for though the use of qualitative methods is commonplace in sociology of religion, their use in theological enquiry is a rarity. Thus some of my methodological concerns are about reconciling this disparity. One of those concerns has been to situate my work in relation to the theological concept of ‘experience’.

Mainstream theologians sometimes employ the so-called ‘Methodist quadrilateral’<sup>5</sup> of scripture, tradition, reason and experience (Stone and Duke 2006, 45-46) as resources for theological reflection and insight. Whilst noting that all life is

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to this nomenclature, Stone and Duke state that the phrase, while deriving from a Methodist context, ‘serves to clarify concerns widely shared by the worldwide community of faith’ (2006, 46).

experience, Howard Stone and James Duke state that for theologians the category has the specific meaning of ‘various encounters with God, and for the awareness of God that comes through faith’ (ibid, 54). For David Tracy the theological interpretation of experience is undertaken in relation to experiences of text, image, symbol, event, ritual, or persons (1994, 56). Alistair McGrath acknowledges the four sources above as the bedrock of theological reflection (1997, 181) and, in respect of experience, states that the term has acquired a specialised meaning where religion is concerned, relating to the ‘inward and subjective world of experience, as opposed to the outward world of everyday life’ (ibid, 223). Thus, in the mainstream, theological recourse to experience is rarely, if ever, recourse to the kinds of quotidian experiences from which ethnography draws its data.

### **Thea/ologies and Experience**

In feminist research as a whole and in thea/ologies specifically the category of experience has paramount importance. In per review of thea/ologies’ methodological resources, Linda Hogan identifies two interwoven strands: ‘women’s experiences of oppression under patriarchy’; and ‘engaged action for change’ (1995, 16). Asserting that thea/ologies emerged with the intention of claiming Women’s experience ‘as authentic human experience’ (ibid), Hogan nevertheless notes that the term ‘experience’ is somewhat uncritically deployed (ibid, 18), in an often essentialist

fashion<sup>6</sup> (ibid, 62) and no homogeneity<sup>7</sup> can be attributed to it (ibid, 11). These caveats notwithstanding, however, person concludes that ‘The consultation of specifically women’s experiences...[is what] gives feminist theology its distinctiveness’ (1994, 705).

Pamela Young also asserts that Women’s experience is ‘the primary category feminists have added to theological methodology’ (2000b, 22). Like Hogan, Young notes a lack of explication of the term (ibid, 21), stating that it is ‘used more often than it is defined’ (ibid, 49). In an effort to rectify this, person assesses that experience is always, first and foremost reflected-upon rather than immediate (ibid), and is experience not of everything in general but of GOD/DE in particular (ibid, 51). Person outlines five types of experience that count: bodily, socialised, feminist, historical and individual, contending that this last ‘cannot be normative’ (ibid, 67), but ‘can act as a catalyst’ (ibid, 56) to wider thea/ological reflection based on the ‘collectivity of women’ (ibid, 69). Thus Women’s experience becomes both norm and source for thea/ologising, along with scriptural and non-scriptural texts and traditions, and wider human experiences (ibid, 19-20).

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<sup>6</sup> Hogan notes calls on ‘the positive evaluation of menstruation...[and] the experience and institution of motherhood’ as prototypical expressions of women’s experience (1995, 18).

<sup>7</sup> Homogenising is not, however, uncommon; a typically claim for Women’s experience is Young’s assertion that ‘All women menstruate or have menstruated’ (2000b, 53), a claim that is utterly refutable by trans, intersex and some cis Women.

Like Hogan, Rebekah Miles contends that the category is problematic because of its false suggestion of commonality of experiences (2001, 11), but notes that one commonality that does span the range of thea/ologies is ‘the appeal to diverse experiences’ (ibid, 12). Diversity notwithstanding, however, the category remains troubling; if we can no longer state with any certainty what constitutes Women, as Chapter 1 has argued, how might we speak with any certainty of Women’s experiences, even when we take diversity into account? Ramazanoglu and Holland argue that feminist theorising addresses not simply Women’s experience but looks more widely ‘at gendered lives’ (2002, 147). From the point of view of this thesis, theologising around gendered lives and experiences—where experience is defined both as something personally encountered or undergone and as the total of conscious events that make up an individual life—as much as from text and tradition, is claimed as a legitimate and potentially fertile ground for embarrassed babblings about that which has been foreclosed and banished for the proper domain of GOD/DE.

## ***Qualitative Research Methods***

### **Qualitative Methods in Thea/ological Enquiry**

Apart from faithfulness to Women’s experience, however vaguely defined, there is no unanimity amongst thea/ologians as to the suitability of one methodological approach over another. In practice, however, few make use of qualitative

ethnographic research methods in collecting and analysing data of experience. These are more usually assembled from published factual and fictional/poetic accounts, generalised from experiences of oppression, and/or extrapolated from the personal reflected-upon experiences of the thea/ologian perself, but are rarely gathered in the form of stories from individuals specifically interviewed for a particular piece of research.

A notable exception to this is Jone Salomonsen's work *Enchanted Feminism* (2002), in which person analyses interviews collected from a Wiccan coven in New York in order to produce a joint ethnographic and theological study of the 'concepts and ritual courses endorsed by Reclaiming Witches' (ibid, 3). Person notes that this unusual 'impure' approach might prove unsatisfactory to both theologians and anthropologists, as neither one thing nor the other, but asserts that it nonetheless produces a rich and original text (ibid, 11). My approach, using stories gathered from interviews with trans people<sup>8</sup>, proved similarly fruitful.

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware of the problematic implications of using trans people's stories in a feminist project; the links between trans communities and feminist communities have not always been comfortable, especially because of anti-trans writers like Janice Raymond (1979), Julie Bindel (Minou 2010) and Germaine Greer (1999). Furthermore, opinion is divided in trans communities over the validity of cis researchers telling trans stories. The arguments of Julia Serano (2007) and Viviane Namaste (2000), referred to in Chapter 1, are particularly apposite in this respect. Other trans commentators, however, welcome feminist interest. From the point of view of my own narrators, two openly expressed pleasure at having been asked to tell their stories when 'nobody ever asks us this kind of stuff normally'. A full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this thesis, however.

## Grounded Theory Overview

While Salomonsen employed participant observation in her study, I opted for grounded theory as my method. Initially developed as a qualitative research method in the late 1960s by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory evolved along two slightly different paths (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 9). For this project, I used that version of the method developed by Strauss and Corbin and first published in 1990, for reasons that I outline below.

The basic principle of grounded theory is that the researcher derives insights *from* the data rather than imposing preconceived theory *upon* the data. Theory thus derived, it is claimed, 'is more likely to resemble the "reality" [of the situation being researched] than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 12). Characteristic of the method is its rigorous and orderly approach (Glaser 1978, 2) that includes all the steps from data collection to the finished writing (ibid, 15). As a way of thinking about the world, it takes seriously what narrators have to say about that world (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 6).

Glaser emphasises the methodical, highly-structured and highly scientific (Thomas and James 2006, 770) nature of the process, insisting that none of the steps

from data collection through many layers of coding<sup>9</sup> and analysis to final writing may be skipped, with a warning that skipped steps will produce flaws in the final product (Glaser 1978, 16). Strauss and Corbin, however, state that grounded theory is both science and art, requiring one to be not only systematic but also creative (1998, 13)<sup>10</sup>. They emphasise the imaginative, fluid and flexible aspects of their approach (ibid, xi, 13), stating that they offer guidelines and suggested techniques rather than a set of inflexible commandments (ibid, 4), and acknowledge that many researchers will approach their work as a ‘smorgasbord [*sic*]’ from which it is perfectly right and proper to pick and choose elements, sometimes blending techniques from elsewhere with the authors’ own (ibid, 8-9). Since some of the central concerns of my own work are with fluidity and flexibility, Strauss and Corbin’s iteration of grounded theory is more apposite for its development of researcher characteristics such as: suppleness and openness, an ability to sustain ambiguity and a willingness not to pin things down too soon (ibid, 6); an appetite for ‘the interplay between [the researcher] and the data’, drawing on one’s own experiences as foundations for deriving insights (ibid, 5); scepticism in relation to existing theories and a desire to measure these against the data (ibid, 6); and a willingness to be shaped by, as much as to shape, the data (ibid, 42).

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<sup>9</sup> Coding is ‘the analytic process through which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 3). In my case, this involved marking up sections of interview text and assigning themed keywords or phrases to them. These themes arose out of my reading of the interview data, rather than being predetermined in advance of that reading.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in Federico Chicchi’s assessment (2000, 16), Corbin and Strauss’s iteration of grounded theory is presented much more clearly and systematically than either the original work by Glaser and Strauss or by Glaser alone.

## **Grounded Theory Process**

Strauss and Corbin state that the essence of grounded theory is that concepts emerge from the data rather than being forced onto it (1998, 33-34), a process that requires sensitivity to the 'aha moments' that result from the interplay of the data with the mind of the researcher (ibid, 47). This requires the researcher to take seriously what the narrator says (ibid, 6) and attempt an accurate representation of the narrator's voice (ibid, 43), acknowledging that, while the account one has been given is neither full nor final (ibid, 18), 'the data do not lie' (ibid, 45); approached openly and sensitively, stories will tell us something new and something true about the way lives are lived. The bulk of the analysis derives first and foremost from the data, with recourse to the literature being made only when the coding summons the researcher there (ibid, 44). The literature is a two-edged sword; familiarity with one's discipline enhances one's sensitivity to the data but can also block creativity and, given that concepts arise from the data, one cannot know in advance what literature will be most valid (ibid, 49). It is this process that I applied to the analysis of interview texts, discussed below, knowing however that aspects of it are open to critique.

## **Grounded Theory Critique**

Thomas and James (2006; see also Allan 2003; Charmaz 2005) offer a sustained critique of the underlying premises of grounded theory, which they assert is built

upon positivist assumptions that there is objective ‘truth’ that can somehow be distilled from data by the application of a highly structured method (ibid, 780). Objectivity is of course impossible to achieve since whatever analysis is applied, that analysis derives from the prior assumptions, knowledge and experiences of the researcher (ibid, 782-783). There is no ground, no hidden truth ‘residing somewhere in the data’ waiting to be discovered (ibid, 782), nor is there any universalisable theory to be extracted, only the interpretation of the particulars (ibid, 779-781). Indeed, it is ‘objectionable’ to assert that narratives need to be turned into theories in order for them to become legitimately knowledge (ibid, 778). I take Charmaz’s point (2005, 508), however, that grounded theory’s positivist roots do not preclude it from being a valid method of addressing data, provided one heeds the challenges to positivist objectivity offered by qualitative research’s social constructivist concerns with the so-called ‘crisis of representation’.

### **Crisis of Representation**

Butler asserts that none of us can give a coherent account of ourselves (2005, 53) not just in relation to gender, but in everything, as I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5. This does not preclude narration, however—we still tell our stories, despite the fact that our accounts have no ultimate coherence—but it does ‘produc[e] it “in a fictional direction”’ (ibid, 37), making for this crisis of representation (Denzin and

Lincoln 2005, 18-19) that reduces the presence of the unreliable narrator and expands the presence of the equally-unreliable researcher<sup>11</sup> (Riessman 1993, 15).

However, since I am finite and flawed this cannot be otherwise (Etherington 2004, 85); I cannot give a perfect representation of another human being, any more than I can perfectly represent GOD/DE, but neither do I thus make idols of my narrators, an issue addressed by Grounded Theology.

## *Grounded Theology*

### **Theologising ‘Experience’**

It is, of course, erroneous to claim that my theologising is of narrators’ experiences themselves, when what in fact I theologise is a *text* produced by my, as opposed to anyone else’s, transcription of a digital sound recording of an interview. This text is at least two steps removed from the actual process that took place between the narrator and me and, what is more, obtained from a narrator upon whose story I cannot rely for any authenticity, whose narration is shaped by per own positionality, by the information I give per in advance and by the form of the invitation to speak that I issue at the interview, among many other factors. None of this, however—the unreliable narrator, my influence on the outcome, the fictive nature of the final text,

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<sup>11</sup> McAdams notes, for example, that the affective dimensions of experience are not visible in representations. Intrinsic to the process of attentive listening to others is the development of genuine, albeit limited, emotional intimacy (1993, 252). I am aware that my differing emotional connections to narrators make themselves known in the process of writing up. However much I might seek ethically to represent my narrator, ‘affording each a right to speak her own truth, in her own words’ (Frank 1995, xiii), using the resources of empathy and respect, ‘more will be pursued than was volunteered, and less will be reported than was learned’ (Stake 2005, 456).

the unfathomable gulf that separates what was originally experienced from what I have finally excerpted onto the page—invalidates my claim that individual experiences are legitimate texts upon which to base theologising.

A poem based on the work of Meister Eckhart offers this interpretation of Eckhart's words: 'All beings are words of God... / Sacred books are we, for the infinite camps in our souls / Every act reveals God and expands His being' (Ladinsky 2002, 112). This reflection on human beings as both words *from* GOD/DE—creatures spoken into being by an act of Divine creation—and books *about* GOD/DE—creatures whose every act tells us more of the nature of the Divine creator—is at the heart of my proposal that each individual has something different to tell of *imago Dei*. The notion that *every* act reveals GOD/DE, not just the good or the beautiful or the intelligible, is central to what this thesis seeks to convey. By collecting stories and analysing their themes as speaking of Divine presence, I seek to make known something of each narrator's existence as a word of GOD/DE and a book about GOD/DE, regardless of how utterly unreliable we are as ÆR creatures.

### **A Grounded Theology Approach**

As stated above, this is not the first work of theology to combine ethnographic and theological methods. However, my approach differs from Salomonsen's *Enchanted Feminism* in that, while person uses interview data to analyse the existing

theological stance(s) of a faith group, I regard my narrators' stories as texts for my own theologising. What I theologise around is not, in the end, a narrator's model of GOD/DE, but rather the narrator herself as in some way demonstrative of *imago Dei*. This is a foundational difference in the process I undertake, a process I term 'Grounded Theology'.

Fundamental to Grounded Theology is my deployment of listening or, analogously to Quaker spiritual practice, 'silent waiting', not only in the interview situation but also at the analysis stage, discussed below. As a theologian, it is impossible for me to separate my spiritual life from my academic work; there is that of GOD/DE in every *thing* as well as in every *one* (cf Sexson 1992, 7). And since much of my spiritual experience is in silent Quaker worship, silent waiting is my primary mode of address when faced with non-coherent data of whatever kind.

In *After Method* (2004), sociologist John Law commends the Quaker practice of silent waiting as one of a number of valid methods for manifesting otherwise non-coherent data (ibid, 147). Since life is messy, incoherent, inconsistent and impossible to universalise, we need to think about methods of enquiry that are 'broader, looser and more generous' (ibid, 4), that acknowledge that there is no security in our data, no unified world of knowables (ibid, 9), that are slow and uncertain, risky and troubling (ibid, 10), quiet, vulnerable and modest (ibid, 11), and focused on process

not product, paying attention to how what we do crafts the realities of which we speak (ibid, 152). Silent waiting has these possibilities, asserts Law, to 'reduce the dazzle of noise and make the kind of silence that will allow the faint signal of...spiritual mystery to be revealed, made audible, and amplified' (ibid, 118).

Transgressive data—dreams, emotions, sensual experiences, prayerful attention—are as much part of the enquiry as 'real' or 'hard' data (St. Pierre 1997, 180; see also Etherington 2004, 111), though rarely recognised as such. But in theology, perhaps more than anywhere else, such data must be acknowledged. Schneider asserts that 'Theology that pretends a distance from prayer is fooling itself' (2008, 5), while Pete Rollins declares that theology should be 'a place where God speaks' rather than 'that which speaks of God' (2006, xiii). Of course, to claim my theology as a place where GOD/DE speaks may not demonstrate quite the quiet, modest vulnerability that Law commends above. Nevertheless, since attention to the still small voice of GOD/DE for 'accidental epiphanies' and 'spirited accidents' (Poulos 2009, 50) to guide my efforts is fundamental to my self-understanding as a spiritual person and as a theologian, I cannot but hope that this is indeed what this Grounded Theology exhibits, not with any security that what I perceive demonstrates 'truth' or 'reality', but as a risky endeavour that offers the 'grown-up regard' of being 'fully present to the bodies of others...[that] shatters illusions and static categories' (Schneider 2008, 205) with regard both to my narrators and to GOD/DE.

## *Simone Weil and Attention*

### **Negative Theology and Attention**

The silent waiting of Quaker practice and the slow, quiet, modest, risky, vulnerable methods Law commends have much in common with a concept Weil calls 'attention', which forms the 'other half', as it were, of the practice of decreation discussed in Chapter 1. Like decreation, attention is shaped by Weil's negative theology, addressed to the GOD/DE who may or may not answer:

God exists. God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion (Weil 2002 [1952], 114).

Although 'God can only be present in the world in the form of absence' (ibid, 109), this absence does not preclude a relationship of some sort between the Divine and the human, for every human being contains that of GOD/DE, which expresses itself as not only a longing for good but also a belief that this good *will* come to pass:

At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from the earliest infancy to the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being (1989, 273-274).

Weil is insistent that nothing in the created world exhibits the goodness person means when person talks of 'the good': 'The good seems to us as nothingness, since

there is no *thing* that is good' (2002 [1952], 13). But the fact that the good barely exists in the World does not mean that it is unreal, any more than our experience of GOD/DE's absence denies the reality of GOD/DE. Indeed, compared with the good, it is existence itself that is unreal: GOD/DE is the only reality and the apprehension of the good comes through the descent of GOD/DE's grace into the World of Gravity through kenotic attention.

### **Attention Defined**

Attention has a specific meaning in Weil's thought. Person sees attention, specifically the attention we focus on the good, as 'the only spiritual resource human beings ultimately could be said to possess' (Cosgrove 2008, 363). 'Absolute unmixed attention is prayer' (Weil 2002 [1952], 117); by turning our absolute unmixed attention to the good, gradually the soul becomes good 'in spite of itself' (ibid), but only on condition that we learn to 'desire without an object' (ibid, 22). The good only works in the soul when we turn our attention to GOD/DE without hope of a result. Attention is thus a process without guarantee of a product, a process that is 'intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous [and] generous' (1989, 285), that allows us to turn our desire from 'the lesser good'<sup>12</sup> of the World to the higher good that is 'pure,

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<sup>12</sup> Evil exists, says Weil, because of the workings of necessity (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 95): it does us no good, and it is pointless to expect the absent God to intervene in its amelioration (Nye 1994, 95). As for natural good, however, Weil can see no logical reason why that should exist. Evil, person says 'is apparent', its sources are obvious to all (2002 [1952], 70). The sources of good, however, are by no means apparent: rather, they are a total mystery (ibid). Person therefore concludes that we have a choice not between natural good and natural evil, but only between natural

perfect total and absolute' (Weil in Wolfeich 2001, 369). Focused on GOD/DE alone, attention mitigates the action of evil in the World (Howe 2008, 49).

Weil constantly juxtaposes attentive looking and consumptive eating, insisting on the radical opposition of the one to the other. Attention is a pure act; to eat is to give in greedily to our desire for material satisfaction, whereas to look is to 'renounce the self in favor of detachment' (Wolfeich 2001, 367). Eating, of necessity, destroys that which is eaten. Looking, however, leaves the looked-upon intact. Thus eating is an act of possession that closes down both eater and eaten, while looking opens the looker to the looked-upon, allowing the looked-upon to enter into the looker without being consumed. When we desire something in an attitude of selfless detachment, we necessarily desire that it continue to exist so that we may continue to contemplate it. Decreation is central to Weil's concept of attention: by selfless decreative attention to another we create or invoke or, even, become a space, through which we apprehend, by GOD/DE's grace, the good that will mitigate, bit by bit, the evil in our souls and, through us, in the World. And the act of directing one's attention to something beyond oneself is inherently self-renunciatory and contains within in it an echo of GOD/DE's withdrawal from creation (2008, 50).

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evil and supernatural good (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 93), a simple choice either to pay attention or not, in the hope but not the expectation that GOD/DE will send ÆR grace into the World. The work of attention is the work of (re)establishing the harmony and order 'that are the trace of divinity in natural life' (Nye 1994, 105). Thus goodness is not something one is but something one does to establish a presence that is capable of responding to the cry for justice of the afflicted. In desiring good without hope of success, good is inevitably generated, since our desire for it is unconditional, devoid of self or will (McLellan 1991, 230).

Attention and decreation form a virtuous circle, each one both requiring and generating the other.

## **The Ethics of Attention**

Weil states: 'I have to deprive all that I call "I" of the light of my attention and turn it on that which cannot be conceived' (2002 [1952], 118). As discussed in Chapter 1, however, person is not turning from the World and its afflicted multitudes, since all Weil's theorising is from their point of view (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 3).

Every time there arises from the depth of a human heart the childish cry which Christ himself could not restrain, 'Why am I being hurt?', then there is certainly injustice (Weil 1989, 274).

It is because of this injustice that person directs all per attention to GOD/DE and the good.

Not only does Weil always have the afflicted in mind, but also person conceives of their affliction as directly resulting from a failure of right attention through illusion and delusion (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 57). Thus, to attend to GOD/DE *is* to attend to the suffering world. The self is mutual, needing to respond to the needs of others (Nye 1994, 124). And more than needing, having an absolute obligation to respect and attend to others, to provide 'what it is that makes us human' wherever we see it lacking (Skrimshire 2006, 292). It is only through understanding our

obligations to others, rather than through outlining the rights<sup>13</sup> accruing to ourselves, that any adequate political ideology can be formed (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 69). A just society formed through an understanding of obligations involves a renunciation of dominological power-over in favour of the duty always to respond to a cry of affliction (Nye 1994, 109). It is this obligation that is the answer to that of GOD/DE which is expressed 'at the bottom of the heart of every human being' as a permanent expectation of good despite all experiences to the contrary (ibid, 112). If every human heart expects the good, then every other human heart is obliged to supply that good by 'consenting to become a sort of conductor through which the love of God [can] pass' (McLellan 1991, 201).

### **Idolatry as Lack of Attention**

Weil is concerned that we should not mistake means for ends and ascribe Divinity to the things of the World, allowing Gravity to pull the Divine down to the level of matter, instead of rising up to GOD/DE. Naming the Divine, the metaphors we use for GOD/DE, must be carefully considered, lest we set up 'something imaginary under the name of God'. Weil's fear of idolatry derives from and drives per concern with the dangers of collective thinking, the Great Beast that I discuss in Chapter 4.

'Man', person asserts, 'always devotes himself to an *order*', a systematised, collective

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<sup>13</sup> Weil writes that the concept of rights 'has a commercial flavour' since it is linked to notions of measured quantities and exchange (1989, 279): 'thanks to this word, what should have been a cry of protest from the depth of the heart has turned into a shrill nagging of claims and counter-claims, claiming an equal share of privilege for everybody—an equal share of things whose essence is privilege' (ibid, 280).

body of thought that centres on the human being, drawing our perspective away from GOD/DE and down into matter (ibid, 61). The only way out of this prison is through decreation both personal and social, and then through a (re)invention of the language of social institutions ‘for the purpose of exposing and abolishing everything in contemporary life which buries the soul under injustice, lies and ugliness’ (ibid, 288).

Because we desire GOD/DE but lack patience, we create *ersatz* gods of the things of Gravity (2002 [1952], 60). Idolatry is lack of attention and lack of attention causes indifference to the affliction of others in favour of our own collectivities, from where it is only a short step to mass brutality<sup>14</sup> (Nye 1994, 94, 123). Idolatrous language is language centred in the self, its fears and its desires, with everything beyond the self reduced to objects in its service. It is the antithesis of what Weil intends for the attentive soul, the soul who turns from the ties of their community and collectivity to embrace a life with ties to no-one but GOD/DE, the soul for whom ‘loving anything less than the universe as a whole is...idolatry’ (Cosgrove 2008, 365).

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<sup>14</sup> Weil is highly critical of the Church in this respect, seeing it as worshipping its own systems and institutions (Ruhr 2010, 59), taking what should be mysteries and turning them into dogmas (McLellan 1991, 193). In so doing, the Church becomes an institution subject not to the good but to the laws of necessity, that arbitrary and blind mechanism of the World that ‘continually tosses men about’ (Weil 2009 [1951], 73), and thus complicit in evil (Nye 1994, 94).

## **Attention as Method of Enquiry**

Attention is not simply a spiritual practice of reaching out to GOD/DE. It is, for Weil, a research method that allows per to encounter the nature of a problem in an unforced and open way: person writes, for example, ‘Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them but to look at them until the light suddenly dawns’ (2002 [1952], 120). Attention is a process that does not require a product, therefore it does not matter if the light does not dawn, since ‘Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted [since].... Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul’ (2009 [1951], 58). Towards whatever the Weilian attention is directed, the possibility of drawing down the good into the World ‘little by little’ is inevitable (2002 [1952], 117). Thus, attention to the study of science, for example, is not only an intellectual pursuit, but also a spiritual one. This act of silent waiting draws together what dominology sees as the disparate strands of mind and spirit in an embodied practice of attention both to GOD/DE and to the World.

## **Similarities Between Attention and Grounded Theory**

In several respects Weil’s application of attention to intellectual endeavour resonates with grounded theory. Like the grounded theorist, Weil approaches per objects of enquiry with an open mind, beginning with no ‘intellectual adherence’ or preconceptions to ‘anything whatsoever’ (McLellan 1991, 228). In a state of focused

detachment, in silence and in unexpectant waiting, ‘suspending thought..., making it available, empty..., not searching for anything’ (Nye 1994, 61), ‘receptive to the object, rather than grasping and desiring’ (Ryan 2005, 354) person creates a space for ‘words or forms’ to develop not according to per own desire but as inspiration from elsewhere (Howe 2008, 61-62). In this, Weil echoes many of the characteristics of the grounded theorist discussed above. In one very significant area, however, Weil differs: while grounded theory is directed towards the things of the World, such things are, to Weil, merely means to a greater end, contact with GOD/DE which draws the good into the world and creates justice and harmony, a ‘legacy that, in turn, enables others to deepen their connection with the divine’ (Howe 2008, 49). Since theology is ultimately words about GOD/DE, Grounded Theology is the application of Weilian attention to the process of grounded theoretical enquiry as an act of attentive ethical listening.

### ***Grounded Theology: An Ethics of Listening***

#### **Ethics in Feminist Research**

Feminist research has as a paramount ethical concern the issue of how we as researchers exercise power over those whom we research. It is generally assumed with ethnographic research that the balance of power lies with the researcher (e.g. Ropers-Huilman 1999, 24; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 159; Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 1). If I were using my data ethnographically, a range of ethical issues would,

therefore require to be addressed. While I have paid due attention to issues relating to power and ethics, in for example, the exercise of researcher reflexivity (e.g. Harding 1987, 9; Ropers-Huilman 1999, 29; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 156; Etherington 2004; Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, 962; Ortlipp 2008, 695), since this study is not ethnographic but rather theological, a detailed discussion of those issues is not germane here. Consideration of the ethical issue of reciprocity has, however, proved extremely important in my formulation of the concept of Grounded Theology.

## **Reciprocity**

Anne Oakley (1981) asserts that the classic non-interventionist dominological relationship between researcher and researched is depersonalising to both interviewer and interviewee (ibid, 37) to the point of being 'morally indefensible' (ibid, 41). It is thus imperative to consider issues of reciprocity in relation to concerns with the balance of power. Early feminist assumptions were that an encounter that is conducted more as a 'conversation between equals than as a hierarchical interview in which the interviewer holds all the power' (Etherington 2004, 39: see also DeVault 2002) would serve to minimise differences in status and create a climate in which intimate sharing by the researched was seen as being

valued, honoured and reciprocated<sup>15</sup> (Etherington 2004, 62). However, since Oakley, reciprocal strategies have been re-evaluated on the grounds that they can engender manipulation and ‘leading’ of conversations by either party<sup>16</sup> (Olesen 2005, 255).

For this project I decided against conversational ‘joining in’ as a way of demonstrating reciprocity, not only because I did not want to lead the conversation but rather follow it wherever the narrator chose to take it, but also because I saw no reason to make the conversation about me on any significant level during the time the narrator allotted to the interview. This does not mean that I did not share anything of my own life and experiences outside that space, or that I did not intervene verbally and non-verbally to reassure the narrator of my attention and to keep the narrative flowing, but rather that the space of the interview itself was wholly devoted to what the narrator wanted to say about herself. Positioning myself as a minimally interventionist and deeply attentive listener more than an active questioner is highly significant in the process of Grounded Theology. Silently waiting on a narrator in this way creates not only ‘a space in which *anything* can be heard’ from the narrator but also a space in which GOD/DE ÆRSELF might hear and be heard, ‘a space for God to attend to the people’ (Muers 2004, 149).

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<sup>15</sup> Often, assessment of reciprocity is accompanied by essentialist claims that women are by nature conversationalists and thus better at cooperatively ‘constructing meaning together’ (DeVault 2002, 94). bel hooks, however, contests the idea that women speakers automatically treat each other with seriousness and respect, asserting that white women do not listen to Black women in this way (ibid, 90).

<sup>16</sup> Some commentators still commend the practice of leading as justifiable if it gets good results (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 128-132).

Furthermore, giving up the power to speak in favour of accepting the role of listener can stand as an overt renunciation of power (ibid, 161).

## **Listening**

As Holstein and Gubrium note (2000, 130), absolute silence in an interview is more likely than not to bring an interaction to an end<sup>17</sup>. However, the act of paying Weilian attention through focussed listening, in which the listener is intent only on the narrator perself and not also on the need to contribute to a conversation, ‘can be a powerful sign of regard—and caring—for one another’ (Ropers-Huilman 1999, 31). This is especially so if the interviewer begins with a ‘not-knowing attitude’ (Etherington 2004, 21), as I did, asking the narrator to tell me what person thought I needed to know rather than to answer questions that I needed to be answered, a process described in more detail below. This shift in relationship from interviewee and interviewer to narrator and listener (Chase 2005, 660) was an important one for me in terms of my understanding of how I controlled and gave up control of the process, although my narrators may have experienced this differently. My silence was, of course, action not non-action, as productive of consequences for the narration as conversational reciprocity (Rapley 2001, 305), no better than any other approach but, I believe, offering some rebalancing of power in giving the narrator

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<sup>17</sup> This is true unless, I contend, both parties are familiar with silence. One of my narrators was a Quaker and well practised in silent waiting; some of our mutual silences lasted for tens of seconds without closing down our interaction.

almost total control over the content of their story within the parameters that my interview invitation had set.

Giving attention to a narrator does not require joining in to exhibit reciprocity; listening is always a mutual act of seeing and being seen (Jones 2004, 190). As an attentive listener, in addition to intense, pure, disinterested generosity of attention, I offered narrators a hearing that was mild, modest, moderate, available, vulnerable, welcoming, patient, tolerant, receptive, attentive and respectful (Muers 2004, 56-57; cf McAdams 1993, 251; Salomonsen 2002, 18), that 'allow[ed] unexpected or unexplored possibilities to emerge' for both of us (Muers 2004, 59). This was the very opposite of the objectionable non-interventionist interview situation that Oakley describes, because I expressed wordless but fully engaged reciprocity, a 'faithful' attending (ibid, 17)—both faithful to the narrator's intentions and full of faith in the still small voice to guide the process—and a care not to let this become just another technique to control the narrator or a way to avoid responsibility for dialogue (ibid, 62). I contend that a strategy of active listening of this kind acted as a Weilian decreative counterbalance in what Rachel Muers designates as a culture of communication that sees speaking as power and listening as weakness (ibid, 56).

## Characteristics of Grounded Theology

In terms of qualitative research methods, Grounded Theology is a transgressive approach, one that is at the same time a method of enquiry and a spiritual practice. Weil's description of intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous and generous attention, echoed in Law and Muers, above, is the heart of Grounded Theology's faithful, prayerful approach. Accidental epiphanies and 'aha' moments come from the renunciation of control that attentive listening requires, in which the narrator and the subsequent data do what they do regardless of the researcher's wishes; it is thus the very opposite of positivist in its Weilian decreative desire without an object, a listened-to who is not consumed by the listener.

Grounded Theology honours the turning of theology upside down by prioritising all embodiments and experiences, both unintelligible and intelligible, both quotidian and numinous, according the utmost importance to what the narrator says as the only resource from which to begin; other resources complement or expand upon the story but never dictate its form. While Young contends, above, that the collectivity of Women's experience always takes priority over individual experience, Grounded Theology asserts that attention to the individual counterbalances the possibility that Women's collective experience has become an unchallenged idol.

Grounded Theology approaches research as far as possible without preconceptions, seeking insight from the data rather than imposing potentially idolatrous theories upon the data, paying attention to the person who is, as it turns out, as unknowable as GOD/DE. The crisis of representation itself stands against idolatry, for if I know that my narrator is ultimately unrepresentable, I am less likely to attempt to make per into a thing. As Weil acknowledges that GOD/DE both exists and does not, so does Grounded Theology for people: I am quite sure that there is a narrator whose story I hear, but I am equally sure that there is no narrator that I can represent as anything like the person I meet.

Furthermore, in honouring narrators as words *from* GOD/DE and books *about* GOD/DE, I simultaneously assert that they are not idolatrous models *of* GOD/DE, even though they are *imago Dei*. While grounded theory is focused on the things of the World, the end point of Grounded Theology is attention to GOD/DE; theologising around human experiences is always a means to that end, the end of drawing down GOD/DE's good into the World and mitigating the blind workings of necessity that continually toss us about. The attention that Grounded Theology pays is *to* GOD/DE and *for* the World, for justice for the unintelligible; thus, attention to the One is attention to the other. In Grounded Theology that attention is given in the form of the interview, analysis and theologised account, a process I now describe in greater detail.

## *Applying Grounded Theory: Interviews*

### **Interviews as Unreliable Sources**

The use of interviews as a means of collecting data is not unproblematic. Although the first choice for data collection in the social sciences (e.g. Rapley 2001, 303-304; Holstein and Gubrium 2002, 112; Silverman 2007, 39) and feminist research (Chase 2005, 652), based on a commonly-held assumption that interviewing is 'prospecting' for 'true facts and feelings' (Holstein and Gubrium 2002, 114), some commentators (e.g. Atkinson and Delamont 2006; Silverman 2007) are highly critical of the prominence this method has achieved. Silverman (2007) cites a cultural obsession with personal interviews in what he calls the Interview Society (ibid, 43), which buys into a romanticised view of personal interviews as capable of giving access to people's authentic 'deep interiors' (ibid, 46).

Contrary to the belief that narrators have pure, authentic experiences which are capable of being reported on to an audience (ibid, 126), Silverman points out that as narrators we consistently adopt interviewers' categories which we then use to adapt our narrations to suit an audience's requirements<sup>18</sup> (ibid, 39-42; see also Rapley 2001, 317). Furthermore, we fit our personal stories into wider social contexts, again

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<sup>18</sup> O'Keefe notes that, because person is a trans woman, other trans people are 'willing to speak more openly' to her than to a cis person (1999, 160). One of my narrators stated, not necessarily that person would have been any more frank, but certainly that person would have told a different story to a trans interviewer from the one person told me, not least because of shared experiences that would not need expressing to another trans person.

adopting and adapting to the dominant narrative of social groupings (Silverman 2007, 126). It would thus be a mistake to believe that there is one distinct and individual narrator's point of view or perspective which can ground analysis (ibid, 125-126); narrators tell what they believe is wanted, in the style that their communities' expectations and experiences dictate<sup>19</sup>.

Silverman, however, tempers per repeated assertions that all narrators are perforce unreliable with the acknowledgement that this does not therefore render interview data unsatisfactory (ibid, 54). In addition, person notes that many qualitative researchers turn to the interview not in search of 'deep interiors' but for the far more pragmatic reason that, when there are experiences about which we know little or nothing, we quite sensibly ask people who have had those experiences (ibid). It is in that spirit, rather than in any romantic search for my narrators' deep interiors, that I address this project.

### **Impossibility of Neutrality**

One structuring aspect of the interview is the way in which, even though I aim to offer the broadest possible scope for narrators to control their own stories, my own categories impose themselves on the interaction from the start. As described below, I asked specifically for 'stories', a category that immediately shapes a narrator's

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<sup>19</sup> Since all my narrators had undergone counselling or therapy of some sort, it is reasonable to assume that this experience, for example, imposed its own shapes upon their stories.

expectation of what type of telling is required. Furthermore I requested a specific kind of story, a 'spiritual life story', emphasising one aspect of experience over all others. I also spoke of 'journeys' as a structuring metaphor, as if some kind of progress from a start to a finish is a given, and 'intersections' between gender and spiritual journeys, as if the two are necessarily separate experiences. And I declared my affiliations to 'feminist theology', 'gender deconstruction', and 'Quakers', leading my narrators to perceive me in specific ways.

The feminist label is potentially problematic because of antipathy engendered by anti-trans feminists, and the reference to gender deconstruction for its associations with the erasure of transsexual experience as noted in Chapter 1, but neither more so than links with faith and theology, given that very many trans people feel particularly badly served by religion in general because of the evident transphobia of many faith groups.<sup>20</sup> And all had the potential to create expectations that I might respond to stories in particular, perhaps not necessarily sympathetic, ways<sup>21</sup>.

Interviews are, then, by no means a 'neutral conduit' (Holstein and Gubrium 2002,

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<sup>20</sup> Yip (2010, 35-6) and Browne (2010, 237) note the antipathy of LGBTQI folk to organised religion based on a 'dominant view that organised religions lag behind the secular sphere in embracing sexual diversity as a social reality' (Yip 2010, 35). Browne (2010, 237) and O'Keefe (1999, 3) contend, as do I, that this blanket antipathy is not necessarily justified, however.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed two of my narrators asked for reassurance that their frank sexual talk did not offend my spiritual sensibility, while another expressed concern that I might be aligned with transphobic church doctrines; within the bounds of my minimally interventionist style, I offered reassurance as best I could, hoping that an attentive, non-judgemental, non-threatening, affirmatory, vulnerable and empathetic demeanour (McAdams 1993, 251; see also Salomonsen 2002, 18) would serve to allay their concerns, as it seemed to do. My main tactic was to promise at the start of the interview that I would respond in detail to any questions once the narrator was certain person had finished telling per story to per own satisfaction. This seemed to work to our mutual satisfaction.

112) through which the unalloyed details of a life are given; as with any social encounter, the stuff of the story is jointly constructed between narrator and interviewer simply by virtue of an interview having been solicited in the first place.

### **Data Collection Process**

My research strategy combined a qualitative research approach with more traditional text-based theological methods, using face-to-face interviews as the basis of my theologising project. Ethnography is concerned with seeing the remarkable in the mundane (Silverman 2007, 16), with truth telling (however vexed a concept that might be) and justice (Brown 1999, 352) and with the transformation of messy and unruly experience into something that speaks to the human condition (Wolf 1999, 355); thus, an ethnographic approach to theological enquiry is, surprisingly, more suitable than might have been supposed. I begin, therefore, by outlining the practical steps taken to collect and analyse data, then discuss issues arising from this process.

Starting in late 2004, I used a number of forums to circulate requests for interviewees: a flyer in a trans studies conference pack; posts on a number of communal blogs for trans/genderqueer interest groups; a poster at a trans-affirming church service; personal contacts; and posts to faith-specific email lists. The earliest versions of my request went into some detail about the project's background, in 10pt

type on one side of A4, citing my interest in theories of gender deconstruction and how these might fit in to a revisioning of feminist theology, and outlining my academic and spiritual backgrounds. As I progressed, however, I honed this down over a number of iterations to:

You and God?

I'd love to hear your story. I'm researching the spiritual life stories of transexed<sup>22</sup> and transgendered people. I'm a PhD student at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre (affiliated to the University of Birmingham). If you'd like to participate in this project, please get in touch.

I specifically orientated my requests towards people of faith not only because I was hoping to encounter trans models of GOD/DE but also because, being aware that many trans/genderqueer people have been very wounded by the transphobia of religious groups, I did not want to co-opt non-faith-based stories for purposes that may be inimical to their narrators.

Responses came slowly, the first resulting in an interview in April 2005. Over the next 18 months I interviewed 11 people, two who self-identified as transmen, two as translesbians, one as a woman originally misassigned male, one as a transwoman<sup>23</sup>, three as male-to-female transsexuals, one as neither male nor female but having

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<sup>22</sup> Over the course of this project I learned that 'transexed' and 'transgendered' are not generally accepted terms, replacing them in my vocabulary with 'transsexual' and 'transgender'.

<sup>23</sup> Although 'transman' is a widely accepted terms, the concomitant 'transwoman' was not as generally accepted as a nomenclature for male-to-female transsexuals among my narrators.

some [male] trans experience and one as a boy, but equivocally so. None identified as genderqueer.

I undertook unstructured interviews, having no list of questions or topics that I wished to cover but rather a single invitation to ‘tell me what you think I need to know about your story’. In a pre-interview emails and blog entries, I explained a little of what we would be doing in the session, reiterating some of the detail from the flyers and adding that I was hoping that ‘you tell your story in the way that seems most natural to you’ and that, though I was most interested in the intersections between gender and spiritual journeys, to the good and to the bad, ‘I leave it up to you to decide what and how to tell’.

I conducted nine interviews in narrators’ houses, one in my car and one in a public garden, all locations chosen by the narrators. Four people fed me afterwards and one put me up for the weekend. The shortest interview lasted an hour, the longest almost five hours, with most being around two-and-a-half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, since I did not want to make any decisions prior to the analysis about what might or might not be relevant to my enquiry. Transcription was thus a lengthy process, as was the subsequent analysis.

Following the practices of Grounded Theory, discussed above, I did not approach the data with any predetermined set of categories that I hoped to find but followed themes that presented themselves to me over the course of five or six passes through each interview transcript, each pass taking a considerable amount of time to complete, sometimes many weeks. The richness of the data shifted around in my waking and sleeping thoughts for up to a year, as I gave Weilian attention to each story. Three of the eleven interviews comprise the core of this thesis<sup>24</sup>, the rest forming the foundation of my understanding of transness that is supported by the study of printed and audiovisual material outlined above

Once a theme or group of themes rose to prominence above all others in a story, I then conducted an extensive literature search for material to analyse, illustrate and theologise the theme, not limiting my searches to any specific discipline. Thus, I have drawn not only from feminist and mainstream theologies and philosophies and gender studies, but also from areas as diverse as Renaissance studies, medicine, English literature, pedagogic research, history, communications theory, mythology, social sciences, cultural studies, physics, psychology, philology and mathematics.

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<sup>24</sup> The three analysed interviews were chosen not least because each narrator was assigned l-female at birth, placing them in the broad category of transmen, an area of experience that is underrepresented in the literature of transness.

## *Applying Grounded Theology: After the Interviews*

### **Transcription**

Decisions about transcription<sup>25</sup>, as any other part of the process, have ethical implications. What to transcribe, in how much detail, and how to arrange the words of the page, are not neutral choices but affect how a subsequent reader will address the data (Riessman 1993, 12). Any transcription, no matter how detailed, is necessarily ‘incomplete, partial and selective’ (ibid, 11). It is advised, therefore, to adopt a practice that preserves ‘some of the “messiness” of everyday talk’ (DeVault 2002, 103) in order that the ‘authenticity’ of the originating voice<sup>26</sup> may have some presence on the page.

Attentive listening was as essential a component in transcription as it was in the interview, as I tried, however inaccurately, faithfully to render what I heard of each narrator’s story. I made a full transcription, which is to say that, through repeated listening, I recorded every verbal and phatic utterance, both the narrator’s and my

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<sup>25</sup> I did not offer my narrators the opportunity to participate after the interviews, asking at the beginning of the session that they consent to the fact that any interpretation of their words would be mine alone and agree that they would have no editorial or veto rights over any work I produced. All agreed to this without question. However, on the issue of informed consent, I accept the view that this is a highly problematic concept, such that ‘fully informed consent’ is probably never possible (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 158; Olesen 2005, 254) and thus neither is adequately ethical research (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 158). In the case of this project, since I had little idea of where data analysis would take me, any notion of fully informed consent is confirmed as impossible. I have, however, pursued this enquiry ‘alert to the interests of [my] participants’ (ibid) and hold myself accountable to the moral obligation I have to our ‘disclosing and protective covenant’ (Stake 2005, 459).

<sup>26</sup> This is problematic advice since it supports a romanticised view of the narrator as having a ‘deep interior’ (Silverman 2007, 46) that is authentically representable.

own. I adopted a stanza format (Chafe 1980; see also Etherington 2004, 116), inserting line breaks to represent natural interruptions and hesitations in speech, to break up 'what might seem a dense format that might otherwise be less accessible' (Etherington 2004, 56). The results of this process are visible in Appendices 1-3.

## **Analysis**

It is on the analysis of data that the substance of the thesis hangs, and here also that the exercise of researcher power is arguably most marked (DeVault 2002, 93; Silverman 2007, 54). In the analysis I decided what my narrators meant to me, both how to theologise around their stories in a way that represents that of GOD/DE for me, and how to represent their voices in a way that brings some of the person I encountered to the reader, all the time acknowledging the impossibility of either task. Analysis involves 'listening to the texts, in silent contemplation, in a way that takes them "beyond" themselves' (Muers 2004, 17), beyond what the narrator tells of per life and into what per life tells of GOD/DE, into 'aha' moments and accidental epiphanies.

In giving voice to the narrator, the researcher recognises a responsibility not only to the one who told the story but also to the ones to whom that story is relayed (Riessman 1993, 10-11) and to the story the researcher has to tell; these competing demands necessitate a constant negotiation of choices. With every good intention,

control is exercised over the data the audience sees; the power of giving voice is always ultimately with the researcher<sup>27</sup> (ibid, 16). What I offer then is never a representation of the narrator but always an interpretation (ibid, 8), and I recognise that these interpretations may be ‘simultaneously considered positive and negative by those who hold a stake in them’ (Ropers-Huilman 1999, 26).

One common practice of ethnographic work is that of generalising based on the identification of typical themes across a number of cases. However, some commentators (Chase 2005, 667; e.g. Stake 2005, 451-452; Silverman 2007, 23) assert that atypicality, what Penketh calls ‘breach and exception’ (2011, 29), are as informative as the converse, and that generalisation draws attention away from ‘features important for understanding the case itself’ (Stake 2005, 448). Since my intention was to approach each narrative as a specific case of *imago Dei*, I did not therefore set out, in the analysis, to look for general themes across narratives but rather distinct themes within each story (Chase 2005, 663). Even themes that appear to be general to all three stories, such as Thinness, are therefore addressed as to their specifics within a single narrative.

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<sup>27</sup> Another issue connecting with researcher power is the degree to which I might have offered narrators control over data analysis. The desire to do research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ participants is a paramount feminist ethical concern (e.g. Pillow 2003, 179; Christians 2005, 151; Ortlipp 2008, 701), an essential element in ‘giving voice’ by ensuring participants contribute to ‘how they are presented, quoted, and interpreted’ (Stake 2005, 459). However, this kind of participative practice, while appearing to give control over representation back to the researched, is not without problems, a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

## Pen Portraits

Nowhere is it more apparent that the researcher has ultimate control over the visible shape of the narrator's story than in the reporting of research. Every decision I made resulted in saving or losing aspects of the story (DeVault 2002, 99). That being the case, I present extensive excerpts in a style Hollway and Jefferson call 'pen portraits' (2000, 70), in order to 'make the person come alive for the reader'<sup>28</sup> (ibid). These contain material descriptive of the narrator, sufficient to serve as a substitute 'whole' for a reader who will not have access to the raw data<sup>29</sup> (ibid). In providing details that exceed the analysis I subject them to, I hope to create a space for different readers to read differently, holding the texts open for 'further acts of hearing' (Muers 2004, 20; see also Riessman 1993, 14), as a way of preserving the listened-to from being consumed by my listening.

Moreover, in order to expand readers' access to the text beyond these pen portraits, I have included an appendix for each narrator, giving not the whole of the interview transcription but the verbatim quote in its context, with line numbers to guide the reader from the excerpt in the main text to the verbatim section in the relevant appendix. This combination of resources will, I trust, enable multiple readings and

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<sup>28</sup> Again, I acknowledge the romanticism implicit in Hollway and Jefferson's assertion that a narrator might be presented so completely as to come alive for a reader.

<sup>29</sup> Riessman advises that narrative fractures that disrupt the order and flow of the original should be avoided, since both are germane to the analysis (1993, 4). I have adhered to this where practical but, of necessity, have moved some material around for my own purposes. The original ordering of utterances is preserved in the Appendices.

interpretations of the text beyond what I present. The appendices are particularly important since I have decided, for the sake of readability, to ‘polish’ the quotes in the body of the text<sup>30</sup>. This polishing is sometimes more like paraphrasing, since some of the original extracts are extremely long and discursive. I hope, in this, that I have not done too much violence to the narrators’ unique speaking styles and have retained the spirit, if not the letter, of their utterances. Ultimately, I contend, it matters more that each of these stories is told in some detail in an accessible way than that an inevitably unsustainable claim to accurate representation of speech is asserted.

To account for responsibilities to minimise the possibility of harm to my narrators I have adopted the standard practice of anonymisation. Thus, all names have been changed, both those of the narrators themselves and those of any other characters in their stories. However, a simple change of name is not always sufficient to maintain anonymity, especially for people the circumstances of whose lives render them more than usually visible. I have, therefore, substantially fictionalised all biographical details that do not relate directly to gender while maintaining the spirit of the narrator such that person might recognise herself, but hopefully not even close friends and relatives would recognise her. Given Butler’s assertion that narratives are

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<sup>30</sup> DeVault notes that text polishing in this way, although it makes the data easier and more compelling to read (2002, 101), nevertheless imposes restrictions on the text. However, person advises that dialect, non-standard grammar and vocal tics, etc, be included only where they important to the narrative. This is the practice I have followed in polishing excerpts.

always produced in a fictional direction, this additional fictionalisation does not, I assert, impinge upon the reliability of the portraits I tender in the three chapters that result from my Grounded Theological enquiry.

### *Summary*

Because the truth of GOD/DE is impossible to know, Grounded Theology can make no claim to the verifiability, reliability or generalisability that qualitative methods would hope to claim. Grounded Theology, in offering a contribution to embarrassing babblings that might turn theology upside down, is thus a risky exposure. I can say nothing true of GOD/DE and yet I must speak; apophasis, the saying-away of all metaphors for GOD/DE, is nothing without kataphasis, the saying of things that can then be unsaid. A primary claim of thea/ologies is to assert that the right to kataphatic creation belongs to anyone, regardless of gender.

In 1652, George Fox addressed a church congregation thus:

Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God? (Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain 1995, 19.07)

Grounded Theology, in approaching research prayerfully, waiting silently upon data for the Spirit to move through them, attempts to speak what comes inwardly from

GOD/DE, and thus to be a theology in which GOD/DE speaks, as Rollins commends. It also takes individual embodiments and experiences seriously as loci of the Holy in all their quotidian glory and imperfection. By paying attention to bodies thus, Grounded Theology seeks to draw down the good into the World. In the next chapter, I offer my first response to Fox's challenge 'what canst thou say?' in my discussion of the quotidian experiences of Leigh, a young transperson intent on making sense of the complexities of per gender.

## CHAPTER 3

# LEIGH: STANDING AT AN ANGLE TO THE CERTAINTIES

### *Introduction*

This chapter addresses Leigh's story, starting with an extended pen portrait that details key facets of her gender and spiritual experiences. My analysis begins with a consideration of themes of seeing and being seen, and proceeds to instances in which Leigh has been 'Seen Through', not as negative experiences but rather as examples of her tendency to engender awe and wonder. While Leigh describes herself as a shaman, I suggest that there is something of the magician and the seer about her, descriptions which highlight a sense of Leigh's being in the World but not of the World. From this I draw parallels between Leigh's experiences and those of the mystic Julian of Norwich, asserting that each responds to the promptings of an insistent inner 'voice' that drives their perpetual questioning and reframing of self-understanding in the light of embodied experience. Furthermore, each acts as a compassionate counsellor, offering healing and absolution to the sad and the broken within her community. I expand this analysis, moving from the notion of mystic to the Celtic spirituality concept of 'thin place' and Rudolph Otto's idea of the numinous (1958 [1923]), and assert that we might think of the mystic and, by analogy, Leigh as numinous 'Thin' people. I develop the metaphor of 'Thinness' in

the light of Simone Weil's notion of *metaxu*, intermediaries or bridges between the world of matter and the world of the transcendent, and contend that Thinness might be seen as a specific category of *metaxu*, a category that allows for embodied experiences like Leigh's to be conceived of as means and not ends, conduits through which connection with the Divine might be experienced. I extend the notion of Thinness to gender, asserting that 'Thin gender' can be seen as both *metaxu* and metaphor, enabling connection and demonstrative of *imago Dei*. I warn, however, against casting Leigh's Thin embodiment as an end in itself rather than a means to experience the numinous, and assert that, by conceiving of Thin gender as *metaxu*, we might value embodiments without idolising them. I conclude this chapter by asserting that Thin gender, as metaphor and *metaxu*, alerts us to something of the vast complexity of the nature of GOD/DE.

### ***Leigh: Dashing and Very Roguish***

Leigh is an American, 19 years old at the time of the interview and just coming to the end of a gap year in the UK. Leigh describes per spiritual/philosophical position as existentialist, monist, naturalistic pantheist, artist and shaman. Person was judged l-female<sup>1</sup> at birth and thus assigned a Female metagender but knew from a very early age that per f-gender did not necessarily align with that: '*When I was a little*

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<sup>1</sup> To briefly recapitulate the gender aspects detailed in Chapter 1: l-gender (looks-like) refers to physical characteristics; f-gender (feels like) is about an inner sense of gender identity; p-gender (performs like) is the 'drag' we put on to give ourselves the appearance of one of the two available options; and j-gender (judged as) is about how other people respond to us and how that impacts on our gendered being in the world. The four aspects together form metagender.

*kid I really thought I was a boy, at first; there was no question for me about it' (4-5)<sup>2</sup>.*

Unlike many of my narrators, however, Leigh's sense of herself as f-male was not, at that early stage, unequivocal. Person continues:

*I would dress like a boy and cut my hair like a boy, but I never told people I was a boy or anything—I never made like a thing of it, a deception (although it wouldn't feel like that for me). But as I got older, more and more I started to get really uncomfortable with the moments where people would address me as a boy, cos P usually wouldn't correct them, but my mom would—I think she sensed my discomfort and thought that she needed to establish me as a girl (13-29).*

Frustrated by this conflict between her own, albeit wobbly, sense of f-maleness and the j-femaleness conveyed by her mother's desire to ensure her gender comfort, Leigh says, rather poignantly, '*I just wanted to be—I don't even know how to explain—just kind of left alone'* (31-33).

This is one of a number of passages that illustrate the complexity of gender interactions in Leigh's experiences. For those who do not know Leigh, her j-gender, based on their perceptions of her p-gender, appears to be male and they treat her accordingly. But for her mother, who has access to different information about Leigh's l-gender, person is j-female, a judgement that affects both Leigh's p- and f-genders, the former under pressure to be expressed as Female and the latter in

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<sup>2</sup> I have attached line numbers to direct quotes from the interview text, which refer the reader to the relevant verbatim transcription section in Appendix 1. All quoted text from transcripts is in italics, both in here the main text and in the Appendices.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all emphasis, shown in bold, is as in the original transcript.

confusion. Thus, Leigh's f- and p-genders seem not simply one thing or the other at this point, but uncomfortably both/and.

External judgement notwithstanding, Leigh describes per childhood as a kind of golden age, drawing an analogy with Huckleberry Finn<sup>4</sup>, and perself as '*dashing and very roguish*' (610-611), and always ready for adventure. In one typical passage person says:

*I always loved going on adventures and beating up other little kids—not in a mean way y'know—and I was constantly going on adventures, like going out into the woods, and I didn't even know what kind of games we had invented there but it was like explorations into the unknown, sort of thing (612-625).*

There is a sense in which Leigh's childhood sense of f-maleness seemed to per almost like some kind of special power or magic charm, as suggested in this reference to a pair of trousers:

*I remember when I was very young I had a pair of sort of greenish-olive, khaki pants—they were just like my favourite 'boy pants', like they just made me feel this amazing power and charm (95-106).*

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Twain's 1884 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* relates the story of a 13-year-old boy who, to break free from the parental constraint of an abusive, alcoholic father, fakes his own death and takes to the Mississippi River on a raft with an escaped slave, Jim. A central theme is the moral development of a young boy who absconds from society and its attempts to 'civilize' him. Mark Twain claimed that the novel describes the situation where 'a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers a defeat' (Hutchinson 1993, 193).

To Leigh's distress, the charm began to fail, however, with the onset of puberty and per realisation that, whatever per f-gender, the outward changes in per body made her l-gender all too obvious:

*I started getting too uncomfortable to get boys' clothes and I would get girls' clothes, and I just would always have this nostalgia for this time when it was like I didn't have to do that. And as I went on it got worse, because it became that it wasn't just a social presentation thing anymore, because as you get older, when you hit puberty, then your new problem is not just 'how am I presenting' or whether people are gonna call me 'he' or 'she' or buy me a glove<sup>5</sup> at Christmas or a doll (109-123).*

It was not only puberty that imposed a judgement of Leigh's f-gender. Even earlier, person describes an incident at elementary school when j-femaleness thrust itself into per Huckleberry Finn narrative forcefully and with great pain:

*It really crystallised when I was older, in elementary school, and we went on this field trip to a one-roomed school house, and as a kind of bonus thing you could dress up like the kids from that era—and I was really excited about it because I liked the idea of being like Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer or something. So I pulled my socks up, and I had little short trousers—and I was really, really into it, I thought it was great—and then I got there and they had the two entrances, one for boys and one for girls, and I got in the boys' line. I was a little nervous about it cos I knew that they might try to catch me out, but I also just sort of thought, this is how I look, this is what I am, so what are they gonna do? And I remember the teacher just giving me this **look** and thrusting me over into the girls' line, and I was just **so crushed**—I think it was like first time I **really, really** felt social shame (35-65).*

The onset of puberty brought with it not only a sense of being pressured into p-femaleness in terms of clothing and pastimes—a doll or a baseball glove for

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<sup>5</sup> The 'glove' Leigh refers to here is a baseball glove, archetypal symbol of boyhood in the USA.

Christmas—but also issues of sexual attraction, of whom and how to date. Having earlier in the interview asserted that per mother was ‘a fairly open-minded person and bisexual’ (10-11), it is reasonable to assume that same-sex desire would have been less problematic to Leigh than to many teenagers and thus, for per to date boys ‘as a boy’ would have been a distinct possibility. Interestingly, however, person decided to date ‘as a girl’, for reasons person perself finds difficult to articulate:

*The first phase I went through, I just tried to be a girl and date guys as a girl—I did that very privately, I didn’t tell my mom at all about trying to date guys because there would probably be..., that it felt like..., I dunno, y’know, I guess [sighs]. I just always assumed I’d be a normal heterosexual girl, like that was just what was expected of me and that’s what I would be, but at the same time I knew that it was not gonna work out—it felt so brittle, that identity, that I really kinda hid it, even though it was an acceptable identity. Which is sort of ironic y’know, but anyway (127-157).*

Again, this complex passage illustrates the serpentine interactions of the four gender aspects. As puberty rendered Leigh more visibly l-female, person essayed p-femaleness, but in secret. Although person was well aware that per mother judged per j-female, person could not bring perself make this judgement visible, as to have done so would have been to undermine per own f-maleness, uncertain though this seems to have been. Indeed at this point, person partly assumed that l-female would become per metagender, j- f- and p- would align themselves accordingly, and per f-maleness would wither away, despite the fact that it was per p-female identity that was brittle and insubstantial.

By 17, Leigh was ‘*a mess, frankly*’ (183). Therefore, having graduated from high school a year early, person decided to take a year off and go to Europe, hoping that the trip would clarify some of per confusions:

*At the time I just hadn’t dealt with any of the gender/sexuality issues that I’d been having, which is strange because I was always an artist and introspective and that sort of thing. But at the same time there was always part of me that was just, I don’t even know how to explain it, sort of.... You know the part of the ocean where there’s no light and you wouldn’t be able to see it, although all the water is on top of it so it’s kind of important [laughs]—it was strange that I never explored that. But I went to Europe basically hoping that I would have sex with someone and I would just know what I needed to be doing or what my identity was (183-203).*

Aware that per f-gender was not a stable, certain entity (as, in contrast, it seems to be for many trans people by this age) Leigh hoped that the act of sex, in which one’s l-gender is inescapable, would somehow shine a light into the deep ocean of per gender trouble. But that is not what happened; person came back from Europe without the sexual experiences person had hoped for: ‘*So once I got back from Europe it was like, god, that didn’t work! What do I do now? And I started seeing this therapist*’ (263-264).

Regular sessions with per therapist, whom Leigh describes as ‘*not the most insightful person in the universe (but that’s not to say he was a bad guy)*’ (275-276), did not go particularly well at first:

*For the first few months I didn't even talk when I went to the sessions, kind of shutting down, which was strange—and that went on for a really long time actually, for months (279-286).*

Then one day Leigh got into a row with per mother, triggered, as many rows are, by a fairly trivial incident, Leigh's (uncharacteristic) lateness (288-297). And in the heat of the argument Leigh first revealed to per mother what person thought was going on:

*I basically just said I'm dealing with this stuff and I don't know what to do anymore and I'm freaking out basically and I'm having like a nervous breakdown. She could tell that I was just so consumed with whatever was going on, and I was crying and [sighs] she was waiting for me to tell her what it was I needed to tell her, and I finally told her, I think I might be a boy or something (298-313).*

After this initial coming out and the loving reaction of per mother, Leigh came out to per school friends, though expecting a fairly negative response:

*You think it's going to just be horror stories of like you tell people and they're like 'what the fuck is wrong with you!' and then throw you in a Baptist church, lock the door and set it on fire (392-399).*

The actual responses, however, confounded person's worst fears and merit quoting here at length:

*After that I went through more coming out times and it was bizarre how all my friends reacted. One of my best friends—he's gay and he's a little bit feminine—it was funny when I told him cos he's like 'You can be my boyfriend!'—he thought it was **fantastic**, and that was really weird. And then I told my best friend who's a girl and heterosexual, and she was like 'If you do change or something and become a boy, I'm never gonna live it down if I'm attracted to you', which is a very bizarre thing to have said to you. And one of my*

*other friends was like ‘Oh my God, me too! I think I’m a girl’, and I was like **whoa**, OK! But, yeah, the more I talked about it the more I found people responding..., I can’t remember a single person that didn’t respond well actually. Like there was this girl I’d known all during high school—we were pretty close and I knew she really admired me in a general sense but I never really thought that she could be attracted to me—when she found out about it, she basically admitted to someone else that she’d had a crush on me for the longest time and had always wondered if I would become a boy, so for her it was a dream come true. And that was what was really bizarre about it, cos I mean you think it’s going to just be horror stories (327-393).*

The act of coming out resolved some of Leigh’s confusions but was by no means the end of per gender story. Throughout per narrative are long, sometimes extremely long, passages in which person reflects upon per gender experiences in the light of per understanding of the workings of the cosmos. These cosmological reflections then go on to shape per subsequent experience of gender, in a recurring pattern of reflexivity which I have called ‘experience/reflection cycles’. Below is a typical extract from a cycle that, in transcript, covers six pages, moving through person’s own spiritual position to philosophy to person’s sense of gender identity to the biology of gender to person’s own sexual attraction to the industrialisation of the

West and so on:

*If you look at the history of philosophy and the roots of dualistic thought, back to Plato, this idea of the ideal forms behind the shadows of the real or whatever, I really don’t believe that. I really am a very monistic thinker—I think that this is here, this is everything, everything is already important, alive or dead or animate or inanimate. And part of that has really come from my understanding of science and quantum physics, that whole idea of essential oneness. And I do tie it back to gender because when I was younger I really thought of myself as a boy and **not** a girl—that’s an*

*important statement, the grammar of it is important—and now I just don't really think of myself as **either** exactly (464-496).*

Leigh's statement '*I don't really think of myself as **either** exactly*' is entirely the product of per reflexive process. Person takes per early gender perceptions—'*I really thought of myself as a boy and **not** a girl*'—and measures that absolute certainty against per increasing cosmological understanding and comes to the conclusion that, since the universe is an essential oneness and everything is already important, there is no such thing cosmologically as gender certainty and that, therefore, person cannot live as a gender-certain being. These experience/reflection cycles ultimately result in person feeling '*I didn't want to be just a typical guy or a typical girl*' (578-579), that '*I never fit with regular girls or the regular boys*' (1175), that '*there was always a part of me that was in fluctuation*' (1197-1198), but that '*I'm sure if you ask me 20 years later I'll probably have a new idea of it*' (1344-1345).

Despite this strong sense of being in fluctuation, however, person also feels that the path of full transition is one person must explore:

*I've been in therapy for another therapist who deals more with gender stuff and **of course** I've thought about full-on becoming 'a boy', like physically transitioning (667-675).*

How much of this is driven by the expectations of a therapist and how much by Leigh's own desire to fix<sup>6</sup> per genders is unknowable from the available data. At times person revels in per unfixed state, but at others talks of per need to stabilise per genders in order to be fully an adult:

*So, in a way, it seemed like pursuing that masculine identity to the ultimate end of being an adult man—how that would physically change me...I would finally become a bit bigger, cos I've always been very skinny (721-729).*

*I really like the idea of being a bit stronger and solid—not that I want to be huge either cos that doesn't feel graceful to me—I don't want to be some giant **brute!** But in a way it seemed like much of my childhood was trying to deny this masculine identity or boyishness or something, so that I never grew older than a 12-year-old boy. I mean I look down and still see that little kid, and part of the idea of transitioning for me is almost to finally say 'I'm an adult!'. I don't know how else to convince myself I'm a grown-up now (738-764).*

One aspect of per identity about which Leigh is absolutely certain, however, is per status as an artist. Although person's early statement '*When I was a little kid I really thought I was a boy*' has the ring of certainty when one first encounters it, a degree of hesitancy becomes apparent when one contrasts it with the *absolute* certainty of the following statement that Leigh makes about herself as artist:

*Anyway, as I grew older I eventually realised I had to do this. It's not like I have a choice about it—I need to be an artist. I **am** an artist, y'know, it's just my identity (425-433).*

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<sup>6</sup> I use 'fix' here to mean 'fasten in place' not 'mend', since I do not contend that there is anything about Leigh's gender that is broken.

Closely linked with Leigh's identity as an artist is person's perception of herself as a shaman. This is not by any means a frivolous or fanciful claim; as with any of Leigh's insights, this is a position person has arrived at after much thought and in the light of her wide reading and cosmological reflections. In claiming the status of shaman, Leigh's primary concern is with the transmutation of matter. As an artist, person sees herself as part of a tradition of craftspeople who create extraordinary, even divine, artifacts from mundane sources:

*It's about how things are created, and how you can use things to do other things with, and part of it comes from the physical act of painting—I mean if you think of the classical parts of it, where you'd actually grind the paints together and then you would have this painting, from just this lump of rock to this divine experience of a representation of god, if you want to think of it that way (1094-1108).*

*To me, being a shaman is just moving things around, just by the nature of your existence, validating existence itself—like the fact that I can look at the world makes the world beautiful (1144-1156).*

One of the art practices Leigh describes to me in detail is her method of creating photographic portraits:

*A lot of times what I like to do is take photographs of people without asking them first—it's a passive way of being intimate with them because all you're taking from them physically is their light (1236-1247).*

This practice involves Leigh in pointing the camera at her chosen subject and waiting for that person to become aware of her presence. It is at that moment of first awareness that Leigh presses the shutter:

*Most of the time they'll notice but they won't look, but eventually they'll look right over at you, and at that first instant where they see you, I take the picture (1304-1306).*

Leigh explains that this act is not simply about acquiring a portrait, but also, and more importantly, about recording the moment of recognition, the point at which person and per subject recognise each other as both existing in the world together and existing in it forever separate. Furthermore, person reflects, per practice would not have come into being but for the distance created by per gender experiences:

*It's partially about just that moment where we establish as two living things that were eternally separate, were never going to be together—and to me, I don't know that I would have been as focused or even, dare I say, obsessed sometimes with that idea if I hadn't had that sort of general distance (1308-1327).*

Reflecting on per childhood, person speaks wistfully of having a 'bizarre nostalgia' (94) for a magic time that can in no way be redeemed<sup>7</sup>. However, there is no sense in Leigh's story that redemption is a factor in per growing from the 'dashing, adventurous fellow' (654) of childhood into the thoughtful, reflective young adult, measuring per lived experiences against the laws of the cosmos. Rather, person seems content that every answer leads to another question, that maturity brings no certainty and no healing, or rather, that uncertainty *is* healing:

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<sup>7</sup> Returning to the earlier 'Huck Finn' motif in Leigh's story, the contrast between this and a classic 'expulsion from the Garden' narrative deserves mention. In contrast with the Garden of Eden, where breaking the rules and rocking the boat lead to pain and sorrow, the world of Huck Finn is one in which rocking the boat is the whole point: transgression, movement and change are the genesis of fun and adventure. Transgression, in Leigh's golden age does not lead to freedom lost, but to freedom gained. This is not to say that Leigh experiences no sense of loss for the time that is past; per reference to per 'bizarre nostalgia' for that time would suggest otherwise.

*It wasn't that you had the answer and then you asked questions about the answer and then you had the answer again. It's that you asked questions and then got the answer and then that answer gave you another question and it just goes on forever (1361-1366).*

One question Leigh has been brought to understand much earlier than some is that of per own mortality. Person has a health condition which, while it is currently under control, may yet cause per serious problems. In typical fashion, however, Leigh reflects upon this experience through per cosmological knowledge:

*I enjoy being a living creature but I've kinda gotten to the point where I feel like that even to be an inanimate thing, even to dissolve into the ground or become ash or anything, it's still part of a much grander, deeper scheme. I just think that once you get that, you are less consumed with what you are or what you aren't (519-540).*

It is in being '*less consumed with what you are or what you aren't*' that Leigh seems to find per stability, a stability rooted in a much reflected-upon and freely-chosen position of instability, even in relation to per own mortality.

## ***Main Themes***

### **Seeing and Being Seen**

One theme that emerges most strongly from Leigh's narrative centres on issues of visibility. From the first, Leigh's account is concerned with the way in which per feelings and perceptions of perself, as the dashing, roguish adventurer, contrasts with the judgements of others. The incident on the trip to the schoolhouse is a primary example of this. This is Leigh's first deliberate outing of perself; up to this

point, per p-male behaviour is something person has not sought to draw attention to. On the school trip, however, person decides to take the opportunity it presents to become a visible Boy. As far as Leigh is concerned if per p-gender is congruent with Boy, as demonstrated by pulling up per sock and standing in the Boys' line, then per teacher and classmates will see a Boy: *'this is how I look'*. When person is finally visible to per teacher, however, the look person receives is far from accepting. Though not described as anything other than *'this look'*, it is clear from Leigh's telling just how devastating person finds it. The Look is compounded by the act of thrusting per *'over into the girls' line'*, making person's utter humiliation visible to per classmates: *I was so crushed...I really, really felt social shame*. The Look turns Leigh's perception of perself from Boy to unintelligible Monster; in that dreadful moment per f-gender is completely demolished by j-gender.

After this, and with the onset of puberty, issues of gender visibility become more complicated, as physical changes make l-femaleness more evident. Leigh's response to this is partially to accept the l-female by dating 'as a Girl', but to do so invisibly, in order to maintain per sense of gender authenticity. Per gender trouble thus becomes *'the part of the ocean where there's no light..., you wouldn't be able to see it [but] it's kind of important'*, a darkness person seeks to illuminate through sexual connection, in the belief that by making per body visible to another, person will make per identity visible to perself. Ultimately, however, it is not through sex, but

through the process of coming out, first to per therapist, then to per mother and finally to per friends, that person moves from invisibility to visibility.

### The 'Soccer Dad' Story

The theme of visibility does not end here, however. In addition to telling of being seen, Leigh also tells of being 'Seen Through'. Two incidents in particular highlight this aspect of Leigh's narrative. In the first, person encounters a schoolmate's father while at per brother's soccer game with per mom. Person describes perself at that time as not '*often actively present[ing] like a boy*' (846-849), but as having longish hair and boyish clothes. At the start of the encounter, Leigh's mother introduces per to the Soccer Dad by per obviously female name:

*I dunno how he heard it, but he thought it was like Larry or Harry or something (bizarre). But anyway, what was weird was, he started talking to me as a boy, and then, because of the way my parents were referring to me, he suddenly understood that I was actually a **girl**, because they were using a **girl** pronoun. And it was weird because he got like a twinkle in his eye and when people get that I know that one of two things has probably just happened, either they're still attracted to me, or more attracted me, because they know I'm some kind of strange creature<sup>8</sup> (883-910).*

Thus, the Soccer Dad not only sees Leigh, but also sees *through* per, through the obviously female name and the female pronouns to the '*strange creature*' on the

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<sup>8</sup> This account and the Cheerleaders incident that follows are substantially shortened from the original transcription.

other side, with a *'twinkle in his eye'*, as if he and Leigh have shared an erotic secret. The act of Seeing Through Leigh does not apparently produce in the older man any sense of anger at having been duped, but rather delight at their complicity.

### The 'Cheerleaders' Story

At the time of the second incident, which takes place in the front lobby of per school, person is not, Leigh repeats, actively presenting as a boy, but wearing androgynous clothing and long hair. Person is waiting for per mother to pick per up when person notices a group of cheerleaders from another school watching per across the lobby, and discussing amongst themselves:

*Then finally two of the girls leave the little cluster and walk about midway, and they stare at me for a minute, and then they finally come up to me and I turn around, cos obviously they're coming over to talk to me, and say 'What's going on', and I think the first question they asked me was 'What time is the football game?'—How would I know? I had nothing to do with the football game and also there're our cheerleaders right there, who probably do know (968-985).*

*It became obvious to me that they thought I was a boy and that the cheerleader girl had sent them over to talk to me—it was very bizarre, like I suddenly realised that they don't know what's going on. Anyway they asked me a few other suspicious, weird questions, and then, thank god, my mom rescued me, and I just politely said goodbye and left, I told other people about 'the cheerleaders hitting on me' story and they're like 'That's every heterosexual male's dream', but for me it was just terrifying (1032-1055).*

Like the Soccer Dad, the Cheerleaders See Through the fact that Leigh is not actively presenting as a boy, although not with same clarity of vision: *'they don't*

*know what's going on*'. And, perhaps because of the cheerleaders' confusion, this encounter is far more uncomfortable for Leigh; indeed it is '*terrifying*'.

## **A Visibility of Self and Others**

The fear of not 'passing' as one's affirmed gender is a common one for transgender people, as is the even greater fear of what violence cisgender people might do in response to feeling 'duped'. In Leigh's case, however, what is noteworthy is that per Seen Through narratives are not about not passing as a Boy, but about not passing as a Girl; even when per presentation is not particularly masculine, people See Through it to the Boy on the other side.

The Seen Through narratives extend beyond such incidents, however. In addition to people seeing through Leigh's presentation, there are incidents in which Leigh describes people as having seen themselves more clearly through their encounters with per experiences. In per Coming Out narrative, for example, one friend is emboldened come out in per turn and declares '*Oh my God, me too!*' And a second friend uses Leigh's coming out as an opportunity to express tender feelings towards per, admitting that since she'd '*had a crush on [Leigh] the longest time*', for Leigh to transition would be her '*dream come true*'.

If Coming Out is an act of making the invisible visible, in Leigh's case it is an act that makes visibility possible for others as well as for Leigh herself. It is as if the light person shines into her own deep places spills over onto those around her. Thus, when I talk about Leigh as being Seen Through, I mean this: that people seem to observe in her something that is at odds with what she herself seeks to present—they see through her presentation as through a ruse; and people seem to see something that is beyond or on the other side of her—they see through her as through a window. Furthermore, what they see through Leigh allows them to see more of themselves.

There is something of an air of magic around Leigh's narratives of being seen and being Seen Through. In the Coming Out narrative, utterances like *bizarre*, *amazing*, *whoa!* and *dream come true* suggest the successful accomplishment of a magic trick, in which the reveal elicits gasps of surprise. The Soccer Dad story demonstrates a certain delight in the proceedings both for Leigh and for her audience. There is something of the 'magician's reveal' also in her practice of taking portraits of strangers unannounced. In this act (as in the Coming Out and Soccer Dad narratives), the object of the reveal is Leigh herself. She takes the picture not only because she wants to create an artwork, but also because she wants that moment of recognition, that moment when the subject sees her, the moment when

person ceases to be invisible. The camera becomes a magic wand: the shutter clicks and, hey presto, the magician reveals...perself.

There is also a sense in which Leigh is not just a magician, but is perself magical, existing somewhat beyond the boundaries of the mundane world. Part of this comes from per physical appearance. For one thing, person is tall and almost ethereally thin, or '*svelte*' as person prefers to describe perself (167). What is more, per appearance seems to me to 'flicker', never settling into anything that is categorically Male or Female, always hovering somewhere in between, boyish Girl or girlish Boy or both/neither at the same time.

Person also positions perself as an observer, literally a seer, one who sees more of human behaviour by virtue of per outsider status. In relation to sex, for instance, person speaks of the difficulties person has in initiating sexual encounters:

*I just sort of wanted to know what is it these other normal people do when they just feel comfortable going out and having sex with other people, because for me there's always an intermediary. It's just that they always have that potential, so that there's always that sort of confidence of 'I'm already ready', right here, any time, and for me it was always like I'm this observer, wondering how these people are doing this (780-812).*

This sense of sex as an act that can never happen on the spur of the moment, that will always require some mediation, some explanation on per part, locates per on the edge of 'normal' human relationships, always an observer and an outsider, and never

a spontaneous participant. Relating this back to per photographic practice, person meditates that the exchange of looks, which in 'normal' circumstances established mutual levels of sexual attraction, for per can never be that sort of interaction:

*So I always find my exercise of taking pictures without their express consent is partially about this idea of when you look at someone, you're establishing how much you're going to let them in—it's interesting, because for me I never felt like I could interact in that world because I couldn't be a boy for someone or I couldn't be a girl for someone exactly. I couldn't give people that look because ultimately I couldn't answer that promise (1277-1295).*

The seer is an important element of Leigh's understanding of herself as a shaman. Having spoken of the shamanic process of the transmutation of matter, Leigh goes on to describe how per view from between worlds has given per a sense of being outside this world, a *non entity*:

*I've always felt like that observer, and I think that really affected the way I spiritually deal with things too, cos I was always kind of a non entity, like I was already a step between the mere physical world and something that was divine. And I think that's why a lot of transsexuals think of themselves to some degree as like shamans or something, because there is that part of you that's never going to be directly and easily physical—there's always going to be that gap (813-836).*

Thus Leigh is not only the seen and the Seen Through, but also the shaman-seer, whose Outsider status, while not altogether comfortable, gives per access to a slantwise view of human behaviour. Person is in the World but not of the World. In this respect person bears a marked resemblance to the figure of the mystic, embarked upon

a combination of an inner and an outer quest...[leading] deeply into the divine centre of their own souls, but then...outward again to the concerns of God's created world and those of suffering humanity (King 2004, 4).

## *Mystic Parallels*

### **Promptings of an Inner Voice**

There are some striking parallels between Leigh's experiences and those of the visionary Julian of Norwich<sup>9</sup>, the fourteenth century English mystic and anchorite<sup>10</sup>. The content of Julian's visions, or 'showings', need not concern us here; what is important is that the showings themselves were but the start of Julian's journey. Over twenty years Julian reflects upon the meaning of her visions, publishing her reflections in two forms known as the Short Text<sup>11</sup>, and the Long Text<sup>12</sup>. In both of these Julian is very clear that she writes not for herself, as an act of autobiographical introspection or spiritual self-development<sup>13</sup>, but to bring the

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<sup>9</sup> Julian of Norwich was an anchorite, or secluded religious, attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich. Known only by the name of the church to which she was attached, her birth name is a mystery, as are any significant biographical details. She was probably born in 1342 and died around 1416. In 'the year of our Lord 1373, on the eighth day of May' (Spearing 1998, vii) when she was 'thirty and a half years old' (ibid) Julian, ill and on the point of death, experienced a series of visions or 'showings' about the nature of the divine-human relationship. Her major work, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, consisting of an account of and commentary on those visions, is held to be the first book whose writer can with any certainty be identified as a woman (ibid).

<sup>10</sup> Although it remains more common to refer to Julian in the feminised form of the term, ' anchoress', mediaevalist Mari Hughes-Edwards, author of a recent major reevaluation of the anchoritic tradition (2012), asserts that there is no need to make this gendered distinction and that 'anchorite' serves perfectly well for any gender (pers comm).

<sup>11</sup> This was probably written close upon the originating experience in 1373 (Spearing 1998, xii)

<sup>12</sup> This has been dated to 1393 on the evidence of Julian herself, who writes that a key revelation of meaning in the Long Text was granted to her 'twenty years after the time of the showing, all but three months' (Spearing 1998, xii).

<sup>13</sup> Although it is not uncommon for mysticism to be understood as an introspective 'quest for one's self' and personal liberation (e.g. Lanzetta 2005, 12), writers like Murk-Jansen (1998), Jantzen (1995),

product of per experience/reflection cycles to all per fellow Christians (Jantzen 2000, xxi). Like per contemporaries the Beguines, Julian writes in the vernacular<sup>14</sup>, ‘not only for those with special religious commitments [the readers of Latin] but for everyone’ (ibid).

Julian’s texts, in particular the Long Text, show evidence of both breadth and depth in per educational background that allowed per to place ‘her own conclusions, drawn from her own experiences’ (ibid, 16) within the context of wider contemporary cosmological understandings (ibid, 16-17). Julian’s experience of union with the Divine is not a single life-changing event but rather the start of sustained cycles of experience and reflection into the nature of the Divine-human relationship. It is the work of per life to understand what GOD/DE has shown per and to offer those understandings to per fellow Christians. Of this work Julian says: ‘So I saw him and sought him, and I had him and lacked him, and this is and should be our ordinary undertaking in this life, as I see it’ (ibid, ix). The purpose of life is to both know and not to know, to seek constantly and not to find, always to ask the questions and never to know the answers, to have and at the same time to always be

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Sells (1994) and Jones & Neal (2003) insist on the public, pedagogic nature of mystical texts as works intended not simply to delineate the mystic’s own spiritual development but produced with an wider audience in mind.

<sup>14</sup> Despite per possible lack of Latin, Julian was not the ‘simple, unlettered creature’ that the conventions of the time required per to claim to be (Jantzen 2000, 15). Jantzen speculates that it would certainly have been possible for Julian to have learned some Latin even without the education available to men at the period (ibid, 16), and goes on to assert: ‘[Julian] is clearly a woman of profound intellect: and her book, especially the Long Text, shows such meticulous organisation and literary skill that she has been ranked with Chaucer as a pioneering genius of English prose’ (ibid).

seeking for GOD/DE, to enjoy an unquenchable longing for GOD/DE and for the next question. Thus, when GOD/DE provides Julian with the apparently ultimate answer that 'all shall be well' (Julian of Norwich 1998, 22), per immediate response is to ask another question: 'Ah, my good Lord, how could all be well?' (ibid).

I do not assert here that Leigh's experiences are mystical experiences, experiences of union with the Divine, *per se*, nor that the intention of per reflections upon those experiences is explicitly to serve or to inform a community. Neither do I claim that Leigh's experience/reflection cycles are directly analogous to Julian's reflections upon per showings. I do however contend that the experiences of the one shed slantwise light upon the experiences of the other. Like Julian, Leigh undergoes something profoundly personal and life-changing. Like Julian, person reflects upon that in the light not just of the experience itself but also of per cosmological understanding. Like Julian, Leigh never really settles for any answer but constantly questions per understanding, expanding per knowledge, reviewing per quotidian experience on the basis of that expanded knowledge and reviewing per knowledge based on per quotidian experiences: '*there was always a part of me that was in fluctuation...I'm sure if you ask me 20 years later I'll probably have a new idea of it*'. Both Julian and Leigh are responding to the promptings of an insistent inner

‘voice’<sup>15</sup>. This is not to claim that Leigh is responding to a prompting from GOD/DE, necessarily, but rather that the urgency of the prompting is so strong, so important, so central to the core of each one’s being, that the experiences of the one might be seen as a metaphor for the other: the mystical experience for the trans experience and vice versa.

### **Mystic as Pastoral Figure**

The analogies between the two sets of experiences extend beyond the experience/reflection cycle. As we have seen, the purpose of Julian’s reflection was to serve per community, to publish to all per fellow Christians per understanding of GOD/DE’s relationship with the world. But Julian’s service to per community had practical day-to-day applications as well. As an anchorite Julian prayed for the souls of per community’s departed, to shorten their time in Purgatory and help them on their way to Heaven (Jantzen 2000, xvii). And for the living, person acted as a counsellor and spiritual mentor (ibid, 29), per inner life of contemplation, reflection and rationalisation feeding per outward actions in support of the spiritual lives of per community:

She would offer her time and her understanding and prayer, listening with patience and acceptance to the tales of sin and sadness and brokenness, and helping the person to find a path of healing (ibid, 47).

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that Leigh never refers to having or hearing an inner voice: I am using the word ‘voice’ here as a metaphor for the whatever-it-is that prompts Leigh’s gender questioning.

For Leigh in per community, at school especially, per visibility brings people to per with their own need for acceptance and, in some cases, a sort of absolution. In three separate instances, person relates per sense of being regarded as counsellor/confessor for per community:

*Towards the end of high school I was starting to be more vocal that I liked girls, so sometimes people would come to me with their gayness, if that makes any sense, like I was the gay beacon or something (1059-1072).*

*People were always telling me their secrets, always confessing thing to me, which was very strange—I've had people confess everything from abuse to rape to incest to desires of incest to coprophilia to every fetish you could think of. Pretty much everything but murder has been at some point confessed to me (1205-1224).*

*I felt I was like a pastoral figure, a shaman with the superpower to be your confessor and even absolve you in a weird way, just by telling you you're OK. I mean that's actually enough absolution for people—people really don't even need to hear that god has forgiven them, they just need to know 'I haven't violated what it is to be human' (1379-1392).*

It is not that Leigh seeks out such encounters; it is simply the fact of per existence as a person who questions per gender, a person who is both seen and Seen Through, that makes per '*the gay beacon*' and '*a pastoral figure*'. Just as anchorites like Julian were accepted and valued simply by being and not necessarily by doing (Jantzen 2000, xvi)—it was their presence as prayerful beings in the world that was their value—so Leigh is valued by per community for being a person apart rather than for any specific actions person perself takes. Or rather, the action person does take is to

accept the role of confessor, to accept that per personal experiences and per reflections upon them might serve not only perself but also per community.

In per introduction to the life and work of Julian of Norwich, Grace Jantzen assesses the relevance of the anchoritic life to a postmodern age and asserts:

part of what it means to be an anchoress in post-modernity must surely be voluntarily to enter a space—indeed to become a space—where thinking otherwise can happen: where creating responses to the death of the structures of modernity can be discerned (ibid, xxi).

Although, arguably, Leigh's entry into such a space has not been altogether voluntary, per embrace of per shamanic, even anchoritic, status has positioned per as a space where thinking otherwise is happening, for both perself and per neighbours<sup>16</sup>. By sharing per self-understanding through per coming out, person becomes an otherwise space through which the sad, the broken, and the unintelligible can see more of themselves and be healed of their sense that they might have violated what it is to be human, thus contributing to the death of the structures of modernity that constrain our view of humanity.

Jantzen further speculates:

And might it not mean that, standing at an angle to the certainties and preoccupations of the world around her as any anchoress must do, a postmodern anchoress might have much in common with her

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<sup>16</sup> I am using 'neighbours' in the widest sense here, to mean anyone with whom Leigh comes into contact.

premodern counterpart in the interrogation of modernity, and an openness to the divine in a world that has given itself to the mundane? (2000, vii)

As one whose inner 'voice' calls per to stand at an angle to the certainties of gender, Leigh might well, then, be the kind of postmodern anchorite Jantzen proposes.

Ursula King describes mystics as travelling 'along the margins of...the world of the mundane and the world of the spirit, where all things are made whole' (2004, 4).

Like Leigh they are people on the threshold, liminal people, who experience and reflect upon the extraordinary and bring those reflections into the ordinary world.

But Leigh not only brings the extraordinary into the ordinary, in many ways person *is* the extraordinary in the ordinary; in per and through per others experience something otherworldly that makes their eyes shine with delight and wonder.

Person thus appears to be possessed of a certain transparency or thinness that is not material (though person is indeed *svelte*) but rather, perhaps, psychological or spiritual.

## *Thin Places and Numinosity*

### **Celtic Spirituality and Thinness**

In Celtic spirituality<sup>17</sup> reference is often made to the notion of ‘thin place’:

a place where the veil between this world and the Other world is thin...where connection to that world seems effortless, and ephemeral signs of its existence are almost palpable (Burgoyne 2007).

Little academic work in the humanities has been done on this concept<sup>18</sup>; however, the origin of the phrase is commonly attributed to George MacLeod<sup>19</sup>, founder of the Iona Community. Person described Iona as ‘a very thin place where only a tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual realm’ (in Power 2006, 45). Jim Gordon assesses this as meaning that there MacLeod ‘found an exaggerated and immediate sense of the spiritual awareness that discerned the purported proximity of the Triune God’ (2009, 35).

Moving into the wider Celtic spirituality tradition, the thin place is any location where ‘the sacred breaks in to the everyday and...washes over the ordinary’ (Poulos 2009, 51). Kathryn Madden emphasises not simply a one-way awareness of GOD/DE breaking through to us, but the possibility of passage to and fro between material

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<sup>17</sup> I have here conflated Celtic Christianity and Celtic spirituality for the sake of textual economy, since both seem to use the concept of thin place in similar ways. I am aware, however, that the two movements do not necessarily have the same agendas.

<sup>18</sup> A literature search on the phrase turns up far more material on textile manufacture than anything else. Thin places in this context are significant as potential weaknesses in spun thread.

<sup>19</sup> While it has become commonplace to attribute the concept to the Celtic tradition (eg Madden 2003; Maignant 2007; Poulos 2009), Power asserts (2006, 45) that references to thin place may be found in early Eastern Orthodox traditions, traditions with which George MacLeod was very familiar.

and spiritual planes (2003, 274). Catherine Maignant, speaking of Celtic pilgrimage sites, attributes thinness to places 'saturated with holy memories', through an 'endless succession of past generations' that link the modern pilgrim to the sites' ancient cultic histories (2007, 18-22). Thus, thinness is assigned a historical as well as a geographical constituent.

In common with a wider sense of sacred geography (e.g. Clavel 2008; Munt 2010a), thin places tend to be associated with both formally designated 'divine dwellings' and 'the heart of nature' (Clavel 2008, 16). Maignant similarly situates thin places, but adds the condition that, to qualify as thin, a place must have an identifiable boundary, a threshold that can be crossed as 'a rehearsal for the soul's journey to eternity' (2007, 24). Madden moves the concept beyond what we might think of as traditional landscape locations, positing the psychotherapist's consulting room as a thin place where the 'sacred work' of healing the psyche is undertaken (2003, 274).

David Eicher expands the definition further, away from literal, geographical locations, to include 'any place our hearts are opened', citing *acts* of worship<sup>20</sup> as examples (2010, 19). Echoing this, James Miller asserts that a thin place is 'a sacred *event* [my emphasis] that somehow reveals a glimmer of the depth and richness of life that sits just behind our everyday routines' (2001, 357). As an example of such an

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<sup>20</sup> Here Eicher is distinguishing between worship acts themselves and the places in which those acts take place.

event, Miller observes the way in which doctors become more to their patients than mere dispensers of medical care:

the doctor, by virtue of his gifts and calling was himself, in the eyes of the patients, a 'thin place'; he represented something of a window into life's bigger questions, where the issues that really matter tumble out and come alive...[where] the mystery of life comes to the surface (ibid).

Although Miller herself does not use the term, what person has described here might well be called a 'thin person'<sup>21</sup>; Chris Cook and Brenda Heales analogise directly from thin place to the idea of the thin person as someone 'of such humility and love for God that a sort of radiance emanated from him'<sup>22</sup> (2001, 58).

## Rudolph Otto and the Numinous

Thinness is an example of Rudolph Otto's concept of the numinous, as explicated in *The Idea of the Holy* (1958 [1923]). Attempting to describe the a-rational elements of belief, Otto asserts that though the ineffable Holy eludes our understanding, it does not elude our grasp, since we have apprehensions of it of which we can and do speak (ibid, 2). These apprehensions of what he dubs the 'numinous'<sup>23</sup>, come from

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<sup>21</sup> 'Thin' in this usage is in no way linked to religiously inspired self-starvation, or what has been called 'holy anorexia', a 'self-injurious behaviour' possibly exhibited by some mediaeval mystics in pursuit of ecstatic experiences (e.g. Bynum 1987; Kroll and Bachrach 2005).

<sup>22</sup> In this instance Cook and Heales are referring to St Cuthbert, asking us to reevaluate per apparently uncongenial 'neurotic self-punishing' life (2001, 58) as having contemporary relevance, but they offer their observations as applicable to any person of extraordinary spirituality.

<sup>23</sup> Otto states: "I adopt a word coined from the Latin *numen* [originally a nod or a hint, but extended to mean a divinity]. *Omen* has given us 'ominous', and there is no reason why from *numen* we should

beyond ourselves as something ‘to which the mind turns spontaneously’ (ibid, 11)<sup>24</sup>. Although Otto stresses the awful, overpowering urgency of the numinous experience, with its potential to strike us ‘chill and numb’ (ibid, 28), Jung’s adoption of the concept to describe unconscious experiences needing to be made conscious (Stein 2006, 45) leads to a gentler definition as ‘something in the objective situation awaiting discovery and acknowledgement’ (Casement 2006, 20). In the psychotherapeutic context, contact with the numinous’s ‘illuminations, revelations and saving ideas’ (Main 2006, 158) might effect a healing (Corbett 2006, 54), a revaluing of the a-rational both individually and collectively in a World that has ‘exalted rationality’ (Rowland 2006, 99).

Numinosity, and thus thinness, is a difficult subject about which to rationalise<sup>25</sup>; it is an overwhelmingly affective experience that can only be explained through metaphor (Huskinson 2006, 200). It is a hint of a link to the transcendent, a ‘glimpse of grace found in the ordinary’ (Stein 2006, 47) that happens independently of our will or control (Kawai 2006, 186). It cannot be overpowered, it can only overpower

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not similarly form a word ‘numinous’ (1958 [1923], 6-7). Person also describes the phenomenon as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the tremendous and fascinating mystery.

<sup>24</sup> Otto describes the experience as presenting sometimes as ‘strange excitements’ and ‘intoxicating frenzies’, ‘wild and demonic’, sometimes as ‘a gentle tide, pervading the mind’, as ‘hushed trembling, and speechless humility’, but always as the consciousness of an inexpressible mystery that is ‘above all creatures’ (1958 [1923], 12-13). As a power utterly above ourselves, it requires our humility (ibid, 21). As ‘that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar...[it] falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’ and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment’ (ibid, 26).

<sup>25</sup> It may, of course, be possible to identify the neurological processes that are initiated during a numinous experience, and Ann Casement points per readers to interesting work in this area (2006, 21), but the province of neuroscience is beyond the scope of this study.

(Huskinson 2006, 202), for it is an 'autonomous manifestation' (ibid, 200) in both its religious and its psychotherapeutic conceptions. As such, it demands that we be humble in the face of what exceeds us, even as it is 'an affront to reason' (Tacey 2006, 222). Moreover, according to Lucy Huskinson, in Otto's conception the numinous experience has no moral or ethical purpose (2006, 205-206); to delineate the numinous is to delineate 'the meaning of 'the holy' above and beyond the meaning of goodness' (Otto 1958 [1923], 6). It reveals nothing of GOD/DE except that GOD/DE *is*.

As an affront to reason, numinous thinness without doubt stands at an angle to the certainties and preoccupations of a World that has exalted rationality to a dangerous degree. Through its tissue paper veil, it offers us something that waits to be discovered and acknowledged, an effortless connection to something beyond the mundane; it calls us spontaneously and without our bidding across its threshold, offering us a flickering window on life's bigger questions, showing us depth and richness and mystery. Its glimpse of grace reveals, heals and saves, not by any action we might take but simply because it summons us humbly into the presence of something that exceeds our mundane experiences. Just so, Leigh, the Gay Beacon, offers healing acceptance and absolution by being an otherwise space, a threshold that exceeds our mundane experiences of gender.

Thin<sup>26</sup> as a concept, then, summons us not only in places, but also in events and, more importantly for this text, in people who point to the Holy. Like the attentive doctor, the mystic and the Gay Beacon, Thin people hold out the promise of consolation and healing by calling us into the presence of something that exceeds mundanity. Thin people are those who nod towards the numinous beyond themselves and their quotidian experiences, and also beyond ours. If, when we are addressed by numinosity, we pay Weilian attention, we might *see* Thin people but might also see *through* them as what Weil calls '*metaxu*' (2002 [1952], 145-147), beyond the threshold they lay open for us to the absolute good that such attention might draw down into the World from GOD/DE.

## ***Simone Weil and Metaxu***

### ***Metaxu Defined***

Conceiving of *metaxu* as bridges between the world of matter and the world of the transcendent, Weil states: 'The essence of created things is to be intermediaries...leading from one thing to another...leading to God' (2002 [1952], 145-146) and thus, any created thing may be called into service as *metaxu*. Using a prison metaphor, person states that *metaxu* is like the wall that separates two prisoners, upon which they tap out their communications. As matter, the wall is an inseparable barrier but, as a method of communication, it is their only means of

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<sup>26</sup> From this point onwards I capitalise Thin to indicate that it is a concept that encompasses all I have said up to this point.

union: 'It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link' (ibid, 145). Though the world is 'a closed door, yet it is by attention to things of the world that we open the door to God' (ibid).

However, although every material separator is a spiritual link in theory, in practice, Weil concentrates on 'things of beauty that have the potential to direct one's attention to the divine' (Howe 2008, 34), in particular mathematics, science, the arts, politics, labour and religion (ibid, 48). These are, for Weil, the cultural expressions of beauty<sup>27</sup> *par excellence* that direct our attention to absolute good: 'Beauty captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul' (Weil 2002 [1952], 148). A key component of the experience of beauty is that it is something to be desired but not to be consumed; rather it is to be contemplated only: 'The beautiful is that which we desire without wishing to eat it. We desire that it should be' (ibid, 149). Beauty is thus, inasmuch as it is analogous to the human experience of GOD/DE with whom we can unite through contemplation but

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, no concept of beauty is unproblematic. Notions of beauty are culturally determined, and personal taste cannot be discounted. When it comes to literature, Weil has a very narrow concept of what might be deemed to be beautiful enough to act as *metaxu*, citing the *Iliad*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Phédre* by Racine and the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles as among the very few works worthy of attention (1989, 282). Thus, in Gray's assessment, Weil's view of beauty is 'utopian, rigorously traditional, and somewhat priggish... "Beauty" with a capital B' (2001, 216). Furthermore, Weil's insistence that the contemplation of beauty automatically leads the contemplator to the good is not without its difficulties, as Weil herself was aware. Person worries at the question of how it is that there are 'so many perverted aesthetes', for example the Roman emperor, Nero, 'if the beautiful is the real presence of God in matter and if contact with the beautiful is a sacrament in the fullest sense' (2002 [1952], 151). Person concludes that though the 'perverted person' may indeed be a lover of music, person can hardly believe that they would be enamoured of truly GOD/DE-filled music such as Gregorian chant (ibid).

towards whom we cannot actively approach. This distance, says Weil, 'is the soul of the beautiful' (ibid).

Though traditionally translated from the Greek as 'between', an online dictionary that tracks Greek usage throughout the Bible (Heartlight 2001-2011) notes that *metaxu* has been used variously to mean: between; meanwhile; in the meantime; after; afterwards; and next. Weil herself (2002 [1952], 145-147), writes of 'the bridges of the Greeks', reiterating the bridge motif several times, but also referring to links, intermediaries and 'a stepping stone to God'. Ideas of bridges and of intermediaries are popular among commentators (e.g. McLellan 1991; Tatsuko 2000; Cosgrove 2008; Howe 2008), but other concepts such as counterbalance (McLellan 1991, 201), counter-reality (Fan 2007, 136), 'precarious in-betweenness' (ibid, 129), a space between realities (Selles-Roney 1994, 274), and simply 'between' (McLellan 1991, 201) are also used. While the majority of these usages conceive of *metaxu* as a concrete noun, with occasional reference to states of being (like betweenness), it is rare for *metaxu* to be conceived of as a verb: Fan comes close to this when person describes *metaxu* as 'the art of mastering divergent points of view' (2007, 131), although even here the main concept, an 'art', is a noun. Macfarlane's description of 'passing through the known to reach the unknown' is most verb-like, although person precedes this by calling *metaxu* 'a process' (2008, 241). In order to preserve

some of the original meaning, however, I use the term without either definite or indefinite article and without a plural.

*Metaxu* is of primary importance in Weil's thought<sup>28</sup> (Hellman 1984, 83; Hermsen 1999, 189), since without it no contact with the transcendent is possible: 'I have not the principle of rising in me.... It is only by directing my thoughts towards something better than myself that I am drawn upwards by this something' (Weil 2002 [1952], 99).

McLellan sees *metaxu* as 'the concept [that] forms the link between the practical and the mystical sides of [Weil's] thought' (1991, 201) and right attention to *metaxu* as 'a mirror and a magnet, reflecting the nature of God and drawing the soul towards it' (ibid). For Howe, *metaxu* links beauty and art to hope and justice (2008, 36). Citing an occasion where concentration on Gregorian chanting allowed Weil to set aside the pain of an excruciating headache<sup>29</sup>, Wolfeich notes the value of *metaxu* in overcoming suffering (2001, 361), while Nye observes the vital importance of the

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<sup>28</sup> There are occasional detractors, Wolfeich, for example, in a footnote (2001, 359) cites Weil's biographer Jacques Cabaud as finding *metaxu* to be peripheral to her thought

<sup>29</sup> Abosch records that Weil was always frail and often sick, with headaches that started when person was 12 and never ceased (1994, 7). Though commonly referred to in biographies as migraines and/or sinusitis, these may well have been cluster, or chronic daily, headaches, nicknamed 'suicide headaches' by sufferers because of the chronic, intolerable and intractable pain they generate. Some sufferers report that intense concentration on something other than the headache, as in Weil's experience of the Gregorian chant, reduces the severity of an attack.

concept in overturning the Christian notion of work as punishment for sin, in that Weil reconceptualises manual labour as *metaxu* (1994, 101).

Howe opines (2008, 47) that *metaxu* is twofold in nature, requiring both that the object attract the looker's attention and that the looker consent to attend. Howe illustrates this with an account of Weil's use of the repeated recitation of George Herbert's poem *Love*<sup>30</sup> to '[draw] her thoughts away from herself and [direct] them towards the divine' (ibid). The poem only acts as *metaxu* because of Weil's consenting thus to use it. And this two-foldedness exists not only between the looker and *metaxu*, but also between the looker and GOD/DE: the looker's consent to attend through *metaxu* is necessary, says Weil, 'in order that he [GOD/DE] may perceive his own creation through us' (2002 [1952], 40-41). Weil illuminates this point with a metaphor in which person considers per perception of the table through the point of a pencil, and desires to be similarly a pencil point for Christ, 'to be [a mediator] between God and the part of creation which is confided in us' (ibid, 40), suggesting that *metaxu* is as important to GOD/DE, as a way of knowing ÆR creation, as it is to humans, as a means of experiencing GOD/DE's grace. Rather poignantly, Weil declares: 'I cannot conceive of the necessity for God to love

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<sup>30</sup> The poem, which begins 'Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back' (Herbert 1967, 91), was brought to Weil's attention by a young English man whom she met in 1938 in Solesmes. Weil came to use the recitation of this poem, as person did the contemplation of Gregorian chant, as a means of alleviating per excruciating headaches: 'Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines' (2009 [1951], 27).

me....But I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am' (ibid, 41).

Although much of the commentary on *metaxu* focuses on those cultural artifacts that Weil adjudges to be beautiful, Hellman notes the breadth of resources to whom/which Weil gives value, citing manual labour, the afflicted, academic work, language, neighbours, and oppression (1984, 88-89), all of which form part of our roots, the 'living cultural matrices' which sustain our lives in community (Nye 1994, 129). Howe points out that attention beyond the beautiful results directly from Weil's understanding of the nature of attention: compassion towards one's fellow human beings requires, says Howe, exactly the same quality of attention as does the contemplation of works of art (2008, 57). And attention to one's fellow human beings perforce leads to ethical action in the World (Rozelle-Stone 2010, 32). According to Hellman, attention has but one aim, the amelioration of affliction (Hellman 1984, 89), the answering of Weil's most fundamental question: 'What are you going through?' (2009 [1951], 64). In responding to this question, in loving one's neighbor with ethical action, one is loving GOD/DE, since 'love of God and love of neighbor [are] made up of the same substance—attention' (Hellman 1984, 89).

## Removing Oneself from the Centre

Tatsuko sees *metaxu* as essential to the prevention of reification or idolatry, preserving the things of this world as means not ends, since attention removes oneself from the centre and puts 'that which is other than the self' in its place (2000, [n.p.]). Duttenhaver and Jones add, in relation to scientific enquiry, that attention demonstrates a non-strategic, non-instrumental impartiality that is markedly different from the 'calculative grasping' and will to mastery of the scientific method (2010, 180). Similarly, Hellman notes that attention to/through *metaxu* is a process rather than a product, in which a problem does not necessarily require a solution (1984, 84). In contradiction to the prevailing view that intellectual endeavour and religious contemplation are two entirely separate activities, asserts Hellman, Weil demonstrates the value of the latter to the task of the former. In this, adds Gray, attention calls to mind a slogan of the anti-war movement, intended to remind activists that there is value in simply bearing witness: 'Don't just *do* something, *stand* there' (2001, 219).

It is worth returning, at this point, to the word *metaxu* itself, its definition in Greek and the various meanings assigned to it by Weil and per various commentators, since this has a bearing on idolatry. Despite the origin of the word as a preposition it seems virtually impossible to make use of it conceptually as anything other than a noun, as shown above. This is important in light of Weil's own comments on the

dangers of reification or idolatry in respect of *metaxu*. Referring to ‘the bridges of the Greeks’ person states:

We have inherited them but we do not know how to use them. We thought they were intended to have houses built upon them. We have erected skyscrapers on them to which we ceaselessly add storeys. We no longer know that they are bridges, things made so that we may pass along them, and that by passing along them we go towards God (2002 [1952], 146).

What were intended as means, even unto the concept *metaxu* itself, are ever in danger of becoming ends in themselves, idols that we worship instead of worshipping GOD/DE. Although Weil acknowledges that *metaxu*, as indicative of ‘the true earthly blessings’ of ‘home, country, traditions, culture, etc’, are vital to human beings as things that ‘warm and nourish the soul’ (147) and make a human life possible, nevertheless we must guard against worshipping such things in and of themselves. To acknowledge the roots of country and culture as *metaxu* should be with the aim of ‘making our way towards a point where it is possible to do without them’ (ibid).

### **Selves as *Metaxu***

Although Weil’s discussion of *metaxu* concentrates on abstract concepts for its explication, if we take seriously per assertion that every material separator is a spiritual link, then we ourselves are as much *metaxu* as are beauty, truth, work or mathematics. However, if we also take seriously assertions about the concept of

Thinness, as a numinous something that calls to us, demands our attention even, then we cannot avoid the fact that in our experiences some things more readily offer themselves as *metaxu* than others. As Weil summons beauty, mathematics and truth as between us to GOD/DE, I summon, or am summoned by, Leigh as Thin person to do likewise, expanding the notion of *metaxu* to encompass not merely abstract concepts or inanimate objects, but to assert the value of embodied quotidian experiences as nodes to the numinous.

## **Thin Gender**

Elizabeth Obbard describes Julian moving 'from sight to insight' (2008, xix) as she works to rationalise per experience of union with GOD/DE. Similarly Leigh's experience/reflection cycles move per from sight to insight; the more person holds per own experiences up to the light of per cosmological knowledge, the more person is able to embody both experience and reflection. As Leigh herself puts it: '*I was always so focussed on figuring myself out*'. But it is not just Leigh who moves towards insight. Those who encounter per are moved in that direction also; through seeing per, we see *through* per to something new about gender. As the mystic might be figured as a Thin person for the Divine, Leigh is a Thin person for gender. The Soccer Dad and the Cheerleaders do not simply see Leigh as person presents herself, but see through that presentation to something beyond, something that they do not necessarily understand but that, in the case of the Soccer Dad certainly, causes eyes

to twinkle with what might be recognition but might also perhaps be wonder. And just as we might figure Leigh as Thin *for gender*, so *gender itself* might be figured as Thin *metaxu*.

Thin gender as a concept operates on two levels, as a metaphor for that of GOD/DE and as an instance of *metaxu*. In the first, Thin gender as something in embodied experience that is expressive of GOD/DE's nature might be theorised in various ways. We might see it as a state in which the 'veil' between the binary genders is less substantial such that we might question both our own judgement of a person's metagender and our understanding of the gendered nature of GOD/DE. This is not especially fruitful, however, since it remains embedded in a binaried understanding of gender. While we might with some justification assume that this is the experience of gender Thinness that Soccer Dad and the Coming Out narrative schoolfriends have had, since their understandings of gender might be assumed to be firmly rooted in the binary, a perception of Man-ness in Woman and vice versa does not tread new ground, theologically.

We might, however, understand Thin gender to mean that seeing beyond the veil of the binary to something complex, fluid or ambiguous, such as Leigh's experiences exhibit, is more expressive of GOD/DE's vast complexity than is binary gender. Complexity is certainly what Leigh demonstrates, in per sense of fluctuation, of

never wanting to settle or be settled by others into a binary gender choice, of '*just wanting to be left alone*', in the condition I have described as 'flickering'. Rivera describes the sensation 'of being faced by something for which there is no concept in our system of thought' as having the quality of haunting (2007, 119); it is this haunting quality of being someone not entirely in the same world as the rest of us that Leigh exhibits, as discussed above. Thin gender then might serve as a metaphor for investigating notions of both Divine complexity and mutability, which I address in the next chapter, and conceptions of transcendence and immanence, which I deal with in Chapter 5.

This second conceptualisation has great theological potential, since it asserts that gender fluidity, ambiguity and complexity are legitimately *imago Dei* in that they reflect the fluidity, ambiguity and complexity of a GOD/DE who is greater than we can know, an assertion that runs counter to both a classical and a populist Christianate understanding of 'Man and Woman created He them'. It is, however, highly problematic, as it might also appear to suggest that Thin gendered people have some kind of higher positioning in a hierarchy of likeness to a GOD/DE who is unquestionable complex beyond any human comprehensibility. Like the Valentinian Gnostics<sup>31</sup> who posited that only the spiritually aware pneumatics were

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<sup>31</sup> The Valentinian system of gnosticism proposed that the Demiurge (a kind of lower God responsible for the created world) had created humans of three spiritual types: the Hylics, 'people who are resolutely 'in matter' and care only for the concerns of the flesh'; the Psychics 'who are not so caught up in the pleasures and pains of earthly existence, but who are more inclined to thinking'; and the

able to receive knowledge of GOD/DE (Martin 2006, 50), this definition of Thin gender might be taken to suggest that Thin is more legitimately *imago Dei* than Thinless.

As feminist theologians have been pointing out for the last 40 years, there are serious consequences for theological models that valorise one set of human physical characteristics or embodied experiences over another. It would be dangerous, therefore, to suggest that Thin gendered people are in some way closer to GOD/DE than the Thinless, that Thin gender is a kind of esoteric knowledge, a gender gnosis, possession of which through birth traits or acquisition of which through experience aligns the possessor more nearly to GOD/DE's image. In traditional theology, this thinking has led to all those dominological abuses of power and control that feminist theologians rightly critique. And in feminist spiritualities, it had given rise to the countering of dominology with the divinisation of Female bodies 'living in the lap of the Goddess' (Eller 1993). More recently, Trans theologians Virginia Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan (2003) fall into the trap of what we might call 'gender Gnosticism' in their conceptualising of Trans people as 'gender-gifted' (ibid, 32), people whose very embodiments allow them special access to, for example, a more perfect understanding of problematic biblical texts (ibid, 36). In all of these theologies, a

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Pneumatics who 'are spiritually aware people, who are above dogma and division, and who are able to receive gnosis'. Gnosis is the esoteric knowledge necessary for a human being to be able to return to the Pleroma, the uncreated realm of the True God (Martin 2006, 50-51).

particular type of embodiment is seen as providing its possessors with a direct knowledge of, or access to, GOD/DE that is unavailable to others.

We must, therefore, beware of making an idol of Thinness and remember that it is not only metaphor but also *metaxu* and, as such, always means and never end; herein lies Thin's main value as a concept. When Mary Daly famously asserts that if GOD/DE is male, male becomes GOD/DE, person speaks of a confusion of means and ends. Men are means that should draw our attention to the Divine, not ends, not gods themselves. When we confuse the one with the other, we erect skyscrapers on the bridges of the Greeks, creating of the means idols that we falsely worship, and hence dominology. In desiring to give any embodied experience theological value, we are ever in danger of succumbing to this confusion but, while there is that of GOD/DE in all our embodiments such that each of us is as much in *ÆR* image and likeness as any other, we are not GOD/DE's body, since GOD/DE far exceeds the material world, either as parts or in whole. As *metaxu*, however, the absolute value of our embodiments is asserted as precarious in-betweenness linking the mundane and the material to the transcendent, unknowable but nonetheless experienceable Beyond. Leigh and per Thinness are without doubt of value, not because person is in some way gender-gifted, but because person's quotidian experiences open the door to GOD/DE if we consent to pay attention. *Metaxu* allows for the possibility of a non-idolatrous appreciation of embodiments, valuation without valorisation.

Furthermore, though through a Thin *metaxu* we connect with GOD/DE, this does not mean that those of us are Thinless are any less *imago Dei*. We need not aspire to be *metaxu* ourselves (although we undoubtedly are, since *every* separation is a link) but to pay attention to the numinosity Thinness evokes, so that we might draw down the good into the World. The potential of Thinness as *metaxu* lies in the way in which it affects the observer as much the observed. Hence, Thinness is not something to which we must all aspire, for that would make it an idol, but rather something we can aspire to recognise as a nod to the numinous. *Metaxu* calls us not to *be* but to *see*, to remove ourselves from the centre, not necessarily to do something but to stand there.

It is, therefore, not solely the Thinness of the person that we value, but our alertness and response to its numinosity when it summons us. Thinness is as much in the eye of the beholder as it is in the body of the beheld. This is apparent in Leigh's story in the way that, while person never actively presents as p-male, people see through per performance and respond to something that summons them whether they will or no. In Leigh's case, though person does not actively choose to embody Thinness, Thinness arises around per, possibly as a function of per own ambiguity about per gender choice, per constant questioning and per experience/reflection cycles. Thin gender is then not as a physical attribute of a particular body, but rather as a state of

perception through which the onlooker sees a disruption in the solidity of the gender binary, a potential breakthrough point to something beyond. The precarious in-betweenness of Thin gender is a countersign, an otherwise space, a proposition that stands at an angle to the certainties of the binary and asserts that this structure of modernity is not a stable edifice, but something fragile and unsteady, something that flickers and shifts, the more so the harder we look.

### **The Risks of Thinness**

Having said this, being the space where thinking otherwise can happen is not altogether comfortable. In the case of (especially female) mystics, being Thin often brought them into perilous conflict with the church authorities, so much so in fact that some, like the Beguines Margaret Porete and Aleydis, were executed for their activities (Hart 1980, 22). Being a contemporary Thin gender countersign is no less likely to create mortal danger, as the statistics of violence against trans/genderqueer people amply demonstrate<sup>32</sup>. Standing at an angle to the certainties of gender, deliberately or not, troubles the norms. For some, like the Soccer Dad, who are open to the possibility of wonder, the summons of Thinness is welcomed. For others, however, Thin gender challenges the very basis of self-understanding and creates tension, if not outright animosity.

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<sup>32</sup> For example, in 2012, according to the Trans Murder Monitoring Project, 265 transgender people were murdered worldwide, an increase of 20 percent on the previous year (Ford 2012, [n.p.]).

Almost at the end of per interview, Leigh states '*just my very existence is a question*'

and continues:

*My existence calls into question why you are the way you are —a lot of girls, they act girly but they never really think about why they act girly, they just act girly because they're a girl, they never think about 'why do I curl my hair in the morning? Is it because I'm a girl or is it because I actually like having curly hair?', and just my existence makes them think 'Why, why am I doing this, why am I thinking this?'*(1419-1433).

*It can be too much for some people—they don't want to know, they don't want to think, and I think that's why they react so violently sometimes. I guess if you want to keep it in the shaman metaphor, it's like to say, to think that there's someone who's crossing between those worlds, highlights that you can't, that you're stuck in this and that world* (1440-1456).

In casting per existence as a question, Leigh highlights that per ambiguous l/f/p-gender has become a *de facto* judge of other people's l/f/p-genders. Per Thinness causes those around per to ask why they are as *they* are and not as *person* is. And though for some, this might be a welcome question, the Thinness that surrounds per is not *metaxu* for everyone. There are those for whom it is a barrier, it is *too much*, an unwelcome sign that there are people in the world who exist in ways most of us do not. In Leigh's view, it draws attention to the fact that those of us who are Thinless are mired in the mundane.

In this rare reference to the potential for some to react violently to per presence in the world, Leigh pulls into focus for us the dangers for the Thin *metaxu*. For the

person around whom Thinness gathers, as much as for those who do not like the Thinness they see, the experience is not necessarily to be celebrated. Of course, if Leigh's Thinness is *metaxu*, we have no need to fear being stuck in this and that world; person might be a shaman who crosses the between, but the transcendent makes itself known to us too through per embodiment. This does not, however, diminish the very real pain Leigh experiences. Having talked for some hours in very positive terms about per experiences, in the final minutes of the interview person hands out a huge caveat; being an otherwise space is not a comfortable place to be; it is dangerous, it is challenging to self and to others, it sets one apart.

### **Thickness**<sup>33</sup>

One way Leigh seeks to overcome per sense of isolation is through the connecting medium of the camera. Another is through sexual encounters. A third possibility is for per to anchor per body in a state of fixity, to become both an adult and a fixed gender. However, per choice between Man and Woman is by no means certain. At one point person meditates on whether per maturity equates with Womanhood:

*I thought about what my reasons are for becoming a boy, and sometimes I've wondered if part of it is that as a girl I always did feel immature in that role, and I still feel immature even though I'm a fairly functional person — I live on my own and go to school and all that and I guess I'm an adult, I guess I'm a **woman** — I never call myself a woman, that's very **weird** for me (703-719).*

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<sup>33</sup> My use of Thickness in this context does not in any way relate to anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1993, 3-30) notion of the 'thick description'.

Ultimately, however, this is not merely very weird, but too weird to be considered and Leigh quickly moves away from the topic.

When it comes to being a Man, Leigh is not much more forthcoming. However, it is noticeable how many metaphors of thickness, solidity and substantiality person uses, in the brief considerations person gives to the topic. To recall a section from the interview (738-764) quoted previously, Leigh states per wish to '*finally become a bit bigger*', to be '*a bit stronger and solid*'. But in per typical anticommittal<sup>34</sup> style, this desire is tempered; person does not want to be '*some giant brute*'. Person is torn between a desire for fixity and a desire to remain '*graceful*', for which we might read less substantial or bulky, lighter possibly, and more filmy.

To offset this theme of maturity as bulk, solidity and certainty, however, there is a counter-theme that equates growing up with growing *into* uncertainty that I have previously described. Leigh embraces perhaps not being a *question*, but certainly being questioning, as we have seen demonstrated in per experience/reflection cycles and per statement '*if you ask me 20 years later I'll probably have a new idea of it*'. Though per Thinness and per existence as a question set per apart from others, these are not states person necessarily wants to relinquish. As we have seen, Leigh views

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<sup>34</sup> To describe Leigh as 'noncommittal' would, I think, be to ignore the way in which person actively chooses not to commit to decisive statements about many things. The passage about becoming a Man is a good example: I want to be bigger, but not too big because I want to be graceful, not that I am graceful.... For this reason I have coined the term 'anticommittal' to indicate what appears to be an active decision not to decide.

being '*less consumed with what you are or what you aren't*' as a positive place to be. It is this place of actively-chosen indecision, this experience of living as a question, I contend, that might be responsible for Leigh's Thinness.

I must repeat here that Thinness is not a physical trait pertaining to a body type, but rather a state engendered by sets of embodied experiences. In Leigh's case, Thinness seems to arise out of per radical indecision, per anticommittal attitude to per gender presentation. Leigh has not set out to *be* Thin, but Thinness has come to be as a result of the perceptions of others. For some, these perceptions create positive feelings and for some, negative. Indeed, Thinness might be seen to be directly related to j-gender. I contend, however, that the means by which Thinness impinges upon the consciousness of the beholder is different from the mechanism of gender judgement. J-gender acts in relation to the rules and norms of society. We judge an embodied someone to be a Man because they appear to us to conform more or less to societal norms with regard to what constitutes a Man: they have a particular timbre of voice, they fall within certain parameters of height, their body language conforms to certain expectations and so on. Thinness, however, addresses us on a different level. Rather than demanding judgement, Thinness summons us with awe and wonder; it asks simply that we humbly pay attention through its *metaxu* to the existence of a numinous, transcendent something that exceeds us, and not that we place a moral or ethical value upon the experience.

## *Summary*

In Thinness, GOD/DE makes known something of ÆRSELF that is not normally knowable:

Truth abides in thin places; naked, raw, hard to face truth. Yet the comfort, safety and strength to face that truth also abides there. Thin places captivate our imagination, yet diminish our existence. We become very small, yet we gain connection and become part of something larger than we can perceive. The human spirit is awakened and will grow if the body and mind allow it (Burgoyne 2007).

The naked, raw, hard to face truth of gender is that if we construct it as an idolatrous binary, forgetting that, like any other *metaxu*, it is means and not end, this blinkers us to GOD/DE, limiting our potential to know ÆR and to know ourselves to our fullest extent. This knowledge, that gender is not as simple as we think it is, causes deep anxiety for some. For others though, like the Soccer Dad, imaginations are captivated and eyes begin to twinkle. We experience the beginnings of wonder and awe, becoming small but gaining a connection to something larger than we can perceive. We have an overwhelming sense that we no longer need be mired in the mundane, or trapped in a net of norms, whether of gender or of theology, but can ourselves become spaces where thinking otherwise can happen. Something of the nature of GOD/DE is drawn down into the World through the *metaxu* of Thinness. Something of the complexity of that nature is expressed in the metaphor of gender's complexity. As binary gender proves to be

Thin and insubstantial, so do our rigid concepts of GOD/DE. Through the precarious in-betweenness of *metaxu* like Leigh, who embody Thin gender, we begin to understand of some of the vast complexity of GOD/DE's nature, a complexity that stands at an angle to theological certainties and that I explore in greater depth in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

# ROBIN: NARCISSUS, PROTEUS AND THE GREAT BEAST

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I address Robin's story, beginning with an extended pen-portrait of my narrator that details key moments in both per gender and per spiritual peregrinations. Reflecting Robin's story, which progresses through a number of distinct phases, my analysis advances stage by stage, mutating somewhat as it goes. Thus I commence with a return to the metaphorical model of Thinness, extrapolated from Leigh's narrative, and, drawing on Robin's experiences, discuss whether it might be valid to talk also of Thickness or, at least, Thickening as additional metaphors for gender and spiritual experiences. Using the notion of Thickening or occlusion as generative of reflectionality or mirroring, as opposed to Thinness as analogous to transparency, I proceed to the myth of Narcissus to discuss the particular properties of per mirror, its connections to Robin's narrative and its associations with Divine-human relationships. I argue that the Narcissan Mirror illuminates only part of Robin's experience and that, to understand per story more fully, we might attend to another myth, that of Proteus the shapeshifting sea-god. I examine Robin's account in the light of Protean themes of unrestrained mutability, contrasting these with a Christianate fear of change. I then explore Simone Weil's

concept of the Great Beast, as emblematic of this fear of change, in relation to the Narcissan and the Protean. I contend that Robin's Protean experiences of genderedness offer us the possibility of an alternative metaphorical model, beyond the Great Beast of unitary doctrinal orthodoxy, of GOD/DE *as changeability*. I argue that the concept of Proteanism, while it flies in the face of mainstream notions of divinity as the God-who-changes-not, is supported by Laurel Schneider's recent work on a 'theology of multiplicity' (2008) and Marcella Althaus-Reid's on the *Queer God* (2003). I contend that, as Robin's narrative demonstrates the Protean with regard to gender, so too do the Queer God and the Multiplicity of God with regard to the Divine, and conclude with a conjectural and provisional description of the characteristics we might envision Protean GOD/DE to reveal.

### ***Robin: Genderedness That Slips Around***

Robin, now in per late forties, was born and brought up in Holland and went to university in Scotland, where person settled after gaining per first degree. Person has recently completed a further course of study and had moved out of the city into a Scottish village with per partner and twin boys. Judged l-female and assigned metafemale<sup>1</sup>, person describes per genderedness as '*physically female but with some*

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<sup>1</sup> To briefly recapitulate the gender aspects detailed in Chapter 1: l-gender (looks-like) refers to physical characteristics; f-gender (feels like) is about an inner sense of gender identity; p-gender (performs like) is the 'drag' we put on to give ourselves the appearance of one of the two available options; and j-gender (judged as) is about how other people respond to us and how that impacts on our gendered being in the world. The four aspects together form metagender.

*trans qualities*' (577)<sup>2</sup> and '*basically it's neither male or female [sic], or it's both or, y'know, it slips around a bit*' (737-741).

Robin begins per story with an account of per early spiritual influences:

*Well I suppose I come from a family background where there was a lot of interest in religions, and also in things like psychology, so I was sort of brought up with that and with people having conversations about spiritual things, even though I wasn't trained into any particular spiritual pathway when I was a child. But I suppose we talked about—well, we didn't really talk about them a lot—but we talked about things like reincarnation or meditation and stuff like that, and about energies* (19-51).

Person describes two spiritual experiences as foundational: a trip to a New Age school, where person experienced meditation for the first time; and a teenage visit to a spiritual community, where person undertook '*a couple of different programmes*' (71-74) from the wide range of activities on offer to visitors. Arising from these early influences, person states:

*Most of my spiritual experience was just around nature and just being and stuff like that, not particularly channelled, but it was very much in the live dimension, and I think that sense of spirituality being a live dimension has continued through my life* (62-70).

In per teens per parents separated, triggering '*a kind of dark night of the soul, a sort of spiritual crisis I suppose*' (87-91), although person gives no further details of the

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<sup>2</sup> As with the previous chapter, I have attached line numbers to direct quotes from the interview text; these refer the reader to the relevant verbatim transcription section in Appendix 2.

substance or effects of this crisis, passing swiftly on to per current spiritual position which has its roots in per mid-20s, when:

*I got interested in paganism and earth-based religion and got involved in doing basic spiritual pagan practices with friends. And then a bit later I did a training [sic] with someone who's involved in the New Age scene, around spiritual awareness and energy work and stuff like that, and I've also trained as a healer. And I mean now I don't do a great deal but I'm kind of just aware that it's there (95-111).*

In terms of genderedness Robin describes per f/p-gender as 'quite unambiguously identifying as a girl' (120-123) in pre-pubescence, but:

*In my teens I became a bit more gender-ambiguous, and I think it was partly round being critical of gender norms, cos I didn't really fit the gender stereotypes and I had quite a hard time growing up (125-132).*

Person attributes this 'hard time' in part to per l-gender decision to come out as bisexual in per teens and to not having a 'very female' (140) p-gender, and recounts a diary entry in which person expressed some of per sense of isolation and alienation resulting from per schoolmates' j-gender assessments:

*I remember at one point writing something like 'the guys think I'm a gay girl and the girls think I'm a gay guy', and it was this sort of despairing moment when, 'oh, no-one fancies me cos I'm the wrong gender to everyone y'know' [laughing]—it was kind of a horrible feeling of just not fitting the norms in terms of my gender and sexuality (142-149).*

However, person states that the presence of other lesbian and bisexual Women in per 'very progressive' (157) school provided per with role models to support per l/p-

gender choices, and that this alleviated some of per sense of alienation, as did j-gender affirmation from ‘*other people who identified as queer or gay*’ (166-167). And, after leaving school, person became involved in ‘*the anarchist and squatting movement*’ (170) where person met others who were experimenting with p-gender subversion:

*I remember a bloke wearing a dress—it wasn’t gay culture but it was kind of an alternative, anarchistic culture—and with that went quite a lot of messing around with different boundaries including gender and sexuality, and then I started to kind of get quite a lot more empowered really around my gender identity and my sexuality (171-179).*

Robin describes per p-gender at that time as not fitting ‘*the girly-girly stuff*’ (194), a position that generally left per feeling greatly empowered in respect of per f-gender sense of not meeting the norms. However, moments of alienation continued to obtrude, as demonstrated by the following anecdote in which the repeated phrase ‘*I didn’t fit*’ serves to highlight Robin’s ongoing j-gender discomfort:

*I remember in my early 20s, I was going out with someone at the time and I didn’t used to wear dresses or skirts at all, and one day I wore one and they said, ‘oh, you look like a drag queen’, and I remember being kind of quite hurt [laughing], but y’know, this was like I didn’t fit even though I was more heterosexual and bisexual than gay, sort of in terms of my actual sexual practice at that time—I didn’t really fit the stereotypes (195-211).*

Robin describes per l-gender position in per early 20s as ‘*coming out as a dyke*’ (213), as opposed to having come out as bisexual at school, although person then qualifies this statement:

*well [sighs] I mean I sort of slipped around between identifying as a dyke or bisexual, but I was in quite a serious long relationship with a woman and I became quite butch, and I kind of started to convey my butchness really (214-221).*

Despite the breakup of this serious relationship, Robin continued to identify as a dyke, reiterating that per p-gender at that time was ‘*really quite butch*’ (226-7), continuing:

*I think butch for me at that time was a sort of dyke identity, which I know it is for a lot of dykes—it was quite a masculine identity but it was a female masculine identity, sort of [Judith] Halberstam<sup>3</sup> and stuff like that (230-234).*

At this point in per life, then, Robin regarded per gender identity, certainly as it related to per l/p-gender, as well-established and stable. However, around this time person had two encounters that began to work changes<sup>4</sup> on this sense of stability.

First, person attended a conference on sexuality:

*because I was very interested in theory and I was going, well, what’s next, y’know, what’s the next thing on the agenda, cos there was quite a lot of staid stuff, and to me it seemed like it was this stuff about transgressing binaries and what happened when you open up the binaries and what’s there really—and I got really interested in postmodernism and poststructuralism (248-268).*

The result of this encounter with theory on Robin’s f-gender was so profound that it caused per to start to ‘*question my dyke identity*’ (279) despite the fact that ‘*at that*

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<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to Halberstam’s book *Female Masculinity* (1998).

<sup>4</sup> It would be tempting here to use terminology such as ‘undermine’ or ‘destabilise’ in relation to the changes Robin underwent. However, such terminology carries negative, even pejorative, meanings that do not reflect my sense of Robin’s experiences of fluctuation.

*time it was a very strong identity—I was quite lesbian feminist, in that sort of camp'* (279-281). This questioning led Robin to revise per l/p-gender identity from dyke to bisexual, inevitably moving per away from the lesbian feminist camp. Soon after that, person went to a '*summer school...around homosexuality*' (282-284), where person became friends with a group of '*gay blokes*' (285):

*and I always think it's quite ironic that that's the point at which I started to come out as bisexual, cos I got on really well with these blokes—prior to that, for quite some time I'd hardly had any sort of social contact with blokes at all—and I got on really well with these blokes and I thought, oh god, what am I going to do with this, y'know—it was really awkward* (285-291).

The friendship with the Gay Blokes extended beyond the bounds of the summer school, leading Robin back to continental Europe for the summer, where person became involved in a mainly male drag/burlesque group that existed not only to entertain but also to act as quasi 'agony aunts' for the queer community in holiday resorts:

*There was sort of an idea about serving the community—we used to do things like go out to clubs and pick up all the people who'd been dumped and who'd had a bit too much to drink, or we used to hand out condoms, kind of being there to support the queer community—it was a bit like unpaid outreach worker really* (318-327).

For Robin, per involvement in the Agony Aunts' activities not only fulfilled per ethically and socio-politically, but also provided per with a powerfully fluid and important p-gender '*sub-personality*' (351):

*It was a bit like being transformed on a transgender level, because obviously I was dragging up as a man dragging up as a woman<sup>5</sup>—I started to kind of take on a sort of gay bloke identity (348-356).*

The ethical/socio-political action aspects of the group, and something in the ritual of dragging up itself, had significant spiritual meaning for Robin. Person describes per participation in the group as having had strong sacred overtones for per:

*It did have a kind of spiritual...I mean no-one else who was involved in it is into spirituality, but for me it had a sort of spiritual dimension. It did, it had a spiritual sense to it (337-342).*

And person repeats a couple of minutes later: '*it did, it had a spiritual sense to it*' (372-373), emphasising the importance of this experience.

On per return to Scotland, Robin began '*socialising with people who were into the broader queer scene*' (373-374), where person began to meet and make friends with transgender people, with one of whom person subsequently entered into a relationship. Person describes this time in per life with enormous enthusiasm:

*But it was kind of a time for me, exploring stuff around gender and sexuality, and it was incredibly exciting, because all of the boundaries that I'd taken for granted started to fall apart (382-386).*

However, the experience was also not entirely positive. Seeing per partner transitioning from male to female set Robin to thinking deeply about per own f-gender:

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<sup>5</sup> To clarify, as a member of this mainly male group, Robin's drag was a two-stage affair, involving per first taking on a male identity, before 're-Femaling' as an Aunt.

*And I really identified with this person and it was kind of like I was almost them—do you know what I mean?—and I really did start to question my gender identity in a very real way (397-400).*

As a result of this profound f-gender enquiry, Robin says:

*I actually took it a bit too far and I got overwhelmed and got ill basically and had to take some time out, and I went through a very fundamental restructuring of my identity really, where I had to really consider, did I want to transition or was this a sort of spiritual journey—or an identity journey—but not actually something I wanted to make actual in my outside world if you see what I mean (401-414).*

At that point Robin had ‘*stopped identifying as lesbian-feminist—I kind of gave that the boot*’ (472-473) and had ‘*started to really identify as a trans identity—as part of the trans community—and I really saw myself as being part of it*’ (426-427) and, as person had been with the drag/burlesque Agony Aunts, was ethically and socio-politically involved in trans activism. Thus, deciding that, ultimately, per f-gender leading was not towards making the outward l-gender journey of physical transition, but rather something ‘*more sort of an emotional identity, spiritual type thing*’ (418-419) was immensely difficult and painful. Reflecting on the experience with hindsight, person says:

*Y’know, you start to deconstruct yourself and you lose touch with yourself basically—well this is what happened to me and it was really, really scary (461-463).*

What started as deconstruction ended up as breakdown (though Robin never actually uses that word), an overwhelming sense of no longer knowing what person's identity, especially per f-gender, was. In order to recover from this collapse, Robin began a deliberate project of rebuilding per self:

*So I sort of had to redefine my identity really, and for me that was a really spiritual thing, because what got me through was actually getting in contact with my spiritual sense of self and what for me was a core (482-486).*

The process took 'a period of maybe six months or a year' (510-511), during which time person 'just did a lot of **really sustained** growth work' (511) on per own:

*Deciding who I was, who I wasn't, what I wanted in my life, getting rid of a whole load of crappy beliefs that I'd taken on from my family and from alternative cultures—it was a really focused sort of sorting out, a really sustained rebuilding (513-537).*

Looking back on the experience, person sees perself as having been out of the 'normal' flow not only of genderedness, but also of time:

*In terms of my gender, I sort of made a decision at that point that I didn't want to go the full way, but in a way it almost felt like I had made a gender transition because it was like I'd been out of being female, and I'd been in what was definitely an ambiguous space for quite a while—well, in actual reality it might have only been a few days but it felt like it was a period of maybe a year or so (544-554).*

And, despite person's sustained rebuilding of identity, person feels that per f-gender has 'never really settled again, even though I live as a female' (557-558), continuing:

*In terms of my gender identity, I did settle back into something which was kind of physically female but had some trans qualities I*

*suppose, and that's what I've continued to say—but I think I didn't kind of want to jump on the trans bandwagon and say 'oh, I'm trans' when I wasn't actually having to live any of that, so what I do now is to just say, 'I've had some trans experience but I don't identify on an everyday basis as trans', and that seems to work (576-586).*

At this point in per story, Robin turns to the present and describes how per genderedness experiences have changed as a result of having set up as a apparently nuclear family with per Male, heterosexual partner and small children in a gender-conservative village. Referring to per own sense of per f-gender as permanently unsettled, person reflects with some unhappiness that, in terms of j-gender, person now 'passes' and per ambiguity and complexity is no longer visible:

*Sometimes I feel like I'm living a bit of a lie, cos I live this kind of quite ordinary life—I'm in a relationship with a bloke, and everyone thinks I'm female, but it's not really like that—but anyway—yeah [sighs] (563-573).*

Indeed, a sense of deep sadness for times lost resonates through Robin's narrative: at the very beginning of per story, person comments that per spiritual practice has waned since having the babies; person comments nostalgically on the 'fantastic...really good time...[and] real sort of sense of camaraderie' (362-363) that person experienced in per Gay Bloke identity; per excitement around exploring gender boundaries has already been cited; and in explicit relation to per current p/j-gender situation, person states:

*I mean I don't even look butch anymore—I don't dress up in leathers, I don't cut my hair short, I don't hang out in dyke clubs anymore, I don't really engage very much in the trans scene, but*

*that's partly because I'm in a relationship with a bloke and I've got the kids so there are practical constraints—I really miss it, I miss it really badly, but I kind of feel like I've made some sacrifices that I have to live with now really* (593-604).

In all, twelve major instances of regret for times lost are manifest in Robin's narrative, seven of which are explicitly linked to the fact that the l-gender experience of childbirth and rearing and being settled into an apparently nuclear family unit has 'normalised' per j-gender and rendered per f-gender invisible.

### ***Thinness Revisited***

#### **Thickening**

At this point in Robin's story it is appropriate to return to the metaphor of Thinness and to ask whether we might apply this to Robin's experiences. It is certainly possible to read Thinness in Robin's experiences: in per description of a genderedness that is non-stereotypical, that slips about; in per sense of spirituality in the '*live dimension*', the transcendent visible in the quotidian materiality of the World; in per shifting sexuality and per Queer and transgender transformations; and in per sense of having an f-gender that never really settles. However, applying the metaphor of Thin to this, it seems inevitable that we have also to consider whether the metaphor has an obverse, as we did with Leigh's intimations of solidity. For, although Robin's story clearly demonstrates gender Thinness, there is also much that we might describe as Thick or, at least, Thickening.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Thinness, in relation to gender, is not a physical attribute of a particular body, but rather a state of perception, through which the onlooker sees a disruption in the solidity of the gender binary, a potential breakthrough point to something beyond. In relation to GOD/DE, this manifests in locations and people as a sense, more pronounced than normal, that we are in the presence of the Divine. One way to describe Thin might be as a window through gender into GOD/DE. By analogy, we might then think of Thick as that window occluded.

In terms of Robin's genderedness, there do seem to be occlusions, on first reading at least, appearing to derive from the process of settling into 'nuclear-family' stability.

With reference to per current gender position, for example, person states:

*I think when I'm with people who are heterosexual and not transgendered I tend to identify more as female, and when I'm with trans folk I tend to become a bit more trans, or that side of me comes out, and I mean, there's certain things that I'll talk about around my sexuality and so on that I'd only talk about with people who are trans positive, that I wouldn't talk about with my straight friends who would probably either be fascinated or horrified (608-622).*

Person's horror of being imprisoned by externally-enforced norms is very evident in per fear that pregnancy might mark per as '*inescapably*' (670) and/or '*essentially*' (702) female, '*freezing me into a female identity*' (720) with '*all the breast feeding and all the crap that goes with it*' (729-730).

In relation to the twins, Robin is especially aware of how difficult it would be to impose per gender thinking on them, despite per strong desire to ensure their access to a wide experience of gender options:

*I would want to encourage them to like pretty things and to be sensitive and to be sensitive to nature and to cook—I don't know if I'd go as far as giving them girly dolls—I wouldn't, though I think if I had them on my own or with a trans partner I might—and I mean it has been interesting how gendered people have been, in expectations of that's how they would be and stuff—but I think it's up to them and what they're saying—that should mean that they should have the full spectrum, which means they should be brought up as boys but they can choose what that means or, if they want to change that later on, they can—I think I just try and give them as rich an experience as possible basically (810-851).*

Person's expresses per hopes and fears for per children at some length, taking the last 10-or-so minutes of a 55-minute interview to describe how person hopes per influence on the twins will overcome the external influences of growing up in 'quite a narrow-minded' (878) village.

But it is in relation to Robin's own sense of gender fluidity or ambiguity that the gender-Thickening effects of parenthood seem to be most obvious and most poignant:

*I think at the end of the day having a stable family is more important than me faffing round with my identity at this particular point in my life (641-643).*

*It almost feels like the gender stuff's a bit of a luxury really, like I don't have the space—do you know what I mean? At the moment exploring my gender fluidity is a luxury that I can't really afford (764-768).*

Gender fluidity has dwindled from a source of excited exploration, transformation and spiritual sustenance to 'faffing round', a 'luxury' and an unaffordable one at that.

However, all we do in exploring the notion of Thickness is to create an(other) unhelpful binary opposition, with Thin as the valorised position and Thick as the pejorative. Using this metaphorical framework, Robin's story reads as tragic, the triumph of nature over culture, biology as destiny. But, without wishing to minimise the pervading sadness of Robin's occluded experiences, what if we choose to resist the binary urge, saying instead that, though Thin exists in varying degrees, there does not have to be an alternative labelled Thick. There are other metaphorical models that we might derive from Robin's story.

### **A Hall of Mirrors**

If we regard Thick as a window occluded, we might then consider the window to have become, rather, a mirror, a metaphor which proves somewhat apt in relation to Robin's story, at least at first sight. One striking feature of this story is the way in which person describes encounters with communities of people in whose attributes, lifestyles and/or activities person sees per self reflected, sometimes as person is and

sometimes as person wishes to be. This has the effect of creating a kind of Hall of Mirrors for the onlooker. Beginning with the conversations about psychology, religion, reincarnation and meditation that informed per early spiritual life, the reflections progress through: the positive lesbian and bisexual role models at school; playing around with gender fluidity of the anarchist and squatting movement; lesbian feminism and female masculinity; postmodernist deconstructions of binary gender; ethico/socio/political action and gender experimentation with Gay Blokes and the Agony Aunts; per identification with per transgender lover; and per current family circumstances. While most of these reflections provide Robin with positive experiences, some reflect back pain, alienation and isolation as, for instance, in per recollection of being '*the wrong gender to everyone*' at school, of being told by a lover that person looked like a drag queen, and of being ultimately overwhelmed by per f-gender explorations. Negatives aside, however, each group person encounters offers Robin an image of perself to whom person is strongly attracted. In this respect, person resembles the mythical Narcissus gazing at perself in a still forest pool and seeing someone to love in its reflective surface. Thus, it is to this myth that I now turn to explore its metaphorical potential.

## *The Mirror of Narcissus*

### **The Myth of Narcissus' Mirror**

As retold by Robert Graves (1955b, 286-288), Narcissus' story runs thus: the beautiful youth, son of a nymph and a god, is loved by many, both Girls and Boys, but loves none in return. Narcissus' mother, concerned for the welfare of her son, consults the prophet Tiresias who tells her that her son will live well into old age only provided Narcissus does not come to know himself. The nymph Echo falls in love with Narcissus but is unrequited and wastes away, leaving only her voice behind. But Echo's dying prayer for vengeance is heard by Nemesis and punishment is duly meted out. Narcissus comes upon a spring, 'clear as silver, and never yet disturbed' (ibid, 287), and, stopping to drink, is arrested by the sight of his reflection. Not recognising this as himself, Narcissus takes it to be a beautiful and desirable boy with whom he falls deeply in love. Eventually the true nature of his object of desire becomes clear to him and he is distraught, knowing that his love can never be requited: 'The vision is only shadow, only reflection, lacking any substance' (Ovid in Kristeva 1987, 104). Recognising the truth and yet unable to tear himself away, he withers and dies, leaving behind an eponymous flower and a prophecy fulfilled.

The tale of Narcissus has ‘nourished Western thought about love and the self for the past two thousand years’<sup>6</sup> (Adams 2000, 427). References and allusions are commonplace in mediaeval writings such as *The Romance of the Rose* (Nouvet 2000), *Le Lai de Narcisus* (Adams 2000) and the works of Dante (Nolan 1990) and in Early Modern works such as the poetry of Edmund Spenser (Edwards 1977). And, of course, it is impossible to reference without also making mention of the central part the myth plays in Freud’s epoch-making psychoanalytic theories<sup>7</sup>. From the point of this review, however, it is not the fundamental importance of Freud’s thinking on narcissism to his libido theory that concerns us, nor the subsequent psychoanalytic theories of such writers as Kristeva, Lacan and Irigaray<sup>8</sup>, but rather what has been read from the original Narcissus myth and how this manifests in the literature. Furthermore, I am interested as much in what is said about the nature of the Mirror as in the character of Narcissus. I begin this review, therefore, not with psychoanalysis but with mediaeval literature.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Julia Kristeva, the story’s entry into Western discourse runs concurrently with that of Christianity (1987, 103) and represents a ‘fundamental topos’ of early Christian thinking; the story of Narcissus and the story of Christianity are intimately intertwined from the start (ibid, 105). Tracy Adams attests to the value of the myth thus (2000, 428): ‘The Narcissus trope is sufficiently complex to bear conflicting interpretations. On the one hand, it can be dovetailed into a Neoplatonic philosophy of the image, where it serves as a negative exemplum. On the other, it plausibly suggests the opposing philosophy that material contact is an essential part of living, in and of itself, and not merely an access to the life of the spirit’.

<sup>7</sup> Although, according to Gay (1995, 545), at the time of publication Freud downplayed the ‘revolutionary implications’ of *On Narcissism* to per early theories on libido, by 1924 in *An Autobiographical Study*, Freud was claiming per insights as having ‘fundamental importance for the libido theory’ (1995, 35) and in *Civilisation and its Discontents* in 1930 as ‘The decisive step forward’ (ibid, 753).

<sup>8</sup> In the context of this brief review, I have not visited the work of Lacan and Irigaray since, unlike Freud and Kristeva, they do not refer in any detail to the actual myth of Narcissus in their writings on the mirror stage of human development.

## Mirror as Self Seduction

In mediaeval literature, Tracy Adams asserts, Narcissus' Mirror, as the material World, offers merely an image of true spiritual reality and Narcissus' mistake is to confuse the one with the other (2000, 428). What kills Narcissus is per unrequited physical passion for what turned out to have been merely a shadow in the Mirror (ibid, 434), the material mistaken for the transcendent. The Mirror thus highlights our innate tendency to be seduced by 'object incapable of providing fulfillment' (ibid, 436). According to Calvin Edwards, Narcissus clings to the reflection in the Mirror, but this self to which person clings is already in the past, a reflection of who Narcissus was before self-knowledge changed per (1977, 65). Ultimately, Narcissus remains fixed on the Mirror, refusing to use per knowledge to free perself from its thrall, feeding per body and not per soul, in 'a kind of...hoarding of the self' (ibid, 76).

The terminology of narcissism in psychoanalytic theory, deriving from Freud's<sup>9</sup> notion that Narcissus 'preferred his own reflection to everything else' (Freud 1995, 463), was used 'to denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the

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<sup>9</sup> The terminology was, according to Freud in per paper of 1914, *On Narcissism*, initially developed by Paul Näcke in 1899. Other sources (e.g. Britannica Online Encyclopedia) attribute the identification of the narcissism as a mental disorder to Havelock Ellis in 1898.

same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated'<sup>10</sup> (ibid, 545). While Freud (and psychoanalysis in general) ultimately moved away from the notion of narcissism as abnormal, in a recent series of commentaries on the concept in the journal *Psychological Inquiry* the self-regarding and self-deceptive traits of Narcissus remain generally viewed as pathological<sup>11</sup>. Little is said in this discipline, however, of the nature of the Narcissian Mirror, though the underlying assumption is that the reflection the Mirror produces, and thus the Mirror itself, will always play us false.

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<sup>10</sup> As such, narcissism was first regarded as an abnormal or pathological mental state. In earlier work, For example *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* published in 1910, Freud had made reference to narcissism as adult 'perversion' (1995, 462-463), but by the publication of *On Narcissism* in 1914 (ibid, 545), Freud had begun to see it as endemic to early childhood development and a foundational experience of humanity. In this respect, Freud cited its implication in the development of homosexuality in men According to Freud, a homosexual man has repressed per love for per mother and put love of perself in its place, taking 'his own person as a model in whose likeness he chooses a new object of his love. In this way he becomes a homosexual...He finds the object of his love along the path of narcissism' (1995, 463). Normal development saw the child turn outward from the primary narcissism of being in love with his [sic] own body and 'the woman who nurses him' (ibid, 554), from the reflection in the Mirror, to seek 'object-love of the attachment type' (ibid), that is to say to Other(s) rather than self, the real rather than the reflected.

<sup>11</sup> The narcissistic self appears to hold itself in high regard, but is in fact 'unstable, vulnerable...fragile' and self-deceiving (Andersen, Miranda, and Edwards 2001, 197). It shores up a 'Taj Mahal' of grandiose self images on a shaky quicksand of foundations (Arkin and Lakin 2001, 203) comprised of equal parts 'self-love and self-loathing' (Brown and Bosson 2001, 210). Thus Narcissus might be considered to be addicted to false self-worth (Baumeister and Vohs 2001, 206). However, while such clinical accounts of the 'condition' suggest that Narcissus is 'brittle, empty and depleted' (Campbell 2001, 215), research contends that narcissism may in fact be a logical coping strategy in a World that encourages grandiose self images and the yielding to all inner urges (ibid).

## Mirror as Prison of the Past

Philosopher Louis Lavelle (1993), uses the myth in his 1939 work *L'Erreur de Narcisse*<sup>12</sup> the central concern of which is self-love, even self-obsession, and its effects on self-understanding and self-development. The self that we develop in Narcissan contemplation is, person asserts, inherently faulty, and the 'pathetic enterprise' of being a spectator of oneself, is 'doomed'; instead of *living* per life, Narcissus dies in contemplation of it (ibid, 27-28). The illusion of self-knowledge in the Mirror is a trap, a prison that pretends to a reality it does not hold, no aid to progress but rather a barrier which we 'batter with clenched fists' but cannot break (ibid, 28-29).

In Lavelle's assessment, the Narcissan self is faulty not simply because it contemplates itself but because the self it contemplates longer exists. What we see when we look in the Mirror is a self that is past (cf Edwards above). Our 'real' self is the self that is continuously being developed through forward movement in time (ibid, 30-31). Narcissan contemplation is an act of self-idolatry (ibid, 35) in which we turn from the world beyond self, 'the universe flashing into being' before our eyes, in favour of self as object (ibid, 32-33).

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<sup>12</sup> This title is somewhat inaccurately translated into English as *The Dilemma of Narcissus* (1993), inaccurate since Lavelle is less concerned with Narcissus' dilemma than with per terrible mistake: 'Narcissus is expecting that his eyes, his eyes alone, will reveal his essential self, and the tragedy is that what he sees with his eyes is nothing more than appearance' (ibid, 26). Person gazes into the pool, hoping to find someone to love but instead finds that '[n]o other love than the love of himself pursues him...even at those moments when he tries hardest to detach himself from it' (ibid, 27).

True self-knowledge comes not through the Mirror but through a renunciation of the image of self past in favour of action to create self in the future, to realise our full potential; 'self-consciousness' says Lavelle, 'is not a light which illuminates a pre-existing reality without changing it, but an activity which deliberates on its decisions and holds its own destiny in its hands' (ibid, 44). And while it is through our activities that our self is formed, it is through relationships with others that this self is ultimately revealed to us. Narcissus, trapped in the Mirror, melancholy and alone, does not realise 'that all men need the mutual presence of others in order to bear the burden of existence' and so dies, knowing neither perself nor per saviours (ibid, 53-54).

### **Mirror as *Erzatz* of GOD/DE**

In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva (1987) uses the myth to critique mainstream Western theology and philosophy. Narcissus is misled by the pursuit of the 'vain shadows' of the World in the Mirror and drawn away from contemplating the transcendent in favour of self-contemplation (ibid, 106). Person cannot see that the reflection is indeed perself (ibid, 107); person lacks both self-knowledge and knowledge of the transcendent. The Mirror into which Narcissus looks for an Other to love, gives back only a Self, an *ersatz* of GOD/DE, and sorrow, alienation and death are the inevitable result (ibid, 121).

'Narcissus kills himself' asserts Kristeva, 'because he realizes that he loves a fake' (ibid, 126); Mediaeval appropriations of the myth as emblematic of mendacity, fraud, forgery, counterfeit, and the overturn of the moral order (ibid, 127-128) derive from this. What Narcissus fails to realise, however, is that person does have a genuine object within per, which Kristeva calls 'psychic space', that is worthy of love, not the fake divinity that is merely the image of perself, (ibid, 116). And to traverse this psychic space, two paths are available to per, to us: we might plunge in a narcissistic pursuit of Self with religious fervor; or we might become Narcissan artists, 'watery prowler[s]', eschewing self-centeredness in favour of creative explorations of 'labyrinthian [*sic*] and muddy canals of an undecideable sailing' (ibid, 135-136) into our psychic space.

### **Robin as Unceasing Invention**

Despite the potential for this myth to yield multiple interpretations, one thing is certain: the Mirror of Narcissus is a doomful and deadly thing. Having only the seeming of stability and reality, it is in fact a container of illusion and vain shadows, filled with undeliverable promises, addiction, lies, counterfeit and deceit. It is nothing more than a trap and a prison. It is the self absorbed with its own materiality and wilfully ignorant of all that transcends it. It is the World pretending to be GOD/DE. In Weilian terms the Mirror is a manifestation of Gravity—we

might call it a 'Gravity Well'<sup>13</sup>—that keeps us from rising up to GOD/DE. And Narcissus, the enthralled gazer, is as unstable as the mirror's reflection. Person is lacking in self-awareness, loves and loathes herself in equal measure, is vulnerable, fragile, brittle, empty and depleted.

Lavelle asserts that every encounter, every relationship with the world beyond self, changes both the self and the encountered. Thus, the way to avoid the Narcissian trap of (self)idolatry is to commit wholeheartedly to this inevitable mutability:

There is a fundamental rule which I must keep ever before my eyes, namely, that my life's every action, my mind's every thought, my body's every movement should be, as it were, a commitment and a creation of my being, an expression of a decision taken, and of my determination to be what these proclaim...For every man invents himself unceasingly, though he does not know what the end will be. As soon as he stops inventing, he changes into a thing (89).

In per reaction to the many mirroring episodes in per narrative, Robin has far more in common with Lavelle's fundamental rule than with the trapped and dying Narcissus, unable to reflect upon her own reflection, unable to change even when death stares her in the face. Robin is very far from this unreflective, unreflexive creature; in response to her experiences, person does indeed invent herself unceasingly and does not change into a thing.

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<sup>13</sup> In scientific terms, a gravity well is 'the pull of gravity that a large body in space exerts' upon objects that fall into it. The greater the mass of the body, the larger or deeper the well it creates; the Sun's gravity well, for instance is larger or deeper than that of the Earth (Qualitative Reasoning Group [n.d.]).

We see, for example, how the influence of per family on per spiritual beliefs and a ‘*whole load of [other] crappy beliefs*’, concerning per past self in fact, are dissected and, where necessary, discarded as the Mirror’s illusions and vain shadows in the ‘*really sustained rebuilding*’ that person undertakes after per breakdown. Per lesbian feminism, despite its initial appearance of stability and reality, does not survive contact with the promising ‘*what’s next*’ of the influential conference, per growing interest in postmodernism/poststructuralism and per involvement with the Gay Blokes and Agony Aunts. And, despite the sadness it brings on the one hand, on the other the relinquishment of what might be seen as the idolatrous luxury of gender experimentation in favour of the nourishing reward of parenthood has brought per great fulfillment.

Robin does indeed mirror each of the situations to which person is drawn, but the Mirror never succeeds in trapping per since person never refuses the opportunity to unstick per self, not necessarily from a counterfeit or deceitful situation, but certainly from a stagnant one, and move on. Unlike Narcissus, person does not hoard per self, refuse to know per self, or cling to a self that is history. In per self, and also in per children, person assents to potential futures flashing into being before per eyes. Robin is no narcissistic self-pursuer, doomed to gaze on, unrequited, long after the reflection’s promise has proven undeliverable, eschewing a life of active engagement

with the future in favour of a fantasy world of times past. Person's narrative is far more one of Narcissan watery prowling, of turning from the Mirror in favour of creative explorations of the labyrinthian and muddy canals of an undecideable sailing, of setting per course away from '*staid stuff*' and towards the encounter with '*what's next*'. This watery prowling therefore benefits from examination in the light of a different, more fluid myth.

## ***Proteus***

### **Unrestrained Mutability**

The tale of Proteus, 'the shy metamorphic sea-god' (Peradotto 1984, 213) runs thus (Graves 1955a, 346): Menelaus, struggling against adverse weather conditions to return home from the Trojan War, is advised by the nymph Eithodea at Pharos to 'capture her prophetic father, Proteus, who alone can advise Menelaus how to break the adverse spell and secure a southerly breeze' (ibid). Having, on the nymph's advice, disguised herself and three companions in seal skins, Menelaus seizes Proteus as the god comes ashore to bask with a flock of seals, whereupon Proteus begins to change, becoming first lion, then serpent, panther, boar, water, and tree, in an attempt to break Menelaus' grip. But Menelaus holds fast until the god returns to manlike form, thus ensuring that Proteus will prophesy truthfully in response to any question.

Like the Narcissus myth, though arguably by no means as nourishing to Western thought, the tale of changeful Proteus, as a metaphor for unrestrained mutability<sup>14</sup>, speaks to the imaginations of writers from diverse disciplines and times. Apart from the classics<sup>15</sup>, Proteus has perhaps most notably made an appearance in the scientific writings of Francis Bacon (2009 [1733]) in the seventeenth century and in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (2003 [1922]) in the twentieth. The god is also experiencing something of a renaissance in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, where person is wrestled with in disciplines as various as communications management (Amidon and Blythe 2008), virtual reality (Yee and Bailenson 2007), career planning analysis (Inkson 2005), pedagogic research (Smith 2008), and postmodern psychology (Lifton 1993)<sup>16</sup>. In the following review, I draw mainly on Proteus's appearances in English literature, philosophy and psychology.

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<sup>14</sup> Although Proteus has come to stand for unconstrained metamorphosis, the myth itself catalogues a very specific set of changes, which Graves expands upon, detailing the particular cultural references each item represents: for example, lion and boar are 'intelligible emblems of a two-season year', while the panther is linked to Dionysus, trees have a variety of sacred connotations, and so on (1995a, 354).

<sup>15</sup> Burns (2001, 970) notes that, in antiquity, Proteus' story occurred in different forms in Homer's *Odyssey*, Plato's *Dialogues* and the lesser-known *Antiquities of Egypt* by Diodorus Siculus. In the *Antiquities*, Proteus appears not only as a prophesying, mutable sea-god who challenges terrestrial order, but also as a human king, 'a pillar of strength and a preserver of values' (Lifton 1993, 5).

<sup>16</sup> In this last, Lifton's Protean Self is one of a number of metaphors relating to the postmodern perception of the self as no longer permanent, stable, unitary and autonomous. Other metaphors include the self as saturated and under siege (Gergen 2000), Coyote or Trickster (Phelan 1996), nomadic (Braidotti 1994), storied (Holstein and Gubrium 2000), and either/both empty or/and multiple (Hoffman et al 2008, 143). In terms of theories of the self, each of these metaphorical models has aspects in common with the Protean Self. However, in terms of this study, it is the elaboration of the Proteus metaphor that concerns us, rather than place of Lifton's theory in the 'family' of postmodern theories of subjectivity.

## Multiplicity and Deceit

This review begins with the work of natural scientist Francis Bacon. Peter Pesic (1999) notes that, for Bacon, Proteus stood for ‘Matter—the most ancient of things, next to God’ (Pesic 1999, 84). Bacon proposed that, in order to understand nature, one must bind Proteus with chains and ‘vex’ per into revealing per secrets through scientific experimentation, a proposition that has earned Bacon the opprobrium of feminist scholars as the rapist of (female) Nature<sup>17</sup>. From the point of view of this study what is interesting is that Bacon accorded Proteus near-parity with GOD/DE and our struggle with per as always ‘the moment of creation, charged with divine energies’ (ibid, 88). But, Pesic reminds us, while Proteus revealed GOD/DE, was the most ancient of things *next* to GOD/DE, person was not to be mistaken for GOD/DE *ÆRSELF* (ibid, 86).

William Burns notes that there were both positive and negative characteristics assigned to Proteus as an allegory of ‘multiplicity and deceit’ (2001, 970). Positive associations both with matter as a whole and with specific material substances made Proteus attractive to the alchemists, for example symbolising the power to transform base matter into gold (ibid, 975). Proteus also represented the ideal ruler, a Solomon who keeps the balance in a kingdom by shifting position through wise judgement

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<sup>17</sup> Vandana Shiva, for example, interprets this as ‘a masculine mode of aggression against nature and domination over women’ (1996, 269), on the basis that nature and the material are indelibly identified with women. However, Pesic argues that, in Bacon’s case, Proteus, and thus nature, is most definitely gendered male (1999, 84). Burns also contends that the unambiguously male status of Proteus contradicts feminist concerns about Bacon’s violent vexations of nature (2001, 969, 973).

(ibid, 976). However, for those opposed to occult knowledge, Proteus represented false knowledge (ibid, 972) and the shifting, mutable person who might also be considered untrustworthy, deceitful, hypocritical and fraudulent, ‘a being of many forms..., all of them...false’, whose archetype was not Solomon but Shakespeare’s Richard III (ibid, 978)<sup>18</sup>.

In an analysis of the work of sixteenth-century author John Marston<sup>19</sup>, Steven Shelburne explicates an unalloyed negative portrayal of Proteus as an expression of man’s [*sic*] ability to change per outward show, (1989, 200). Shelburne observes that ‘a contemporary distrust of unlicensed change’ meant that ‘Proteans’ were seen both as deceivers of others, in that their appearance obscured their real motives, and as deceivers of themselves, since by focussing all their energies on outward show, they failed to understand their own ‘inner substance’ (ibid, 201). And the motive behind this deception was to court the favourable opinion of others; good opinion required that one change on its whim, in order to fit in with the crowd.

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<sup>18</sup> Burns asserts that the trajectory from positive to negative connotations for Proteus occurred over the course of the seventeenth century. By the end of that century, Proteus had so fallen out of favour that per myth declined into the tale of ‘a king of Egypt whose shape-changing was attributed to the fact that he changed his clothes daily’ (2001, 979), thus effectively de-Proteanising Proteus. Jeff Shulman, however, traces this dichotomy back to the Renaissance or even earlier, noting that Renaissance literature ‘inherited two opposing traditions’, the one aligning Proteus with lust, deception and unstable passions, the other demonstrating ‘prudent adaptability’ and ‘amending oneself to the necessities of life’ (1985, 267-268).

<sup>19</sup> The work in question is *The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image and Certain Satyre*, published in May 1598.

According to Jocelyn Harris (1990), the Protean, in the character of Richardson's Lovelace<sup>20</sup>, is no slave to good opinion. Proteus, person avers, was viewed in the eighteenth century as 'at once a lawmaker and a lawbreaker', paradoxically emblematic of man's [*sic*] potential both to create and to destroy (ibid, 327). Proteus/Lovelace was a Hobbesean<sup>21</sup> figure, 'naturally restless' and driven solely by self-interest in a restless, materialistic, power-hungry, corrupt universe (ibid, 328), with analogs that included Satan perself (ibid, 338). Yet this Protean rakehell<sup>22</sup>, the most corrupt of Men, might also appear as 'the one honest man in a corrupt world...lashing the world of knaves and whores for its own good' (ibid, 334), standing out against a Good Opinion that was both degenerate and hypocritical. Thus Proteus may have been a scoundrel, but never thoroughly so since, without per the norms of a degenerate society might have remained unchallenged.

Wendy Olmstead (1996) offers a somewhat different analysis of Proteus, espousing a view that person, along with other metamorphic Classical divinities, represented 'all the fears and necessities of exogamy...stories of pursuit, of travel, of unfamiliar and alien loves' and, further, that those unfamiliar and alien loves resonate with 'the

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<sup>20</sup> Lovelace the rake is one of the chief protagonists in Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa*, published in 1748 (Richardson [n.d.]

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hobbes, seventeenth century author of *Leviathan* and explicator of 'social contract theory', determined that, without a social agreement to abide by laws 'upon which comfortable, sociable, civilized life depends' (Lloyd and Sreedhar 2008, [n.p.]), man's [*sic*] life in a state of ungoverned nature is 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes in Lloyd and Sreedhar 2008, [n.p.]).

<sup>22</sup> Harris argues (1990, 333) that Lovelace was based on the most notorious rake of the seventeenth century, John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647-1680) who '[d]ead at thirty-three...epitomized the wit and wickedness of the age': person was brutal and amoral, with a 'demonic' reputation for promiscuity, obscenity, violence and general debauchery (ibid, 333-4).

mystery of the divine', the transcendent manifesting in the quotidian (ibid, 167). Thus Protean change demonstrated not deception but a crossing of boundaries from the know to the unknown through the mutations of both natural and social identities<sup>23</sup>.

Theresa Kelley<sup>24</sup> observes that the Romantic poets valued Proteus as a metaphor for language that was supple and polyvalent, that 'refused to be hostage to the desire for fixed or stock meanings' even if its form is 'momentarily held captive' (1982, 630). Though both Proteus and the poet needed to put form to their fluctuation in order to be understood, that form was never to be permanent but ever productive of new forms and new meanings (ibid, 631). The Protean poet thus sought expression that 'resist[ed] capture' no matter how vigorously one wrestled with it (ibid, 632), indeed expressed its mutability the more so the more vigorous the wrestling.

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<sup>23</sup> Olmstead illustrates ways in which categories between culture and nature, between genders, classes and ethnicities became blurred, insiders became outsiders and vice versa (1996, 168); through the rites of hospitality, 'such as eating, sexual intercourse and storytelling', outsiders became, at least partially, assimilated (ibid, 170).

<sup>24</sup> Kelley situates per analysis of Protean allegory in Romantic poetry in relation to the account of eighteenth century mythographer Jacob Bryant. For Bryant, Proteus, as Bacon's 'first-born of matter', stood as 'the real Father of the postdiluvian world', tasked not with creating the world *ex nihilo* but with recreating it after the Flood. Thus, in this schema, Proteus's analogs were not scoundrels and rakes but 'none other than Noah, Noüs and Prometheus', with the power to recreate and renew matter, offering hope to survivors of the greatest disaster (1982, 629).

## Outrunning the Straight Path

In the early twentieth century, a pamphlet by Vernon Lee<sup>25</sup>, *Proteus or the Future of Intelligence* (2010 [1925]), expresses ideas which, in content if not perhaps in tone, are remarkably aligned with Weil's<sup>26</sup>. Lee writes that it is by 'intelligence', rather than 'logic' or 'reason', that the human project will flourish, since the inevitability of change must be approached with flexibility, a characteristic of the first rather than the last two (ibid, 20-21). Reason produces totalitarianisms, stimulates the 'glorious unimpeded violence of collective passions' (ibid, 22) and the 'too often degrading loyalty to causes and ideas' (ibid, 34). What reason fails to realise is that everything about the World is Protean, subject to constant change. Thus, Proteus and reality are one and the same thing (ibid, 6), and there is no more worthwhile a human endeavour than 'hunting Proteus', looking for and looking at the contradiction and mutability that is reality itself; it is '*the* [my emphasis] chief creative joy...outrunning the straight path...in circles like those of a dog pleased to be taken for a walk' (ibid, 47)<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Vernon Lee was the pseudonym of Violet Paget (1856-1935), an author of supernatural fiction and member of the English Aesthetic Movement. The pamphlet *Proteus or the Future of Intelligence* was one of a series, *Today and Tomorrow*, the first in which was J B S Haldane's *Daedalus or Science and the Future* (Stableford 2001, [n.p.]).

<sup>26</sup> The resemblance is perhaps not so remarkable when one notes that both writers were living through a period of European history that was awash with totalitarianisms and that both were writing contra that spirit of the age. And it is not only Lee's writing that calls Weil to mind. Like Weil, Lee adopted an androgynous appearance, eschewed marriage and 'never made the slightest effort to cultivate feminine mannerisms' (Stableford 2001, [n.p.]). Also, Lee suffered from chronic illness described by Stableford as 'neurasthenic disorders' which, though debilitating, were never allowed to interfere with her work (ibid).

<sup>27</sup> However, Lee qualifies this assertion with the observation that it may be our limited human perspective, our 'narrow and shifting field of vision' that makes reality appear Protean, adding, in a

In a series of Weilian parallels, Lee notes briefly that the Protean intelligence refuses 'to regard *means* as *ends*'; lauds its capacity to take 'passionate pleasure in dealing with *Otherness* and...frequent indifference to *here* and *now*, [and] disrespect to *self*' (ibid, 22-23); and insists that, in its service, we renounce self-concern in favour of 'whatever is not *ourself*, even our own personalities, which we should look at objectively from a renunciatory position (ibid, 12-13). Accepting that reality is opaque, that it 'has ways of its own and does not exist merely to suit our liking' (ibid, 14), prevents us from reaching too-hasty conclusions about phenomena and events since the more we observe the mutability and instability of reality, the less 'cocksureness' there is likely to be in our judgments (ibid, 42-43). This selfless approach to understanding reality engenders 'decency' in us, for while it makes us 'irresponsible', in that we care little for making mistakes, it also makes us responsive to others, as well as lighthearted, discursive, unabashedly slovenly (in a good way), impolite and frivolous. Most of all it gives us (counter)balance, 'because [Protean intelligence] can always take its time, poise circling round and round, and reverse its movement' as and when new information presents itself (ibid, 21-22). And if we subscribe to Lee's project, Protean intelligence will begin to replicate itself as '[one] intelligent mode of thought inevitably leads to another [and]...Every intelligent

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prefiguring of quantum physics, that perhaps Protean reality changes because we are watching (2010 [1925], 8-9).

book adds...to the intelligence of at least one reader' (ibid, 52), a sort of Weilian calling down of the good into the World.

### **Flexible Adaptation**

Jay Lifton situates per 1993 work *The Protean Self* within postmodernist accounts of subjectivity inasmuch as it embraces postmodernism's 'contingency, multiplicity and polyvocality', and its 'playful self-ironizing patterns' (ibid, 8-9)<sup>28</sup>. The Protean self, Lifton finds, loosely integrates within perself per disparate elements, requiring only 'a modicum of inner continuity' (87), not seeking a secure unification but rather 'steer[ing]...a course that is both fluid and ethically formed' (ibid, 91). This self seeks not to tie perself firmly to a single cause, doctrine or ideology, but aims to maintain a balance, 'a certain poise...bound up with agility, with flexible adaptation' (ibid, 93). The Protean self performs a balancing act between responsive mutability on the one hand and consolidation and coherence on the other, presenting perself as 'both fluid and grounded' (ibid, 9). This inherent flexibility ensures that the progress of the Protean self through time is not a linear one, not bound by normative expectations of life stage events; this self 'presses the limits of the life cycle' (ibid, 124), 'darts and teases', less concerned with stable and foreseeable progress than

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<sup>28</sup> Lifton does not, however, align per work with those who equate the above with the total disappearance of anything we might call a coherent self (1993, 8-9). Rather, person determines that, though the self is indeed fluid and many-sided, it 'turns out to be surprisingly resilient' (ibid, 1), shifting as time and circumstance requires but never, at least in its healthy form, totally losing form or cohesion (ibid, 5).

with manoeuvrability through the shifting currents of unpredictable events<sup>29</sup> (ibid, 93).

In terms of connection to others, the Protean self seeks commitment but is averse to dogma; connections to others are thus, necessarily, elusive, fluctuating and difficult to maintain, even as they are necessary to ground the self in relationship with others (ibid, 120-121). Thus, the Protean self suffers the ethical dilemma of how to live a principled, morally consistent life 'in the midst of [constant] psychological flux' (ibid, 6). Lifton finds that the Protean self only ever partially resolves this dilemma but that, by constructing 'irregular groupings' (ibid, 106), partial and fluctuating communities 'in odd places and combinations' (ibid, 103), alliances that may come and go, the Protean self both acquires and maintains necessary connection and ethical grounding and, in the process, participates in the creation of new, more flexible, more creative concepts of community<sup>30</sup> (ibid, 106).

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<sup>29</sup> This notion of the Protean self's non-linear progress bears a marked resemblance to Judith Halberstam's notion of Queer temporalities. Queer lives, person argues, are lived 'unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance and child rearing' (2005, 2), ungoverned by heteronormative, middle-class notions of reproductivity-driven respectability that valorise longevity, family history and the accumulation of property, and expect life-stage events to happen in a predictable sequence (ibid, 152).

<sup>30</sup> Characteristic of the Protean self in Protean community include: links forged through the commonality of shared experiences rather than presumptions of sameness based on class, race, ethnicity and so on (Lifton 1993, 214); embrace of multilocality and 'the evolutionary capacity to connect to faraway places' (ibid, 230); and the capacity for empathy, for appreciating the experiences of others without necessarily having to have experienced the same oneself (ibid, 214).

The Protean self is not without a dark side; exposure to this ‘chaos of possibilities’ might render the self incoherent, mire per in ethical superficiality and inertia, stunner into immobility and/or overwhelm per with a ‘cumulative sense of loss’<sup>31</sup> (ibid, 190-191). However, it is the endless recombining of experiences and responses that creates the specificity of each life (ibid, 51) and, though constant change might makes us vulnerable, yet it ensures that ‘we need never stand still’ (ibid, 49). Better yet, it develops in us the capacity to emerge from ‘stuckness’, from slavish adherence to a particular mode of being/believing even after that mode has ceased to be of use to us (ibid, 51). An embrace of the Protean, Lifton finds, develops maturity (ibid, 9), openness and sensitivity to the ‘outside world’ (ibid, 58), imagination (ibid, 102) and an ironic, self-deprecating humour that values absurdity (ibid, 94).

### **Robin: Fluid and Ethically Formed**

In summation, what we see of Proteus as a metaphor are two contradictory sets of characteristics. On the one hand, person represents deceit, hypocrisy, illusions, evasiveness and fraud, the evil alchemist, the rake, the libertine and even Satan perself. Person is all form and no substance, in thrall to the good opinion of the World, unquestioning and blind. At best person deceives only perself, but even in

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<sup>31</sup> Lifton goes on to describes a number of models of negative Proteanism including: a fragmented self, lacking self-knowledge and in danger of turning to fundamentalism to shore up their fragmentation (1993, 202); a static self, who blocks out the circumstances that might engender positive change (ibid, 205); a multiple self, a ‘protean caricature’, whose many selves lack a viable self-narrative to tie them together (ibid, 208); a deracinated self, torn up from per roots in community or family and rendered ‘hollow’ (ibid, 210).

this the damage might be immense, leading to an incoherent, ethically superficial or inert multiplicity. On the other hand, however, Proteus is of the divine, the whole of created matter, a generator of creativity and transformer of ordinary into extraordinary. Person is symbolic not just of human others but of the Wholly Other and our desire for communion with the alien and the transcendent. Person represents ideas that roam unfettered by fixed meanings and assumptions. Person is human intelligence applied to totalising belief systems, asking us to renounce our 'cocksureness' and obsession with self in favour of openness to the expanded horizons of the opaque and unknowable. Even in per scoundrel, rakehell form, person challenges the knaves and whores of degenerate society, when no-one else will. Person demonstrates an adaptive and ethical response to the nature of our times, skilled in forging alliances, experimenting with new concepts of community. Our experiences of Protean mutability save us from getting stuck in bad places, generating a mature, generous, imaginative, playful, humorous, non-linear and empathic acceptance of others. And, while person is not GOD/DE ÆRSELF, we may well regard Proteus as a bridge to GOD/DE, a Weilian *metaxu*, requiring our tenacious grasp and discerning attention.

Robin is adept at Proteanism, as person prowls per winding course through the undecideable waters of per genderedness. Some of per experiences certainly fall within the negative Proteanism described by Lifton, such as the '*really, really, scary*'

breakdown into near-incoherence that person suffers, when all the boundaries person has taken for granted fall apart. However, person expresses none of the other negative characteristics of Proteanism—person does not lie, does not court the World’s opinion regardless of cost to self or others, is no libertine. While it might be tempting to view per decision to closet per trans history somewhat in relation to per ‘*straight friends*’ as touching on the deceptive and hypocritical, we might also see this occlusion as a wise judgement, a balancing of per own needs with those of per family.

Overall, Robin experiences per fluid, ethically formed Protean course as a creative, liberating, spiritually nourishing mode of existence. As we have seen above, at each stage in per story, person encounters a potential Narcissan Mirror, a totalising belief system that might trap per and fix per form, but at each point, person ultimately refuses the trap and instead embraces flexible adaptability. In per teens, person rejects ‘gender norms’ in favour of a more ambiguous presentation even though this rejection of Good Opinion has some cost to per own happiness—person is judged not the ‘*right*’ gender by per schoolmates, a ‘*man in drag*’ by per lover. However, person persists in outrunning the straight path, first renouncing the ‘cocksureness’ of heteronormativity in favour of coming out as a butch dyke and then renouncing that cherished identity in favour of the opaque and unknowable ‘*what’s next*’ of gender deconstruction. This leads to unfamiliar and alien loves, transcending per alliance

with lesbian feminism, in per irregular grouping of '*fantastic*' camaraderie with the Gay Blokes, and per '*important sub-personality*' as a cross-cross-dressing Agony Aunt.

Even when the excitement of exploring gender and sexuality ends in per becoming overwhelmed and ill, person successfully unsticks perself with a determined reevaluation of the totalising belief systems that person has inherited from per family and from the New Age movement, refusing to retain the '*crappy*' stuff that no longer serves per well, alchemising a base experience of pain and misery into an opportunity for transcendent spiritual growth. And, as a parent, person rejects the norms that attempt to freeze per into a female identity with '*all the breast feeding and crap that goes with it*' and plans for per children's rich, '*full spectrum*' future.

Person grounds perself in communities of shared experience, ethics and action, revising per alliances in ways most efficacious to support perself, per loved ones and per ethical/spiritual/political commitment, while maintaining links to per past (albeit with difficulty). There is certainly playfulness and humour in Robin's story, for example in relation to the odd combinations of the Gay Blokes and Agony Aunts. For now Robin renounces per gender explorations in favour of the relative fixity of parenthood, balancing the responsive mutability of per deeply-held beliefs about gender with the consolidation and coherence necessary to provide a stable and

nurturing environment for per children. There is also attention to the transcendent, through a general imaginative openness to ‘*the live dimension*’, and through the specifics of per pagan practices and per perception of the spiritual dimension of dragging up as an Aunt. In my analysis, then, Robin’s fearless embrace of Protean mutability is not simply that, but might also be construed as *metaxu*, a source of spiritual opening that feeds per connection with GOD/DE through attention to the live dimension, to family, to friendship, to intellectual inquiry and to love.

### ***Fear of Mutability***

Fearless though Robin might be in per embrace of Proteus, the sea-god’s eclectic, unorthodox, even heretical, metamorphic world is not well regarded in Christianate culture. Many of its deepest fears see themselves embodied in mythical figures of mutability such as the Werewolf, the Vampire<sup>32</sup>, the Witch, the Fey<sup>33</sup>, the Trickster<sup>34</sup>, the Extraterrestrial<sup>35</sup> and, most dangerous of all, the Woman<sup>36</sup>. Our

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<sup>32</sup> Although perhaps not immediately recognisable as a shape-shifter, Dracula, it must be remembered, was described by Bram Stoker (2008 [1897]) as being able to take on other forms, not just as a huge bat but also as a wolf and as mist. Subsequent portrayals in popular TV productions, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, often show vampires as able to transform from human to demonic in appearance.

<sup>33</sup> Amoral fairies and elves were incorporated into the Christianate worldview as fallen angels, according to Jack Santino (1983, 11).

<sup>34</sup> Yee and Bailenson (2007) cite the Norse God Loki and the Japanese figure of the kitsune, a nine-tailed, shape-changing fox-woman, as notably ‘dangerous and powerful’ figures of transformation (ibid 271).

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Partridge (2004) observes that, from Robert E Howard’s subterranean serpent creatures to David Icke’s Lizard People, a demonology of shape-shifting extraterrestrials, who trick us by taking on human form, has spread throughout North America and Great Britain in the last century (ibid, 176-181).

supreme being, symbol of all that we hold most high and dear, on the other hand, is cast as the God-who-changes-not while ‘change and decay in all around we see’ (Lyte [1909-14]), the omni-everything, immortal, invisible, ‘God Who Is And Ever Shall Be’ (Schneider 2008, 4).

Turning specifically to notions of human being, Christianate dominology insists that ‘identities be kept clean and unambiguous’ (Phelan 1996, 133), a point reiterated and greatly expanded upon by Léon Turner in per 2008 work *Theology, Psychology and the Plural Self*. Turner contends that mainstream Christianity has largely failed to engage positively with postmodern psychological theories of the plural (Protean) self and instead insists, without question, that ‘a healthy self is always a unified self’<sup>37</sup> (2008, 3). Turner asserts that the plural self, far from being seen as the positive, natural, adaptive development of human selfhood that authors like Lifton describe, is ‘almost always treated [theologically] as pathological in some senses’ (ibid, 3), an aberration rather than an adaptation<sup>38</sup>. The problematic of the plural self, Turner contends, lies in the doctrines of sin and *imago Dei* (ibid, 10), which require the self responsible for sin and bearing of the image of GOD/DE to be a ‘unique centre of

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<sup>36</sup> The literature, feminist and otherwise, on Christianate fear of mutability, its associations with Women/female/feminine and concomitant demonisation of same is vast and beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>37</sup> Turner relates this back to the account in Mark’s gospel of the man afflicted by demons, whose ‘name is Legion, for we are many’ (2008, 1) and to St Augustine’s account of the self in per *Confessions* (ibid, 123).

<sup>38</sup> The Christian response to the plural self has been an overriding concern with debunking such theories that it characterises as being thoroughly embroiled in ‘modern individualism and the associated discourses of isolation, fragmentation and self-alienation’ (Turner 2008, 6) and the breakdown of the bedrock of society (ibid, 9).

consciousness and subjectivity'<sup>39</sup> (ibid, 24). Thus, 'the absence of personal wholeness is taken to correspond to corruption, or denial of the image of God'<sup>40</sup> (ibid, 176). The only cure is seen by many to be to return society to the certainties of 'traditional (Christian) moral sources of selfhood' and to restore some order of unitary doctrinal, largely premodern, orthodoxy (ibid, 33).

### ***Weil and The Great Beast***

As discussed, Proteanism has little regard for unitary doctrinal orthodoxy and the false idols of Worldly opinion that keep us trapped in the Gravity Well of the Mirror. As representative of the alien and unknowable, the alchemical, the polyvalent, Proteus represents all that transcends easy categorisation and definition. Lifton sets up per Protean project in direct opposition to inflexible, dogmatic and 'suppressive idea systems' (1993, 111) and fundamentalisms, which person deems to be inherently violent and destructive dead ends (ibid, 11). Lee, too, stands out against 'the Molochs of collective superstition' (2010 [1925], 37) with their 'obsolete shibboleths and new-fangled catchwords' (ibid, 53) couched as rational and logical but experienced as oppressive and destructive of human liberty. Even the Protean libertine characterises per behaviour as a scourge on the collective opinion of

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<sup>39</sup> If the self is plural, in which part of that plurality does the unique centre of consciousness abide, which part is *imago Dei*, which part sins (Turner 2008, 4)?

<sup>40</sup> Disunity 'only ever has negative implications', says Turner (2008, 177)—egocentrism, alienation, disengagement, dis-ease, mental strain, social malaise, the dissolution of stable communities (ibid, 32-3) and just plain evil (ibid, 176).

knave society and a challenge to the restless, materialistic, power-hungry corruption of the World.

Weil refers to dogmatic and inflexible idea systems and the Molochs of collective superstition as ‘The Great Beast’<sup>41</sup>, which Dutton and Jones describe as ‘the intellectual edifice generated and sustained by the power/knowledge relation..., an idolatrous and illusory system of social abstractions’ (2010, 183). Since being an outsider<sup>42</sup> is always ‘the very *essence* of [Weil’s] position’ (Fiedler 2009 [1951], x), the resulting distrust of the insider’s perspective ensures that person sees and points out the ‘flaws, shortcomings and half-truths’ of any unitary doctrinal authority, or collectivity, person might otherwise have been moved to espouse (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 19). The concern is that the needs of collectivity are at odds with the needs of the individual (Rozelle-Stone and Stone 2010a, xxi). Because the Great Beast of collective opinion ‘provides a ready-made pattern for thought’ as a substitute for paying attention to the world and one’s own relationship to it (Cabaud 2010, xix), Weil characterises the collectivity as that which suppresses both truth and the individual’s obligation to dissent (Hermsen 1999, 193): Truth, for Weil, is ever ‘personal and cannot be collective’ (Cabaud 2010, xviii), and the Great Beast’s totalising belief systems always carry with them the probability that violence will be

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<sup>41</sup> Weil is referencing Plato’s *Republic*, in which the Great Beast is characterised as ‘mass opinion and collective judgement’ (Gray 2001, 119).

<sup>42</sup> Although Abusch sees Weil’s turn to religion as a (failed) attempt to reverse her previous political position as pariah (1994, 17), I think it is more accurate to see her as having maintained her outsider stance as person transferred her political thinking into a spiritual milieu.

used to enforce their objectives on those who disagree<sup>43</sup> (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 68).

Weil writes: ‘The Great Beast is the only object of idolatry, the only *ersatz* of God, the only imitation of something which is infinitely far from me and which is I myself’ (2002 [1952], 164). It is, person asserts, not merely an object of idolatry but *the* object of *all* idolatry, the connection to which binds us with Gravity, preventing us from rising up to GOD/DE (164-165). It is exemplified in such human institutions as the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, Marxist ideology and Biblical Israel (ibid, 167). It loves nothing but itself, and is repulsive, heavy, artificial and soulless (ibid, 167-168). The Great Beast is, like Narcissus’ Mirror, full of illusion and vain shadows, undeliverable promises, addiction, lies, counterfeit and deceit, a trap and a prison, the World as (the only) *ersatz* of GOD/DE. The Protean, however, might serve as a valuable counterweight to the Mirror’s Gravity Well, since it rejects the cocksureness of unitary doctrinal orthodoxy in favour of a mature, generous, imaginative, playful, humorous, non-linear and empathic openness to the expanded horizons of the opaque and unknowable, to Grace and to a GOD/DE who, in ÆR turn, may prove distinctly Protean.

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<sup>43</sup> However, lest, in eschewing collectivities, we fall into a narcissistic individualism, Weil urges us to embrace the impersonal, since ‘Every man who has once touched the level of the impersonal is charged with responsibility towards all human beings: to safeguard, not their persons, but whatever frail potentialities are hidden within them’ (1989, 277).

## *The Protean and GOD/DE*

### Protean Image and Likeness

Turner's (2008) work on the theological significance of the plural self attests to the opposition between Protean multiplicity and the Great Beast of unitary doctrinal Christianate orthodoxy. As discussed above, Turner argues that theology would do well to embrace postmodern theories of self-multiplicity rather than pathologising them, since the evidence that selves are positively Protean seems irrefutable<sup>44</sup> (119). What Turner's work does not do, however, is suggest that, rather than being a corruption or denial of the divine imprint, it may be that the plurality of the self *itself* is *imago Dei*, that the GOD/DE in whose image and likeness we are created is *ÆRSELF* multiple, far more the Protean shapeshifter than the God-who-changes-not. I propose that GOD/DE is just such a shapeshifter. Just as Leigh's story, and the metaphorical model of Thinness we derive from it, illuminates the transparency of both genderedness and the Divine, so too do the model we drawn from Robin's Protean genderedness and the fluid multiplicity of GOD/DE reveal each other. To support this proposition, that GOD/DE is not One but multiplicitous, I turn to two

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<sup>44</sup> Turner concludes that theories of narrative identity answer the theological question of which self is it that is *imago Dei*, arguing that our self is unified (but not made unitary) by the stories we tell of ourselves and that such a cohered but still plural self is thus no obstacle to relationship with GOD/DE. 'A divided self' Turner declares, 'is not always a troubled self' but rather a self that is exploring per multiple GOD/DE-given potentials (2008, 179), explorations which are then bound together by narrative (ibid, 181). It is our plurality that gives each of us our singularity, the uniqueness that enables our relationship with GOD/DE (ibid, 119). Furthermore, to refuse to acknowledge this plurality is to seek to isolate the development of the self from interactions not only with the World (interactions which Lavelle, we might recall, deemed vital to successful self development) but also, and perhaps more importantly, with GOD/DE (ibid, 145). Thus, a unified-in-multiplicity self is (re)presented as the image and likeness of GOD/DE and the dilemma of the plural self in Christianity is answered, as far as Turner is concerned.

recent works of feminist theology: *Beyond Monotheism* by Laurel C. Schneider (2008); and Marcella Althaus-Reid's *The Queer God* (2003).

### **Schneider's *Beyond Monotheism***

Christian theology<sup>45</sup>, asserts Laurel Schneider, is an imperial theology, first deployed by Constantine 'in search of a divine [Narcissan?] mirror for...totalitarian dreams of state' (2008, 4), co-opting ideas of the transcendent in idolatrous worship of Worldly power and might. The resulting Christianate dominology demands an absolute commitment to immutability; it is a frozen ideology, stuck fast in the ice of its unitary doctrinal orthodoxy (ibid, 89-90). Because of its insistence on unicity rather than multiplicity, it refuses to pay attention to the multiplicatory specificity of actual human experience, insisting on 'a soul that is One,...[that] can only survive by destroying all other stories and memories, all fuzzy and permeable borders' (ibid, 194). Thus, the Christianate 'logic of the One' fuels fundamentalisms, nationalisms and totalitarianisms, 'chok[ing] on itself like a stone in the mouth' (ibid, ix). As such, Schneider's 'logic of the One' strongly resembles Lifton's suppressive idea systems, Lee's Molochs and Weil's Great Beast.

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<sup>45</sup> 'When', Schneider asks, 'did the stories of God become the story of totality, of a closed system, of One?' (2008, ix). The answer, she asserts, lies in the 'earliest beginnings [of] Christian theology' (ibid, 17), a disciplinary tradition that demonises contradiction and, conversely, valorises the reduction of complex and context-specific phenomena to oversimplified universals (ibid, 145).

Since there is no Truth except that which is contingent upon embodied experiences, Schneider finds that the multiplicity of GOD/DE expresses itself fully in bodies, ‘confounding certainty at every turn’ (ibid, ix), undermining the unitary doctrinal orthodoxy of the Great Beast with the uncategorisable specificities of human lives. Thus, the multiplicity of GOD/DE ‘comes to body, to being, differently every “time”, in every instance of incarnation’ (ibid, 166), every instance of which is literally invaluable, inexchangeable for any other (ibid, 176). Moreover, I would argue, the multiplicity of GOD/DE is bodied forth in the multiplicity of each self; we are Protean *imago Dei*, not only in that each of us is different from all others, but also in that each of us has the potential to embody the Protean within ourselves, as Robin’s experience manifests.

To apprehend the multiplicity of GOD/DE, Schneider asserts, we require a mature, non-linear flexibility of attitude (ibid, 156)—this closely echoes that attitude described by both Lee and Lifton, that outruns the straight path like a happy dog, that circles round, taking its time to come to always-provisional conclusions, that darts and teases and constantly (re)corrects its balance in its Queer non-linear progress<sup>46</sup> (cf Halberstam 2005). However, the multiplicity of GOD/DE cannot be taken to represent the wholeness of GOD/DE, contends Schneider. We do not and cannot have all the pieces of the jigsaw; the best we can manage is a temporary

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<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the multiplicity of GOD/DE ‘sins against ideologies of linear progress, as if there is a single goal or telos towards which the rich manyness of the cosmos must “process” in flight from itself as it is’ (Schneider 2008, 2).

assemblage of GOD/DE-pieces into not a whole but ‘a boat with holes’ (ibid, 10). In ÆR multiplicity, GOD/DE remains opaque to us, since we always begin in the middle of GOD/DE’s and our own stories: ‘there are no clean starts so there can be no tidy finishes...[only] the middle...which has the benefit of being where we are already located’ (ibid, 10).

### **Althaus-Reid and *The Queer God***

Analogous to Weil’s Great Beast and Schneider’s ‘logic of the One’ is Althaus-Reid’s concept of T-Theology, ‘Totalitarian theology’ (2003, 8) (sometimes also ‘traditional theology (ibid, e.g. 186)), which person describes as ‘theology as ideology...‘the One and Only Theology’ which does not admit discussion or challenges from different perspectives’ (ibid, 172). This is a heteronormative, colonial, capitalistic ideology that insists on homogeneity and renders the multiplicatory specificity of ‘real bodies, hungry, ill-treated, sad and isolated’ invisible, unintelligible and utterly beyond our attention (ibid, 110). It thrives on a process of identical duplication, both of material goods and human consumers (ibid, 155), reducing the multiplicity of GOD/DE to a ‘monotonous narrative’ conveyed by ‘monotonous messengers’ (ibid, 92), producing a straight GOD/DE (ibid, 53), irrevocably enmeshed, according to Althaus-Reid, in the hierarchical, discriminatory, persecutory and oppressive ideology of heterosexuality (ibid, 163). In its collusion with the capitalistic commodification of bodies and repetitive duplication of acts, argues Althaus-Reid, T-theology therefore

resembles nothing less than pornography (ibid, 109), which is itself another manifestation of idolatry, another reflection in the Mirror that occludes the transcendent, another Gravity Well that prevents our gaze from rising to GOD/DE.

The pornographic reduplications of T-Theology's God-the-Father must, asserts Althaus-Reid, be replaced by a Queer GOD/DE, whom person characterises as inherently unstable, indeed 'no more stable than heterosexuality' itself (ibid, 62). Furthermore  $\mathcal{A}$ E is complex and unruly (ibid, 34), in transit, having neither totality nor ultimacy (ibid, 68), a GOD/DE who can be led astray (ibid, 51) and who 'disorders the law' (ibid, 171). Unlike the reduplicative pornographics of T-Theology, the Queer GOD/DE never duplicates, not us and not  $\mathcal{A}$ ERSELF, never mistakes categories for specificities and therefore 'there is no unicity in God to be reflected either scripturally, dogmatically or ecclesiologically' (ibid, 109). The Queer GOD/DE is as fluid, unstable and multiple, as Protean as we are ourselves, a GOD/DE who has both 'a back'<sup>47</sup> (ibid, 16) and an unintelligible 'excluded face' (ibid, 153). The Queer GOD/DE is an opaque GOD/DE; there is far more to  $\mathcal{A}$ ER than meets the eye.

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<sup>47</sup> Althaus-Reid's reference to GOD/DE's back (2003, 16) is almost certainly an allusion to the story of Moses in Exodus 33:19-23, in which GOD/DE refuses to show Moses  $\mathcal{A}$ ER face on the grounds that none may see  $\mathcal{A}$ ER and live: 'I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen' (KJV).

This GOD/DE unsettles, even scandalises, the stable regime of T-Theology, transgressing the existent order, and is, thus, ‘a stranger at the gates’<sup>48</sup> (ibid, 153), an alien outsider from beyond the boundaries of all that is respectable; not a GOD/DE who watches over the margins from a position in the centre of T-Theology, but a truly marginal GOD/DE for whom the centre has absolutely no relevance (ibid, 98); we might invite this outsider GOD/DE into our lives but Æ will never partake of rites of hospitality and become assimilated into our family.

### **Protean GOD/DE**

Althaus-Reid argues that T-theology places unwarranted limit on the excessiveness of GOD/DE (2003, 28), producing a ‘grace which works by dis-gracing’ unintelligible oppressed, persecuted and colonised bodies (ibid, 46). And Schneider argues that the anti-Protean ‘God Who Does Not Change’ is merely an immature fantasy, created out of our desire for an intelligible ‘lover who will never age, never look away, never betray’ (2008, 157), an image in the Mirror that we think is GOD/DE but is actually ourself. However, by (re)introducing the excessive notion of omnisexuality into the catalogue of GOD/DE’s other “omni” attributes’, we might regain ‘the lost presence of [GOD/DE’s] polyamorous body’ (Althaus-Reid 2003, 53) and return to GOD/DE the multiplicity that is denied ÆR by ‘the name of the Father...a hidden presence of limitation in our hearts’ (ibid, 61). The God-who-changes-not is a

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<sup>48</sup> Although not referenced as such, Althaus-Reid’s use of this phrase may be a reference to Mel White’s autobiography *Stranger at the Gate: To be Gay and Christian in America* (1995).

theological 'dead end', asserts Schneider (2008, 138), and we must raise our heads from the reflection in the frozen pool of narcissistic immaturity and open ourselves up to a Protean 'grown-up, open, worldly encounter with flowing divinity'<sup>49</sup> (ibid, 157). GOD/DE must commit heterosexual suicide, contends Althaus-Reid, renounce the monotonous narrative of capitalistic, pornographic, idolatrous replication, in favour of becoming an immoderate, unstable, unreasonable/a-rational, Queer divinity with 'multiple embraces and sexual indefinities' (2003, 57).

As a Weilian Gravity Well, Narcissus' Mirror traps us in the World and prevents us from rising up to GOD/DE. The Mirror is not Thin, is not *metaxu*, since the World that it reflects back to us occludes the view of a Queer, Multiplicitous, Protean GOD/DE we might otherwise perceive. Similarly, the genderedness that we see in a rigid binary system is a Mirror view, blocking us from seeing that the Protean genderedness that Robin's experiences manifest is in fact true for genderedness as a whole. For Robin's story is not one of a mainstream gender trajectory; it does, I believe, highlight the point argued in Chapter 1 that genderedness rarely demonstrates categorical and consistent alignment of all gender aspects with one binary metagender option; genderedness, like the Queer God, is complex and

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<sup>49</sup> Schneider characterises the multiplicity of GOD/DE as first and foremost fluid and mutable (2008, 154), and also porous, interconnected, open, streaming, reforming, responding, shapeshifting, heterogeneous and temporal (ibid, 162-164). These are not, however, to be seen as merely abstract characteristics, person cautions, but as drawn from actual, bodied experiences (ibid, 10). Like the shy, metamorphic sea-god, the multiplicity of GOD/DE is inextricably linked to water: it is, for example a concept that require sea-legs to think it through (ibid, 144); it might slip its moorings if we do not pay attention (ibid, 165); it leaks through the interstices of the logic of the One (ibid, 1-2).

unruly, disorders the law, and proves no more stable than heterosexuality itself. If, as Lee contends, the whole of reality is Protean, then our genderedness, as part of reality, is Protean in its turn; and in gender as in everything else, there is no more worthwhile a human endeavour than hunting Proteus.

The World we see in the Mirror is necessarily the World past—since the future is opaque to us—and is thus also necessarily idolatrous, since the past is fixed in a way that the future is not. Hence, to rely on Great Beasts from the past to define our concepts of gender and of GOD/DE, such as the cocksureness of the notion that ‘male and female created He them’ in His image and after to His likeness (KJV Genesis 1: 26-27), is to view both gender and GOD/DE in the Mirror of Narcissus, as immature, duplicitous, pornographic and idolatrous reflections from the past rather than immoderate, unstable, unreasonable Protean possibilities opening out into the future.

However, we must remember that neither Protean, nor Queer, nor Multiplicitous, *is* GOD/DE; each is simply one more metaphorical model for Æ who is beyond all descriptions. Indeed, Schneider cautions against reifying the metaphor of multiplicity and setting it in a binary opposition with unicity; the multiplicity of GOD/DE is both mutability and finitude, limit and possibility (2008, 137), a divine that remains both irreplaceable singularity and unbounded variety. Furthermore,

the ‘logic of multiplicity’, in the centrality it affords to each inexchangeable individual life, does not lightly dismiss the ‘sanity-producing value’ of collectivities that unite us (ibid, 199), provided that we always remember that those collectivities are temporary, provisional and context-dependent and that ‘trouble comes when the temporary gets mistaken for the permanent’ (ibid, 202). However, Schneider holds that ‘[t]he stories we tell of [the Divine]...form the fabric of imagination about what is possible for us in this world that God so loves’ (ibid, 207). Therefore, in naming the Divine, the metaphors we use for GOD/DE must be carefully considered, lest, as Weil contends, we set up ‘something imaginary under the name of God’ (2002 [1952], 56), an idolatrous Great Beast of an ideology that reflects in its Mirror a loveless and unlovely World, an *ersatz* of a loveless and unlovely GOD/DE, forgetting that

Love is impatient.  
It ignores traditions and conventions.  
It is not bound by human constructs, jurisprudence, and the laws of men.  
Love reaches out and holds, open hearted, it demands attention.  
It is in a world of its own, yet it connects worlds that will forever be set apart. (from Zephaniah 2007)

### ***Summary***

Any description of GOD/DE can only ever be provisional and conjectural; lest we stumble into unitary doctrinal orthodoxy, therefore, we would be wise to hedge around ÆR Protean characteristics with ‘mights’ and ‘mays’. Because Protean GOD/DE is opaque, has both a back and an excluded face, we can come to no hasty

conclusions about ÆR; ÆR story is longer than we can ever know, and we always join it in the middle, knowing little of what has passed and nothing of what is to come. However, if we take seriously George Fox's question 'What canst thou say?', then we must attempt some conclusions, however provisional and conjectural they may be.

We might, therefore, say that Protean GOD/DE is a Divinity who resists capture, who becomes the more mutable the harder we struggle to fix ÆR. Indeed the Protean, as a continuous Baconian 'moment of creation, charged with divine energies', might reveal a GOD/DE who has no need of fixing, *cannot* in fact be fixed, in any sense of the word. Darting and teasing, this may be a GOD/DE who presses the limits of our understanding, momentarily taking form only to dissolve into something new under the pressure of our grasp, ever elusive and fluctuating and needing a light touch in order that ÆR transcendent, alien divinity, ÆR complete marginality, be maintained. Such an alien GOD/DE might reveal that our own alien loves, irregular groupings and fluid alliances can be more productive than dogmatic adhesions to unitary doctrinal orthodoxies. Æ might lead us to understand ÆR through the multiplicative specificities of stories that in no way resemble our own, through quotidian experiences that might seem foreign to us but are nevertheless utterly and inarguably *imago Dei*. Thus, even the rakehell might prove to be in this frivolous, unruly, impolite, slovenly, disreputable GOD/DE's image. Althaus-Reid

offers us the prospect of a Sodomite GOD/DE, whose loving nature scandalises a degenerate and hypocritical Good Opinion because it is freed from the purely reproductive strictures of T-Theology to engage in pleasure in ‘multiple combinations and exchanges’ (2003, 88), loving for the sake of love alone; as Weil puts it, loving as an emerald is green (1970, 129).

Protean GOD/DE might then be a manoeuvrable GOD/DE, steering ÆRSELF and us through undecideable waters in a boat with holes, a GOD/DE with fuzzy and permeable borders. Seemingly irresponsible, Æ might be concerned less with moral and ethical consistency than with moral and ethical responsiveness, a GOD/DE who reveals that one size cannot fit all, that what is sauce for the goose may be poison for the gander. Æ might poise, circling round, refusing to tip the scales in favour of one side or the other, preferring lively balance over a deadening decisiveness, reflecting no unicity, scripturally, dogmatically or ecclesiologically.

However, this GOD/DE, who confounds at every turn our childish need for certainty, might also appear as murky and chaotic, a GOD/DE whose incoherence and unintelligibility might bewilder us unless we pay constant, Weilian attention. This stranger at the gates might resemble not at all the God-who-changes-not that we have been led to expect, for Æ is inassimilable, always beyond the margins of our circle, excessive, boundaryless, and unreasonable. Protean GOD/DE might be what

we encounter when, like Robin, all the boundaries we take for granted fall apart. And so, like Robin, perhaps, we need to put in some really sustained growth work on our spiritual core, examining our unitary doctrinal orthodoxies and rejecting the ‘crappy’ beliefs that no longer deliver justice for the unintelligible. Attention to Protean GOD/DE might ward against the Narcissan Mirror’s stagnant, immature fantasies and dead ends, the idolatrous icy images reflected back from a glaciated once-upon-a-time. Instead *Æ* might offer us an unreasonable Grace that unsticks us from our certainties, freeing our attention from the Well of Gravity to soar upwards and outwards to the potential futures flashing into being before our eyes, outrunning the straight course, hunting Proteus, seeking the transcendent, a concept I examine in greater detail in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

# SOL: TRANSCENDENT EMBODIMENTS AND AN APOPHASIS OF GENDER

### *Introduction*

This chapter engages with the text of Sol's story and especially with the contradictions apparent therein. I begin, as before, with an extended pen portrait; this deals mainly with Sol's experiences of genderedness and the two rather different stories person tells. These lead me to discuss the nature of contradiction as a quotidian experience and to Simone Weil's particular attraction to contradiction and paradox; Weil does not try to rationalise these away, but rather embraces them and makes them integral to per thinking, saying we should use contradictions as 'pincers' with which to 'grasp the truth beyond' (2002 [1952], 121). I suggest that, viewed as Weilian pincers, Sol's contradictory narratives shed light on the nature of GOD/DE as  $\text{Æ}$  who has, according to Althaus-Reid, as noted in the previous chapter, both a back and an excluded face, an opaque GOD/DE to whom there is far more than meets the eye. Expanding on this concept of opacity, I deploy Judith Butler's contention (2005) that opacity is a necessary aspect of the self to which none of us is immune and which requires an ethical response. I develop the concept of opacity as it is expressed in a number of other disciplines and then, following the lead of theologian Catherine Keller (2008; 2010), demonstrate that there are strong

correlations between Butler's concept of opacity and the theological practice of negative theology, touched upon in Chapters 1 and 2, correlations that are supported by Sol's quotidian experiences.

Reading apophaticism as a strategy to preserve the otherness of GOD/DE from idolatry by preserving ÆR opacity, ÆR unintelligibility, I consider the concept of transcendence and the legitimate concerns thea/ologies have had with its above-and-beyond tendency to erase bodies in the here-and-now, particularly the bodies of women, the poor and the queer. I contend that the thea/ologies of immanence that have arisen in response to these concerns are themselves not unproblematic and note that there are also feminist voices raised in support of transcendence. I go on to consider two of these voices in detail: Mayra Rivera's *The Touch of Transcendence* (2007); and Rebekah Miles's *The Bonds of Freedom* (2001). In concert with these accounts, I assert that, rather than being expressive of an unattainable above-and-beyond, transcendence might be better read as indicative of the opacity of both GOD/DE and ourselves, and contend that Sol's contradictory narratives, inasmuch as they demonstrate the Butlerian 'primary opacity of the self' that is in all of us, also demonstrate an embodied transcendence, the otherness of GOD/DE invisibly visible in Sol's here-and-now. Furthermore, I argue that notions of opacity and apophasis might also be applied positively to genderedness, whilst not ignoring how such a consideration might be problematic to those among us, like Sol, for whom binary

gender has meaning and value. I conclude by suggesting, however, that we might challenge some of the Great Beasts of unitary doctrinal orthodoxy by attempting to live without a why, by learning how (not) to speak either of GOD/DE, self or gender, through a practice of Opaquing, of positively embracing the ethical importance of acknowledging that neither GOD/DE nor human is ultimately intelligible.

### ***Sol: A Round Trip to Hell***

Sol was born in a small Cornish town in the 1950s. Person was judged l-female<sup>1</sup> at birth and thus assigned a Female metagender but knew for certain from a very early age that person was f-male: *'I've never had any feeling of myself as not being male, not since age four'* (226-230)<sup>2</sup>. As a result of this, person has recently undergone gender reassignment surgery to confirm per metagender as Male.

Firm in per self-identity as f-male, person refused normal p-girl behaviour from childhood, stating that person had *'never played with dolls or did any girly things'* (16-21), preferring marks of p-maleness like *'trousers and what-have-you'* (45). This firm assertion of per f-gender to per parents from a very early age seems to have

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<sup>1</sup> To briefly recapitulate the gender aspects detailed in Chapter 1: l-gender (looks-like) refers to physical characteristics; f-gender (feels like) is about an inner sense of gender identity; p-gender (performs like) is the 'drag' we put on to give ourselves the appearance of one of the two available options; and j-gender (judged as) is about how other people respond to us and how that impacts on our gendered being in the world. The four aspects together form metagender.

<sup>2</sup> As with previous chapters, I have attached line numbers to direct quotes from the interview text. The relevant verbatim transcription sections of Sol's interview are in Appendix 3.

assured per j-maleness with them: *'My parents were absolutely fine about that, so they just treated me as I wanted to be treated from the start'* (22-28).

And this j-male affirmation by adults spread beyond the immediate family into the wider community in which Sol was growing up:

*Everyone accepted me as an odd boy. I remember once I was helping my dad in his garage, and when my dad said, well, actually that's a girl, one of the mechanics said, no, no, it's definitely a boy, kind of accepting (which was quite nice for me) that I was definitely a boy. And that's really what my parents and local people tend to do* (62-79).

Once person was sent to school however, Sol's p-male behaviour did not elicit the same unquestioning j-male affirmation:

*It wasn't a problem until I went to school but then of course it was, because on my first day there I said I was really a little boy until I'd had an operation that made me look like a girl<sup>3</sup>, and I was teased non-stop after that, cos everybody used to shout in the playground that I'd fallen into a muddy puddle and turned into a girl. It was absolutely horrible* (29-41).

Sol's assertion that person was born l-male but had been intervened upon to become l-female was accepted by per classmates, but only partially. In their judgement, it was not a clean and clinical operation but this down-and-dirty fall into a muddy

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<sup>3</sup> The operation in this case is a fiction Sol constructs to explain per p-maleness to classmates who 'know' per to be Female; it does not refer to per later gender reassignment surgery that affirms per as l-male.

puddle, reminiscent of Enid Blyton's story of the little black doll<sup>4</sup>, that had effected the change.

School then became a site of torment and humiliation for Sol. And if primary school was '*absolutely horrible*', secondary school was much worse:

*And at secondary school it was absolute hell on earth, because I went to a girls' secondary school, which was unmitigated hell. From the time I started to develop, at the point of puberty, I'd be wearing a body stocking to correct and impress my chest and so on, but kids would hang over the toilet cubicles when I got undressed to go for a pee—even now that gives me kind of wrench in my chest. I didn't develop much, thank heavens, but it was just awful, absolutely awful (86-106).*

As it does for many trans people, puberty for Sol marked a time of terrible trial. Despite per certainty in per f-maleness, per l-female body thrust itself insistently into per life. In something of an understatement, Sol says '*it all gets a bit sad here*' (125), as the pressures of l-gender from within per body and j-gender from without resulted in psychiatric intervention. For Sol, a deeply devout Christian from early childhood, an already complex situation was made more so by per deepening sense of a vocation to the priesthood:

*I first went to a psychiatrist with this gender problem when I was 15, and it was thought to be because I couldn't get to be a priest, that I was having gender reassignment so I could go into the Church. But it was real of course—the gender thing came first. So they just sort of accepted...And I was diagnosed with....No, they diagnosed it first as*

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<sup>4</sup> In Blyton's (in)famous story (1965) the doll is scorned and derided for being black, until person falls into a puddle and the blackness washes off per, making per acceptably pink and 'pretty'.

*childhood schizophrenia, and then it changed into this trying to get into the Church, which it wasn't. Basically y'know I just said I was a guy and they said 'you're not', and I said 'well I am', and they kept saying 'you're not', and I was thought to be delusional, which I think it was a common enough diagnosis then (126-152).*

In this diagnosis, j-gender trumped f-gender in the worst possible way, as Sol's 'gender problem' was interpreted first as a psychiatric disorder (mad) and then as a ruse to gain entry to the all-male domain of the priesthood (bad).

University, however, provided Sol with the first opportunity to live as person wished:

*While I was at university it was better because I became very, very, very much into my stuff—I got into it and had a kind of as far a male life as I could get without having any sort of therapy for it (166-175).*

Finally Sol transitioned physically from l-female to l-male and found a spiritual home as a member of an intentional community, in a p-male role that now provides per with a deep sense of both stability and worth. As far as Sol is concerned, person is now fully the Man person wishes to be, comfortable in per l-gender, a useful and productive human being, and unreservedly accepted as j-male in per worship communities:

*I was just neurotic as hell, but now I'm not riddled with agoraphobia and I don't have any problems going out. Even the hospital said 'oh, this appears to be a sort of complete cure of anything which might have been psychologically wrong, so it was obviously just the gender which was creating all your difficulties'. So the community are*

*actually delighted that this has happened for me and that I'm so useful and productive and helpful (193-209).*

*The thing I was most worried about was the community, but people were so sort of thankful to God for the result that I went from being as neurotic as hell to being absolutely fine (295-304).*

Sol sums up per experiences thus:

*I suppose I've been through the process of disintegration and reintegration in my own body, and so I can see it as a holy sort of process of reintegration through the round trip to hell, possibly. Yes, that's about it (409-415).*

This is the first narrative theme in Sol's story, a type of Fall and Redemption narrative. I do not mean to suggest here that there was something sinful in Sol's gender problem that brought about per expulsion from per childhood Eden, or rather that the 'sin' is not Sol's. However, expelled person surely was, through no fault of per own. An idyllic childhood of total, almost unquestioning acceptance was abruptly curtailed by the intervention of school, and a descent into '*absolute hell on earth*' is the result. Gradually, though, by continuing to assert per self-identity despite the adverse judgement of authority figures, Sol emerged from the depths into a position of inward and outward acceptance, and thus the trip to hell becomes a Round Trip, a there-and-back-again experience, a return to the acceptance of childhood but with the knowledge and experiences of an adult.

Running alongside this Round Trip to Hell, however, is another theme that I identify as Sol's Contradiction narrative. In this, statements in the Round Trip that appear to be absolute are contradicted by others, equally absolute. For example, Sol's assertion that primary school was '*absolutely horrible*' is immediately followed by this rather different description:

*Having said that, at the weekends I was fine cos I could wear trousers and what-have-you. And I did make friends with boys and joined the boys' groups, so I was a kind of honorary boy and, even though I was teased by girls, the boys were fine with me, so junior school wasn't too bad actually (44-52).*

Similarly, some of Sol's recollections seem to undercut per understanding of unquestioning j-male affirmation from per parents, as attempts were made to elicit p-female behaviour from their child:

*There was one nasty episode when I was made to wear a bonnet which I tore up [laughing]. And they bought a doll once and I gave it away or I probably threw it somewhere (250-261).*

Furthermore, what is characterised as parental acceptance in some parts of the story comes across more as resignation in others:

*They never worried about my gender expression just cos they learned quickly, I suppose, that it wasn't any good trying to (274-276).*

In response to my question: 'I've heard quite a few people describe transition as a spiritual journey; is that what it feels like for you?' Sol replies '*no, not really; erm, I wish I could say it was*' (320-324). Yet it is hard, as a listener, to hear per description

of a *'holy sort of process of reintegration through...the round trip to hell'* as not having some kind of spiritual content. Moreover, there are seeming contradictions in Sol's assessment of the importance of per *'gender problem'* in per relationship with GOD/DE. At one point, for example, person says:

*I used to confess it regularly year in, year out, and even after transition I still find it necessary to confess it, in case it was against the will of God (that was what someone said when I was trying to get ordination, that it was contrary to the mind of God; I dunno how they know it). And now I've just stopped confessing it. Surgery's over and everything but I still only just stopped confessing it about two years back; I still sometimes think, I wonder if I've done something hugely sinful (340-362).*

And yet shortly afterwards person concludes, *'Perhaps gender doesn't matter much in my relationship with God; it doesn't, I don't think'* (386-389).

## ***Contradiction***

### **Contradictory Narratives**

In the crisis of representation, contradiction is a common occurrence, as we try to make sense of our experiences to our listeners. As Dan McAdams observes:

I know that not everything people tell me is important, and that some of what they say may function merely to make them 'look good' in my eyes. I also know that there is much that will remain untold, no matter how successful our interview or how intimate our rapport (1993, 20).

That said, the point of collecting stories for research purposes is to reflect on them, inconsistent though we know them to be, and to attempt to draw from them insights

that we can share with others. However, the prospect of imposing upon a story, *Sol's* story, decisions as to what is 'important' and what functions 'merely to make [Sol] look good', what is, in effect, the 'truth' of Sol's story, should make us deeply uncomfortable, for who are we to decide the truth of another person's tale: 'Any one of those is a possible narrative, but of no single one can I say that it alone is true' (Butler 2005, 37-38). This being the case, then, how might we approach contradiction in a theological, not to say ethical manner, as a resource to assist us rather than a problem to vex us? If we consider again the metaphors of Thin and Thick in this context, or the Protean, any of these might prove to be applicable: contradictions might be read as indicative of Thinness, of seeing through one narrative into the other; or we might read them as Thick, the lack of consistency signalling an occlusion of Sol's story; or, in the oscillation between the two themes, we might detect a Protean mutability. However, since I am committed to the specificity of each story, rather than the repetition of previous themes, I find another starting point for my metaphoricising in Weil's embrace of contradiction and paradox.

## **Weil and Contradiction**

Contradiction and paradox abound in, and indeed are central to, Weil's thought. Contradiction, Weil says, is nothing less than reality itself (2002 [1952], 98) and apprehension of contradictions is of the greatest spiritual importance: 'When the

attention has revealed the contradiction in something on which it has been fixed, a kind of loosening takes place. By persevering in this course we attain [spiritual detachment] (ibid). Weil contends that an insistence on absence of contradiction is a form of reification or idolatry, a nailing down of that which should be unattached, a tribute paid to the Great Beast. Everything that is truly good, that is of GOD/DE, holds within it contradictoriness and impossibility, attention to which is attention to Divine good and a generator of new insight (Howe 2008, 39). To illustrate per concept of contradiction, Weil uses a metaphor of mountain climbing: lower down the mountain, one might see a lake while, higher up, the lake is out of view and a forest is visible instead. Human eyes may only see one thing or the other while lower down the mountain but, by rising up (and here person means both by moving towards GOD/DE and by seeing from GOD/DE's perspective), a view of both is possible (2002 [1952], 99). This 'unifying grasp of contradictory ideas', person says, is an 'approach to God' (ibid, 100) and goes on: 'We have to elucidate the ways contradictories have of being true. Method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what ways the contrary is true' (ibid, 102).

Weil describes contradiction as 'pincers' that we should use to grasp at the higher truth (2002 [1952], 121). Contradictory truths inevitably coexist unresolved in the sphere of the material that Weil calls Gravity; this we must accept and acknowledge. It is only in the sphere of the supernatural that their resolution or dissolution is

possible and will result in knowledge of a higher truth. Contradiction should, therefore, be willingly embraced (Nye 1994, 60). Indeed, Weil's embrace of the inevitability of contradiction is so total that it becomes not merely an intellectual discipline but an 'approach to the nature of being' (Baker 2006, 136). As such, Weil's method is not to construct common denominators by ignoring inconsistencies, by setting aside that which does not fit, but rather to grasp the inconsistencies and work with them, taking a path that goes not directly from premise to conclusion but wanders obliquely from one idea to the next by way of apparently tenuous connections (Nye 1994, 124-125). This method holds true to the demands of an intellectual honesty that requires us not to 'smooth over and ignore the contradictions inherent in human life' (ibid, 59). Weil refuses the stability and consistency that Christianate thought valorises, instead giving value to 'the continual presence of reversals and contradictions..., even within the "solutions" to problems of the human condition' a move which prefigures many of the concerns of postmodernism (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998, 35).

Weil's apparent logical inconsistencies demonstrate per determination to show relationships 'among supposedly discrete entities' (ibid, 31), a tendency that is wholly consonant with her refusal to set boundaries of social, spiritual or intellectual convention around either ideas or people. This 'tentative...open-ended, enquiring, probing' (McLellan 1991, 191), 'fragmentary, open, eclectic, sometimes

ambiguous...interdisciplinary [and] idiosyncratic' (Hermsen 1999, 184) method of inquiry produces a rich and complex world view in which 'all is questioned and nothing is answered..., [where] truth is always concealed and yet the search for revelation is absolute'<sup>5</sup> (Baker 2006, 146). At the core of Weil's thought are two questions: 'Why should the truth not be impossible? Why should the impossible not be true?' (Carson 2002, 201). Contradictions and paradoxes are not to be resolved by logic or by will, but rather through a concentrated act of attention, 'the patient holding in the mind of seemingly incompatible truths' (Nye 1994, 60) which creates *metaxu*, a 'threshold to a mystical revelation of the divine' (Cosgrove 2008, 355).

### **Contradiction as Quotidian Experience**

One of the most vexing contradictions in Divine nature is the so-called 'problem of evil', of how it is that evil comes into existence if GOD/DE is omnipotent, omniscient, creator of all that is and, most particularly, wholly loving and good. Logic dictates that if evil exists, then one of the traditional attributes of GOD/DE—loving goodness, creation, omnipotence or omniscience—must be false. Since Christian orthodoxy holds that all of these attributes must be true and since evil evidently does exist, theologians have attempted explain away the resultant

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<sup>5</sup> Having said that, Weil was, as Abosch (1994, 126) and Fiedler (2009 [1951], viii) point out, famously inflexible and 'notoriously without doubt' (Abosch 1994, 10): even when person had changed per mind about something, person was as categorically for per new point of view as person had been for per previous one. Abosch therefore judges per to have been a fanatic (ibid, 133) and guilty of totalitarianism (ibid, 126). In my opinion, however, Weil simply lived the contradictory nature of reality that per thought seeks to describe.

'problem of evil' by recourse to various theodicies (e.g. McGrath 1997, 263-267). Such attempts to 'solve' the problem of evil, to apply a unifying grasp to these contradictory ideas, have given rise to equally problematic conclusions. The original sin theodicy, for example, has led to two thousand years of oppression for women, thea/ologians consistently argue. Clearly 'the existence of evil' and 'the God of love' are contradictory narratives and it is our habit to attempt to resolve contradictory narratives by proving that one of the two is false.

In Sol's quotidian experiences, however, we see an example of a contradictory narrative embodied. Sol sees per experiences now one way, now another, apparently without feeling that either narrative is a 'lie', even though a listener might find it difficult to determine what is actually 'true'. In order to resolve our confusion, we might decide to dismiss one set of utterances in favour of the other, taking, for example, the Contradiction narrative as evidence of, say, some unresolved internal conflict, or some desire to fulfill a societal norm, or some unexpressed negative emotion, hidden truths that thus undermine the Round Trip to Hell rendering it, if not wholly false, then at the very least suspect. In effect we would sanctify aspects of the Contradiction narrative and demonise the Round Trip, setting the two in a competition which the one must win and the other lose. This is what happens in a theodicy; the two conflicting narratives of 'the existence of evil' and 'the God of love' are set in competition, with the winner determined in advance, and the

theodicy constructed to justify the outcome. Theodicies are constructed to sustain the status of 'the God of love' narrative as normal while pathologising the 'existence of evil' narrative.

However, if we accept that contradictory narratives might co-exist without the need to pathologise one in order to normalise the other, using Sol's quotidian experiences as an example of this actually being played out in the World, then we might no longer need to explain away the pathological narrative, no longer need to force one narrative to lose in order that the other might win. Applying Sol's experience of contradiction as Weilian pincers to the problem of Evil, we reach a point where, instead of having to work to explain away the existence of evil, for example, we would merely deal with the consequences of that existence, adopting what Starhawk describes as a 'beer-can principle' (1997, 33) for addressing the consequences of evil, in which it matters not who dropped the beer-can but rather that someone picks it up and disposes of it. Viewed as Weilian pincers, Sol's contradictory narratives become not a problem for us to interpret away, but *metaxu* to the utter complexity of GOD/DE that makes it impossible adequately to account for the existence of evil. Sol lives a complicated story through which we might glimpse a limitlessly complicated GOD/DE, a Queer GOD/DE who, to refer back to the previous chapter, has both 'a back' (Althaus-Reid 2003, 16) and an unintelligible 'excluded face' (ibid, 153), an opaque GOD/DE, to whom there is far more than meets the eye.

## *Opacity*

### **Judith Butler on Opacity**

Cynthia Gayman, in her 2010 work *An Ethical Account of the Self Who Might Be Otherwise*, draws links between Weil's theo-philosophy and Judith Butler's recent work on ethics, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). In this, Gayman concerns herself with Weil's apparently contradictory assertion that there is a part of each of us that is unknowable to ourselves: 'My 'I' is hidden for me (and for others); it is on the side of God, it is in God, it is God' (2002 [1952], 38). Analogously, Butler asserts that:

there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no 'I' that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning. (2005, 7)

Echoing her earlier work on gender, Butler concludes that our formative histories orchestrate and limit the selves we are able to express and, moreover, the selves that are intelligible to others as legitimately human: 'what I can "be", quite literally, is constrained by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being' (ibid, 22).

This being the case, Butler argues, although we are required to account ethically and morally for our actions, a full, unequivocal, incorrigible account is impossible. We

are, body and mind, launched at birth into a world of pre-existent norms that shape us in ways we can never fully comprehend; we cannot but contradict ourselves since we cannot see the back of our own story any more than we can see the back of GOD/DE. Butler thus deems us *opaque*, both to ourselves and to others, an opacity that is inherent in the human condition; a 'primary opacity of the self' is 'built into our formation' (ibid, 20). However, though we are foreign to ourselves, this unintelligibility can function as 'the source of [our] connection with others' (ibid, 84) since we are all linked by our opacity, by our intrinsic inability fully to account for ourselves, and we must consider the ethical value of establishing relationality 'where no common ground can be assumed' (ibid, 21).

There is violence, Butler declares, in a normative view that requires a stable and transparent self-identity, since this encourages us to 'purge and externalize [our] own opacity' by judging and condemning the inconsistencies of others (ibid, 46). When we judge, we fail fully to recognise the opacity of another, imposing our own values where they are not applicable and reducing the other person to a thing. Rather than insisting that, in order for me to recognise you as also intelligible, you must be able to give me a satisfactorily intelligible and watertight account of yourself, we must 'revise recognition as an ethical project, [seeing] it as, in principle, unsatisfiable' (ibid, 43): we will only deal with each other ethically when we recognise that no intelligible account will ever be forthcoming. Accepting this might

engender a nonviolent response, 'a certain patience with others that would suspend the demand that they be self-same at every moment' (ibid, 42), the kind of patience we offer to Sol's story when we view per contradictions as pincers rather than problems. By embracing opacity in ourselves and others, we might thus shape an ethical system based on 'our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves'<sup>6</sup> (ibid, 41).

In addition to addressing the ethical issue of recognition, an embrace of opacity encourages a critique of the very norms from which our opacity arises. When we, as individuals, find ourselves at odds with the Great Beast that the norms represent, this becomes 'the inaugural experience of morality' (ibid, 9), as we critique the forces that orchestrate and limit us. In a willingness to unpick ourselves even a little from the normative fabric into which we are born, we risk unintelligibility, to be sure, but the risk might be worth it if, in recrafting ourselves 'with and for another, [we] participate in the remaking of social conditions' (ibid, 135), bringing new ways of being intelligibly human into the world:

Ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human (ibid, 136).

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<sup>6</sup> Butler is careful to note, however, that an embrace of opacity does not thus sanction irresponsibility: 'If the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself, it is not thereby licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its obligations to others' (2005, 19-20). The fact that I can never fully account for my actions does not permit me to act in any way I choose and claim opacity as my 'get out of jail free' card.

## Other Views on Opacity

Opacity is not, of course, a concept unique to Butler, and some consideration of additional commentators will expand upon and complement per account. Gillian McBride (2003), for example, employs the notion of opacity to critique ideas of self-transparency in relation to the politics of presence<sup>7</sup>. Arguing contra standpoint theory, McBride concludes that opacity renders the view that ‘I am my own best interpreter’ (ibid, 292) questionable, and suggests that, rather than valorising our own position, ‘a measure of humility in the light of [our] own finite nature’ is to be recommended, since it is always possible that someone else may better interpret our experiences than we ourselves.

Anthropologist Rupert Stasch addresses the topic in relation to ethical claims based on ‘not presuming to know others’ minds’ (2008, 450). These claims, asserts Stasch, are as much concerned with preserving others’ rights to self-determination, to ‘knowing their own minds’ and to not making assumptions or judgements, as they are to asserting the incomprehensibility of others. As such, one might consider them to be a form of tolerant acceptance of actions that are not necessarily explicable, reminiscent of Butler’s contention that opacity breeds patience.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Politics of presence’ signals an approach to dialogue-centred politics that supposes a more democratic outcome is achieved by the inclusion of the standpoints of hitherto marginalised groups.

Mikhail Bakhtin had definite views about the oppositional nature of the transparent and the opaque (Garvey 2000). Contra Habermas, who argued that the more transparent a word, the more undistorted the communication of its meaning, Bakhtin asserted that clarifications of meaning halt 'the process of historical becoming in which a word is constantly engaged' (ibid, 377), in effect reifying the word. As opaque, with meanings unfixed and open to constant reinterpretation, words support personal autonomy:

A word is always 'half someone else's'. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adopting it to his own semantic and expressive interior<sup>8</sup> (378).

Although it may seem counterintuitive to acknowledge myself as partially incomprehensible, as McBride points out no personal growth or change is possible without opacity (2003, 229). If we were truly self-transparent, our first impressions on any topic would be our only impressions and we would remain in infancy; the reflexive process of 'drafting and redrafting could never take place' (ibid). Thus, opacity is wholly necessary to human development. This is true not only of individuals but also of social and political systems; since no individual experience is

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<sup>8</sup> Transparency, on the other hand, is never neutral but rather a facet of ideological control, a tool of the Great Beast; in order to clarify the meaning of words, political decisions are made about meaning that are not to be allowed, as contradictions and variations are removed in order to support the dominant ideological interests. Transparency is thus 'inseparable from the forces that purge...subversive...meanings' (Garvey 2000, 380).

beyond reinterpretation, there is no unassailably correct political or social position, guaranteed to be beyond critique. Edwin Laursen supports the notion that opacity, 'the gift of *not* perceiving directly, of *not* automatically believing what we are experiencing', encourages personal and social critique by 'mak[ing] it possible for us to question our first-person perspectives' (2011, 111).

Commentators also employ the concept of opacity negatively. Habermas, as was mentioned above (Garvey 2000), much favoured transparency over opacity in human communication. Jane Kopas notes 'a modern bias against what cannot be clearly explained or exposed to the light...[and] a long history of associating darkness with evil and negativity' (1994, 63). In this vein, Jaci Maraschin makes use of the concept in a critique of 'the opaque and obscure world of modernity [where] it is convenient not to think' (1998, 187), where people experience opacity as a 'deep disenchantment' occasioned by globalisation, censorship and the dumbing down of culture (ibid, 188). And Webb Keane raises the idea that opaque minds might be keeping secrets, a factor that has ethical implications for political engagement, since 'the capacity to keep something hidden would be seen as a source of power' (2008, 478).

Notwithstanding these concerns, however, opacity has positive ethical potential. By adopting a strategy of what I call Opaquing, we approach apparently contradictory

stories such as Sol's with nonjudgemental openness, patience, tolerance, nonviolence and humility, similar to Weil's tentative, open-ended, probing method of inquiry where all is questioned and nothing is answered. We acknowledge with Sol our shared, invariable and partial blindness about ourselves, not presuming to know another's mind but taking responsibility for our own actions even when we cannot fully account for them. We acknowledge too the lack of fixity in self and society that opens the World out to constant reinterpretation and undermines reification and idolatry. We cannot become aware of our own opacity without also owning the orchestrating and limiting norms out of which it arises, like the Great Beast of assigned gender which Sol rejects. This gives us the potential to critique those norms and grow beyond them, individually and collectively, into a recrafted future. Thus, we may be confident of the ethical significance of opacity. What follows addresses its theological resonances.

## ***Apophaticism***

### **Opacity and Apophaticism**

Theologian Catherine Keller links Butler's analysis of opacity to the notion of apophasis (2008; 2010), or negative theology, a discipline that seeks to highlight the transcendence of Divinity, the utter, irreducible difference of GOD/DE from the World. In the apophatic tradition, GOD/DE is affirmed as 'what is on the other side of anything at all we can be conscious of, whether of its presence or of its absence'

(Turner 1995, 264), as  $\text{\AE}$  who ‘overflows and blinds our understanding’ (Rollins 2006, 22) and who can ‘never be completely mastered, and always has the capacity to surprise’ (Fiddes 2002, 36-37). Thus, when Butler asserts of opacity that ‘life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it’ (2005, 43), person might be said to be speaking of human opacity as a form of apophaticism, an argument I develop below.

According to Michael Sells (1994) *apophasis*, a word commonly understood to mean negation, is more properly translated as ‘un-saying or speaking-away’ (ibid, 2), and is paired with the term *kataphasis*, meaning ‘saying, speaking-with’ (ibid, 3). Apophaticism is a linguistic or discursive strategy, employed in the production of negative theology, which affirms the notion that GOD/DE is so far beyond human knowledge or understanding that anything whatever we say about  $\text{\AE}$ R must always immediately be contradicted or negated, said away or unsaid in favour of a new proposition that must in its turn be unsaid, *ad infinitum*.

The tradition has its beginnings in the Neoplatonism of Plotinus’ *Enneads*, and was developed in Late Antiquity and the Mediaeval by mystical writers such as Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, Marguerite Porete, the Beguines and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but interest in the tradition died out in the Early Modern (Sells 1994, 5). However, ‘the burgeoning of contemporary

languages of the unsayable' (ibid) in postmodernism, particularly in the work of Derrida, has led to a revival of interest in the earlier tradition (e.g. Davies and Turner 2002; Soskice 2002; Rivera 2007; Boesel 2010; Boesel and Keller 2010a; Keller 2010). In feminist theory, Irigaray has embraced the concept of apophatic mysticism to develop 'what might be called a negative theology of "woman"' (Priest 2003, 2; see also Stockton 1992; Gudmarsdottir 2010). Contemporary thinkers like Derrida and Irigaray, suggest Boesel and Keller, 'consider the possibility that apophasis may be good medicine for bodies threatened by concepts of "God" that also threaten the divine' (2010a, 6); in other words, a renewed interest in the power of unsaying offers a potential strategy to counterbalance the power of the Great Beast.

Denys Turner asserts that the central metaphors of apophatic theology in the Mediaeval tradition concerned inwardness, ascent, oneness with GOD/DE and lightness/darkness (1995, 1) or the 'cloud of unknowing'<sup>9</sup> (ibid, 4). In this study, it is with this last that I am most concerned. In my analysis, the dazzling darkness<sup>10</sup> of the cloud of unknowing is to the Divine what opacity is to the human, 'not...a naïve *pre-critical* ignorance...but...a kind of acquired ignorance..., a strategy and practice

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note, assert Denys Turner, that the cloud of unknowing does not represent the absence of GOD/DE, but rather a darkness filled with an excess of GOD/DEly light, a 'luminous darkness' (1995, 17-18). Furthermore, he contends that a 'mysticism of negative imagery', such as desert, silence, formlessness and abyss, does not constitute an apophatic theology, since each of these images represents a *something* rather than the *no-thing* towards which true apophatic utterances point (ibid, 35).

<sup>10</sup> The phrase 'dazzling darkness' is used frequently in writings about apophaticism and comes from Henry Vaughan's poem *Night*: 'There is in God, some say / A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here / Say it is late and dusky, because they / see not all clear' (Allison *et al.* 1970, 354).

of unknowing' (ibid, 10). Apophatic utterance is a 'breakdown of speech' (ibid, 20), an 'indefinite and open-ended...infinite regress' of meaning that constantly escapes us (Sells 1994, 15), speech of continuous contradiction that intends 'yes and no and yes again' (Johnson 1992, 115), 'ellipsis...and allusions to the hauntings of (un)wholeness' (Miller 2010, 47), 'a glimpse that cannot be maintained..., continual movement' (Sells 1994, 58) and a 'sidestepping' of certainty (Miller 2010, 58). Apophaticism evinces an 'agnosticism of definition..., the highest human knowledge of God [being] to know that we do not know'(Johnson 1992, 108); it is how (not) to speak of GOD/DE (Rollins 2006). Analogously, seeing a strategy of Opaquing as an acquired ignorance, a strategy and practice of unknowing, we also consider how (not) to speak of another person, 'how to speak of the other without speaking, how to make the ineffable present in language. without reducing it to the logic of that language' (Priest 2003, 14). Opaquing is how (not) to speak of Sol, how to embrace the contradictions in per story without applying our own judgement and reducing per to a thing.

The opacity of another human being does not, of course, preclude the establishment of dialogue. Indeed, Butler theorises that a more ethically productive and flourishing dialogue might result from a strategy of Opaquing. Analogously, the unsayability of GOD/DE does not preclude a relationship with GOD/DE through ÆR self-revelation. Though we cannot speak of GOD/DE, GOD/DE can still speak to us; to

insist that it is otherwise would be to place unwarranted limits on a limitless GOD/DE. But we must be clear that when GOD/DE reveals *ÆRSELF*, it is on *ÆR* terms, as a free event of grace. GOD/DE is always 'irreducibly Other, always *beyond* our grasp. But not beyond our touch' (Rivera 2007, 2). This notion is echoed in Weil:

A case of contradictories which are true. God exists. God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word (2002 [1952], 114).

### **Apophaticism as Fracture**

The starkness of Weil's contradictory assertion 'God exists. God does not exist' is shocking; and the value of contradiction as a technique of apophaticism is just this, that it 'shocks the mind' (Priest 2003, 11) by interfering with our expectations of language. However, the paradoxes and contradictions of apophatic language are not merely employed for the temporary shock value, which wears off once the contradiction has been resolved. As Weil asserts, the resolution of contradiction is a form of reification or idolatry and an homage to the Great Beast. Thus, rather than a temporary shock, apophaticism is 'an attempt to liberate [language], however momentarily, from the spatial and temporal idols [which are] monsters and abominations' (Sells 1994, 61). This insistence on the infinite regress of apophatic language, on the perpetual re-unsaying of GOD/DE's transcendent nature, is undertaken not simply to create a rich and complex metaphorical language for the Divine, but at its root to insist that GOD/DE is never reducible to a thing in the

World of things, ‘an attempt to confirm a transcendence beyond delimitation [that] prevents the deity from being reduced to what Eckhart calls “a this or a that”’ (ibid, 151). Apophatic language insistently reminds us that GOD/DE has no material ‘whatness’.

The fractured, anarchic language of apophaticism<sup>11</sup> leads us ‘off the boundary of language itself...into the brilliant darkness’ (Turner 2002, 20) of the GOD/DE with no whatness. Thus, it has as its purpose an ethical desire ‘to ‘save the name’ of God...from the always toxic consequences of [human] mastery’ (Boesel 2010, 309). In the Mediaeval, apophaticism was employed to ensure the ‘dethronement of *theological* idolatries’ [my emphasis] (Turner 2002, 14): now we might employ it in the dethronement of *all* idolatries, to critique *all* unitary doctrinal orthodoxies. Resonating with Butler’s recommendation of Opaquing as a nonviolent practice, Boesel contends that saving the name of God might be construed as ‘knowing and speaking without undue violence’ (2010, 326), a kind of knowing otherwise that saves not only ‘the Name’ but also ‘the neighbor’ (ibid) from the toxic consequences of imposing the judgements of the Great Beast on the opacity of others and of GOD/DE.

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<sup>11</sup> Lanzetta describes the apophatic as language which is ‘designed to break down linguistic coherence and structural logic’ (2005, 15), Turner as language that ‘bursts at the seams’ and ‘cracks open in order never again to close’ (2002, 32), and Sells as language continually splitting, fusing and shifting (1994, 24) and attempting to create ‘a moment that is ...‘anarchic’—without *arche* or first principle’ (ibid, 209).

Living with the fracture and contradiction that are evoked by both the apophatic and the opaque, 'groping in the dark...without assurances' (Maraschin 1998, 187), is not a comfortable or comforting experience. Contact with Weilian uncertainty might only serve to make us 'nervous and wretched' (Teuber 1982, 222). Rollins, however, declares that the fractured and contradictory nature of apophatic texts serves not only to protect GOD/DE but also to reminds us that we live similarly fractured and contradictory lives, that indeed fracture and contradiction are all we can hope for (2006, 13). As Weil observes, irresolvable contradiction is inherent in the sphere of Gravity. Once we embrace this as a 'space of knowledgeable ignorance' (Rollins 2006, 31), and recognise that limitation is our lot, we will be willing to become undone, as Butler puts it, willing to participate in the remaking of social conditions, willing to become human.

### **Thea/ologies and Apophaticism**

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson asserts that apophaticism is essential to save the name of GOD/DE from dominology (1992, 104). However, the mystical traditions of Late Antiquity and the Mediaeval from which our understandings of apophaticism derive are not unproblematic to thea/ologians. Specifically, traditional apophatic mysticisms, with their concentration on mystical union with a Wholly Other transcendent Divine, are criticised as self-absorbed, a/anti-political, a/anti-

ethical and a/anti-materialist (Rivera 2007), traits previously discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to renunciation.

The apparent renunciation of embodied experience in favour of being transcendentally out of body, of being above-and-beyond, is particularly problematic<sup>12</sup>. 'Transcendence smacks of indifference...in the face of the needs, desires, and sufferings of an embodied life' (Boesel and Keller 2010a, 3); if bodies are involved in mystical texts, they are ascetic bodies, schooled in denying desire, not necessarily evil or disgusting but certainly distractions from or obstructions to the transcendent (Keller 2010, 26). Mystical models that valorise a disembodied passivity over activity, renunciation over desire, silence over speech, and selflessness over self-assertion can rightly be seen as reinforcing oppressive dominological norms for women (Lanzetta 2005, 38). With their focus on the desirability of mystical union, of the self fully renounce and dissolved into the/an other, these texts might be seen to underline 'a self-defeating tendency in women to be overly determined by their external relationships' (Hughes 2010, 356), an assertion that echoes Saiving's arguments (1992 [1979]) discussed in Chapter 1. Furthermore, Sigridur Gudmarsdottir notes concerns that a strategy of unsaying threatens women as only-recently and still-not-unproblematically speaking subjects (2010, 283).

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<sup>12</sup> An extensive review of feminist objections to the languages of transcendence is not within the scope of this project. I have, therefore, limited my review to assessments of this phenomenon made within a sample of works of feminist writers on apophaticism.

Boesel contends that the mystical traditions of transcendence are problematic not only because they denigrate the material, but also because they evince epistemological privilege; in order to acquire knowledge of the nature of GOD/DE, the adherent must rise upwards through levels of experience. Knowledge thus attained is not available to the uninitiated, engendering a hierarchical divide. Because of this mystical texts might be seen as ‘unethical par excellence’ (Boesel 2010, 313) and, in addition, ‘dangerous’ (Hughes 2010, 350) and ‘hostile’ (Gudmarsdottir 2010, 275) to thea/ologies’ central concerns with subjectivity, agency, autonomy and embodiment. There is undoubtedly a problem with the mystical, apophatic tradition for thea/ologians, and that problem is transcendence.

## ***Transcendence***

### **Thea/ologies of Immanence**

The customary response to the problem of transcendence has been to develop thea/ologies of immanence, to insist that GOD/DE is present in the World and that ÆR presence is embodied in the experiences of Women, even that Women are, to a greater or lesser extent, Divine in and of themselves. Thus a binary is affirmed, a ‘contraposition of transcendence to immanence [that] is almost common sense’ (Rivera 2007, 35). Although commentators on apophaticism insist that the tradition expresses no radical separation between the transcendence of GOD/DE and ÆR immanent presence in the World, that ‘the truly transcendent can be known only

through its self-revelation as the absolutely immanent'<sup>13</sup> (Sells 1994, 149), it has become the habit of thea/ologians to dismiss the languages of transcendence in favour of the immanence of GOD/DE as articulated in Women's experiences, since they justly see that its lack in dominological Christianate traditions has fostered Women's oppression. A transcendent GOD/DE is a GOD/DE who is beyond us, a GOD/DE who renders the World if not wholly bad, then at least meaningless. And a transcendent Self, a primarily male self modeled on a GOD/DE beyond, is a self that gets above itself, that arrogates to itself the powers of a GOD/DE. Transcendence, in giving ultimate value to the above-and-beyond, is what put the World in peril; immanence, as a re-sacralising of the here-and-now, is what will save us.

A central problem of thea/ologies of immanence is the tendency they have to conflate Divine and human such that GOD/DE is not simply immanently present in embodied experiences of Women, but is seen as 'refer[ing] to an aspect of the self' (Miles 2001, 15). For example, 'Reading God's presence through the body'<sup>14</sup> of women is the writing of women's divinity in the world' (Lanzetta 2005, 157), while Women's bodies are 'honored...as living manifestations of the divine' (Hughes 2010, 357). Such appeals to women's 'self-deification' (Lanzetta 2005, 159) sound very much like idolatry, for, no matter how justified the desire to reclaim Women's

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<sup>13</sup> Turner similarly points out that the only access we have to the invisibility of GOD/DE is through the visible entities of the material world (1995, 253), while Rollins asserts that 'immanence and transcendence are one and the same point...because God remains concealed amidst revelation' (2006, 25).

<sup>14</sup> In Lanzetta's writing, Women only have one body to share between them all.

bodies from the dirt, there is no GOD/DE but GOD/DE, and to assign Divinity to any *body* is to place an unwarranted limit on the Illimitable and to reduce the Irreducible to a thing.

It is not that apophaticism regards bodies as not good, but rather that they, we, are not GOD/DE (Boesel and Keller 2010a, 4). Thus apophaticism insists on GOD/DE's transcendence not as set against humanity *per se*, but as set against the idolatry of assigning materiality to GOD/DE. Thus, thea/ologies are right to unsay the idolatry of GOD/DE-He, as Johnson recommends (1992); however, we must pay like attention to the idolatrous potential of GOD/DE-She, ensuring that none of our metaphors for GOD/DE assumes 'too cozy a relationship' (Boesel and Keller 2010a, 3-4) with  $\mathcal{A}E$  who must ever be affirmed as Not Us. Immanentist thea/ologies often fail to maintain the difference and distance that is between us and GOD/DE, attempting to 'impale'  $\mathcal{A}ER$  on a 'descriptive hook' (Turner 2002, 20) of Women's experience, subjectivity or embodiment.

### **Revaluing the Transcendent**

In reinstating apophaticism, as Johnson advises, as a method for critiquing the Great Beast and saving the name of both GOD/DE and neighbour from idolatry, may we then similarly recuperate transcendence from the above-and-beyond, or is it forever irredeemable to thea/ologies? What might the utterly immaterial, inexpressible

nature of GOD/DE have to do with bodies that matter, especially the dirty, defamed and disparaged bodies of the Others of the dominological Christianate corpus? And, if the recuperation of transcendence has any value at all, have Sol's opaque experiences anything to contribute? Might Sol be transcendent too?

Since the central problematic of the traditional language of transcendence is its dismissal of (Women's) bodies, a thea/ological re-visioning begins with an acknowledgement that transcendence and immanence are not and cannot be, in fact, radically separate, since the material is the only resource we have in which to encounter the immaterial, and the known the unknown: 'Our apophatic practices are funded by apophatic bodies, those infinite incarnations that continually conceal and disclose the divine' (Hughes 2010, 363). In our spiritual lives we are 'lured by the transitory that reveals the transcendent' (Sexson 1992, 1). Bodies and their experiences express the GOD/DE who is immanently present to us, indeed, but they also express the GOD/DE who transcends all matter. In saying this, however, are we recuperating transcendence or merely reiterating the insights of thea/ologies of immanence, that (Women's) bodies are not barred from embodying the sacred? Miles (2001), Lanzetta (2005), Rivera (2007), Hughes (2010) and Gudmarsdottir (2010) all note that, while transcendence is habitually problematised in thea/ologies,

there are those<sup>15</sup> who see great value in the concept and regret its repudiation by the feminist mainstream. Mayra Rivera's *The Touch of Transcendence* (2007) and *The Bonds of Freedom* by Rebekah Miles (2001), offer two extensive arguments for a feminist recuperation of transcendence.

### **Rivera and *The Touch of Transcendence***

As with the commentators above, Rivera (2007) notes the problematic traditional associations of transcendence with GOD/DE's aloftness, distance, separation, immateriality, beyond-normality, independence and superiority (ibid, 1). Person asserts that this model has encouraged a theo-philosophical tradition that both ignores and valorises human self-transcendence, that claims the magnificent, peaceful, clean above-and-beyond for a straight, white, male power elite, whilst at the same time assigning the lesser, dirtier, more painful realm of here-and-now to the Others—the women, the poor, the non-white, the Trans, the Queer. This 'tool of patriarchal and imperial self-legitimation' (ibid) has necessarily engaged thea/ologians in a recovery of the here-and-now in thea/ologies of Divine immanence. However, without the legitimate vision of the *Divine* difference that transcendence expresses, we cannot fully understand *interhuman* difference, Rivera argues (ibid, 128). Furthermore, the loss of transcendence 'tends to reduce creation to something that can be fully grasped by human constructs or reduced to categories

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<sup>15</sup> Among the cited writers who favour a notion of transcendence are Grace Jantzen, Amy Hollywood, Dorothee Soelle and Elizabeth Johnson.

within social systems' (ibid, 37): if GOD/DE is all immanence, what is left of GOD/DE for us (not) to speak?

'Wary and a bit weary' (ibid, 2) of the both traditional formulations of transcendence and feminist objections to them, Rivera therefore proposes a re-evaluation of the notion of transcendence, asking:

What if transcendence were not understood as that which radically distances God from creatures, but rather as a theological concept that makes differences significant, especially our differences from one another? (ibid, x).

In order to begin, Rivera contends, we must resist the traditional formulations that cast GOD/DE as above-and-beyond, and concentrate rather on the notion of GOD/DE as 'inappropriable' (ibid, 2), present *in* the World, since 'transcendence flows through reality, as the sap through the branches of a tree' (ibid, 53), but irreducible to anything *of* the World.

Rivera then conducts an extensive review of models of human otherness as expressive of transcendence, critiquing among other sources, Derrida, liberation theologies, Dussel, Levinas and Spivak. Person concludes that conceptualisations of 'the face of the Other' as the place in which 'we' encounter the transcendent, though immensely valuable in their locating of transcendence within the World, are nonetheless problematic. In Levinas's thought, for example, immanence is cast as

‘sameness’ or ‘we-ness’ while transcendence is ‘they-ness’. Thus, ‘the self remains radically separated from the Other..., the transcendence of the Other is...a distance’ (ibid, 63); transcendence and immanence remain an indissoluble binary, and transcendence retains its hierarchical burden of aloftness, distance, separation and beyond-normality, losing only (perhaps) its immateriality.

Rivera asserts that for a revised model of transcendence, which person names ‘interhuman transcendence’, to succeed in having true liberatory potential, we must ‘avoid the images of clear and fixed boundaries between self and [excluded] Other’ (ibid, 77). In schemas that propose the face of the Other as the location of transcendence, the Other is always this ‘excluded Other’ and who ‘would want to protect transcendence if it depend[s] on exclusion?’ (ibid, 77). However, person does see immense value in reconceptualising transcendence as constitutive of all human *being* as well as of GOD/DE’s being, as a part of our full humanity. And in re-visioning GOD/DE’s transcendence as inappropriability rather than aloftness, we create a space to reimagine the otherness of others not as that which is alien but as that which is irreducible to any unitary doctrinal orthodoxy.

In an echo of Butler, Rivera states: ‘Human beings...are never fully present to us. There is always more to the Other.... It induces in us a feeling of wonder, surprise and astonishment’ (ibid, 138). This wonder, says Rivera, is not something by means

of which GOD/DE points away from the World to ÆRSELF in the above-and-beyond, but rather 'the very brilliance of God' in the here-and-now, transcendence *in* immanence, duality dissolved. Our transcendent bodies shine light on GOD/DE in and through 'the unsurpassable mystery of creatureliness' (ibid, 139). We are Weilian contradictory pincers; in our dark, unknowable embodiments we reveal both ourselves and GOD/DE.

Being open to 'God's more' (ibid, 46) prevents us from believing ourselves to be the One and Only, the very model of perfect human being from which every Other falls short. To know the Other to be transcendent as inappropriable, rather than as alien, is to make ourselves infinitely open to the 'concrete and particular in-finity [*sic*]' (ibid, 125) of every other person. Thus, while '[a] world that participates in God [is] always open to that which is beyond itself', that Beyond remains firmly here-and-now in the bodies of this World, not in the forever-out-of-reach Above.

To welcome 'what comes from...beyond the self' (ibid, 25) is a precondition of just and ethical relationships, since it allows us to think 'beyond straight lines and between dichotomies' (ibid, 114), to critique the apparent inevitability of the Great Beast and to pursue social transformations. And, if transcendent otherness is a feature of all human *being*, from which none of us can escape, if we are all 'they' just as much as we are 'we', we are called to reconsider all formulations of us-ness and

them-ness. For, although we have no control over the norms that have instituted the processes of othering, since we are always born *in media res*, we can yet critique the forces that orchestrate and limit us, as Butler recommends.

Thus, Rivera's theology of interhuman transcendence is established in relation to a network of others as individuals, both in the past and in the present, and to institutions, structures and norms, evoking 'an air of incompleteness and excess' (ibid, 81), 'always unfinished: produced in relation to the transcendence of the Other' (ibid, 82). And, as a re-visioned definition of transcendence Rivera offers the following:

Transcendence designates a relation with a reality irreducibly different from my own reality, without this difference destroying this relation and without the relation destroying this difference (ibid).

### **Miles and *The Bonds of Freedom***

While Rivera comes to transcendence through the traditions of liberation theology, Rebekah Miles (2001) approaches it as a feminist Christian realist.<sup>16</sup> Miles offers an extensive analysis of models of transcendence, with a particular concentration on self-transcendence, using as sources for her critique the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sharon Welch, among others. Noting that there is no single thea/ological position on transcendence but, rather that 'the diversity of

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<sup>16</sup> Miles states that feminist Christian realism 'grows out of [mainstream] Christian realist understandings of the distortions of human power, shared human experiences as a ground for normative claims, and the reality of a God who relativizes, unifies and gives meaning to human choices and desires' (2001, 10).

voices among feminist theologians can hardly be overestimated' (ibid, 11), person nonetheless concludes that the central concern of any feminist critique is with the imbalance of power expressed in 'divine transcendence [as] the pinnacle of a web of hierarchical dominations' (ibid, 14). A separate, individualistic transcendent GOD/DE has supported and encouraged notions of the separate, individualistic (male) Self that 'pervades the whole patriarchal Christian system and supports oppression' (ibid, 30). Thus it is with self-transcendence, more so than with GOD/DE's transcendence, that feminist critiques in fact take issue.

Self-transcendence, getting above oneself, supports hierarchical, binaried power-over structures and a destructive 'politics of individualism' (ibid, 32). This autonomous above-itself self is considered inapplicable to the essentially relational and non-competitive, communal, power-with nature of Women's experiences (ibid, 31-32). For many thea/ologians, therefore, driven by concerns over the 'supposed ethical effects' of the doctrine of Divine transcendence (ibid, 12), the rejection of power-over in favour of power-with is determined to be the method by which a more just society will be established (ibid, 32). It is in thea/ologies of immanence that the particularity and boundedness of human bodies is best expressed, that 'feminist values of relationality and mutual empowerment' (ibid, 13) are valorised, so much so that it might sometimes appear that GOD/DE is not simply immanent in

such experiences, but that 'community relationships and the natural evolutionary process' *are* GOD/DE (ibid, 17).

Miles critiques feminist notions that human transcendence arises out of conflicts between the limited perspectives of the individual as against the diversity of viewpoints available in the community, where:

transcendence is radically 'located' in community interactions. And within these communal relationships and mutual critical human interactions is the divine.... We are many and conflicted: the divine is us (ibid, 140).

This scenario makes no allowances for the individual to transcend the Great Beast of communal opinion: if I can only transcend myself by coming to understand that my perspective is limited as compared with the necessary diversity of the community's perspective, then I am always to some extent wrong as compared with communal opinion's rightness, and a transformational critique of the norms is not possible. An 'adequate feminist ethic and theology' requires that we have the freedom<sup>17</sup> to stand in opposition to our community as we are called by individual conscience (ibid, 118).

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<sup>17</sup> Miles consistently equates self-transcendence with 'radical human freedom' (2001, 118) without offering any critique of notions of freedom, of how, exactly, we are free to critique the norms and act to transform them when we are entangled in the constraints of class, race, gender and/or sexuality. As Rivera notes, 'we cannot purge ourselves from the markings that history has left in us' (2007, 103; cf Butler 1990; 1993); complete freedom from the norms is achievable only by 'transcend[ing] out...from our world and its influences' (ibid, 103). Of course, Miles does not advocate this sort of freedom, but rather a freedom to act within the bonds of our situation. Nonetheless, I find per uncritical use of the concept of freedom troubling.

While Miles appreciates the analyses that have brought thea/ologians to their conclusions, person maintains that these are based on a misinterpretation of the notion of transcendence as power-over. Person contends that, in truth, 'to say that God is transcendent is simply to say that God may not be reduced purely to that material reality in which God is radically present' (ibid, 22), not that  $\mathcal{A}$  is above-and-beyond but simply that  $\mathcal{A}$  is not coterminous with, is absolutely more than and utterly different from, the World. In dismissing transcendence as in any way useful and focusing instead on immanence, thea/ologies have 'undercut the anthropological, moral, and religious assumptions on which feminism rests' (ibid, 3), which is to say the freedom to undertake an ethical pursuit of societal transformation through the critique and transcendence of the norms that orchestrate and limit us:

An affirmation of the human capacity for radical self-transcendence, for radical freedom over culture and nature is necessary to make sense of the realities of feminist moral experience (ibid, 17).

Transcendence offers the possibility of a limit on idolatry, a mode of mystery, an embrace of moreness and irreducibility, an undermining of the namings of dominology, and a check on destructive, hierarchical dualisms (ibid, 21-23). Transcendence values human experiences that take us beyond the here-and-now but not necessarily into the above-and-beyond: imagination, foresight, memory and conscience (ibid, 63). Without a 'self-transcendent capacity', we have no way to reflect upon experiences (cf McBride 2003, above) and no way to critique our social

position. And without critique, there can be no feminist transformations, no way to transcend the limits of communal expectations and unitary doctrinal orthodoxy. The self-transcendent human is truly 'ecstatic', free to stand outside a bounded, limited self, community and World, 'never satisfied with creation' (ibid, 25), compelled to search for meaning and transformation. It is thus, in our freedom to question 'the character of reality in its totality', says Miles, that we are *imago Dei* (ibid, 118); as GOD/DE judges human endeavours and finds them wanting, so too do we find ourselves wanting and seek to change. In this, we are free to accept the bonds GOD/DE places upon us.

### **The Embodiment of GOD/DE's Transcendence**

Sells asserts that the logic of apophaticism, with its insistence on the limitless transcendence of GOD/DE, is overturned if we then limit GOD/DE to being only *beyond* and not also *in* everything there is (1994, 21); 'That which is beyond is within. That which is other, is non-other' (ibid, 207), and that which is embodied may be as expressive of GOD/DE's transcendence as any other aspect of the World. Thus, when Boesel and Keller and Gudmarsdottir ask whether apophaticism can say anything relevant to feminists, 'anything sensible (that is to say both wise and pertaining to the senses)' (Gudmarsdottir 2010, 274), about the 'concrete finitude of the body' (Boesel and Keller 2010a, 3) without making an idol of those bodies, Rivera and Miles respond with re-visions that seek to do just that.

Within these schemas, some form of non-idolatrous, embodied outshowing of GOD/DE's transcendence is assured. But how exactly does this relate to GOD/DE, and to the other, to Sol's embodiment? How, moreover, does this relate to self, to my embodiment, as surely it must if transcendence is to be assured for *all* bodies, the body of self as much as the bodies of others? For both commentators the transcendence of GOD/DE is a given, which must be recuperated by re-visioning human bodies as in some way expressive of that transcendence rather than of GOD/DE immanent. Rivera's relational interhuman transcendence is based on previous conceptualisations of transcendence as encountered in 'the face of the Other'. Rivera thereby appears to maintain a self/other binary predicated on the self as knowable *vis-à-vis* the others' transcendent unknowability. Even though Sol is no longer the *excluded* Other, but simply one who is not-me, the binary remains and thus remains problematic since it maintains itself as an unbridgeable divide; GOD/DE's transcendence is located in Sol's quotidian experiences, but not in mine. In Miles's re-vision, self-transcendence derives from our embracing the freedom to act upon a critique of antipathetic societal norms. Sol and I might both be included, but only inasmuch as we act upon a feminist dissatisfaction with the Great Beast<sup>18</sup>. If we never critique the norms, we never achieve self-transcendence or, more

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<sup>18</sup> Sol and I have, of course, both acted upon our critique of the Great Beast, Sol in transitioning into per affirmed gender and I in undertaking this project; our transcendent embodiments are thus assured in Miles' re-visioning.

importantly, never embody the transcendence of GOD/DE. Thus, in neither of these models is transcendence assured for *all* bodies in *all* circumstances.

By returning to Butler's notion of opacity, however, we might expand these two revisions, because opacity belongs to all, whether engaged in critique or not, and to me as much as to others. It is not that I cannot give a full account of you, but that you cannot account for your self any more than I can account for mine. I, like you and like GOD/DE, am a dazzling darkness: authored by 'that which precedes and exceeds me' (Butler 2005, 82), 'that which I am defies narrative capture, insists on itself as an opacity that resists all final illumination' (ibid, 80). I cannot speak of myself without a constant unspeaking of myself, a constant redrafting of who I am. Because I am 'other to myself' (ibid, 27) as you and GOD/DE are other to me, in my opacity I am the embodiment of GOD/DE's transcendence.

Rivera cautions against conceptualising otherness as something that can be co-opted by sameness, asking 'If anyone could adopt as one's *own* the alterity of the Other, would she or he not erase said alterity?' (2007, 75). However, in Butler's analysis, opacity is an inescapable fact of human existence that does not erase the otherness of others. In knowing myself to be unknowable, I do not claim that my unknowability is *the same* as yours, but simply that it *is*. Miles, too, advises caution, in this case with regard to the misappropriation of transcendence as a way of getting above our

‘bodily and cultural environment’ (2001, 13). But, in my naming opacity as demonstrative of transcendence, it is not the transcendence of the human above-and-beyond our materiality that I seek to claim, but rather an aspect of *imago Dei*, of how we body forth the transcendence of GOD/DE in the here-and-now. I am not a Divine Woman, a self deified, but I am a self that nonetheless manifests something of the ineffability of the Deity that I can never be.

### Sharing in the Unsayable

Gregory of Nyssa wrote: ‘[S]ince the nature of our minds...evades our knowledge, it has an accurate resemblance of the superior nature, figuring by its unknowableness the incomprehensible Nature’ (Tanner 2010, 118). Similarly, Meister Eckhart asserted that the self ‘is nameless with the namelessness of the Godhead itself’ (Turner 1995, 141). GOD/DE’s incomprehensibility is reflected in us as opacity. We form part of the dark glass of St Paul’s paradigm; through our opaque embodiments we darkly reflect the mystery of the Divine<sup>19</sup>. Thus, if opacity is part of *imago Dei*, to refuse to honour it either in ourselves or in GOD/DE would be highly unethical.

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Nolan notes that the very paradigm itself—‘Now we see through a glass darkly’ (*videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*) —is something of an apophatic dark glass since ‘the closer we look for precision of meaning, the less we find it’ (1990, 1). Translations of the words *per* and *aenigmate* for example are many and various, with the meanings of the former including ‘in’, ‘through’ and ‘by means of’, and the latter both ‘an enigma’ and, according to Marcia Colish, ‘a species of metaphor or riddle’ (1983, 15). It would therefore be possible to translate the line as ‘Now we see by means of a mirror into a metaphor’, among many other possible permutations.

Sol's contradictory narratives highlight per opacity, per unsayability, through which we see, embodied in per, an image of GOD/DE's dazzlingly dark transcendence. Always 'arriv[ing] late' to ourselves (Butler 2005, 79), our own opacity shows us GOD/DE's back. It shows us too that the norms that orchestrate and limit our lives have a back; they are not born with us but 'emerge, transform and persist according to a temporality that is not the same as the temporality of my life' (ibid, 35) and thus, they too opaquely body forth the GOD/DE whose story is longer than we can ever imagine, that we always join in the middle, knowing little of what has passed and nothing of what is to come. Unlike GOD/DE however, whose Protean mutability is so vast and varied that we can never grasp ÆR, the norms are amenable to, even require of us, critique and transformation; though we cannot fully know their back, we can, as Miles points out, unsay their influence, get over them and go beyond to reimagine and transform the future.

## *An Apophasis of Gender*

### **Subverting Dualisms**

Lanzetta commends an apophatic *via feminina* to our attention, as 'a continual un-saying...of the previous thousands of years of 'saying' by patriarchal cultures and religions' (2005, 16). I contend that, if we are to unsay the works of dominology, to critique and transform the norms, we cannot not exclude the opacity of binary gender from that apophatic practice. As one of the unitary doctrinal orthodoxies of

the Great Beast that orchestrates and limits the selves we are able to express, binary gender requires our critique and our transformative endeavours. If we name ourselves or GOD/DE we attempt a mastery to which we are not entitled: that holds as true for the namings of She and He, as for any other. These names are not ontological, there is nothing essential about them: they are the sayings of dominology and need to be unsaid if justice is to be done for all of us, unintelligible and intelligible alike.

An apophasis of gender is not new to the tradition of negative theology. Kitty Datta, for example, notes the 'crossing of gender boundaries' in the works of the Beguines, identifying this as 'one of the strategies of dislocation to prevent misapprehension of the inexpressible' (2000, 128). Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart both, according to Sells, unsay both a 'monogendered deity and monotonic gender relations between divine and human' (1994, 205) in a language that 'subverts the dualisms and delimitations' of more orthodox religious discourse (30). However, in these contexts and not unexpectedly, the binary remains intact, the boundaries crossed being from one box into the other and the monogendered deity being expanded to bigendered. It is in contemporary analyses that the potential for an unsaying of the binary itself is expressed, particularly in the works of Boesel and Keller (Keller 2008; Boesel 2010; Boesel and Keller 2010a; Keller 2010) who contend that 'The unsaying of bodies implies an unsaying of the impermeable boundaries and

ontological—indeed ontotheological—fixities of a modern body’ (Boesel and Keller 2010a, 10).

### **How (Not) to Speak of Gender**

If we unsay the impermeable boundaries of the body with an apophasis of binary gender, do we then invalidate Sol’s own gender experiences? After all, Sol expresses no desire to do anything other than survive per Round Trip to Hell with grace and dignity, to leave behind the female body that made person ‘*as neurotic as hell*’ and to get on with being ‘*absolutely fine*’ in per ‘*useful and productive*’ male body. How might we, indeed can we ethically, unsay binary gender without gainsaying Sol’s gender experiences? Serano (2007) and Namaste (2000) are, as noted in Chapter 1, highly critical of deconstructivist theories of gender that delegitimise the gender experiences of transsexual people by calling into question their self-identifications within a binary gender system. Furthermore, how, ethically, do we unsay a phenomenon that remains responsible for appalling oppression and suffering in the World? While we may want to claim that the namings of Woman and Man are idolatrous dominological fabrications, the sufferings inflicted by those namings cannot be gainsaid.

Turner contends that the concern of apophatic theology is to construct itself as ‘distinguishable from a mere denial of theism’ (2002, 14). The dilemma for

apophaticism is that in unsaying all our namings of GOD/DE, we risk saying GOD/DE out of our lives for good and all. However, even to say that GOD/DE is *not* is to say something about GOD/DE that must subsequently be unsaid; to say that GOD/DE does not exist presupposes a GOD/DE who might. By analogy, we might fear that to unsay binary gender is to say away the binary-gendered. If, however, I paraphrase Weil's statement that God both exists and does not exist, some sort of accommodation that enables us to conceive of a transformed gender world without saying our binary-gendered sibs out of it might be reached:

Binary gender exists. Binary gender does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is binary gender in the sense that I see its effects, for good or ill, on my life and in the World. I am quite sure that there is no binary gender in the sense that I am quite sure there is ultimately nothing universally really real, situated beyond geography, history and society, that can support the concepts of Woman and Man that govern our lives.

And to paraphrase Rollins (2006, 32), speaking of gender is never speaking of gender but only ever speaking about our understanding of gender; thus we must learn how (not) to speak of gender in a manner that is productive of social transformation whilst not destructive of the well-being, especially, of those who are already oppressed. To that end, an apophasis of gender must both unsay binary gender and unsay the unsaying of binary gender, in an infinite regress of what Turner calls self-subverting utterances (1995, 21).

### *Aporias as Weilian Pincers*

The self-subverting utterance, the statement that expresses within itself an unresolvable contradiction, such as 'a dazzling darkness' or 'a limitless limit', is an example of *aporia*. Neither part of the utterance is true in and of itself but, in the tension created between the contradictory parts, between the points of the Weilian pincers, the truth of God's unsayability is expressed. 'Real contradiction occurs when language engages the ineffable transcendent but these contradictions are not illogical', affirms Sells (1994, 3). The *aporia* is not a mere rhetorical flourish, a seeming contradiction 'used for effect and then...resolved by further explanation' (ibid, 21). Like the contradictions in Sol's story, all parts must stand lest we impose our own limits upon the limitlessness of an/the Other. The purpose of the *aporia* is thus to keep the mind in constant activity, 'never allowing it a fixed referent' (Sells 1994, 30), so that it moves from one aspect of the *aporia* to another and back again, reaching no rational resolution, knowing that our knowledge fails, 'but not knowing what it is that our knowledge fails to reach' (Turner 1995, 265).

This may not necessarily be a comfortable experience: Plotinus asserts that to find ourselves in an *aporia* is to be 'in agony over how to speak' (in Sells 1994, 16) and, what is more, no simple agony but the agony of giving birth. We may with good reason shy away from invoking such anguish. On the other hand, however, Weil asserts, above, that when the attention has revealed the contradiction in something

on which it has been fixed, a kind of loosening takes place. This is not a loosening in the contradiction such that we might resolve it, but rather in ourselves, through what Butler, above, calls a willingness to become undone from our attachment to the Great Beast, to certainty, logic and the need to know. There is an unresolvable contradiction between those who live the deconstruction of binary gender and the gender experiences of transsexuals like Julia Serano, Viviane Namaste and Sol, an aporia that we must accept with open hearts and not attempt to rationalise away. Open hearted acceptance of aporias is open hearted acceptance of our utter inability ever to exert total mastery over the namings of GOD/DE and selves:

Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest). A mechanical process. More often than not a dialogue between deaf people (Weil 2002 [1952], 135).

‘Each statement I make...reveals itself to be in need of correction. The correcting statement must then itself be corrected, *ad infinitum*’ (Sells 1994, 2). I unsay GOD/DE, I unsay gender, I unsay myself. I cannot give a full and true account of anything. But that does not mean that I am not ethically obliged to speak, to account for myself, to take responsibility for my being in the World. Nor does it mean that I cannot critique the norms into which I am born, ‘only that when I do, I must be careful to understand the limits of what I can do, the limits that condition any and all such doings’ (Butler 2005, 82). We must accept that we are conditioned by the norms even as we seek to change them, that we require the norms to make us

intelligible to each other as ‘speaking beings’ (ibid, 132). When we challenge them we therefore risk our own and others’ intelligibility. The norms explain us to ourselves, but there remains a haunting excess, a part of ourselves that we cannot explain away despite constant revision, the unsayable that cannot be unsaid. We are mysterious to ourselves, as GOD/DE is mysterious to us.

### **The Mysteries of Gender Unsayings**

Much has been written in thea/ologies of Women’s mystery. Lanzetta, for example, declares:

the mystery of women and feminism, subverts easy identities..., articulates precisely those realities that transgress the boundaries of everyday consciousness and develops a literacy that speaks to the heart of women’s deepest possibility (2005, 43).

But if we are to unsay Women, how then do we speak of their mystery and their deepest possibilities? Do we still want or need to? Does not an opaque transcendence that speaks to the heart of the deepest possibilities for every body, binary gendered or not, serve us better when it comes to mystery? Certainly, the preservation of mystery is at the heart of apophaticism, even if its achievement is, as Sells notes, ‘unstable and fleeting’ (1994, 217). This is mystery not as a secret gnosis, available only to initiates by virtue of allegiance to a cult, or through a hierarchical set of practices, or indeed from possession of a particular genital morphology (the gender gnosis discussed in Chapter 3) but rather as an all-encompassing sense of ‘wonderment [and] bewilderment...that is rediscovered at the point where

[discourses] point beyond themselves' (ibid, 216). To become open to wonder like this requires effort, certainly, to free ourselves from our entanglements in the norms. It requires a certain loosening to take place, a willingness to become undone, 'to let go...of the grasping for guarantees and for knowledge as a possession' (ibid, 217).

We cannot apprehend the mystery of the transcendent by rational means, and should never make the mistake of taking 'rational constructions of reality for the thing itself' since there is always more to any one/thing than meets the eye (McIntosh 2002, 140). There is need for rational thought, of course, but also need for the open-hearted, non-judgemental 'astonished wonder' (145) that the a-rationality of transcendent mystery can engender. If we refuse mystery, warns Cardinal Newman, we 'do not look out of [our]selves...do not look through and beyond [our] own minds...but are engrossed in notions of what is due to [our]selves, to [our] own dignity and [our] own consistency' (in McIntosh 2002, 143). A reality that is wholly rational, where knowledge is a possession that must be grasped firmly and the World is shrunk to fit into quantifiable dimensions, leaves no room for that which is radically new, incomprehensible, immeasurable, illimitable, irreducible, ungraspable, mysterious: 'This kind of formation does *not* really have a use for the ability to encounter the unknowable' (McIntosh 2002, 145), for unresolvable aporias held in pincers, or the haunting excesses of GOD/DE and self.

Sells (1994) and McIntosh (2002) remind us that living in relationship with mystery and wonderment requires us to let go of any idea we might have had that we can grasp GOD/DE. However, as Rollins attests, ‘while we do not grasp God, faith is born amidst the feeling that God grasps us’ (2006, 30). Similarly Rivera has reminded us that GOD/DE is always beyond our grasp, but not beyond our touch (2007, 2). Like Weil, we have a sense that, while we know there is nothing true we can say of GOD/DE, yet there is a GOD/DE who touches our lives and about whom we must speak, impossible though it may seem. But why, as Carson asks, above, should the truth not be impossible and the impossible not be true? Why should not the aporias of Sol’s story and of gender not act as *metaxu*, thresholds to a mystical revelation of the Divine?

Mystery is not important for its own sake, of course, even though it ‘lures and...delights’ us (Hughes 2010, 364), but is a way of living in apophatic critique of the Great Beast, ‘an invitation for continual reevaluation of [worldviews] as the limited constructions they are’ (Sells 1994, 217). Like Thinness, Opaquing sets us at an angle to the certainties as an ethical project that requires us to risk ourselves with our willingness to become undone, as Butler assert, above.

Butler assumes that the risk is worth it, as do I. However, with every risk comes the potential for damage to self or others. The dangers to transsexual people of an unsaying of binary gender are noted in Chapter 1. In addition to this, there is the danger that an ethics of unsaying says away the voices of the voiceless at exactly the moment when they begin to come to speech (Keller 2008, 26). Gudmarsdottir echoes this concern, but adds that we must nevertheless grasp the nettle and disclose ‘the vulnerabilities and wiles of language’ (2010, 283) that orchestrate and limit the selves we are able to be<sup>20</sup>. Even in unsaying, we do not remain voiceless, since every unsaying requires to be said, unsaid, and said anew *ad infinitum*. There is no apophasis without kataphasis, no unsaying without first a voice to say.

### **Living Without a Why**

It can be argued, as discussed in Chapter 1, that we are only intelligibly human inasmuch as we conform to the orchestrating norms; any critique that challenges our intelligibility therefore challenges our humanity. As Keller notes, ‘the more sealed the boundaries of some established binary, the more violent their rupture’ (2010, 30) for ourselves and for societies. Certainly any challenge to binary gender, arguably the most firmly sealed of all boundaries, already results in daily violence in the lives of our trans/genderqueer sibs. Thus it would seem that, in order to remain

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<sup>20</sup> In reference to feminist fears that the death of the subject is being heralded just at the moment when Women appear to be coming to subjectivity, Butler asserts: ‘this death...is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had’ (2005, 65).

safely and intelligibly human, we would do well to know fully and account rationally for ourselves. But to acknowledge the limits of our self-understanding is, Butler asserts, 'the sign of our humanity' (Butler 2005, 83). The apophatic moment 'of unsaying and unknowing is what it is to be human' (Sells 1994, 217); Meister Eckhart calls this 'living without a why' (ibid, 203).

If our humanity is considered as the ability to define and assert ourselves, then to live without the definitions and assertions of a why is to undermine that humanity, to become unintelligibly inhuman. Butler, however, offers us these Weilian pincers as an approach to a different understanding of what might constitute our humanity:

We embody the 'inhuman' by offering a critique of the will, of assertion, and of resolve as prerequisites of the human. In this sense, the 'inhuman' is not the opposite of the human but an essential means by which we become human in and through the deconstitution of our humanness (2005, 106).

By refusing to assert our need for an explanation, our desire for the intelligibility of GOD/DE, other or self, our will to answer the 'why', we become more just, more open-hearted and more humanely human. Living without a why is what enables us to stop arrogantly demanding to know the reasons GOD/DE behaves in 'a strange, inappropriate, "ungodly", and seemingly unfair, unethical way' (Boesel 2010, 324) and rather to start humbly picking up the beer-cans.

## Humility

Humility has not, according to feminist critiques, been seen to play much of a part in the language of transcendence. Quite the reverse, since transcendence has been held responsible in large part for egotistical (Male) human beings getting way above themselves. In the re-visioning of transcendence, however, we might also begin to reformulate the language of apophaticism away from the notions of hierarchical ascent that seem to be the commonplaces of the mediaeval convention<sup>21</sup> and that have passed, to our detriment, into the dominological Christianate corpus<sup>22</sup>. In Christianate formulations, the 'trans' of transcendence is taken to mean above-and-beyond, freedom from earthly boundaries and the limitations of a painful, dirty, messy and very mortal body. However, the prefix 'trans' is more accurately translated as 'on the other side of' or 'across' (OED). Thus, rather than meaning 'to climb up'<sup>23</sup> or to get *above* ourselves, transcendence may be taken to mean 'to climb across' or to get *over* ourselves. In common parlance, to get over ourselves is to stop taking ourselves seriously, to remember that we are not the centre of the universe, to have a little modesty. Moreover, even if 'trans' is legitimately translated as

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<sup>21</sup> Sells notes that while apophatic language appears to affirm the hierarchical, what in fact happens is that, under the pressure of unsaying, these structures 'collapse from within the directional context; the highest station becomes...no-station; the most noble becomes the most common' (1994, 213). However, in this formulation, hierarchical binaries not unsaid but merely inverted.

<sup>22</sup> A vivid illustration of the way in which valorised notions of transcendence are embedded in the corpus, to the detriment of the material, is detailed in what Bourdieu calls 'antagonistic adjectives': 'The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest), spiritual and material, fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal), light (subtle, lively, sharp, adroit) and heavy (slow, thick, blunt, laborious, clumsy), free and forced, broad and narrow...is the matrix of all commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order' (in Penketh 2011, 92).

<sup>23</sup> The 'scend' part of 'transcend' comes from the Latin '*scandere*' meaning 'to climb' (OED).

'beyond', transcendence might be taken to mean 'overflow' as Sells suggests (1994, 51), a spilling out of ourselves into a beyond that is not necessarily above. Thus, going *beyond* ourselves would be expressive of working for the transformation of the World with empathy, compassion and humility.

The final sentence of the Quaker *Advices and Queries* no. 17 asks us to 'Think it possible that [we] may be mistaken' (Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain 1995, 1.02:17). This counsel seems to me to be at the heart of both Butler's thinking on opacity and the practice of apophaticism. In the apophatic tradition, GOD/DE is the only (N)One whose vision is perfect, who sees 'all the factors involved in the vast extent of the world' (Fiddes 2002, 37) and it is our humility in the face of all this that we cannot know that liberates us from idolatry and 'the urge to commodify truth into the coinage of our own rational certainties' (McIntosh 2002, 151). To be human, says Butler, is to be 'fallible' (2005, 111); this does not mean that everything we think or do or say is erroneous, of course, but it does mean that that we have always to think it *possible* that we may be mistaken. Thus Butler cautions that 'a certain humility must emerge in this process..., a certain knowingness about the limits of what there is to be known' (ibid, 69), a caution that is echoed by Fiddes in reference to the wisdom saying of the Book of Proverbs: 'Because of the complexity of the world there are unknown factors that the wise man must reckon with...and so a proper approach to life is

humility' (2002, 37). In order not to get above ourselves and imagine ourselves as Divine, we must truly transcend, getting over ourselves with proper humility, offering up our opacity as a constant reminder that we may be mistaken.

### *Summary*

To acknowledge GOD/DE as opaque may be no great stretch, far less so, perhaps, than to acknowledge ÆR as Thin or Protean, despite our burning desire to iron out the contradictions in ÆR backless narrative. Only the most arrogant among us would claim to know the entirety of GOD/DE's dazzling darkness. That said, we must take care to remember that even our reformulations of GOD/DE as GOD/DE-She, intent on redressing a balance long tilted in favour of dominology, must in the end be unsaid. Simply to favour one set of reified metaphors over another does not end idolatry and power-over, but merely impales GOD/DE on a different descriptive hook. As Weil points out, 'When we recommend the opposite of an evil we remain on the level of that evil' since to propose the transfer of power from oppressor to oppressed is not to 'get free from the oppression-domination cycle' (2009 [1951], 101). The cycle remains intact unless we unsay it all *ad infinitum*, in a strategy and practice of unknowing that constantly critiques the orchestrating norms of every Great Beast, even the Great Beast of feminist collectivities.

To acknowledge ourselves as opaque may be a somewhat greater stretch, schooled as we are in an Enlightenment view of full self-knowledge as wholly desirable and ultimately attainable. However, if we subject our own stories to the same attention as we have Sol's (or Leigh's or Robin's, for that matter), we cannot but be aware of the contradictions with which they are riven, of exactly how much of what we say is truly important and how much functions merely to make us look good to others (and to ourselves). This primary opacity of the self nonetheless offers us an enormously fruitful ethical opportunity. Through Opaquing we might establish relationality where no common ground can be assumed, nonviolently, nonjudgementally, tolerantly, patiently and with humility, recognising our shared, invariable and partial blindness about ourselves, as we learn to live with the inevitability of fracture and contradiction. Through Opaquing too we might understand ourselves to express the transcendence of GOD/DE, not by getting above ourselves, by valorising all those ways in which we are better than other parts of the World, but by getting over ourselves, by humbly accepting our errancy, living without a why and applying the 'beer-can principle' to a World in need of compassionate justice.

To acknowledge genderedness as opaque is a greater stretch than some of us can manage, a violent rupture of apparently impermeable boundaries. We may find ourselves in an agony of how (not) to speak of binary gender's contradictions, of

how it both exists and does not exist, of the many and various oppressions its (non)existence inflicts upon our frail bodies. Unsay irreducible, illimitable GOD/DE into  $\text{\AA}$ ER dazzling darkness might be logical. Unsay ourselves as humbly transcendent bodies might be acceptable. Unsay something as apparently fixed and essential, even ontotheological, as binary gender might, however, seem like madness. But the tension created by an open-hearted acceptance of the aporias of gender might also act as pincers to pry apart the jaws of power-over, causing a necessary loosening of dominological supremacy to take place through our own willingness to become undone. Our Weilian method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what ways the contrary is true, groping in the dark to say, unsay, and say again. Thus, through an apophatic strategy of Opaquing, of GOD/DE, of self and of gender, we might save the Name and the neighbour from human mastery and call down Divine good into the World:

Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt. To accept the fact that they are other than the creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God. I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness. (Weil 2002 [1952], 9)

## CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSIONS

### *Introduction: Beyond God the Mother?*

When I began this study, I had in mind, somewhat playfully, to call it *Beyond God the Mother*, analogising from Mary Daly's groundbreaking work of early feminist theology *Beyond God the Father* (Daly 1985). I feel as deep an unease with concepts of GOD/DE-She as with GOD/DE-He, since neither seems truly to reflect either the troubled sense of gender that began with my handed-down khaki shorts, or the growing sense I have of GOD/DE's vast unknowability. Certain though I am that dominological constructions of divinity have led the World into terrible peril, I am not convinced that putting GOD/DE in a skirt or living in the lap of the Goddess (Eller 1993) are a solution. Thus, I went searching for more adequately gendered models of GOD/DE, turning to people for whom genderedness was a pressing daily issue, trans people whom I designated at the time as 'knowing gender better than me'. At that point I had expected straightforward tales of people who, because they had experienced gender non-normatively, would conceive of the gender of GOD/DE in a similar fashion; beyond GOD/DE the mother would be GOD/DE the transsexual. This was not quite the case; people for whom the day to day negotiations of gender make life difficult are drawn to the security of fairly 'normal' views of GOD/DE it seems. What I actually found was infinitely more interesting

and rewarding than what I thought I was seeking, as my narrators' stories became *metaxu*, and their embodied quotidian experiences led me into considerations of how those embodiments were demonstrative of that of GOD/DE.

It is a commonplace to acknowledge that GOD/DE is beyond gender, as *Æ* is beyond *all* human concepts. And yet, the fact remains that we continue to ascribe gender to *Æ*R, and that gender still tends overwhelmingly to be masculine despite all attempts to make it otherwise (e.g. Coakley 2002, 64; McIntosh 2007, 250). Is it possible, therefore, that after we transcend gender for ourselves, we will allow GOD/DE to do the same? Esther Macintosh argues that we might achieve a gender-transcendent GOD/DE-language if we adopt 'a less specific concept of God' (2007, 255), and suggests 'supreme or infinite agent' (ibid, 253) as possible terminology. Like per, I commend new language for GOD/DE, but recommend that we do not stop at one renaming when those names should, like GOD/DE *Æ*RSELF, be infinite. We must by all means reclaim gynocentric images of GOD/DE, however those might be conceived, of course, but by no means should the project rest there. Every one of us is *metaxu*, whatever gender we may be, and every one of us has something to impart about the nature of GOD/DE if we pay attention. Even to call *Æ*R 'infinite agent' is to place an unwarranted and idolatrous limit on GOD/DE. The only possibilities we have to avoid that becoming the case are either not to speak of GOD/DE at all, an impossible, nay futile, task for a thea/ologian, or indeed a theælogian, or to speak

and speak and speak again, naming and renaming ÆR as prolifically as we name and rename gender, while knowing all the time that no naming is ever adequate. Thus we might renounce our attachment to any desire for certainty, fixity or simplicity with regard to GOD/DE. Only then do we have any chance of refusing the idolatry that is one of my central concerns.

This chapter begins with a consideration of those central concerns, opening on my foundational assertion that binary gender is but one metaphor among many with which to discuss human experiences of genderedness. From this I move to the notion of *imago Dei*, claiming that all human experience demonstrates that of GOD/DE but that this does not constitute us as Divine in our own right. Asserting that attempts to fix names to GOD/DE, self and gender are idolatrous acts, I commend a strategy of renunciation, or Weilian decreation, an apophysis or unsaying of the binary of gender for the benefit of our unintelligible sibs. Such a strategy, I contend, affirms a yearning towards an embodied transcendence and an expansive future horizon of hope. Aligning this thesis with Yip's model of turning theology upside down, or expansion, I offer a methodology of Grounded Theology that uses quotidian experiences as the basis for theologising around three new metaphorical models for Divine-human relationships; the Thin, as demonstrated by Leigh's story; the Protean, as drawn from Robin's experiences; and the Opaque, as it is reflected in Sol's story. I then discuss the concept of unintelligibility and the

demand for justice for our unintelligible sibs that might be worked towards through the foundation of fruitful alliances. I assert that binary gender is unjustly out of balance and that its decreation might act as a Weilian counterweight to that injustice, creating a judgement-free space where thinking otherwise can happen. I argue that outsidersness, as it is embodied not only by Leigh, Robin and Sol but also by my whole approach to this thesis, acts as just such a counterweight. Drawing an analogy between Althaus-Reid's notion of Queer sainthood and Weil's own lived experience of outsidersness as ethical necessity, I propose the concept of outsider saints and offer some considerations of how outsider sainthood might be achieved through a renunciation of cis gender privilege in favour of our unintelligible sibs. I conclude by acknowledging the utopian intent at the heart of this thesis.

## *Central Concerns*

### **Gender**

My foundational concern is with the notion of a World without binary gender, in which our sibs who are currently unintelligible because they do not fit the two available gender boxes might be rendered intelligible and thus fully human. One way I have sought to reconfigure the gender landscape in the compass of this thesis has been to institute a thought experiment, using the epicene pronoun *person* to signify that the binary gender of those who appear within is less important than what each has to say about genderedness. The point of this work, however, has not

been simply to speak of human genderedness but, more importantly, to use the consideration of such to generate fruitful new openings into the Divine, to cast new contra-idolatrous metaphors for GOD/DE and for *imago Dei*, to answer that of GOD/DE in every human being. In (not) speaking of gender as a site of permanently irreconcilable incoherence, as Butler recommends, I also learn how (not) to speak of GOD/DE.

In Chapter 1, I have argued, using the work of Judith Butler and others, that the binary is but one metaphorical model of human experiences of genderedness, that there is no gender identity behind stylised repetition of acts that constitute the expression of gender. Furthermore, it is a tenuous, phantasmatic, chimerical, tricky will-o-the-wisp of a model that does not serve us well either for our own use or as an accurate signpost to that of GOD/DE. Because we accord binary gender a reality over and above its status as metaphor, because we reify gender, I assert that we have turned it into an idol, forgetting that it is means and not end. Gender thus blinkers us to ourselves and GOD/DE, limiting our potential to know the Divine and the human at their fullest extents, strictly, even violently, policing the list of attributes both GOD/DE and humans are allowed to claim as rightfully ours. If thea/ologies uncritically accept the categories Woman and Man as bounded spaces, they leave un-honoured, uncelebrated and unsymbolised all that is both/neither Woman and/nor Man. Thus, with Anderson, Wittig and Butler (see Chapter 1), I have

contended that an idolatrous bioessentialist, matriarchalist gynocentrism, or 'wombfulness' as I have called it, leaves our unintelligible sibs on the outside of feminist re-visionings of patriarchal theologies, barred forever from the category of the human and of *imago Dei*.

## **Imago Dei**

It is by collecting stories that I have sought to make known that of GOD/DE in every one, through each narrator's quotidian experiences as words of GOD/DE and books about GOD/DE; this practice goes to the heart of my proposal that every individual has something specific to tell of *imago Dei*. This assertion is more than a simple acknowledgement that we are all children of GOD/DE through whom, in well-lived lives, GOD/DE's presence shines. It is to say that we cannot pick and choose which parts of our experiences are that of GOD/DE and which not. We need to look at all the quotidian stuff of lives in order to do justice to both the Divine and the human; not to do so places an unwarranted and idolatrous limit on GOD/DE. That of GOD/DE in every one is, I assert, present in all of every one, not just in the data that fit, but also in the so-called 'junk' data, to use a qualitative research methods analogy. Having said that, to claim all human experience is *imago Dei* is not to claim that human lives are Divine lives. The maps are not the territory; we must not mistake the image for the actual and to think otherwise is to create the

map as an *ersatz* of GOD/DE. Thus, also central to this project is the desire to speak of human beings as *imago Dei* without slipping into idolatry.

## **Idolatry**

In ascribing to the things of the World, gender included, the status of ends rather than means, we commit idolatry. This lack of attention to the transcendence of GOD/DE causes indifference to the affliction of others in favour of our own collectivities. Idolatry causes us to care more about preserving the binary than achieving justice for our unintelligible sibs, absorbs us in the gravity well of the Narcissan Mirror, turning us from the universe flashing into being before our eyes in favour of binary gender as an object. Idolatry is the self absorbed in the World and willfully ignorant of all that transcends it, a self that demands of per sibs not the ethical acknowledgement of Opacity but a permanent and stultifying self-sameness. Thus idolatry is the monstrously abominable attempt to name ourselves and GOD/DE, to exert a mastery to which we are not entitled. Idolatry impales GOD/DE on the descriptive hook of collective opinion and makes a permanency of that which should be temporary, not just in the name of dominology but potentially in the name of thea/ologies too, with their tendencies towards wombfulness that leaves the category Women unchallenged.

## **Renunciation and Decreation**

By fixing our gaze on gender in the Narcissan Mirror, instead of raising our heads to the unknowable beyond, we embrace an unrequitable love, since our idol is only a poor and inadequate reflection of what could be ours. I have therefore commended an apophasis of gender, an unsaying of (im)permeable borders, making of gender not to be a fortress to be protected at all costs but rather a braided rope for pulling down our prison walls (Pratt 2005, 184-185).

In its concern for the unsaying of certainties and the acknowledgement of all GOD/DE-language as metaphorical, apophasis proves a particularly apt analogy for the renunciation of gender absolutism. I have noted legitimate thea/ological concerns with the notion of renunciation but, nonetheless have argued with Coakley and others that there is value in re-visioning renunciation, or what Weil calls decreation, as a legitimately empowering feminist practice, that is as applicable to gender as to all our Worldly attachments. Binary gender is as much a critiqueable norm of the World over which Fox urges us to walk cheerfully as is any other aspect of Weilian gravity. I have also contended that apophasis is an entirely appropriate concept in relation to gender. The unsaying of GOD/DE does not say away the existence of GOD/DE but only the reality of words about GOD/DE; similarly, I have not sought to gainsay the realities of experiences such as Sol's transsexuality, noting the justifiable concerns of Serano and Namaste on this score. Nor have I sought to

diminish the horrifying gendered experiences of oppression and affliction sustained by women on a minute-by-minute basis worldwide. Binary gender exists. Binary gender does not exist. I know it exists because I see its effects. But I am sure that it is renounceable, that it can be unsaid for the good of us all.

One way of unsaying the binary is through the medium of my newly conceived gender schema, with its four gender aspects, detailed in Chapter 1, of: l-gender (looks-like), referring to physical characteristics; f-gender (feels like), concerning an inner sense of gender identity; p-gender (performs like), which is the performative 'drag' we put on to give ourselves the appearance of one of the two available options; and j-gender (judged as), which concerns the responses of others and how that impacts on gendered being in the world. The four gender aspects together form a metagender, and only when all four aspects conform to the same set of rules, in terms of the patriarchal requirements of the binary gender system, can we unequivocally claim the metagender of Woman or Man. But as Leigh's, Robin's, Sol's and even my stories suggest, gender aspects often do not categorically align in one metagender box. Used to describe the fissures in metagender, this inflected schema operates to destabilise preconceptions, to undermine the idols of binary gender, and to highlight its complexities, opacities and absurdities. It points out that binary gender is not really real but merely one more deconstructable metaphorical model to be transcended.

## **Transcendence**

Renunciation, the decreation of all our roots, both personal and social, is the means by which we refuse the Narcissan gravity well and commit to a life of unceasing reinvention for self, for gender and for GOD/DE. Renunciation affirms a yearning towards the transcendent and that which exceed the I. Through the decreative act we acknowledge ourselves as tiny beings in contact with something immense, not mired in the mundane or trapped in a net of norms, but a space where being otherwise can happen. We become selves that cease to be absorbed with our selves but instead become absorbed in(to) GOD/DE.

However, this concern with transcendence, orientated though it is towards the refusal of idolatry, means nothing if it smacks of indifference to embodied lives. Thus I have been concerned to elucidate a transcendence that is not contra the material conditions of real bodies, locating it in the quotidian experiences of Thinness, Proteanism and, most notably, Opacity. It matters that bodies be understood as that of GOD/DE transcendent and not just immanent or, more accurately, to be transcendence and immanence indissolubly combined. This is not to say that because bodies are of GOD/DE, that bodies are themselves GOD/DE; I resist any measure to valorise bodies as Divine in and of themselves since this effaces the absolute difference of GOD/DE from us, pushing out of the World any concept

of GOD/DE's inappropriability and excess. If all we have is all we have, then it is all we will ever have and no change in circumstances, no expansive future horizon of hope or transformation, is possible.

## *Methodological Issues*

### **Expansion and Metaphor**

Following Yip's analysis of the trajectory of developments in Queer Theology (2010, 36-41), I have situated this study not in justification or 'defensive apologetics' that offers theological warrant to previously unintelligible groups to be regarded as fully human in the sight of GOD/DE, nor in reclamation and inclusion or 'cruising' religious texts for a trans genealogy, but in expansion, the tradition of 'turning theology upside down', using the turning-upside-down of gender as my fulcrum. While I wholly subscribe to an apophatic viewpoint that we can say nothing of GOD/DE that is true, just as we can say nothing of gender that is true, nevertheless, I assert that we also cannot remain silent about GOD/DE but must continually describe and redescribe *ÆR* if we are to avoid idolatry. One outcome of my grounded theologising of expansion has been, therefore, the creation of new metaphorical models for GOD/DE and the Divine/human relationship (after McFague 1975; 1982; 1993). I have posited three such—Thinness, Proteanism and Opacity—derived respectively from attention to my narrators Leigh, Robin and Sol. Each model represents the valuing of the embodied experiences of one person as an

opening to GOD/DE, an aspect of the nature of genderedness and a way in which we might (re)think GOD/DE.

MacIntosh contends that eventually we may be able to rehabilitate female and male imagery in GOD/DE-language once Women and Men are finally ‘equal in religion and society’ (2007, 254), but this ignores all of our sibs who are not Women or Men, rendering them unintelligible as *imago Dei*. By contrast, I have asserted that only when we have renounced binary gender for ourselves, and understood ourselves to be *imago Dei* in all our Thin, Protean, and Opaqued embodied transcendence, will we truly be able to conceive of GOD/DE ÆRSELF as gender-transcendent. Thus I have offered the Thin, the Protean and the Opaqued as my contribution to the profusion of metaphors for transforming our relationship with GOD/DE, knowing that in the end, however, ‘Human silence after fruitful imaginative naming pays the best tribute to divine mystery’ (Johnson 1992, 119).

### **Theologising Around Experience**

The source of my profusion of metaphors has been the somewhat vexed category of experience, not the ‘sacred’ experiences that mainstream theology employs, nor the experiences of the collectivity of Women espoused by thea/ologies, but the fullness of everyday experiences personally encountered or undergone that make up the totality of conscious events in a narrator’s life, for which I have devised the concept

‘quotidian experiences’. And since non-normative experiences of gender have been my theme, the experiences of trans people have been the source of this quotidian material. In theologising around these experiences, I have claimed my narrators as having lives *worth* theologising, lives worth rendering intelligible in the light of GOD/DE.

The richness of the quotidian provides fertile potential for the embarrassingly prolix babblings essential to express what has been foreclosed and banished from the proper domain of GOD/DE, at the same time maintaining as central the inexchangeability of each individual life, such that no generalisations are possible about human life, about gender or about the Divine. Through the multiplicatory specificity of these stories that in no way resemble our own, through quotidian experiences that seem foreign to us, we see more of GOD/DE and of how we are all *imago Dei*.

Of course, this appeal to experience might itself be idolatrous if I fail to acknowledge the crisis of representation and hold to an idea that interviews reveal some romanticised notion of a unified and knowable deep interior. But I cannot adequately represent my narrators any more than they can adequately represent themselves, and this is a hedge against idolatry. Even as I say that I look to narrators not for what they say *about* GOD/DE but as models *of* GOD/DE—words of GOD/DE

and books about GOD/DE—I must unsay the potential for this to constitute them as idols and assert that *imago Dei* is never a representation but only ever an interpretation of GOD/DE. We are at our most unreliable when our quotidian experiences narrate GOD/DE's story, since we are but fragments of the infinite.

There is more to everything than meets the eye; GOD/DE, self and gender have a back we can never see. But the fact that we are *in media res*, born into the middle of a plot we do not author and cannot control, does not invalidate a claim to theologising around experience, simply that experience is not what we thought it was; as Butler asserts 'this death [of the subject]...is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had' (2005, 65). And being *in media res* does not preclude critiquing the plot. Indeed, critique is one of the few plotlines available to us to author; in critique, we meet Fox's challenge 'what canst thou say?' and speak of the norms that orchestrate and limit our potential to be fully human.

That I have used the quotidian in this way stems from my sense of the Holy as being expressed not just in that deemed morally good, or the well-lived life. The Holy, the something in the objective situation awaiting discovery and acknowledgement, reveals nothing of GOD/DE except that GOD/DE *is*. However, in assigning

numinosity to trans experiences, I have not sought to imply any level of trans glamorisation or mystification, asserting that unintelligible embodiments are in some inhuman way morally or spiritually superior to the intelligible, for fear of placing too heavy a burden of perfection on those already burdened by misplaced judgements. As previously stated, we are all *imago Dei*; using trans experience to investigate this is a way of justly reincorporating those experiences in the light of GOD/DE, not sacralising them over and above cis experiences.

### **Grounded Theology**

My approach for theologising narrators' experiences has been the methodological practice I have devised, for which I have coined the term Grounded Theology, a way of listening to stories that takes them beyond themselves. This is a slow, quiet, modest, flexible, open and sensitive approach that conceives of neither theories nor narrators as idols, but holds all open to change. It asserts that all theology is a prayerful act, an exercise, however fallibly executed, in making a space for GOD/DE to speak in theology rather than for theology to speak of GOD/DE. Grounded Theology has then some of the same characteristics as Weil's notion of attention; it seeks to be an intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous and generously attentive process, that risks vulnerability in knowing that there is no verifiable truth to speak of and yet speak it must. In this and in its abandonment of preconceptions in favour of waiting to see what comes up, Grounded Theology is contra-positivist and thus

contra-idolatrous, focussed on process rather than product, on hearing rather than naming.

The heart of Grounded Theology is listening, attending or silently waiting for non-coherent data to make itself a little more coherent. By being intent on the narrator alone, spending time with per not just in the interview but in transcription, analysis and writing up, faithfully attending both to per intentions and to the still small voice of GOD/DE's guidance, I have waited on my narrators until light gradually dawned, in an open and unforced way. In listening, in being receptive rather than grasping or desiring, in giving absolute unmixed, prayerful attention, I have asserted that attention to GOD/DE and attention to narrators are made up of the same substance.

The silent waiting of Grounded Theology creates a space where anything can happen, where GOD/DE can hear and be heard, an overt renunciation of my power in favour of desiring without an object. The attentive mode of Grounded Theology seeks to eschew power-over, letting the listened-to *be* without desiring to consume per, acknowledging that I can never *have* my narrator as an object. Attention in Grounded Theology is ethically directed *to* GOD/DE and *for* the World; attention to the One is attention to the others who long for good at the bottom of their/our hearts, cry out that they/we are hungry and want some bread and piteously seek to know why they/we are being hurt.

Grounded Theology is an embodied practice of being fully present to the bodies of narrators; it is theology grounded in individual quotidian experience. It is a Thin methodology that sees the remarkable in the mundane, transforming the messy and unruly into something that speaks of the numinous. It is a methodology that wholly embraces the Protean, knowing that narrators and data change as they will, regardless of my graspings. And, in embracing the crisis of representation at its heart, Grounded Theology is an Opaquing practice. Moreover, it contradicts the idols of methods by asserting that the rational and the a-rational coexist in research, that the disparate strands of mind and spirit are not disparate after all. Grounded Theology is concerned not simply with intellectual pursuit, but with drawing down the good from GOD/DE into the World and with creating an otherwise space, a counterweight to the dominological, as the point of the pencil through which GOD/DE experiences the World. A central tenet of Grounded Theology is ‘don’t just do something, sit there’.

As a Grounded Theologian, I have accepted Fox’s challenge, quoted in Chapter 2, ‘what canst thou say?’, by acknowledging the spirit working within and by taking responsibility for the metaphorical models that I have presented, rather than falling back on an unsupportable claim that the data speak for themselves. I hope that what I have spoken is inwardly from GOD/DE, not mere solipsistic self-indulgence,

although I fully acknowledge that this is an unverifiable hope. And my metaphors are as open to unsaying as any; but there is no unsaying without first my having a voice to say, no apophasis without my claim to kataphatic production as a right of this body in this time and place. Fox's challenge to speak is something of an aporia, demanding both that I assert myself and that I humbly speak GOD/DE's truth, getting over myself and going beyond myself, thinking it possible that I may be mistaken, renouncing my greedy self-perspective and stepping aside for the work. In this I honour the early Quaker women prophets who lifted up their own voices like the sound of a trumpet to sound forth GOD/DE's truth like the shout of a King<sup>1</sup> (Barnsley 2004, 26). It is in this spirit that I have offered my metaphorical models of Thinness, Proteanism and Opacity.

## *The Metaphors*

### **Thinness**

In laying claim to trans lives as lives worth theologising, I have delineated three metaphorical models which describe both GOD/DE and gendered *imago Dei*. The first of these, Thinness, founded upon Leigh's story, draws together Otto's concept of The Holy or the numinous, Weil's thought on the precarious in-between-ness that

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<sup>1</sup> This is a paraphrase of a quote from a Quaker pamphlet of 1659 titled *A Short Relation of Some of the Cruel Sufferings (for the Truths Sake) of Katharine Evans and Sarah Chevers...* in which Katharine Evans tells of an encounter on Malta with the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor accuses her of talking 'like a mad woman'; to this, she replies: 'The Lord did say unto us, LIFT UP YOUR VOICE LIKE THE NOISE OF A TRUMPET, AND SOUND FORTH MY TRUTH LIKE THE SHOUT OF A KING' (Mack 1994, 261).

person calls *metaxu*, and the Celtic spirituality notion of the thin place into a new concept of embodied numinosity I call the Thin person. Leigh, as Thin person, nods to the numinous beyond perself and per quotidian experiences, holding out the promise of consolation and healing by calling us into the presence of something that exceeds the commonplace. We see per and see through per, as a Weilian *metaxu* that values embodied experience and asserts that, though this is quotidian, it is not so mired in the mundane that the sacred cannot shine in it and good not be drawn down from GOD/DE through it. Indeed, it is the very ordinariness of the quotidian that makes Thinness valuable, since this is the Holy made manifest not just in the awe-filled numinous, or in the beauty- or the suffering-filled *metaxu*, but in the regular stuff of the everyday. And Leigh's Thinly gendered *imago Dei*, generated not by per doing anything but simply by standing there at an angle to the certainties as an otherwise space, accepting of instability and the permanent question like a postmodern anchorite, shows us something of the vast complexity of GOD/DE; as gender proves to be Thin, so do our rigid concepts of the Divine.

### **Proteanism**

The vast complexity of GOD/DE figures in a different form, as is only appropriate, in the innovative metaphor of mutable Proteanism, drawn from Robin's story. Turning first to the myth of Narcissus and, more particularly, per Mirror, I constructed a model of the Narcissan gravity well, the reflective snare that mires us in the means

of the mundane when we should be lifting our gaze to the end that is GOD/DE. However, although this is a metaphor with much to say about the dangers of idolatry, when measured against Robin's quotidian experiences, it was not a good fit and so I turned to the myth of Proteus, the shy metamorphic sea god, for greater illumination. Despite some negative appraisals of Proteus, I concur with assessments that value per as ever productive of new forms and meanings, outrunning the straight path like a dog pleased to be taken for a walk, countering the unitary doctrinal orthodoxies of the Great Beast of collective opinion and idolatrous Molochs that provide a ready made pattern for thought. The Protean, fluid and ethically formed, gives us balance, takes its time, circles round, can reverse when necessary, constantly trims its cargo<sup>2</sup> of ideas in order to maintain a steady course. Thus, it represents all that mutability that Christianate dominology so fears, preferring that GOD/DE be unchangeably other to the World of change and decay. Along with Schneider's multiplicity and Althaus-Reid's Queer, the Protean asserts that GOD/DE is ceaselessly mutable and further, that mutability, as it is expressed in bodies and in genderedness, is *imago Dei*, not just because all bodies are different one from another, but because all bodies are internally inconsistent and unrepresentable; thus we embody GOD/DE's Protean nature as complex and unruly, exhibiting no totality or ultimacy. Proteanism has little regard for unitary doctrinal

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<sup>2</sup> In small boat sailing, the weight of passengers and cargo are redistributed, or 'trimmed', in order to ensure that the boat takes maximum advantage of the prevailing wind conditions: 'The principle of trim is to balance the forces acting on the boat...and maintain the fastest underwater hull and foil orientations for all conditions' (Cockerill [n.d.], [n.p.]

orthodoxies and the false idols of Worldly opinion that keep us trapped in the gravity well of Narcissus's Mirror.

## Opacity

Unitary doctrinal orthodoxies are challenged again in the metaphor of Opacity, drawn from Sol's story. Beginning with Weil's concept of contradiction as pincers with which to prise ideas apart, and per insistence upon absence of contradiction as reification or idolatry, a nailing down of what should remain unattached, I have contended that contradictory narratives like Sol's are not problems to interpret away, but rather *metaxu* to the utter complexity of the GOD/DE whose back we cannot see. After Butler, I have asserted that a primary Opacity of the self is not only endemic to the human condition but also a reflection of GOD/DE's incomprehensibility, that we Opaquely body forth the mystery of the Divine. Furthermore Opacity is a characteristic as necessary to human as it is to theological development, since either one fully known is incapable of change; no forward movement is possible if we pretend to know GOD/DE, self or gender.

Since Opacity is part of *imago Dei*, it would be unethical not to honour it in ourselves and others, to account for our unknowability by picking up the beer-cans instead of demanding to know who dropped them. In acknowledging our shared, invariable and impartial blindness, in the act for which I have instituted the concept

of ‘Opaquing’, we acknowledge too the embodied transcendence of all our sibs, not as that which is above-and-beyond but as a humble getting over of ourselves, a learning how (not) to speak in an apophysis that unsays both gender and GOD/DE as utterly exceeding the possibility of a full account ever being given. In claiming bodies as expressive of GOD/DE transcendent rather than GOD/DE immanent, I have thus asserted that the two are not a duality but an indivisible whole. Contra Weil’s assertion that GOD/DE is utterly withdrawn from the World, I see ÆR in *every* creaturely source, working from known to unknown, because our metaphors for GOD/DE can be constructed in no other way; bodies, intelligible and unintelligible together, express GOD/DE as immanently present but transcendentally different and Opacity is *imago Dei* as embodied transcendence

## *Justice*

### **Unintelligibility and Incoherence**

Throughout this thesis I have deployed Butler’s notion of the unintelligible (see Chapter 1) as expressive of all our sibs who are deemed beyond the borders of binary gender norms; trans people, genderqueer people, intersex people, people who feel that they/we have to cut off part of their/our gender heel in order to fit them/ourselves into Cinderella’s binary slipper. In (re)claiming pathologised, abjected, unintelligible lives as lives worth theologising, lives that are as much the image and likeness of GOD/DE as any other, I have sought to assist in returning

intelligibility to those who escape or exceed the norms. I am aware, however, that there is a Weilian contradiction in the use of this term, in that while claiming that unintelligibility is a violent regime inflicted on our sibs, I have also affirmed (after Butler) that incoherence is politically fruitful and theologically transcendent. This is an aporia, an insoluble contradiction that we must hold between the points of the pincers, paying attention until light dawns and it reveals to us new meaning, rather than seeking to inflict too ready a judgement upon it. GOD/DE, I assert, is the only uncontradictory unintelligible, the only One we cannot make intelligible no matter how hard we try.

### **Judgement, Justice and Alliances**

The last of the four gender aspects in my gender schema is that concerned with the way in which the judgements of others impact on our gendered being in the World. Judgement is the looking that consumes and destroys, that imposes idolatrous means upon bodies, that forces the violent excision of heels so that slippers can be forced to fit. Judgement gives Leigh *that look* and forces per over into the girls' line, tells Robin person looks *like a man in drag*, and decrees that Sol is mad or bad for wanting to embody per affirmed gender. Judgement believes we have the right to say what we will, untempered by thinking it possible we may be mistaken. Rather than Thinly standing in awe and wonder, humbly paying attention to that which exceeds the I, judgement enforces its rules and norms arrogantly, demanding

compliance, demanding thickening of Thinness, clarity where there might be Opacity, and unicity in place of Protean mutability.

In order for justice, rather than judgement, to be done, for Leigh and Robin and Sol to be saved from the idolatrous mastery of the Great Beast of collective gender opinion, there is a need for an open-hearted, non-judgemental, astonished wonder, access to the a-rational mystery of transcendent embodiments rather than the World shrunk to fit outworn measurements, lest our unintelligible sibs remain on the outside un-honoured, uncelebrated and unsymbolised. Rather than devoting ourselves to a gender order and making an idol of Worldly collectivities, we might, after Butler, embrace a politics of disidentification, indeterminacy and incoherence, live a continuous critique of gender norms that works the fissures inherent in their composition, refuse to accept the World unchallenged, renounce rather than collude with dominological gender binaries and offer all our certainties up to GOD/DE.

In order to serve the cause of justice for our unintelligible sibs, some trans/genderqueer activists argue that renunciation of gender must come from the cis as well as from the trans, that we must step out of our safe houses and form alliances based on need rather than identity, Protean irregular groupings and partial and fluctuating communities in odd places and combinations, using flexible and creative concepts of community. Alliances require a certain patience with the

Opacity of others, based on a shared, invariable and partial blindness about ourselves. These groupings will not deny the existence of binary genders as experiential categories that violently oppress us but will focus as much on thinly visible hopes and dreams for a future in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually being overcome, as it will on experiences from the past. By establishing relationality where no common ground can be assumed, nonviolently, nonjudgementally, tolerantly, patiently and with humility, alliances will become the cornerstone of political action, acting as a counterweight to collectivities based on identities of sameness.

## **Counterweight**

That binary gender is gender out of kilter is the central claim of this thesis; a renunciation or decreation of gender would act as an important counterweight, following Weil's advice that knowing which way society is tilted requires us to add our weight to the lighter side. The concept of the counterweight itself is a valuable one, as it suggests not plumping down on one side of an argument but rather being poised, circling round, refusing to tip the scales in favour of one collectivity or another, preferring a lively balance over deadening decisiveness.

In Chapter 1, I proposed decreation as a counterweight to gender imbalance; subsequent chapters also embody and expand upon the concept of counterweight.

Attentive listening or silent waiting, for example, offers rebalance in a World where speaking is perceived as power. It also shifts some of the power of the interview from listener to narrator and gives per back control over the content of the story. The Thin person, as an anchoritic otherwise space of absolution and acceptance, who does not just do something but simply sits there, redresses a World in which action is power, and draws down the transcendent into the mundane for us all. The Protean stands against opting for one ideology or another, and for the balance of mutability with coherence, trimming the boat with holes to stay afloat on the shifting currents of unpredictable events. Opacity weighs in against the Great Beast of collective opinion that pretends to a unicity of self, offering instead a non-coercive acknowledgement that we infinitely transcend as self, other or GOD/DE.

Leigh, Robin and Sol are all counterweights to the World of binary gender, spaces where thinking otherwise can happen, spaces of attention rather than judgement, where the sad and broken, themselves and our selves, can be healed of their/our sense that they/we might have violated what it is to be human. They are outsiders shedding slantwise light upon gender and GOD/DE, rebalancing the World for the good of all those sibs who are hungry for justice and want some bread.

## *Theological Value of the Outsider*

### **Outsider Theology**

Half the time I don't know what the girls are talking about; their jokes seem to relate to a past that everyone but me has shared. I'm a foreigner in the world and I don't understand the language. It's a miserable feeling. I've had it all my life. (Webster [1912], 1.290)

This is often how I feel about my genderedness, that it is foreign to me, that I do not understand the language, that this is a miserable feeling I have had for as long as I can remember. But that is not all I feel. Oftentimes I am proud of inventing my own language, proud of a past that no-one else has shared, proud that I know what I am talking about without recourse to the collectivity of the Girls, proud of being an outsider.

This thesis is very much a theology of an outsider, written outside both feminist Christian theologies and Goddess spiritualities, for those whom Wittig designates outlaws, not-Women and not-Men on account of their flouting the laws of heteronormativity; this is a theology that stands with the freaks, as Bornstein commends. My methodological approach too is outsider, transgressing the laws both of theology, with regard to experience, and of qualitative research methods, in its claim to being an a-rational spiritual practice. Far from making me miserable, I find this outsider position to be extremely fruitful in helping me to expose some of the

flaws, shortcomings and half-truths in the Great Beasts of unitary doctrinal orthodoxies, in the hope of calling down justice into the World.

### **Queer Sainthood**

In per own search for metaphors that will call down justice into the World, Althaus-Reid investigates the potential of the concept of Queer, discussed in Chapter 4. The Queer GOD/DE is a GOD/DE who stays outside, person asserts, beyond the totalising centre, on behalf of all those whom the Great Beast rejects. And ÆR Queer followers know that 'religious conversion...does not give space for options' (2003, 167). For the followers of the Queer GOD/DE excommunication and foreignness are radical choices, to enter a place where one can be safe from the optionless salvation of heteronormativity; here, hell becomes 'a Queer space of grace' (ibid, 167) in which 'refuseniks' of unitary doctrinal orthodoxies Thinly bring down the good in the form of justice beyond the norms (ibid, 168). These followers are 'Queer saints...a menace and a subversive force by the sheer act of living in integrity and defiance' (ibid, 166); they Opaquely refuse to learn the language, refuse conversion, refuse the centre, refuse to honour and obey (ibid, 166-7), refuse to idolise the Great Beast, and insist on a Protean participation in the lives of their communities through dissent.

## Weil as Outsider Saint

For Weil, the refusal of the centre, the refusal to be good on any Worldly terms, was a primary ethical task<sup>3</sup>. Nowhere is this position more evident than in her decision to remain unbaptised in solidarity with all those whom her church cast out because they are contrary to its doctrines: 'It is the use of those two little words *anathema sit*<sup>4</sup>...I remain beside all those things that cannot enter the Church...on account of those two little words' (2009 [1951], 33). Weil sees the sentiments exemplified by *anathema sit* to have been at the root of tyrannies, since the words encapsulate the notion of insiders, who are acceptable, and outsiders, who are accursed (ibid, 37). Like Althaus-Reid's Queer saints, Weil holds that religious conversion does not give space for options, and in refusing baptism, enters a place safe from optionless salvation, a Queer space of grace. As Weil puts it, it is 'as well that a few sheep should remain outside the fold' in order to be able to critique the norms of the insiders (ibid, 36), and thus person stands as Althaus-Reid's menace and subversive force, embodying the Thin, the Protean and the Opaque by the sheer act of living in integrity and defiance, at GOD/DE's behest:

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<sup>3</sup> Weil enjoins herself in her notebooks to resist being imprisoned by any affections and to 'keep [her] solitude' (2009 [1951], 67), on the grounds that '[a]mong human beings, only the existence of those we love is fully recognized' and thus, in order to recognise the worth of every human being, personal attachments must be eschewed in favour of impersonal love (ibid, 64). Weil extends this sense of outsidership even to her relationship with herself, stating: 'To love a stranger as oneself implies the reverse: to love oneself as a stranger' (ibid, 62).

<sup>4</sup> *Anathema sit*, meaning 'let her be accursed', are the words of excommunication by which the Catholic Church casts out everyone and everything that does not conform to accepted doctrine. In refusing baptism, Weil had not simply refused to join the church, but had accepted this status of accursedness, rendered thus by her ecumenical, egalitarian views on the acceptability of non-Catholics in the eyes of GOD/DE (McLellan 1991, 219).

I have never once had, even for a moment, the feeling that God wants me to be in the Church. I have never once had a feeling of uncertainty.... He does not want it so far at least..., unless I am mistaken I should say that it is his will (ibid, 31).

Weil's radical individualism impels us to take no value system at face value, to leave none of the Molochs of collective superstition unchallenged. In this, person stands as the Fool<sup>5</sup>, 'doubter of everything which is considered self-evident' (Abosch 1994, 133), a Holy figure, speaking Truth to power, exhibiting 'the madness...beside which the wisdom of this world is clearly revealed as folly' (Fiedler 2009 [1951], xix). Like the Queer saint, Weil demonstrates the saintly nature of outsidership, 'remain[ing] on the threshold...crouching there for the love of all of us who are not inside, all the heretics, the secular dreamers, the prophesiers in strange tongues' (ibid, xxvi), 'belong[ing] to a world culture, still to be formed, where the voices of multiple classes, castes, races, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions, can be respected' (Fan 2007, 139), facing towards the future flashing into being and outrunning the straight path.

## **Outsider Saints**

Like Riki Wilchins and other trans/genderqueer activists, the Weilian outsider sees being part of the problem *as* being part of the solution. The Outsider saint calls attention to the fact that the rules are breakable, refuses to collude with injustice

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<sup>5</sup> According to Abosch, Weil venerated Shakespearean fools as the only people who speak the truth (1994, 133). Abosch counterposes the Fool with the Priest as 'the guardian of the absolute' (ibid).

and helps us all to braid the ropes that might pull down the walls that imprison us at the borders. An outlaw with an oblique point of view, the Outsider saint exemplifies the potential to prise open the gaps and fissures within the norms so that power might be turned against itself. Person stands with the freaks, with those who are cast out because they are contrary to doctrine, adding per subversive confusion to the cause of justice and giving up the purity of per soul and of per gender in favour of the unintelligible. Outsider saints crouch in the margins for the love of all who are not inside, decreators who belong to a culture where the voices of multiple sexualities, classes, castes, races, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and genders will be respected as made in the image and likeness of a GOD/DE whom we can never hope to understand.

### **Towards Outsider Sainthood**

It is traditional at the conclusion of a thesis to offer some suggestions as to what further areas of academic study this work might suggest. In this case, however, I believe that attention might be better directed towards the practicalities a decreation of gender might entail, of how we might create the delicious opportunities for transformation and the different spaces in which to play with the potentialities of gender when we are undefended by gender norms, of how might we begin to become Outsider saints. If we are cis, we might consider how we do now and might in future support our trans and genderqueer sibs and challenge cis gender privilege

in a meaningful way in our theologisings; how we might pursue the building of fruitful alliances of theory and practice; and how we might support each other in the sometimes frightening task of standing up for the outsiders' rights finally to be intelligible. We might ask what liturgical moves we should make to body forth our gender critique; what spiritual practices we might develop to sustain us personally, and in our worship communities, in pursuit of gender decreation as necessary to the quest for gender justice; what resources we might use from existing models of renunciatory practices. We might consider how to protect ourselves and our allies against the risks that decreation holds; and how, practically, we might accomplish being outsiders ourselves, standing at an angle to the certainties and preoccupations of the Great Beast and throwing our weight on the lighter side; how we might (re)construct our language finally to be able (not) to speak of GOD/DE in the light of our decreations of gender. And finally, we might reconsider the work of this thesis in light of the possibility that I may be mistaken; taking our cue from Simone Weil, our method of investigation being such that as soon as we have thought something, we try to see in what ways the contrary is true, groping in the dark to say, unsay, and say again.

### *Utopia*

My method of writing is to take notes on 5x3 index cards, assigning keywords as I go, and then to sort those cards into the order that forms the basis of my written

work. For this chapter, one of the biggest stacks of cards is the one headed 'Utopia' and, without a doubt, this is a theology with utopian intent at its heart. As I stated in Chapter 1, I want to live in Marge Piercy's gender-neutral future in Mattapoisett, a world in which sexual difference exists in all its variety, but socially constructed gender roles do not place an unlimited warrant on anyone, where those of our sibs who are now unintelligible can simply *be*, where the idolatrous stagnation of the Narcissan mirror and the Great Beast of collective gender opinion are given no power over us.

One of the great strengths of Piercy's creation is that person writes of utopia as a constant process rather than a final product, an unfixed future of changing alliances rather than a push towards another rigid collectivity. This is an eternal reaching towards a future, which like meaning itself, is permanently deferred, a future such as Outsider saints might attempt to create, that recognises its own endemic Opacity and yet relishes the delicious and devastating opportunities for transformation, for multiplying gender expressions beyond the oppressive binary choice we now face.

My thought experiment with epicene pronouns is one such outsider move to reconfigure the gender landscape. Trans and genderqueer language uses, with all their shifting complexity and non-coherence are, I suggest, another in their attempts to think the unintelligible into being. Reconfiguring language is one area into which

we can all put some really sustained growth work to get rid of some of what Robin calls our Crappy Beliefs, creating instead a space of knowledgeable ignorance in which we allow ourselves not only the power of political critique but also an openness to wonder and a willingness to become undone.

‘A realized temporal world where there is no male or female...has seemed too unrealistic or utopian for most theologians to take seriously’, but take it seriously we must, asserts Cornwall (2010, 72). Livia contends, as quoted in the Foreword, that it makes no sense to behave as though we are living in a nongendered utopia just because we want it to be so. But how will it be so unless by the living of it? And why should not the impossible be true? As Weil asserts, that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion (2002 [1952], 114). This is true for GOD/DE; why should it not be true for we who are created in ÆR image, and for our own future, especially since the stories we tell of the Divine form the fabric of what we believe is possible for the World? The Thinness of Leigh, the Proteanism of Robin and the transcendent Opacity of Sol speak to the heart of the deepest possibilities for every gendered body.

Weil is no enthusiast for utopias, stating that ‘We must prefer real hell to an imaginary paradise’ (2002 [1952], 53). But to accept the real hell is to accept that there is nothing more to be done, and without a concept of Moreness, there can be

no change. Being open to GOD/DE's More prevents Outsider saints from believing that what we have is all we might have, that this World is the only *ersatz* of GOD/DE. In our embodied transcendence, expressed not just in well-lived lives but in all our messy, unruly, quotidian data, we shine a light on GOD/DE. Through the unsurpassable but utterly non-Divine mystery of creatureliness, we are Weilian pincers, revealing GOD/DE and self through unknowable embodiments. We are dazzling darkneses, authored by a GOD/DE who precedes, exceeds, transcends us in infinite degree. Our material More is the image of GOD/DE's infinitely nonmaterial More; we cannot but want to body it forth in our future, walking cheerfully over the World, answering the Thin, Protean and Opaqued that of GOD/DE in every one.

# APPENDICES

## FOREWORD

### *Punctuation and Other Conventions*

In these transcription excerpts I employ the following conventions:

- Lines numbers apply to this excerpted transcript only, not to the original full transcription. Original documents are considerably longer than the excerpts included here.
- Sections in *italics* are those to which I refer directly in the main text. Surrounding material gives context to these quoted sections.
- The narrator is always indicated by their initial and I by mine.
  - 1 J: let's start
  - 2
  - 3 S: so, OK
- Line breaks are inserted whenever either speaker pauses briefly, to represent natural interruptions and hesitations in speech, in line with the stanza format (Chafe 1980, ; see also Etherington 2004, 116) described in Chapter 2.
  - 19 erm, y'know people would address me as a boy and
  - 20 cos I u... usually wouldn't correct them [laughs]
  - 21 y'know
  - 22 but erm, my mom would
- Long, uninterrupted sections of speech are indented on second and subsequent lines:
  - 501 so you never felt God was punishing you or that you had that  
kind of stuff—would shake your fist at God or anything like that
- Pauses of 1-4 seconds are indicated with a dash:
  - 425 -
- Pauses of longer than 4 seconds are indicated with the relevant number of repeated lines and dashes, one for every 4-second increment:
  - 468 -
  - 469 -
  - 470 -

- Cuts in the original transcription, of any length, are indicated by three consecutive lines of ellipses:

330 ...

331 ...

332 ...

- Non-verbal utterances, such as laughter, and additions, such as indications that parts of the original recording are inaudible, are enclosed in square brackets:

286 [inaudible]

287 [L sighs]

- Full stops and start-of-sentence capitals are not used, since it is frequently impossible to delineate sentences clearly in normal speech. Capitalisation is used only for proper names.
- For similar reasons, other punctuation is minimal, used only where necessary to improve readability.

APPENDIX 1  
VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION SECTIONS  
INTERVIEW WITH LEIGH

1  
2 L: I think about when I was a little kid I was very comfortable with, erm  
3 just, just my general personality, I, I,  
4 *when I was a little kid I really thought I was a boy, at first, like I*  
5 *there was, there was no, no question for me about it, I mean*  
6 and er, my mom was not very  
7 she wasn't a strict person you know, she's very erm  
8 she's basically just like 'if this makes you happy, you're not hurting other  
9 people', y'know, erm  
10 *and she's a fairly, y'know, a fairly open-minded person herself—she's*  
11 *bisexual and er, y'know, that sort of thing*  
12 anyway, so  
13 *y'know, when I w... when I was a little kid I, I would dress like a boy*  
14 *and cut my hair like a boy and I never like I never told people I was a boy*  
15 *or anything*  
16 *I never made it like er a, a thing of er, a deception*  
17 *although it wouldn't've, wouldn't've feel like, wouldn't feel like that for*  
18 *me, erm*  
19 *but, y'know as I got older*  
20 *more and more I started to get really uncomfortable with the moments*  
21 *where*  
22 *erm, y'know people would address me as a boy and*  
23 *cos I u... usually wouldn't correct them [laughs]*  
24 *y'know*  
25 *but erm, my mom would*  
26 *and I mean it's not, it's not that that hurt me or anything*  
27 *y'know I think she was just*  
28 *she, she sensed my*  
29 *discomfort and thought that she needed to establish me as a girl*  
30 when really y'know  
31 *I, I just wanted to be*  
32 *I d..., I don't even know how to explain*  
33 *just kind of left alone*  
34 erm  
35 *and it really crystallised when I was older and er*  
36 *I was in elementary school*  
37 *and we went on this field trip*  
38 *to a one-roomed school house*

39 *and as like kind of a, a bonus thing you could dress up as*  
40 *like the kids from that, that era*  
41 *and obviously the dress, dress code of that time was much more gendered*  
42 *specific*  
43 *y'know, I mean,*  
44 *it's, it's obvious if you're presenting as a boy or as a girl and*  
45 *erm, I was really excited about it because I liked the idea of being like er*  
46 *yeah, like I thought of it as like being Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer or*  
47 *something, y'know, so*  
48 *I pulled my socks up, but I had y'know little short trousers and that sort of*  
49 *thing and*  
50 *I was really, I was really into—I thought it was great*  
51 *and then I got there and y'know they had the two entrances*  
52 *one for, one for boys and one for girls*  
53 *and I remember I got in the boys' line*  
54 *and I didn't... y'know I mean I was a little nervous about it*  
55 *I knew that they might like try to y'know they might catch me out*  
56 *but I also just sort of er y'know*  
57 *this is, this is how I look, this is what I am so what are, what are they*  
58 *gonna do?*  
59 *and it was*  
60 *I remember the, erm, the teacher just giving me this **look** and, and y'know*  
61 *thrusting me over into the girls' line*  
62 *and I got into the classroom and I was just **so crushed***  
63 *I mean I was really*  
64 *I, th...*  
65 *I think it was like first time I **really really** felt social shame*  
66 *like because I wasn't really a, a shameful person even though I was kind of*  
67 *I was always fairly loud like*  
68 *cos I was a very active kid y'know*  
69 *so I would get in trouble y'know—'DON'T TALK'*  
70 *y'know at school, class or blah blah blah*  
71 *but I'd never felt like*  
72 *there was something*  
73 *innately*  
74 *disgusting or horrifying about me y'know and erm*  
75 *[sighs]*  
76 *I dunno, it really, really upset me and I just remember*  
77 *I remember pulling my pants down over the socks that I'd put up y'know*  
78 *to be like, be like the olden type boys and, and, and er*  
79 *I remember thinking I was gonna cry*  
80 *and just sort of like y'know huddling there and, and feeling really **horrible***  
81 *and that, that just sort of went on for*

82 years, really  
83 I mean at like y'know  
84 you, you can never really narrow down a personality change or like a  
85 the way you interact with like just one event I don't think  
86 but y'know  
87 if I, if I wanted to sort of date it chronologically I can look at my life and  
88 say  
89 after that I just started to get really uncomfortable  
90 y'know erm  
91 presenting the way I, I wanted to  
92 y'know erm  
93 as I got older like I would look back at when I was younger with just this  
94 *really bizarre nostalgia*  
95 *like I remember erm*  
96 *when I was very young I had a, a pair of er*  
97 *sort of greenish-olive erm khaki pants*  
98 *and they were boy's pants*  
99 *and my mom had got them for me at the store*  
100 *and erm I remember her saying how they looked great on me*  
101 *and she thought they were going to be great for when I was running*  
102 *around and*  
103 *they were just like my favourite 'boy pants'*  
104 *like they just made me feel this amazing*  
105 *I dunno just this*  
106 *power and charm*  
107 and, and , and I remember when I grew out the them and when I started  
108 getting new clothes and  
109 *I started getting too uncomfortable to get boys' clothes and I would get*  
110 *girls' clothes*  
111 *and I just would always have this nostalgia for this*  
112 *time when it was like I didn't have to do that*  
113 *and erm*  
114 *as I went on it got worse because*  
115 *becau...*  
116 *it became that it wasn't just like a, a social presentation thing anymore*  
117 *because of*  
118 *as you get older*  
119 *when you hit, when you hit puberty*  
120 *then your new problem is*  
121 *not just how am I presenting for y'know*  
122 *wh... whether people are gonna call me 'he' or 'she' or buy me a*  
123 *y'know a glove at Christmas or, or y'know a doll y'know*  
124 I mean suddenly it's, it's, it's a matter of y'know

125 can I, can I talk to this girl or boy as a girl or a boy or what? y'know  
126 and  
127 *at first, at fir... the first phase I went through it I, I just tried to be*  
128 *a girl*  
129 *and I just tried to date guys as a girl*  
130 *and erm*  
131 *I did that **very** privately*  
132 *er I didn't tell my par...*  
133 *well er it's funny because I'm, I'm very honest with my mother but I didn't*  
134 *tell her at all about*  
135 *like trying to date guys*  
136 *because there would probably be that it felt like er*  
137 *I dunno*  
138 *y'know I guess*  
139 *[sighs]*  
140 *it's strange because th... there's something*  
141 *odd about that era when you can sort of have a contradictive*  
142 *erm*  
143 *view of the future like I just*  
144 *I a... I always assumed y'know I'd just be*  
145 *a, a normal hetero... heterosexual girl*  
146 *like that was just*  
147 *what was expected of me and that's what I would be*  
148 *but at the same time I knew that*  
149 *er s...*  
150 *y'know you sort of know at the same time it's just that doesn't*  
151 *y'know it doesn't it's not gonna work out y'know*  
152 *so any way*  
153 *it felt so*  
154 *it felt so er brittle, that identity, that I really kinda*  
155 *hid it even though it was an acceptable identity which is*  
156 *sort... sort of ironic y'know*  
157 *but any way*  
158 ...  
159 ...  
160 ...  
161 when I was like very very young before I  
162 developed my own like boyishness or whatever  
163 erm I was a really pretty little girl like in a, in a very classic  
164 y'know er, er  
165 American sense of like  
166 blonde girl with blue eyes and y'know very Caucasian and delicate and  
167 *cos I've always been kind of svelte y'know that's the*

168 that's the word I've using for it rather than scrawny but erm  
169 ...  
170 ...  
171 ...  
172 L: 'you have a year on everybody else—go to college' [laughs]  
173  
174 J: and that was  
175 fifteen? sixteen?  
176  
177 L: I was  
178 sixteen, and then I turned seventeen yeah so  
179 erm  
180 yeah by the time I got to Europe I was seventeen erm  
181 anyway so I, I ended up taking a year off cos I, I, otherwise I just didn't  
182 know  
183 *I dunno I was mess frankly—at the time I just erm*  
184 *I hadn't ev... I hadn't dealt with any of the er the like gender, sexuality*  
185 *issues that I'd been having like I just sort of erm*  
186 *which is strange because I've always been very y'know er*  
187 *cos I, I was always an artist and I was always introspective and that sort of*  
188 *thing but at the same time there was always part of me that was just*  
189 *I don't even know how to explain it, sort of erm*  
190 *you know the part of the ocean where there's no light, y'know what I*  
191 *mean*  
192 *you just, you woul... you wouldn't be able to see it although its, all the*  
193 *water is on top of it so it's kind of important [laughs] but you're er*  
194 *so*  
195 *it was strange that I never*  
196 *I dunno, that I never explored that but*  
197 *I went to Europe [laughs at something happening in the street]*  
198 *I went to Europe basically hoping that*  
199 *erm*  
200 *without wanting to be crude about it I just, I was hoping I would go over*  
201 *there*  
202 *and have sex with someone and I would just under... I would just know*  
203 *y'know what I needed to be doing or what my identity was*  
204 erm  
205 cos I don't know, that's just  
206 I don't even know why that, that was logical but at the time that see...  
207 y'know I just figured y'know I don't know what else to do  
208 and I don't want to tell anybody about this so  
209 y'know let's do it by  
210 experiment

211 y'know  
212 so I went to Europe and  
213 er  
214 I didn't have sex the whole time I was there  
215 er  
216 ...  
217 ...  
218 ...  
219 and I went to Europe  
220 and I came back and  
221 I was still just as confused as I  
222 had been  
223 and erm  
224 during all that, during all that time, like during the time where I was  
225 I'd skipped grades and I was doing a lot of course work and  
226 erm  
227 that sort of thing  
228 I'd started getting these heart palpitations and er  
229 really severe insomnia, like I  
230 I mean, I mean I still, I still battle with it now but  
231 there are times where I, when I don't sleep, at all y'know—it's really hard  
232 for me  
233 erm  
234 which is y'know it's a whole other kettle of fish  
235 but anyway y'know errrr  
236 so, so basically I, I, I —physically I was suffering y'know erm  
237 and  
238 the heart thing was er became a little disturbing and my doctor was a little  
239 worried about it and  
240 I had a heart monitor for a while and er  
241 they did tests and I had  
242 y'know er  
243 y'know I still, I have a picture of my heart actually when they did er  
244 the sonar thing, which I thought was kinda cool  
245 erm  
246 ...  
247 ...  
248 ...  
249 y'know I w... so I, so I was, physically I was not doing that great  
250 and erm  
251 y'know when I came back from Europe it, it was obvious I needed  
252 some more help because er I mean before I went there I'd, my doctor  
253 prescribed me something for anti-anxiety

254 because  
255 his reasoning at the time was that I didn't have  
256 my blood pressure was too low to use a beta blocker to help my heart  
257 erm  
258 and basically the... er using anti-anxiety would help  
259 ...  
260 ...  
261 ...  
262 anyway erm  
263 *so it was, so it was like once I got back from Europe it was like y'know*  
264 *'God, that didn't work!' [laughs] y'know 'what do I do now?'*  
265 and I er  
266 I started seeing this therapist  
267 erm  
268 his name was Dr [name]  
269 and he was a, he was a pretty nice guy y'know he wasn't a bad guy or  
270 anything  
271 erm  
272 but y'know we lived in a small town so he wasn't really  
273 [sniffs]  
274 y'know erm  
275 *y'know I would say he wasn't the most insightful person in the universe*  
276 *but he was pretty y'know not to say he was a bad guy*  
277 anyway erm  
278 basically I just  
279 *er for the first few months I didn't even talk when I went to the sessions*  
280 *like I would*  
281 *I would, maybe I would for a few minutes and then I would*  
282 *most of it was just silence, sort of me*  
283 *kind of shutting down*  
284 *which was strange*  
285 erm  
286 *and that went on for a really long time actually, that went on for months*  
287 until erm  
288 I can't remember what it was—I got really stressed out with something, I  
289 don't even remember what it was now  
290 and I had a fight with my mom and I  
291 I w... I was like really  
292 oh I think I was late for something for her  
293 y'know and erm  
294 and she was really angry about me being late  
295 and it's unusually for me to be late for things—I mean I'm not the most  
296 punctual person in the world but it's not like I go around y'know

297 holding people up all the time, and I was really upset  
298 *and I basically just said y'know I... I'm*  
299 *I'm dealing with this stuff and I don't know*  
300 *what to do anymore and I*  
301 *y'know I'm freaking out basically and that I'm having like a nervous*  
302 *breakdown*  
303 and erm  
304 it was really, it was really weird because er y'know  
305 *she brought me, she brought me home because she could tell that I was just*  
306 *so*  
307 *so consumed with whatever was going on*  
308 *y'know and I was crying and [sighs]*  
309 *she was waiting for me to tell her y'know what it was I needed to tell her*  
310 *and*  
311 *y'know when I finally told her y'know I, I think I'm a, I might be a boy or*  
312 *something y'know I was, y'know when I told her tha... y'know*  
313 *there's some kind of weird y'know*  
314 *issue there*  
315 she was relieved and she said y'know 'God, y'know I couldn't think of  
316 anything that would upset you, that, that, would upset you this  
317 much—I was worried that you'd killed someone when you were a  
318 little kid, by accident and  
319 y'know you'd just never told anyone all your life cos you were, you were,  
320 you could be a quiet sober kid when you were younger and I didn't know  
321 and'  
322 [sucks teeth] my god  
323 that's good to know and er  
324 'no, I'm  
325 in fact not a murderer'  
326 y'know erm  
327 *so that was like an interesting moment and then y'know after that I di... I*  
328 *h... I went through more coming out times and*  
329 *it was biz... bizarre how all my friends reacted*  
330 *erm*  
331 *o... one of my best friends who was this guy*  
332 *I has a crush on in*  
333 *middle school*  
334 *when we were like **really** little*  
335 *so it was like b... by now there was no, no crushing—we were just friends*  
336 *but erm*  
337 *he w..., he, he's gay*  
338 *and he's a, a little bit feminine—not like really feminine just not a tough*  
339 *guy y'know*

340 *and it was funny when I told him—he's like*  
341 *'You can be my boyfriend!' and*  
342 *y'know [laughs]*  
343 *he, he thought it was*  
344 ***fantastic** and*  
345 *it was really weird and then er*  
346 *I told my best friend er who's a girl and erm*  
347 *er I guess she's like*  
348 *heterosexual I would say but*  
349 *I mean tha... there's a whole other story behind that—but anyway*  
350 *I told her and she was like*  
351 *y'know*  
352 *'if you, if you do change or something and become a boy, I'm never gonna*  
353 *live it down if I'm attracted to you' [laughs]*  
354 *y'know erm*  
355 *co...*  
356 *which i... which is a very bizarre thing to have said to you y'know*  
357 *and one of my other friends er*  
358 *he was this guy erm*  
359 *he was also in like media stuff with me and er*  
360 *I told him and, and he was like 'oh my God, me too!' y'know—he was like*  
361 *'I, I think I'm a girl' y'know and I was like*  
362 *whoa, OK! [laughs]*  
363 *and er*  
364 *but yeah the more I talked about it the more I found*  
365 *people responding like*  
366 *I can't remember*  
367 *a single person that didn't respond well actually*  
368 *and i... and it was strange because there were some things erm*  
369 *like ther... there was this girl I'd known for*  
370 *like all during high school—like one of the people you meet at high school*  
371 *cos they go somewhere else and y'know*  
372 *and erm*  
373 *al the time*  
374 *during high school we were pretty close erm*  
375 *and I knew she really like*  
376 *admired me in a general sense erm*  
377 *but, but I never really*  
378 *I never thought that she could be attracted to me or anything—I mean that*  
379 *never,*  
380 *that never really occurred to me y'know, if you know what I mean*  
381 *y'know—I just didn't really think that*  
382 *I could possibly be her type but erm*

383 *y'know when she found out about it*  
384 *she... she basically*  
385 *admitted to someone else, not directly to me y'know*  
386 *that she'd y'know had a crush on for*  
387 *the longest time and had always wondered if I would y'know*  
388 *become a boy and y'know like*  
389 *and it, it was like for her it was a dream come true and, and*  
390 *you know that was, that was what was really bizarre about it y'know cos I*  
391 *mean*  
392 *y... you think it's going*  
393 *to just be horror stories of like you tell people and they're like*  
394 *y'know*  
395 *'what the fuck is wrong with you!' and*  
396 *y'know*  
397 *'argh!' slap y'know*  
398 *throw you in a Baptist church and*  
399 *y'know lock the door and s..., set it on fire and*  
400 *y..., that's what you expect to happen and, and the truth is, is*  
401 *mos... for the most part, I mean you g... you have to choose, you*  
402 *y'know I don't just tell random people all the time but*  
403 *y'know most people are like*  
404 *'oh, OK' and*  
405 *and er y'know if you*  
406 *answer their questions OK y'know*  
407 *most er*  
408 *most deal with it pretty fine*  
409 *erm*  
410 *but yeah it*  
411 *for me it er*  
412 *it's strange, it's strange to think how it's affected my spirituality because I*  
413 *also erm*  
414 *really consider myself an artist*  
415 *I mean I didn't when I was younger—I thought I was the most uncreative*  
416 *person ever*  
417 *which was strange because I was always drawing and making games and*  
418 *doing little puppet plays and I mean like I was always **being** creative but it*  
419 *just, I always thought y'know 'oh I'm rubbish at this' y'know [laughs]*  
420 *so*  
421 *y'know*  
422 *that's, that's another thing when you're a little kid, how you can be so*  
423 *contradicting—I, I don't know **how** that possible*  
424 *but erm*  
425 *anyway so, so as I*

426 *grew older I just like, I er*  
 427 *I eventually*  
 428 *realised y'know*  
 429 *I had to do this [laughs] y'know*  
 430 *I don't, I don't, it's not like*  
 431 *it's not like I have a choice about, I*  
 432 *I need to be an artist—I **am** an artist y'know—it's not even*  
 433 *er y'know it's just my identity*  
 434 *and*  
 435 *I think that y'know*  
 436 *that's **all** really kind of come together*  
 437 *...*  
 438 *...*  
 439 *...*  
 440 *I was really into science and my mom really encouraged that cos she **loved***  
 441 *science and all that sort of thing although she's never had the*  
 442 *brain for the math y'know to be serious with it*  
 443 *erm*  
 444 *and actually she, she wishes she er*  
 445 *had become a geologist rather than an English teacher*  
 446 *so, which i... which er er that has always*  
 447  
 448 J: *[over] quite a leap*  
 449  
 450 L: *yeah, it seems like a leap but at the same time erm*  
 451 *[sniffs]*  
 452 *y'know the way she always handled that and the way I always*  
 453 *took it from her was erm*  
 454 *y'know*  
 455 *a... and actually it's kind of built on its own in m..., in, in the way that I*  
 456 *just*  
 457 *perceived existing*  
 458 *er*  
 459 *sort of that everything is everything y'know erm*  
 460 *everything is a metaphor for everything else*  
 461 *erm*  
 462 *and evr... and that there's not really*  
 463 *erm*  
 464 *i... like if you look at the ph... like the history of philosophy and you look*  
 465 *at philosophical movements and you look abou... at the roots of*  
 466 *dualistic thought*  
 467 *y'know back to Plato y'know erm*  
 468 *the er this idea of the ideal forms y'know*

469 *behind the shadows of the real or whatever*  
470 *and er*  
471 *I really, I really don't believe that y'know*  
472 *I really am a very monistic thinker—I think that er*  
473 *y'know*  
474 *th... this is, this is here*  
475 *this is everything, everything is already important y'know er*  
476 *alive or dead or*  
477 *erm*  
478 *animate or inanimate—everything's already important*  
479 *and erm*  
480 *y'know part of that has really come from my understanding of*  
481 *er science and quantum physics, which I grew up with my mom cos she's*  
482 *really into*  
483 *er quantum physics and that sort of thing*  
484 *y'know ideas that like we're all*  
485 *made of superstrings or something y'know—there's just basic vibrations*  
486 *that*  
487 *y'know er er*  
488 *th... this whole idea of erm*  
489 *er essential oneness in a way*  
490 *and I do tie it back to, to gender because erm*  
491 *y'know when I was younger I really thought of myself as a boy and, and*  
492 *er y'know not a girl*  
493 *y'know there was, there was like that's an important statement y'know the*  
494 *grammar of it is important*  
495 *and now I just, I don't really er*  
496 *I don't really think of myself as **either** exactly—I, I'm not sure how to*  
497 *explain it erm*  
498 *i... it's sort of like I just don't react to it as, as*  
499 *different things*  
500 *y'know like I don't think that*  
501 *you exist as a man or a woman, you exist as a human being*  
502 *y'know and er*  
503 *these rules that are so arbitrary y'know—the colours we're allowed to*  
504 *wear, the*  
505 *the styles we're allowed to do our hair in*  
506 *y'know even the bodies we're allowed have*  
507 *they're very, they're very arbitrary rules and er*  
508 *the, the more you really get into biology the more you realise that erm*  
509 *variation is what's important and erm*  
510 *...*  
511 *...*

512 ...  
513 y'know people are er  
514 people are  
515 terrified of being dead or, or  
516 not living or that sort of thing and to me it's erm  
517 I dunno, it doesn't really disturb me that much any more—y'know it's not  
518 that I don't want to live—I really enjoy living  
519 *I, I enjoy being a living creature*  
520 *but erm*  
521 *I dunno, I've kinda gotten to the point where I feel like that's*  
522 *even to be an inanimate thing—even to be*  
523 *erm*  
524 *to, to dissolve into the ground or*  
525 *become ash or*  
526 *anything y'know is erm*  
527 *it's still part of a*  
528 *a much*  
529 *grander, deeper*  
530 *scheme y'know*  
531 *erm*  
532 *you're still these particles, you're still these*  
533 *y'know these amazing interactions of, of chemicals and that sort of thing*  
534 *and er*  
535 *so er y'know*  
536 *it's funny for me—I just think that er*  
537 *once you, once you*  
538 *are less erm*  
539 *consumed with*  
540 *what you are or what you aren't y'know erm*  
541 like  
542 I, I, when I explain this I always draw like a Venn diagram y'know like  
543 wha... what, y'know maybe some things overlap but you've still this  
544 separation and  
545 [intake of breath]  
546 I just tend to think that you need to  
547 draw y'know  
548 lines around the whole thing or even better yet just forget the whole idea  
549 y'know and just erm  
550 er exist as yourself  
551 ...  
552 ...  
553 ...  
554 males definitely have a, a harder deal in that

555 they are  
556 the second of the two  
557 y'know sexes—I mean the, the  
558 the original form is the female and it's been  
559 here for a really long time and  
560 I mean that's why  
561 er ma... I mean genetically that's er that's why there was the xy and that's  
562 also genetically why they have so much more disease  
563 shorter lives  
564 y'know what I mean because  
565 basically their o... their only function is to  
566 mix up  
567 the female's genetic information—they're not really there to do anything  
568 else  
569 y'know so it's like they have this horrible identity crisis of  
570 'what am I here for?' y'know I mean erm beyond just being their  
571 their genitals  
572 y'know  
573 where... whereas a, a female has like this whole  
574 y'know thing of like er  
575 y'know 'I, I give life and I take care of life' and er  
576 oh y'know this whole social aspect  
577 and for me er y'know  
578 *as I got older and the more I realised that the more I didn't want to be just*  
579 *a typical guy or a typical girl*  
580 y'know erm  
581 [intake of breath] cos I never, I've never really had the desire to be  
582 pregnant  
583 I mean wh... which is strange because I'm  
584 generally I'm really fascinated with bodily functions—I mean I know that  
585 sounds disgusting but er it's not like  
586 like in a gross like  
587 y'know er  
588 errrr  
589 sensa... sensationalistic way—it's just like erm  
590 as an artist I'm y'know I'm always fascinated when  
591 y'know I get a burn or a cut or  
592 y'know anything that happens to me  
593 and it's weird to  
594 compare that to pregnancy but y'know I mean  
595 anything that d...  
596  
597 J: [over] I can see the link

598  
 599 L: yeah anything that makes you aware of your physical self  
 600 to me seems really important like as a, as a monistic thinker y'know you,  
 601 you, it's, it's very important to  
 602 [intake of breath] experience your hand is not your hand but your, **you**  
 603 that's **you** y'know—your whole body is **you** all the time  
 604 erm  
 605 so, so yeah er but I never, I never really wanted to be  
 606 like er  
 607 a mommy figure  
 608 I was always  
 609 er it was funny wh... when I was a little kid I was very  
 610 *dashing and very er*  
 611 *roguish and er*  
 612 *I always loved going on adventures*  
 613 *and er beating up other little kids*  
 614 *and y'know*  
 615 *erm*  
 616 *not in a mean way y'know—I wasn't a bully, I'm not saying I was a bully, I*  
 617 *was just y'know I, I always stood up for myself when I needed to*  
 618 *stand up for myself and*  
 619 *I was always constantly going on adventures like going out into the woods*  
 620 *and*  
 621 *y'know*  
 622 *I didn't even **know** what kind of games like*  
 623  
 624 *we had invented there but it was like*  
 625 *explorations into the unknown sort of thing*  
 626 [sniffs] y'know so for me it was  
 627 it w... it, it er  
 628 it's funny because although  
 629 society permits more exploration of identity to women  
 630 erm  
 631 y'know in term of  
 632 women are more allowed to think about what they look like, more allowed  
 633 to think about y'know  
 634 what they do besides just working and that sort of thing  
 635 erm  
 636 I al... I alw... er as a child I felt a lot more freedom in  
 637 in a more mascu... wh... what was considered societ... societally  
 638 a more masculine identity that I didn't need to  
 639 worry about er  
 640 giving

641 life to something else or  
 642 submitting to a male or something which was horrifying and erm  
 643 or rather that  
 644 y'know I could go off on these adventures and  
 645 y'know do that sort of thing  
 646 and, and, and it's funny though, although y'know I've matured of course  
 647 hope I have erm  
 648 there's always still that, that  
 649 that little  
 650 er  
 651 always part of that  
 652 y'know there's always  
 653 something in there that, that, that make me think y'know erm  
 654 *y'know I just want to be that dashing adventurous fellow that never has to*  
 655 *worry about these things and er*  
 656 y'know  
 657 ...  
 658 ...  
 659 ...  
 660 and its strange cos I, I think now about wh... wha... c... cos I'm not sure  
 661 what I'm going do about  
 662 my situation—I mean it's still, this is  
 663 y'know I mean I talk about my, my past as a 17-year-old—I'm only 19 so  
 664 this is not  
 665 y'know this is not ancient history  
 666 erm  
 667 *y'know and erm I h... I, I, I've been in therapy*  
 668 *for another therapist who deals more with like*  
 669 *gender stuff and y'know*  
 670 *er er of course y'know I've thought about*  
 671 *like*  
 672 *full-on becoming 'a boy' y'know like*  
 673 *physically*  
 674 *y'know*  
 675 *transitioning*  
 676  
 677 J: surgery, hormones  
 678  
 679 L: yeah  
 680 that sort of thing yeah  
 681 I mean  
 682 part of that is very difficult for me because I'm s... in general don't like  
 683 the idea of modifying

684 erm  
 685 my body y'know—not  
 686 li... like not, not exactly in this, in, in an aesthetic way or anything, or  
 687 even exactly a spiritual way—it's just like  
 688 the, the safety of that is  
 689 erm  
 690 I dunno, there's someth...  
 691 er er I just I don't like it y'know erm  
 692 I always, I always  
 693 want to rely on just what I'm  
 694 what I already have  
 695 y'know  
 696 that's, that's just sort of a basic impulse  
 697 erm but y'know  
 698 the thing is is that even, even w... y'know were I to **become** a boy or if I  
 699 **become** a boy I, I, I, I don't think that I'm going to be  
 700 a big tough  
 701 y'know competitive  
 702 ra-ra kind of macho guy - I've no interest in that, not even remotely  
 703 *y'know and I, I, I thought about*  
 704 *what my reasons are for becoming a boy and, and, and sometimes I've*  
 705 *wondered if*  
 706 *part of it is that er*  
 707 *as a girl I always **did** feel*  
 708 *immature*  
 709 *in that role*  
 710 *y'know*  
 711 *and erm*  
 712 *I still feel immature even though I'm fairly, I mean I'm a fairly functional*  
 713 *person y'know—I*  
 714 *live on my own and*  
 715 *y'know go to school*  
 716 *and all that*  
 717 *y'know and, and I guess I'm an adult*  
 718 *you know I guess I'm a **woman**—I've ne... I **never** call myself a woman,*  
 719 *that's very **weird** for me*  
 720 erm  
 721 *and so, and so in a way it seemed like*  
 722 *pursuing that masculine identity to*  
 723 *the ultimate end of being a*  
 724 *man*  
 725 *y'know being an adult man and er*  
 726 *how that would physically change me—I would, I would*

727 *finally become a bit bigger*  
 728 *y'know cos I've always been very skinny—I mean you can see I'm not, I'm*  
 729 *not a large person—I've always been like that and that's not because I*  
 730 *diet or*  
 731 *exercised a ton although I don.. y'know I'm, I'm a fairly healthy person—*  
 732 *it's b... it's because of my heart—I just, I, I physically can't get*  
 733 *really overweight y'know*  
 734 *and I physically j... sh... can't get that big*  
 735 *y'know erm*  
 736 *and part of me has always really wanted to be [laughs]*  
 737 *y'know erm*  
 738 *I really like the idea of being*  
 739 *a bit*  
 740 *stronger and*  
 741 *solid and*  
 742 *y'know it, it sounds weird but*  
 743 *I, I alw... I always, I'd like that idea y'know erm*  
 744 *not that I want to be huge either—I*  
 745 *cos that doesn't feel graceful to me and*  
 746 *not that I'm very graceful but—I mean in more of like a*  
 747 *just dealing with day to day things y'know—I don't want to be some giant*  
 748 ***brute** y'know er*  
 749 *but, but*  
 750 *in, in a way it seemed like erm*  
 751 *y'know so much of my childhood*  
 752 *was*  
 753 *trying to deny this sort of masculine identity or*  
 754 *boyishness or something*  
 755 *so that I never grew older than like*  
 756 *a 12-year-old boy*  
 757 *y'know I've always been a 12-year-old boy, I'm still a 12-year-old boy,*  
 758 *y'know—I mean I look down and y'know still that*  
 759 *y'know that little kid*  
 760 *and er*  
 761 *part of, part of the idea of transitioning for me is, is almost to finally like*  
 762 *'I'm an adult!' [laughs] y'know*  
 763 *like I don't know **how** else to convince myself*  
 764 *I'm a grown-up now*  
 765 *y'know and*  
 766 *and then that does of course reach into*  
 767 *er sort of like sexual things because erm*  
 768 *and I mean up until*  
 769 *up until recently I'd been a virgin so even then it was like*

770 well I don't know, I don't really know y'know  
771 how, how my gender identity is even gonna affect y'know  
772 er how I, how I sleep with other people and er  
773 ...  
774 ...  
775 ...  
776 so anyway  
777 y'know so I started going to these, these bars and clubs and that sort of  
778 thing  
779 and erm I don't  
780 *really know what I was expecting from it either—I just sort of wanted to*  
781 *know*  
782 *what is it these other normal*  
783 *people do when they just*  
784 *feel comfortable going out and*  
785 *having sex with other people*  
786 *y'know like [laughs]*  
787 *like*  
788 *because for me there's always*  
789 *there's always an intermediary*  
790 *y'know there's, it... it's never just like*  
791 *regular sex y'know like*  
792 *y'know you can't go out as like a guy and*  
793 *and like meet guys and y'know*  
794 *have them go down on you in a bathroom or something y'know what I*  
795 *mean—you have to, you have to ge... you, you have to have a talk*  
796 *with them*  
797 *before anything can even happen y'know or,*  
798 *or if you're with a girl you can't*  
799 *y'know just*  
800 *do, do it in a telephone booth y'know like*  
801 *and it's not like people really go around doing that a lot, it's just that*  
802 *they always have that potential y'know*  
803 *so that there's always that*  
804 *that sort of confidence of like*  
805 *I'm, I'm already ready*  
806 *right here y'know any time*  
807 *I'm ready*  
808 *y'know and for me it was*  
809 *so for me it was always like I'm, I'm this observer*  
810 *wondering y'know*  
811 *how these people are*  
812 *doing this and*

813 *and I've always felt*  
814 *sort of like that observer*  
815 *and I think that really affected*  
816 *the way I spiritually deal with things too cos I could never really get into*  
817 *this idea of*  
818 *like congregating*  
819 *in a social context with people*  
820 *about like*  
821 *some kind of divine force or something or even about wh... how I felt*  
822 *about thing cos I, I, I was always*  
823 *kind of a non*  
824 *entity y'know like I was already*  
825 *erm*  
826 *a step between mere physical world and, and, and something that was*  
827 *er divine y'know and*  
828 *I think that's why a lot of transsexuals think of themselves so.. in*  
829 *to some degree as like shamans or something y'know erm*  
830 *because there is that*  
831 *that part of you that's never*  
832 *erm*  
833 *going to be*  
834 *directly and easily physical*  
835 *y'know what I mean—there's always sort of erm*  
836 *going to be that gap*  
837 ...  
838 ...  
839 ...  
840 but I, I always remember the interaction with  
841 with the guy because er  
842 things like that have happened to me  
843 more than you woul... more than you would expect  
844 because even though I never  
845 erm  
846 *er well not never but I, I, I didn't*  
847 *often actively*  
848 *present as, as*  
849 *like a boy like—like I never really cut my hair that much*  
850 ...  
851 ...  
852 ...  
853 anyway so bu... but even though I was never  
854 actively  
855 presenting a lot of times I would get

856 approached as a boy any way  
857 like er, so the, the  
858 the two times I almost always talk about—one, one of the times is a sort of  
859 funny because I, I erm  
860 my mom had just got me a, a  
861 a binder y’know to  
862 sort of flatten my chest—cos we’d  
863 been talking about y’know what steps I could take to  
864 y’know just explore what would make me more comfortable  
865 and erm  
866 so I was wearing that and I was wearing some  
867 boys trousers and I mean they’re very baggy—I mean I don’t wear my  
868 pants that baggy—I, I, I wear them to fit y’know  
869 erm  
870 and like a, a boy’s  
871 t-shirt, that sort of thing  
872 and  
873 I was at my brother’s soccer game  
874 and er  
875 one of my parents’ errrr  
876 friends came over and was talking to us  
877 and erm  
878 my mom introduced me and  
879 the guy misheard my name  
880 and thought it was a boy’s name—I can’t remember what he  
881 er cos I, I, I’m Leigh y’know  
882 so yeah  
883 *I dunno, I dunno how he heard it - it was like, he thought it was like*  
884 *Larry or Harry or*  
885 *something like, something*  
886 *bizarre*  
887 *[intake of breath] but anyway, but*  
888 *but what was weird was*  
889 *he started talking to me as a boy and then*  
890 *then he, then*  
891 *because of the way they were*  
892 *referring, my parents were referring to me, he suddenly understood that I*  
893 *was actually a **girl***  
894 *because they were using a **girl** pronoun, like they were saying ‘oh yeah,*  
895 *she’s doing*  
896 *blah, blah, blah’ and this and y’know*  
897 *[intake of breath] and, and*  
898 *it was weird because*

899 *he*  
900 *he reacted in this*  
901 *he got like a twinkle in his eye and erm*  
902 *when people get that—and I do get that*  
903 *a lot when that happens—like more than you would expect*  
904 *er, I know that like o... one of two things has probably just happened*  
905 *either they're*  
906 *they're still attracted to me or more attracted me, to me because they know*  
907 *I'm, they know I'm some kind of*  
908 *y'know*  
909 *strange*  
910 *creature that y'know*  
911 ...  
912 ...  
913 ...  
914 there was like a football goin... er game going on, like a junior varsity one,  
915 which means that was probably like  
916 14-15 year olds  
917 15 year olds playing  
918 [sniffs] and erm  
919 there was our  
920 cheerleaders there and then there were the cheerleaders from another  
921 town  
922 from pretty far away—I don't know where y'know where they were from  
923 and  
924 back then I  
925 I didn't  
926 I wasn't like actively  
927 like I said I wasn't actively  
928 pr... presenting as a boy—my hair was pretty long back then too y'know  
929 [intake of breath] and er  
930 and I was wearing this one jacket that er  
931 it's actu... it's not a boy's jacket but for  
932 for whatever reason it looks like a boy's cut y'know and  
933 it sort of flat... y'know it sort of flattens my chest cos I mean there's not  
934 much to flatten anyway so y'know it's just a, a, a whe... when I wear  
935 it I can understand how someone could mistake me for 'a bo y'  
936 y'know, not th... even though I wasn't like  
937 trying—well anyway  
938 so I went into the lobby and I saw y'know  
939 all these  
940 y'know other school cheerleaders

941 looking at me and I thought well they're probably just thinking I'm some  
942 kind of freak or something  
943 and was like y'know whatever  
944 and I was standing by the lobby door, glass doors and  
945 I could tell they were still watching me and I did... y'know I was like wh...  
946 what do they even care y'know it's like I ju... I just want to get home, I  
947 don't care, blah blah blah  
948 and one of them in specific wa... was  
949 just staring at me the whole time—just really like staring at me but it  
950 wasn't in like  
951 a, a derisive way, it wasn't like  
952 she thought I was horrifying or something, it was like  
953 I dunno, I dunno even how to, I, I, I mean, I guess it was definitely  
954 attraction but it was  
955 y'know it's something erm  
956 something about it that seem revelatory  
957 almost y'know but anyway erm  
958 and so  
959 er she, she, she er  
960 sort of congregated her cheerleaders  
961 and they were all talking for a little bit  
962 [intake of breath] and I, I, I was sort of watching this in the reflection and I  
963 was thinking 'oh man I hope they're not gonna do something, I hope  
964 they're not gonna  
965 y'know say something, I don't want to deal with this'  
966 and erm  
967 and I was trying to think of a snappy comeback or something and  
968 *and then finally two of the girls*  
969 *errrr*  
970 *leave the little*  
971 *cluster*  
972 *and walk about midway*  
973 *and obviously I mean they're, they're on one side of the lobby and then our*  
974 *cheerleaders*  
975 *for our school are on the other side of the lobby*  
976 *[sniffs] and they, they walking into the middle*  
977 *and they stare at me for a minute and then they finally come up to me cos I*  
978 *turn around cos obviously they're coming over to talk to me I mean*  
979 *and so I turn around and I'm*  
980 *y'know I, y'know say*  
981 *'what's going on' and*  
982 *and I think the first question they asked me was erm*  
983 *'what time is the football game?'*

984 *how would I know th... I had nothing to do with the football game and*  
 985 *also*  
 986 there're our cheerleaders right there  
 987 who probably know  
 988 y'know [laughs]  
 989 because they're g... actively getting ready for it, and to, I, I mean and it was  
 990 just like  
 991 that was obviously  
 992 like  
 993  
 994 J: a ploy  
 995  
 996 L: a ploy, a ploy question  
 997 y'know so I was like  
 998 I don't know where this is going but I'm disturbed  
 999 [intake of breath] and erm  
 1000 the... then  
 1001 the other girl, so it was like  
 1002 they were sort of like trading off like they  
 1003 they, a... and it was funny that it was two girls and they were both sort of  
 1004 like huddled together  
 1005 like they were on a reconnaissance mission or something y'know like that's  
 1006 the feeling I got, I mean y'know there were like these two girls like  
 1007 y'know come over to talk to me y'know [laughs]  
 1008 and they asked  
 1009 then the other question they asked me was erm  
 1010 was I a foreign exchange student  
 1011 and I, and I was like  
 1012 'no, I  
 1013 I come from round here'  
 1014 and  
 1015 beca... a... and wh...  
 1016 what that clicked for me  
 1017 was tha... because we'd had  
 1018 another foreign exchange student at our school  
 1019 and he was a Spanish guy  
 1020 and the thing was he wore really tight pants like  
 1021 like girls' pants tight pants y'know  
 1022 and it was like  
 1023 tha... that was  
 1024 locally the conception  
 1025 of what  
 1026 a foreign person

1027 a foreign **boy** would do  
1028 is wear these tight pants  
1029 and I was wearing fairly tight jeans at the time like  
1030 and they w... they like black too y'know so they were like the whole thing  
1031 [sniffs] and  
1032 *it became obvious to me that they thought I was a boy*  
1033 *y'know like I, I could tell and that, that*  
1034 *cheerleader girl had sent them over to talk to me*  
1035 *like as an*  
1036 *y'know i... it was very bizarre—like I suddenly realised like*  
1037 *this situation is*  
1038 *they don't know what's going on y'know*  
1039 *anyway they, they asked me a few other*  
1040 *questions of just like*  
1041 *what was I doing around there and*  
1042 *like*  
1043 *was I going out with anyone around there like*  
1044 *like*  
1045 *suspicious weird questions y'know*  
1046 *and then y'know thank god my mom rescued me and*  
1047 *y'know pulled by and*  
1048 *I y'know just politely*  
1049 *said goodbye and left but*  
1050 *[sniffs] y'know and I, and I told other people about this y'know the*  
1051 *'the cheerleaders hitting on me' story and they're like*  
1052 *y'know 'that's every heterosexual male's*  
1053 ***dream** is 15 year old cheerleaders hitting on them' and er*  
1054 *like a whole group of boons[?] like*  
1055 *for me it was just terrifying y'know [laughing]*  
1056 *er*  
1057 *but it was, it was strange cos like*  
1058 *in hi...*  
1059 *towards the end of high school I was starting to*  
1060 *be more vocal about like*  
1061 *er*  
1062 *that I liked girls at least—like I didn't talk about ho.. y'know*  
1063 *exactly*  
1064 *how I*  
1065 *felt in relation*  
1066 *to being*  
1067 *with a girl*  
1068 *if that makes*  
1069 *sense*

1070 *so sometimes people would sort of*  
1071 *come to me with their gayness if that makes any sense y'know like I was*  
1072 *like the gay beacon or something*  
1073 even though I made a very strange one cos I wasn't  
1074 very gay [laughs]  
1075 so y'know  
1076 it was just like  
1077 where I come from I was as gay as it got I guess  
1078 ...  
1079 ...  
1080 ...  
1081 it's funny cos er  
1082 those are so  
1083 cl... y'know erm  
1084 closely intertwined as well that it's hard to separate what's just  
1085 sort of wh... where  
1086 where did that  
1087 thought come from—was it from  
1088 my gender experience or was it from my artistic experience or  
1089 y'know but then again I always come back to they're the same thing,  
1090 they're all the same thing y'know  
1091 erm but yeah I do, I feel like erm  
1092 I, I know  
1093 special secrets about people  
1094 *and about erm*  
1095 *how*  
1096 *things are created and er*  
1097 *what you can use things to do other things with*  
1098 *y'know like, like a... and part of it comes from like*  
1099 *the physical act of painting*  
1100 *y'know erm*  
1101 *like I, I mean if you think of the classical parts of it like where*  
1102 *y'know you'd actually grind the paints together and*  
1103 *and make it and then you would have this*  
1104 *a painting y'know—go from just this lump of rock to*  
1105 *y'know this **divine** experience of*  
1106 *like y'know a representation of*  
1107 *of god somebody would say y'know erm*  
1108 *er if you want to think of it that way*  
1109 errrr  
1110 but yeah i...  
1111 y'know  
1112 as, as sort of like a

1113 pantheistic  
 1114 thinker  
 1115 y'know part of it is that  
 1116 all the time  
 1117 er  
 1118 you're, you're in god  
 1119 y'know you're always  
 1120 doing things with god  
 1121 y'know and erm  
 1122 I, y'know tha... and I don't even like to personalise it like that either cos I  
 1123 don't, I don't  
 1124 necessarily take it that way but it's like  
 1125 erm  
 1126 but it do... it does really do gender though i.. er y'know  
 1127 I think part of it is that I'm not just thinking  
 1128 how am I as a woman or a man reacting to  
 1129 the world around me y'know  
 1130 y'know I'm like  
 1131 like take an example like  
 1132 a girl y'know  
 1133 I, I'm allowed to pick a flower because  
 1134 I can put it in my hair and be pretty  
 1135 y'know like  
 1136 like that's an interaction y'know  
 1137 and for me it's like I jus... I'm always thinking  
 1138 y'know what can I, what can I do like  
 1139 pick a flower and put it in my hair not  
 1140 y'know sure it'd be pretty but not  
 1141 as a girl—this is like  
 1142 this other being y'know like to  
 1143 to take part of something somewhere and put it somewhere else and  
 1144 *like to me*  
 1145 *being a shaman is sort of just*  
 1146 *moving things around*  
 1147 *y'know erm*  
 1148 *errrr*  
 1149 *sort of er*  
 1150 *gosh I wouldn't say recycle because that's n... that's, that's too mechanical*  
 1151 *but i... but, but sort of erm*  
 1152 *just by the nature of your existence you're validating*  
 1153 *existence itself y'know what I mean like*  
 1154 *erm*  
 1155 *ju... er th... the fact that I can look at world*

1156 *makes the world beautiful*  
 1157 y'know  
 1158 so erm  
 1159 I definitely  
 1160 I definitely see that as important and I think that  
 1161 part of it is this  
 1162 and er I  
 1163 though at the same time it does come from that  
 1164 some of that same feeling of  
 1165 being  
 1166 removed  
 1167 from that physical world as much as I, I  
 1168 y'know I do try to feel like  
 1169 y'know  
 1170  
 1171 J: eyes on the outside sort of thing?  
 1172  
 1173 L: yeah exactly cos  
 1174 cos I've always, I've never  
 1175 *y'know I never fit in with regular girls or the regular boys even though*  
 1176 y'know  
 1177 ultimately I, I'm  
 1178 completely capable of girly and boy-y things y'know erm  
 1179 I like ribbons and kittens and  
 1180 you erm  
 1181 I, I even like brown paper bags  
 1182 tied with string [laughs]  
 1183 and I like  
 1184 I like watching kickboxing and er  
 1185 drinking and y'know just stupid boy things too  
 1186 y'know which generally involve self-injury which is another interesting  
 1187 point  
 1188 yeah erm  
 1189 but y'know and, and  
 1190 ...  
 1191 ...  
 1192 ...  
 1193 but even when I was younger, even wh... when I was fairly closed off  
 1194 I was just never very judgemental of people because always y'know  
 1195 inwardly I was always thinking  
 1196 y'know  
 1197 *I'm a little strange or I'm not, I'm not decided y'know there w... there was*  
 1198 *always that part of me that was in fluctuation*

1199 so it seemed unfair to  
 1200 to ever judge anyone as if they probab.. alr... didn't already have their own  
 1201 fluct... fluctuation if you see what I mean y'know  
 1202 [intake of breath] and so  
 1203 f... for me  
 1204 my po... my material point was er er  
 1205 *that, that people we... were always telling me their secrets*  
 1206 *y'know like always confessing thing to me which was very*  
 1207 *very **strange** but*  
 1208 *yeah like I, I've had people confess everything and I'm not, I'm not like*  
 1209 *trying to be like*  
 1210 *arrogant or b... or y'know like*  
 1211 *ridiculous about [moves mike]*  
 1212 *I, I'm not trying to*  
 1213 *say y'know er*  
 1214 *er*  
 1215 *look at my worldliness or anything but I've had people confess everything*  
 1216 *from*  
 1217 *abuse to rape to*  
 1218 *to*  
 1219 *incest to*  
 1220 *desires of incest to*  
 1221 *er like coprophilia to all sort of like every fetish you could think of I mean*  
 1222 *pretty much everything but*  
 1223 *murder has been*  
 1224 *at some point confessed to me [sniffs]*  
 1225  
 1226 J: because they sense in you some kind of openness?  
 1227  
 1228 L: because yeah  
 1229 they sense yeah  
 1230 they sense in me that there's something erm  
 1231 that, that just is not  
 1232 closed off  
 1233 y'know and I mean I explore this a lot in art with  
 1234 with sort of examinations of intimacy  
 1235 erm  
 1236 *like a lot of times what I like to do is take er*  
 1237 *photographs of people without asking them first*  
 1238 *erm which is a very*  
 1239 *can be a very disturbing experience for people*  
 1240 *but I don't do to, to*  
 1241 *with any sense of cruelty*

1242 *it's more the sense that*  
1243 *we're all erm [sniffs]*  
1244 *physically er*  
1245 *w... w... we're this matter in this space but when you're seeing someone,*  
1246 *it's a passive way of being intimate with them because all you're*  
1247 *taking from the physically is their light*  
1248 y'know they're reflecting or not reflecting this light  
1249 and you're getting this and a ca... that's all a camera does  
1250 all a camera can do  
1251 is erm  
1252 take the light that you're reflecting  
1253 and  
1254 capture it on film y'know  
1255 the... the... there's nothing in it that actually takes your soul or anything  
1256 like that [laughs] y'know what I mean  
1257 I dunno maybe I, I can try and find out y'know cos I , I  
1258 yeah  
1259 ...  
1260 ...  
1261 ...  
1262 we just, we, we pass each other by like we're rocks  
1263 y'know like we... a... y'know and, and part of it is because  
1264 we, we're making a statement  
1265 y'know  
1266 'I'm full' [laughs] y'know  
1267 'I can't take you in'  
1268 y'know  
1269 'I already am doing everything'  
1270 y'know 'I'm not, I'm not interested'  
1271 which is why  
1272 why sex and sexuality is so interesting to me because it's, it's that one time  
1273 where we say  
1274 y'know where we take our hands out and we're like  
1275 '**please** come in, **please** y'know I **want** you here'  
1276 y'know and  
1277 *and so I always find, so, so like my exercise of like taking pictures without*  
1278 *their, without their express consent*  
1279 *is erm*  
1280 *is, is partially about this idea of when you look at someone*  
1281 *you're establishing*  
1282 *how much you're going to let them in*  
1283 *y'know what I mean like every time you look at someone you're saying*  
1284 *erm*

1285 *y'know*  
1286 *'no I don't want to have sex with you' or 'ok maybe I do want to have sex*  
1287 *with you' or 'how about you talk to me and then we'll see w...*  
1288 *y'know where that goes'*  
1289 *but it's interesting because for me because I could never really*  
1290 *I, I never felt like I could interact in that world because I, y'know I didn't*  
1291 *th... I couldn't, I couldn't be a boy for someone or I couldn't be a girl*  
1292 *for someone exactly so I was sort of like*  
1293 *y'know I couldn't give people that look because*  
1294 *ultimately I couldn't*  
1295 *y'know a... y'know I couldn't answer that promise*  
1296 *erm*  
1297 *so, so, so that*  
1298 *for me it, it's like*  
1299 *to, to*  
1300 *take picture of people especially at that first moment where they notice*  
1301 *you—like a lot of times I'll just hold the camera and watch someone*  
1302 *for a really long time*  
1303 *until they fi... like cos most of the time they'll notice*  
1304 *but they won't ta... they won't look*  
1305 *but eventually they'll look right over you, at you, and at that first instant*  
1306 *where they see you I, I take the picture*  
1307 *[intake of breath] and*  
1308 *it's, it's partially about just that, that*  
1309 *moment where we establish as*  
1310 *two living things*  
1311 *that were*  
1312 *eternally separate*  
1313 *y'know*  
1314 *were never*  
1315 *erm*  
1316 *were never going to be together*  
1317 *were never*  
1318 *even if we're lovers we're always going to be*  
1319 *lovers and not er*  
1320 *one y'know*  
1321 *erm*  
1322 *and to me I think, I think er*  
1323 *I don't know that I would have been as focused or even*  
1324 *dare I say **obsessed** sometimes er*  
1325 *with that idea if I hadn't had that sort of*  
1326 *general*  
1327 *distance*

1328 y'know  
1329 a general erm  
1330 errrr  
1331 value that way I dunno  
1332  
1333 ...  
1334  
1335 I've been trying to—it's like this sort of thing where I try convert people to  
1336 it cos it's  
1337 to me I, I tend to think of it as it's er  
1338 spirituality it's just y... your own  
1339 development stage  
1340 y'know even what I think y'know I don't  
1341 say that it's the  
1342 ultimate conclusion—it's not even the conclusion to what I'll think I'm  
1343 sure  
1344 *y'know I'm sure if you ask me 20 years later I'll probably have a new idea*  
1345 *of it but*  
1346 I think  
1347 that's just how it goes y'know  
1348 it's not, it's not so much about  
1349 consistent things that stay forever  
1350 y'know  
1351 we already  
1352 stay forever  
1353 kind of  
1354 ...  
1355 ...  
1356 ...  
1357 I think that you should say that science replaced  
1358 some ki... some kind of religious thing or rather that  
1359 it er  
1360 it changed  
1361 *it changed the organisation of it y'know—it wasn't that you **had** the answer*  
1362 *and then you asked questions about the answer and then you had the*  
1363 *answer again, it's that you*  
1364 *asked questions and then got the answer*  
1365 *and then that answer gave you another question and you a... y'know and I*  
1366 *mean tha... I mean it just goes on forever*  
1367 y'know and it's not that that's not very tiring sometimes cos it **is**  
1368 it's very difficult to, to, to be  
1369 responsible and conscious  
1370 just to be conscious

1371 is very difficult  
1372 erm  
1373 ...  
1374 ...  
1375 ...  
1376 anyway so the, the, the, the thing that I was thinking of is erm  
1377 and it's er it's sort of the flipside of being  
1378 erm  
1379 *like what you were saying, was like a pastoral figure erm*  
1380 *a shaman with the superpower to be your*  
1381 *confessor and*  
1382 *y'know even absolve you in a weird way*  
1383 *erm*  
1384 *just be telling you you're OK*  
1385 *y'know I've heard other people say this*  
1386 *y'know I mean*  
1387 *that's*  
1388 *that's actually enough absolution for y... people—people really don't even*  
1389 *need to hear that*  
1390 *like god has forgiven them—they just need to know y'know 'I'm not*  
1391 *'I haven't violated*  
1392 *y'know what it is to be human'*  
1393 y'know what I mean  
1394 but on the flipside of that there's always this  
1395 thing of erm  
1396 since I'm  
1397 er  
1398 different from  
1399 most of  
1400 what's going on in society that er  
1401 *just my very existence is a question*  
1402 *to it y'know and*  
1403 that can be  
1404 destructive  
1405 y'know in a way I mean erm  
1406 a... a... as, as much as I think people have their own solid identities an...  
1407 y'know that's  
1408 totally fine and  
1409 erm  
1410 and, and I, I totally think that some people are  
1411 y'know er  
1412 totally comfortable as  
1413 like women or men y'know as like specific roles or

1414 identities or  
1415 whatever you want to say  
1416 y'know there, there's a lot of time where  
1417 and I think this is what makes it so threatening  
1418 where  
1419 *y'know my existence calls into question*  
1420 *why you are*  
1421 *the way you are*  
1422 *y'know like a lot of girls*  
1423 *they, they act girly but they never really think about why they act girly,*  
1424 *they just act girly because they're a girl*  
1425 *y'know like they never think about y'know*  
1426 *'why do I curl my hair in the morning?'*  
1427 *y'know [laughs]*  
1428 *'is it because I'm a girl or is it because I actually like being*  
1429 *y'know having curly hair?'*  
1430 *y'know*  
1431 *and er*  
1432 *y'know just my existence sort of makes them think*  
1433 *'why, why am I doing this, why am I thinking this?'*  
1434 y'know and er  
1435 tha... I, I've  
1436 seen that y'know really hurt some  
1437 friendships and relationships like what I told you what happened with  
1438 [name] like it just er  
1439 y'know erm  
1440 *i... i... it can be too much*  
1441 *for some people*  
1442 *y'know they don't want to know, they don't want to think*  
1443 *y'know and I think that's why they*  
1444 *react so violently sometimes is that*  
1445 *erm*  
1446 *y'know*  
1447 *yeah I guess, I guess i... if you want to*  
1448 *keep it in the shaman*  
1449 *metaphor it's li... it's like to*  
1450 *to say, to think that there's someone*  
1451 *who's crossing between those worlds*  
1452 *erm*  
1453 *y'know sort of highlights that*  
1454 *you're no... you can't*  
1455 *y'know*  
1456 *that you're stuck in this and that world y'know*

1457 ...  
1458 ...  
1459 ...

APPENDIX 2  
VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION SECTIONS  
INTERVIEW WITH ROBIN

1 J: yeah that's great—erm, I'll,  
2 I've got a kind of checklist of things  
3 that I'm hoping you'll mention  
4  
5 R: [over] yeah  
6  
7 J: and will probably prompt for some of those if they don't come up  
8  
9 R: ok  
10  
11 J: but otherwise, just talk  
12  
13 R: yeah  
14  
15 J: yeah?  
16  
17 R: fine  
18 ok  
19 *well I suppose I come from a sort of background, in terms of my family*  
20 *where*  
21 *there was a lot of interest in*  
22 *sort of religions*  
23 *erm*  
24 *and also in things like, sort of psychology*  
25 *erm*  
26 *so I was sort of brought up with*  
27 *sort of that and with*  
28 *people having conversations about*  
29 *sort of spiritual things*  
30 *even though I wasn't*  
31 *trained into any particular spiritual pathway*  
32  
33 J: [over] mm  
34  
35 R: *erm*  
36 *when I was a child*  
37 *erm*

38 *but I suppose people*  
39 *we talked about*  
40 *well, we didn't really talk about them a lot but we talked about*  
41 *things like reincarnation or we talked about*  
42 *y'know the*  
43 *the*  
44 *sort of meditation and stuff like that*  
45 erm  
46 I'm getting a bit self-conscious now [laughs]  
47  
48 J: [laughs in sympathy]  
49  
50 R: erm  
51 *and we talked about energies and*  
52 I suppose I was sort of aware of the spiritual dimension even though I wasn't  
53 *I think the first time I remember being*  
54 *explicitly*  
55 *spiritually active was*  
56 *when I went to a [New Age] school*  
57 *a... erm*  
58 *on a visit*  
59 *and I did some meditation and I was about 10 then*  
60 erm  
61 but  
62 *so most of my*  
63 *sort of spiritual experience was just around nature and just being and stuff*  
64 *like that*  
65 *sort of*  
66 *really*  
67 *not, not particularly channelled but it was very much in the live dimension*  
68 *erm*  
69 *and I think that sort of sense of*  
70 *spirituality being a live dimension has continued through my life*  
71 *erm when I was in my teens I went to*  
72 *[a spiritual community]*  
73 *and did a couple of different*  
74 *erm programmes there*  
75 erm  
76 and that was kind of really important for me  
77 erm  
78 what I'm going to do is, I'm going to trace my spiritual  
79 history and then I'm going to trace my sort of gender stuff  
80

81 J: great  
82 erm that's fine  
83  
84 R: ok?  
85 erm  
86 so that was really important for me  
87 *and I also went through a bit of a kind of dark night of the soul when I was*  
88 *in my teens and my parents split up*  
89 *and*  
90 *so there was a sort of*  
91 *spiritual crisis then I suppose*  
92 erm  
93 so there was [the spiritual community]  
94 erm  
95 *and then when I was in my mid-20s I got interested in kind of paganism and*  
96 *earth-based religion*  
97 *and got involved in doing*  
98 *some*  
99 *sort of basic*  
100 *spiritual*  
101 *pagan practices with friends*  
102 *erm*  
103 *and then a bit later I did a training with*  
104 *someone who's involved in the New Age scene around kind of*  
105 *erm*  
106 *spiritual awareness and energy work and stuff like that*  
107 *and I've also trained as a healer as well*  
108 *erm*  
109 *and I mean now*  
110 *I*  
111 *I don't do a great deal but I'm kind of just aware that it's there*  
112 *it's very hard to find time to do anything at the moment but*  
113 *erm*  
114 *I'm aware that it's there and it's quite important to me*  
115 *erm*  
116 *so that's my sort of general spiritual background*  
117 *erm*  
118 *in terms of my gender*  
119 *erm*  
120 *I was kind of an*  
121 *quite unambiguously*  
122 *identifying as a girl when I was*  
123 *prepubescent*

124 erm but when I was  
125 *in my teens*  
126 *erm*  
127 *I*  
128 *I became*  
129 *a bit more gender-ambiguous and I think it was*  
130 *partly round being critical of sort of gender norms*  
131 *cos I didn't really fit the gender stereotypes and I had quite a hard time*  
132 *growing up*  
133 erm  
134 *it was partly because I came out as bisexual in my teens*  
135 erm  
136 and  
137 became attracted to women and  
138 sort of  
139 I think with that went a bit of gender fluidity  
140 *and I don't think I looked very female*  
141 and  
142 *I remember at one point*  
143 *writing in my diary something like, oh*  
144 *erm*  
145 *the guys think I'm a gay girl and the girls think I'm a gay guy, and it was this*  
146 *kind of like*  
147 *er*  
148 *sort of despairing moment when, oh, no-one fancies me cos I'm the wrong*  
149 *gender to everyone y'know [laughing]*  
150  
151 J: [laughing in sympathy]  
152  
153 R: [laughing] it was kind of  
154 horrible kind of  
155 feeling of just not fitting the norms  
156 in terms of my gender and sexuality and I mean  
157 *I was lucky enough to go to a school which was very progressive and*  
158 *y'know there were some*  
159 *kind of*  
160 *lesbian*  
161 *or bisexual role models there*  
162 erm  
163 *y'know I didn't feel completely alienated*  
164 *and then when I*  
165 *got a little bit older into my teens I met*  
166 *other people who identified as*

167 *queer or whatever, gay or whatever you wanted to call it*  
168 *erm*  
169 *and also th...*  
170 *cos I got quite involved in kind of the anarchist and squatting movement*  
171 *and I remember a bloke wearing a dress and*  
172 *y'know people weren't*  
173 *it wasn't kind of like gay culture but it was kind of like alternative,*  
174 *anarchistic culture and with that went quite a, a lot of kind of*  
175 *messing around with*  
176 *different boundaries*  
177 *including sort of gender and sexuality and*  
178 *and then I started to kind of get quite a lot more kind of empowered really*  
179 *erm around my gender identity and my sexuality*  
180 *and I don't think I*  
181 *I mean I'm not*  
182 *sort of*  
183 *I, I, I*  
184 *I'm not*  
185 *apart from a sort of fairly brief period which I'll tell you about*  
186 *I've never wanted to kind of transition and become like*  
187 *a drag-king or an FTM*  
188 *erm*  
189 *apart from this period I'll tell about*  
190 *but*  
191 *it*  
192 *it was just kind of like*  
193 *I just didn't fit*  
194 *the girly-girly stuff*  
195 *and I remember like in my early 20s*  
196 *I was going out with someone at the time and*  
197 *erm*  
198 *I didn't used to wear dresses or*  
199 *skirts at all*  
200 *and one day I wore one and they said, oh, you look like a drag queen*  
201 *and [both laugh]*  
202 *[laughing] I remember being kind of quite hurt*  
203 *erm [laughing]*  
204 *but y'know this was the kind of like, didn't fit*  
205 *even though I was*  
206 *more*  
207 *the heterosexual and*  
208 *bisexual than*  
209 *gay i... sort of in terms of my actual practice, my sexual practice*

210 *at that time, I didn't really fit*  
211 *erm the stereotypes and*  
212 *so where was I at*  
213 *and then in my early 20s I came out as a dyke or a, a kind of*  
214 *well [sighs] I mean I sort of*  
215 *slipped around between*  
216 *identifying as*  
217 *as a dyke or bisexual but I was in quite a*  
218 *serious long relationship with a woman*  
219 *erm*  
220 *and I became sort of quite butch and I kind of*  
221 *sort of started to convey [?] my butchness really*  
222 *erm*  
223 *and that broke up*  
224 *er but I carried on identifying as a dyke for another*  
225 *four or five years er at least and*  
226 *during that time I became*  
227 *quite, really quite butch*  
228 *and*  
229 *that was kind of quite important really*  
230 *but I think butch for me at that time was a sort of dyke identity which I*  
231 *know it is for a lot of dykes*  
232 *but it was quite a masculine identity but it was*  
233 *a female masculine identity if you want to*  
234 *erm sort of Halberstam and stuff like that*  
235 *if you want to look at the authors*  
236 *erm*  
237 *so*  
238 *that was my*  
239 *mid-20s*  
240 *...*  
241 *...*  
242 *...*  
243 *and then*  
244 *I started*  
245 *doing*  
246 *studying around sexuality*  
247 *but*  
248 *because I was very interested in kind of theory*  
249 *erm*  
250 *and I went to a conf... a really important con... or a conference that was*  
251 *really important for me*

252 *called something like [conference title]—it was at [a UK University] in the*  
 253 *mid-90s, I don't know if you came across it*  
 254  
 255 J: no, before my time [laughing]  
 256  
 257 R: [laughing] yes that's right  
 258 *erm*  
 259 *and I got, I was kind of like, think... going, well, what's next, y' know,*  
 260 *what's*  
 261 *erm*  
 262 *y'know, what's the kind of next thing on the agenda*  
 263 *cos there was quite a lot of kind of quite staid stuff*  
 264 *and to me it seemed like it was this stuff about kind of transgressing binaries*  
 265 *and what happened when you*  
 266 *open up the binaries and what's*  
 267 *what's kind of there really*  
 268 *and I got really interested in kind of postmodernism and poststructuralism*  
 269 *erm*  
 270 and then I, my  
 271 study focus  
 272 started to kind of mutate  
 273 *erm*  
 274 and over a period of a few months I started  
 275 to *erm*  
 276 refocus on transgender  
 277 *erm*  
 278 and in line with that  
 279 *I was starting to question my dyke identity—and at that time it was a very*  
 280 *strong identity*  
 281 *and I was kind of quite I suppose lesbian feminist, in that sort of camp*  
 282 *and I went to a summer school*  
 283 *erm*  
 284 *around homosexuality and*  
 285 *there were some gay blokes there and I always think it's quite ironic that*  
 286 *that's the point at which I started to come out as bisexual cos I got on*  
 287 *really well with these blokes and*  
 288 *prior to that for quite some time I'd hardly had any*  
 289 *sort of social contact with blokes at all*  
 290 *and I got on really well with these blokes and I kind of thought, oh god,*  
 291 *what am I going to do with this, y'know—it was really awkward*  
 292 *[laughing]*  
 293 *erm [both laughing]*  
 294 and then in the summer I got involved in *erm*

295 I got involved in the [male drag/burlesque group]  
 296 and I don't know if you've come across erm  
 297  
 298 J: yes  
 299  
 300 R: it's a group of erm  
 301 erm  
 302 mostly gay male  
 303 erm  
 304 well, drag queens I suppose not  
 305 it's probably not the right term—anyway, they dress up as kind of agony  
 306 aunts  
 307 and they had a sort of  
 308 important  
 309 activist  
 310 erm kind of drag  
 311 role in the gay community at the resorts on the continent—er, it  
 312 doesn't seem as strong now—but anyway I got involved with them and I was  
 313 I went to erm  
 314 the continent... erm ... Europe  
 315 ...  
 316 ...  
 317 ...  
 318 *also there's a sort, there was a sort of idea in the group about kind of serving*  
 319 *the community—we used to do things like go out to the resorts*  
 320 *and we used to go round and sort of*  
 321 *pick up all the people who'd been dumped and who'd had a bit too much to*  
 322 *drink or*  
 323 *y'know we used to hand out condoms and*  
 324 *y'know it was that kind of*  
 325 *being there to support the*  
 326 *the queer community—it was a bit like kind of*  
 327 *unpaid outreach workers really*  
 328 we had this kind of function  
 329 ...  
 330 ...  
 331 ...  
 332 and with the erm outreach and the  
 333 erm y'know ritual we kind of  
 334 erm went through  
 335 every  
 336 night  
 337 *it did have a kind of*

338 *sort of spiritual*  
339 *I mean no-one else who was involved in it is into spirituality but for me it*  
340 *had a sort of spiritual dimension*  
341 *it did, it had a*  
342 *spiritual sense to it*  
343 ...  
344 ...  
345 ...  
346 *it was a bit like kind of being transformed*  
347 *on a transgender level so, because obviously I was dragging up as a **man***  
348 *dragging up as a **woman***  
349 erm  
350 and  
351 *y'know it became a sort of important sub-personality for me*  
352 *for quite some time*  
353 erm  
354 and  
355 *also I was hanging round with all these gay blokes as well*  
356 *and I stated to kind of take on a sort of 'gay bloke' identity*  
357 *erm*  
358 *and it was great fun — I mean I, I still look back at it with an enormous*  
359 *amount of nostalgia*  
360 *and erm kind of regret really cos I'm not in that scene any more really*  
361 *erm but it was fantastic—we used to*  
362 *have a really good time and there was a real sort of sense of camaraderie as*  
363 *well*  
364 erm  
365 and I was only, I wasn't involved with them for all that long  
366 actively  
367 erm m m m m m  
368 just that one summer  
369 ...  
370 ...  
371 ...  
372 *but it did, it had a spiritual*  
373 *sense to it—and also at the same time I was kind of socialising with people*  
374 *who were into like*  
375 *the sort of, into the sort of broader queer scene and*  
376 *like I had some transgender friends and then I had*  
377 *as I was starting to come out as bisexual I had*  
378 *two sexual partners who were trans*  
379 erm  
380 *who I met socially*

381       erm  
382       *but it was a kind of a time for me*  
383       *exploring stuff around gender and sexuality and it was incredibly exciting*  
384       *because all of the*  
385       *sort of boundaries that I'd taken for granted*  
386       *started to fall apart*  
387       y'know I remember once being mistaken by  
388       one of, she was an ex by that point  
389       erm  
390       for being like a gay bloke  
391       erm  
392       and  
393       also I had a lover who was  
394       trans  
395       who was transitioning from male to female at the time that I was seeing this  
396       person  
397       *and I really identified with this person*  
398       *and it was kind of like I was almost them*  
399       *do you know what I mean—and I really did start to*  
400       *question my gender identity in a sort of very real way*  
401       *but I actually*  
402       *erm took it a bit too far and I got overwhelmed and*  
403       *y'know kind of got ill basically and had to take some time out and*  
404       *erm*  
405       *went through a very sort of fundamental*  
406       *kind of*  
407       *restructuring my identity really, where I had, had to really consider*  
408       *like did I want to transition*  
409       erm  
410       *or was this*  
411       *a sort of er*  
412       *a spiritual journey but—or an identity journey—but not actually something I*  
413       *wanted to make*  
414       *actual in my outside world if you see what I mean*  
415       right for me it was a sort of gender  
416       was the trans thing  
417       actually about wanting to  
418       *change my body or was it more a sort of emotional identity, spiritual type*  
419       *thing*  
420       erm  
421       and it was really tough  
422       actually  
423       cos I didn't really

424 know who to  
 425 because it wasn't  
 426 *it was like—and by this point I'd started to like really identify with a trans*  
 427 *ident... trans community and I sort of saw myself as being part of it*  
 428 but that was partly just because I was doing loads of stuff with trans people  
 429 and getting involved in trans activism  
 430 and  
 431 erm I think it's ever so easy  
 432 erm I suppose this is a bit of a word of warning really [laughing]  
 433 [both laugh]  
 434 I don't want this to sound patronising  
 435  
 436 J: no—it's alright  
 437  
 438 R: [over] it's very easy to get sucked into things  
 439 and also if you're, if you're  
 440 using  
 441 sort of feminist methodologies and participative methodologies  
 442 y'know you're desperately trying to empathise with people and  
 443 y'know to be reciprocal and to get involved and to not  
 444 sort of  
 445 be objectifying and so on—and you end up  
 446 just  
 447 getting subsumed in this kind of  
 448 incredibly  
 449 sort of colourful  
 450 and exciting but  
 451 potentially overwhelming kind of ocean of  
 452 y'know people's identities and  
 453 issues and  
 454 erm y'know and I think  
 455 if you're serious about studying, do examine yourself  
 456 on a kind of quite a fundamental level—well, I certainly did anyway, and I  
 457 think this is a  
 458 a  
 459 problem that quite a few trans allies  
 460 [laughing] sort of face really  
 461 *y'know you start to deconstruct yourself*  
 462 *and you lose touch with yourself basically—well this is what happened to me*  
 463 *and it was **really, really scary***  
 464 and I wouldn't want anyone else to have to go through that so  
 465 erm  
 466 y'know when I

467 when I sort of started to rebuild myself  
468 erm  
469 I had to kind of quite carefully [?] decide what was me and what wasn't me  
470 and  
471 y'know  
472 *and by that point I'd stopped identifying as lesbian-feminist, I kind of gave*  
473 *that the boot*  
474 erm  
475 but  
476 I also decided that I wasn't  
477 kind of trans in to, in a sort of full way in that I wanted to  
478 kind of have a mastectomy and all that stuff  
479 and  
480 erm  
481 and  
482 *y'know so I sort of had to sort of redefine my identity really*  
483 *and for me that was a really spiritual thing because what got me through was*  
484 *actually getting in contact with*  
485 *erm my sort of spiritual sense of self*  
486 *erm and my sort of what for me was a core*  
487 and poststructuralists don't think that we have a soul  
488 as far as I'm concerned that's a load of rubbish  
489 erm  
490 cos  
491 erm  
492 I experience myself as having one and that is what got me through  
493 erm  
494 so  
495 after that I became a lot more kind of erm  
496 wary  
497 really  
498 of  
499 kind of poststructuralism  
500 ...  
501 ...  
502 ...  
503 erm  
504 so that was an incredible  
505 profound learning experience and I think everything that's happened since  
506 then in my life has kind of  
507 sort of built on that really  
508 erm in the sense that y'know I did  
509 o...

510 *over a period of*  
511 *maybe six months or a year I just did a lot of **really sustained** growth work on*  
512 *my own*  
513 *deciding who I was, who I wasn't*  
514 *what I wanted in my life*  
515 *erm getting rid of a whole load of*  
516 *kind of belief*  
517 *crappy beliefs that I'd taken on from my family and from*  
518 *kind of alternative cultures and*  
519 *y'know, sort of really*  
520 *I really sort of*  
521 *it was a really focussed sort of sorting out*  
522 *basically*  
523 *like I, I used to actually sit down and I used to*  
524 *like I remember it, like running through all the attitudes to sexuality I'd*  
525 *picked up*  
526 *right from being born*  
527 *for example*  
528 *and it took a day to do that*  
529 *and it was like all my ideas just kept, came up, and up and up and up, and*  
530 *they all came up*  
531 *and I, all the crappy ones I just sorted through*  
532 *and I tried to replace them with positive affirmations and that's the way I did*  
533 *it, and I did that about my politics, about my sexuality, about my*  
534 *gender identity*  
535 *about my attitude to work*  
536 *y'know it was like a whole sort of*  
537 *a really sort of sustained rebuilding*  
538 *erm*  
539 *...*  
540 *...*  
541 *...*  
542 *erm*  
543 *sooooo*  
544 *in terms of my gender*  
545 *I sort of made a decision at that point that I didn't want to*  
546 *to go the full way but*  
547 *in a way it almost felt like I had made a gender transition*  
548 *because it was kind of like I'd been out of being female*  
549 *and I'd been in what was definitely an ambiguous space*  
550 *for*  
551 *quite a while*  
552 *erm probably a few*

553 *well, er, in actual reality it might have only been a few days but it felt like it*  
554 *was a period of*  
555 *maybe a year or so*  
556 *erm*  
557 *well I don't know—maybe it's never really settled again, even though I live*  
558 *as a female*  
559 *I don't think you ever*  
560 *y'know*  
561 *you never really have your eyes closed*  
562 *once you've been through something like that but*  
563 *it, sometimes I feel like I'm living a bit of a lie cos I live this kind of*  
564 *y'know quite ordinary [laughing]*  
565 *sort of [laughing]*  
566 *y'know life—I'm in a relationship with a bloke and*  
567 *y'know everyone thinks I'm female*  
568 *erm*  
569 *I don't always*  
570 *y'know*  
571 *it, it's not really like that*  
572 *erm but anyway*  
573 *yeah [sighs]*  
574 *I suppose then*  
575 *what happened*  
576 *in terms of my gender identity I did settle back into something which was*  
577 *kind of physically female but had some trans*  
578 *qualities I suppose—and that's what I've continued to say, but I think*  
579 *I didn't kind of want to jump on the*  
580 *trans bandwagon and say, oh, I'm trans, when I wasn't actually having to live*  
581 *any of that*  
582 *so*  
583 *what I do now is to er just say, well, I've had some trans experience but I*  
584 *don't*  
585 *identify on an everyday basis as trans*  
586 *and that seems to kind of work*  
587 *erm*  
588 *in terms of the gender ambiguity, I mean I think there's different levels*  
589 *really, aren't there, I mean*  
590 *on the physical level*  
591 *I'm not really*  
592 *erm*  
593 *I mean I don't even*  
594 *look butch anymore—I don't dress up in leathers, I don't cut my hair short*  
595 *I don't hang out in dyke clubs anymore, I*

596 *I don't really engage very much in the trans scene*  
597 *but that's partly because I'm*  
598 *in a relationship with a bloke and I've got*  
599 *the babies so*  
600 *y'know the sort of practical constraints*  
601 *erm I really miss it*  
602 *I miss it really badly but*  
603 *I kind of feel like I've made some sacrifices that I kind of have to live with*  
604 *now really*  
605 erm  
606 on a sort of social level  
607 erm  
608 *I find that I tend to mutate a bit—I think when I'm with people who are*  
609 *heterosexual and not transgendered I tend to*  
610 *erm identify more as female*  
611 *and when I'm with*  
612 *trans folk*  
613 *I tend to*  
614 *become a bit more kind of trans*  
615 *erm or that side of me comes out and I mean there's certain things that I'll*  
616 *talk about*  
617 *around my sexuality and so on that*  
618 *y'know I'd only talk about with people who are*  
619 *kind of trans positive*  
620 *erm that I wouldn't only talk about with my*  
621 *straight friends who*  
622 *would probably either be fascinated or horrified [laughs]*  
623 erm [laughing]  
624 erm so I suppose I'm a bit  
625 erm I suppose I am a bit closeted  
626 and I think again that's a kind of a  
627 erm  
628 something that I feel ambivalent about  
629 and I don't know if I would necessarily want  
630 to be like that long term  
631 erm  
632 I mean sometimes it feels like a bit of a cop-out  
633 but the thing is I really wanted to have a family and it kind of happened that  
634 I s... had a relationship with a bloke and  
635 y'know he's  
636 het... heterosexual so  
637 if I started to become more seriously trans I think that would probably be an  
638 issue

639 erm  
640 and y'know  
641 *I think at the end of the day*  
642 *having a stable family is more important than me*  
643 *faffing round with my identity at this particular point in my life [laughs]*  
644 so  
645 that's kind of the way it's panned out  
646 erm but I think it could have quite easily ended up  
647 y' know  
648 kind of  
649 erm  
650 solidifying a different way  
651 y' know like if I'd had a  
652 relationship with a woman  
653 and we'd had the twins, then I might well have ended up being the kind of  
654 butch one  
655 erm  
656 I mean I have to say that I think having babies has really changed  
657 my understanding of gender because  
658 erm it  
659 have you  
660 er  
661 have you got kids  
662  
663 J: no  
664  
665 R: no  
666 well  
667 the physical experience of being pregnant  
668 of giving birth and in particular kind of breast feeding  
669 erm  
670 *it, it's very hard not to mark that as inescapably female*  
671 erm  
672 now I know that there are trans  
673 men who've  
674 had babies and  
675 when I was pregnant I went through a bit of a crisis about my gender  
676 actually  
677 erm thinking  
678 y' know feeling really odd about being pregnant and kind of like  
679 oh god, I don't want to be a woman and  
680 y' know  
681 erm

682 it felt really out  
683 it rea... it felt really uncharacteristic  
684 and it really  
685 made me feel like really empowered knowing that there were trans men  
686 who'd had babies  
687 because  
688 I suppose you know what they do—they have to stop taking hormones and  
689 get pregnant and then afterwards they  
690 go back to being  
691 erm  
692 trans men  
693 I just thought that was brilliant cos that just made me feel so  
694 like well, I can have a baby but  
695 I don't have to identify as  
696 y' know particularly female to do it  
697 erm  
698 and  
699 when I went to a Trans event when I was pregnant  
700 I wasn't pregnant actually—I'd had  
701 erm  
702 a problem  
703 with a pregna... a previous pregnancy  
704 erm  
705 one of the [FTM] participants said to me, oh  
706 erm  
707 you'll make a great **parent**  
708 and to me that was just like  
709 manna from heaven  
710 basically because  
711 it was kind of like saying  
712 y' know, I acknowledge that you want to be a parent I understand that, as a  
713 trans man who is a parent  
714 but it doesn't mean that you have to identify as  
715 *y' know essentially female*  
716 and I think, I think for me that, those were just really, really important  
717 because it was kind of like saying, well,  
718 validating that  
719 about parenthood but it wasn't  
720 *freezing me in a kind of female identity*  
721 erm  
722 so I think that  
723 kind of

724 understanding that's kind of left me free to get on with the business of being  
725 a mother  
726 which  
727 is  
728 obviously really important [laughing]  
729 *the fact that all the breast feeding and all that*  
730 *crap that goes with it*  
731 but  
732 at the end of the day I think  
733 it's kind of holding on to that sense of well, y' know I'm more than that as  
734 well—I've got a female body but  
735 *y' know my identity is*  
736 *is*  
737 *well basically it is*  
738 *neither male or female*  
739 *or it's both or*  
740 *y' know it slips around a bit — I mean how you define male or female*  
741 *anyway y' know*  
742 it's one of the moot points [laughing]  
743  
744 J: absolutely, absolutely  
745  
746 R: so  
747 errrr  
748 so I suppose that sort of brings me more or less up to date now  
749 erm  
750 this is a very potted history  
751 erm  
752 ...  
753 ...  
754 ...  
755 erm  
756 I think that's the other thing  
757 that I suppose I've thought since  
758 having the babies really—y'know it's enough  
759 hassle just getting through day to day  
760 the sort of  
761 practical existence  
762 erm  
763 without  
764 *it almost feels like*  
765 *the gender stuff's a bit of a luxury really*  
766 *erm*

767 *like I don't have the space*  
768 *do you know what I mean, it's*  
769 *it's kind of like well*  
770 *now that i... I, I, in a way I feel bad saying that cos it sounds dismissive of*  
771 *people who do have*  
772 *erm*  
773 *serious ongoing gender issues and I know that that's not*  
774 *something that's chosen*  
775 *erm or at least*  
776 *not any more than any other things that are difficult are chosen*  
777 *erm*  
778 *so I'm not being dismissive of that*  
779 *but I think for me personally*  
780 *at the moment*  
781 *erm*  
782 *exploring my gender*  
783 *fluidity*  
784 *erm*  
785 *is a luxury that I can't really afford*  
786 *erm but that's just me*  
787 *and I mean if I was*  
788 *gender dysphoric*  
789 *erm in any significant sense*  
790 *then that wouldn't be the case and obviously it would be something that I*  
791 *would have to tackle*  
792 *and I mean that would probably mean some quite*  
793 *radical changes in my life*  
794 *but y'know obviously I'd have to do that because that's what people have to*  
795 *do*  
796 *but for me that's*  
797 *y'know that's not the case*  
798 *...*  
799 *...*  
800 *...*  
801 J: *do you think, given your experience so far,*  
802 *that you'll make any*  
803 *that you'll take any special measures with the twins*  
804  
805 R: *erm*  
806 *[long pause]*  
807 *yeah*  
808 *I think just trying to encourage both*  
809 *sides as it were, if you're talking in a binary system—like I wouldn't*

810 *I would want to encourage them to*  
811 *like pretty things and to be sensitive*  
812 *and to be sensitive to nature and to cook and*  
813 *y'know*  
814 *I don't know if I'd go as far as giving them girly dolls*  
815 *I wouldn't*  
816 *I think if I had them on my own or with a trans partner I might*  
817 *erm to experiment*  
818 like  
819 dress them  
820 I might dress them in erm  
821 female clothes but  
822 I think that wouldn't be what [partner] would want  
823 so I wouldn't  
824 but if they suddenly started to show a penchant at aged five in  
825 dressing up in girly clothes, then I'd allow that  
826 erm  
827 I think  
828 yeah  
829 *and I mean it has been interesting how gendered*  
830 *people have been*  
831 *y'know*  
832 *oh yeah*  
833 *in expectations*  
834 *of that's how they would be and stuff*  
835 erm  
836 hello [as family come back in from walk—they stay in earshot for next bit of  
837 interview]  
838 erm  
839 *but I think it's up to them*  
840 *and how much they're saying, well, that should mean that they should have*  
841 *the full spectrum*  
842 *and how much that means*  
843 *y'know they should be brought up as boys but they can choose*  
844 *how, what that means or*  
845 *y'know if they want to change that later on, they can*  
846 *I think*  
847 -  
848 -  
849 -  
850 *probably a bit of a mixture—I think I just try and give them as rich an*  
851 *experience as possible basically*  
852 and not say things like, oh, boys don't cry, or

853 y'know, grow up, you great sissy or  
854 y'know [laughing]  
855 erm  
856 things that would make them  
857 think that girls are  
858 less than  
859 or  
860 something  
861 erm  
862 y'know just try and develop a sort of rounded, to give them a space to  
863 develop a rounded personality  
864 erm  
865 so yes, I think it has  
866 ...  
867 ...  
868 ...  
869 R: you'd hope wouldn't you that if you support them  
870 in being what they want to be then they would be respectful in return  
871  
872 J: [over] I'd think so, yeah  
873  
874 R: [over] erm yeah  
875 erm yeah  
876 erm  
877 and if they take on a load of crap from school around  
878 *this village is actually quite a narrow-minded place*  
879 y'know then I'll just have to make sure that  
880 that that gets kind of dealt with  
881 by exposing them to all things  
882 erm  
883 so I'll just have to see  
884 but fortunately it'll be a few years before anything like that will happen  
885 ...  
886 ...  
887 ...

APPENDIX 3  
VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION SECTIONS  
INTERVIEW WITH SOL

1 S: OK  
2 erm I'll go through it  
3 chronologically then  
4 er  
5  
6 J: [over] okey-dokey  
7  
8 S: [over] so  
9 the  
10 gender  
11 erm  
12 problem started  
13 problem  
14 erm  
15 -  
16 *well I've never*  
17 *played*  
18 *with*  
19 *dolls or*  
20 *do any*  
21 *girly things*  
22 *erm my parents were*  
23 *absolutely fine about that*  
24 *so*  
25 *they*  
26 -  
27 *just treated me*  
28 *as I wanted to be treated from the start*  
29 *it wasn't a problem until I went to school—then of course it was*  
30 *erm because*  
31 *on my first day there*  
32 *erm*  
33 *I said I was really a little boy until I'd had an operation that made me look*  
34 *like a girl*  
35 *erm*  
36 *I was teased*  
37 *non-stop after that*

38 *erm cos everybody used to shout in the playground that I'd fallen into a*  
39 *muddy puddle and turned into a girl*  
40 *it was*  
41 *absolutely horrible*  
42 *erm*  
43 *-*  
44 *having said that I, at the weekends I was fine cos I could wear*  
45 *trousers and what-have-you at the weekends*  
46 *and I did make friends with boys and*  
47 *joined the boys' groups*  
48 *so*  
49 *I was a kind of honorary boy and*  
50 *even though I was teased by girls, the boys were fine with me*  
51 *erm*  
52 *so junior school wasn't too bad actually*  
53 *...*  
54 *...*  
55 *...*  
56 *I think I was in some kind of denial because I just thought felt I was brought*  
57 *up wrong*  
58 *in general more*  
59 *as a male, I couldn't see it*  
60 *being a problem*  
61 *somehow*  
62 *because everyone accepted me as, as an odd boy*  
63 *I remember once*  
64 *erm*  
65 *I was*  
66 *working on an engine*  
67 *in, in my*  
68 *my dad's garage*  
69 *and*  
70 *when my dad said, it,*  
71 *well,*  
72 *actually*  
73 *that's a girl*  
74 *one, one of the mechanics said, no, no, it's definitely a boy*  
75 *erm*  
76 *kind of*  
77 *accepting*  
78 *which was quite nice for me—that's definitely a boy*  
79 *and that's really what my parents and local people tend to do is*  
80 *so I didn't really*

81 see it as a problem  
82 ...  
83 ...  
84 ...  
85 erm  
86 *and at secondary school it was absolute hell on earth*  
87 *because I went to*  
88 *a girls' secondary school*  
89 *and erm*  
90 *which was unmitigated hell*  
91 *and I, I*  
92 *from the time I started to develop*  
93 *erm*  
94 *at the point of puberty I'd be wearing*  
95 *erm body stocking*  
96 *to correct and impress my, my chest and so on*  
97 *but kids would*  
98 *hang over the*  
99 *toilet cubicles*  
100 *I undressed to go for a pee and*  
101 *even now that gives me kind of*  
102 *wrench in my chest*  
103 *erm*  
104 *I didn't develop much, thank heavens, but it was*  
105 *just awful*  
106 *absolutely awful*  
107 erm and I went  
108 from—cos I was top of the class at  
109 primary school – to  
110 132 out of 134  
111 it was just terrible  
112 so  
113 totally screwed up by it  
114 -  
115 ...  
116 ...  
117 ...  
118 y'know I wanted to be  
119 something  
120 in the religious li... sort of the religious life  
121 and looking at being a nun but I, I just  
122 couldn't do the gender bit  
123 erm

124 -  
125 *it all gets a bit sad there because*  
126 *I first went to a psychiatrist when I was 15*  
127 *with this gender problem*  
128 *and was thought to be*  
129 *because I couldn't get to be a priest, I was having gender reassignment so I*  
130 *could*  
131 *go into the Church*  
132 *and*  
133 *it was real of course*  
134 *the*  
135 *the gender came first*  
136 *so*  
137 *they just sort of got the*  
138 *just*  
139 *sort of accepted*  
140 *and I was diagnosed with*  
141 *no, they diagnosed it first as*  
142 *childhood schizophrenia*  
143 *and then it changed into this*  
144 *trying to get into the Church*  
145 *erm*  
146 *which*  
147 *it wasn't*  
148 *basically y'know I just said I was a guy and they said, you're not, and I said,*  
149 *well I am and they kept saying, you're not and*  
150 *I was thought to be delusional*  
151 *which I think it was*  
152 *a common enough diagnosis then*  
153 *erm*  
154 -  
155 ...  
156 ...  
157 ...  
158 so I just  
159 kept on  
160 feeling not much change, I kept  
161 feeling religious  
162 writing  
163 religious stuff  
164 erm  
165 going to Mass regularly  
166 *while I was at university it was better because*

167 *I became very*  
168 *very, very much into my stuff, I got*  
169 *into it*  
170 *and*  
171 *had a kind of*  
172 *as far male*  
173 *life as I could get without*  
174 *having any*  
175 *any sort of therapy for it*  
176 *erm*  
177 *...*  
178 *...*  
179 *...*  
180 *the community do know*  
181 *of my background, some of them do anyway*  
182 *and*  
183 *the one thing you in your previous, as a*  
184 *in inverted commas*  
185 *er female I was totally*  
186 *absolutely useless*  
187 *I couldn't hold down a job because I just hated*  
188 *going out, hated*  
189 *I had agoraphobia that was*  
190 *totally incapacitating*  
191 *erm*  
192 *part of the period of grace when I was at university because I didn't have to*  
193 *work, I was just*  
194 *-*  
195 *neurotic as hell*  
196 *erm but now I'm*  
197 *I'm not riddled with agoraphobia and I don't have any problems*  
198 *going out*  
199 *even*  
200 *the hospital*  
201 *said, oh, this appears to be a sort of complete cure of anything*  
202 *which*  
203 *might have been psychologically wrong, so just*  
204 *it was obviously the gender*  
205 *which was*  
206 *creating all your difficulties*  
207 *so the community are actually delighted that*  
208 *this has happened for me and I'm so*  
209 *useful and productive and helpful and*

210 [inaudible]  
211 er now  
212 -  
213 and  
214 -  
215 religion now, it just feels  
216 like any other community member wh...  
217 I know I ought to feel more and I don't  
218 ...  
219 ...  
220 ...  
221 I've  
222 always  
223 felt it to be sort of  
224 I've always felt myself to be a male but  
225 deformed and it's quite nice not being deformed  
226 *I've never had any*  
227 *feeling of myself as not being male*  
228 *for me*  
229 *not since age*  
230 *four*  
231 -  
232 I don't know what  
233 underlies it, I don't know  
234 -  
235 ...  
236 ...  
237 ...  
238 J: but your parents were fine with you being male  
239  
240 S: completely  
241  
242 J: from as soon as you could express it  
243  
244 S: yes  
245  
246 J: yeah, yeah  
247  
248 S: and they used to buy me  
249 boys' toys and  
250 *there was one nasty episode when I*  
251 *was made to wear*  
252 *a bonnet which I tore up*

253 and  
254 [inaudible through laughing]  
255  
256 J: even I'd hate that [both laugh] – I think that's a perfectly normal response to  
257 bonnets  
258  
259 S: *yeah [laughing] they bought a doll once and I*  
260 *gave it away or threw it u...*  
261 *I probably threw it somewhere [laughing]*  
262 and once I'd done that helped cos they kind, they sort of learned quite  
263 quickly [J laughs]  
264 ...  
265 ...  
266 ...  
267 I think they thought of me as  
268 an extraordinarily radical  
269 erm tomboy  
270 but they never made me do housework and my dad  
271 used to teach me how to, he taught me to box  
272 and got me interested in that and he did  
273 -  
274 *they never worried about*  
275 *my gender expression just cos*  
276 *they learned quickly I suppose that it wasn't any good trying to*  
277 erm  
278 ...  
279 ...  
280 ...  
281 I did finish one job and  
282 go to another just because  
283 erm  
284 I'd have moved anyway  
285 but I was  
286 already mid-transition then  
287 and  
288 similarly  
289 in sport  
290 erm  
291 people seemed to think, oh  
292 ok, that's  
293 that makes a certain sense  
294 and  
295 *the thing I was most worried about was*

296 *was the community, but*  
297 -  
298 *people were so*  
299 *sort of*  
300 *thankful*  
301 *to God for the result that*  
302 *I went from being*  
303 *as neurotic as hell to being*  
304 *absolutely fine*  
305 but I think  
306 everybody thought it was  
307 yeah at times there, speak up and  
308 so  
309 I've been very lucky with that  
310 the only bad thing's been  
311 me getting the surgery  
312 problems with it and  
313 that sort of thing  
314 so this little body [inaudible] away the [inaudible] so  
315 -

316

317 J: so, I've heard quite a few people describe transition as a spiritual journey – is  
318 that what it feels like for you

319

320 S: *no not really*

321 *erm*

322 -

323 -

324 *I can't – I wish I could say it was*

325 -

326 -

327 the erm

328 the way in which it's a spiritual journey

329 is

330 -

331 it is in a sense – it, it's not a journey as such, it's a

332 it's a shift

333 I always used to confess

334 being different

335 erm I used to confess it as a sin

336 because

337 being unnatural or something

338 I can't remember what I called it even

339 erm  
340 *but I used to confess it regularly year in, year out*  
341 *and*  
342 *even*  
343 *after transition I still*  
344 *find it necessary to confess it*  
345 *in case it was against the will of God*  
346 *if*  
347 *that was what*  
348 *someone said when I was*  
349 *trying to get orda... ordination, [inaudible] contrary to the mind of God*  
350 *and*  
351 *I dunno how they no it but [J laughs]*  
352 *and*  
353 *now I*  
354 *I've just stopped confessing it and I*  
355 *yeah*  
356 *surgery's over*  
357 *and everything years back that I still*  
358 *only just stopped confessing it about*  
359 *two years back*  
360 *I still sometimes think, I wonder if*  
361 *I've done something*  
362 *hugely sinful*  
363 erm  
364 -  
365 if I had  
366 -  
367 if I had would I  
368 -  
369 would I  
370 de-trans... well, I can't de-transition, I don't [inaudible – agree?] it  
371 erm  
372 ...  
373  
374 and I've tried to [inaudible] spiritual  
375 I suppose spiritual stuff happened  
376 long before  
377 I transitioned  
378 cos I  
379 was relating to God as, as a  
380 as a guide from the start  
381 so

382 er  
383 -  
384 -  
385 -  
386 *perhaps gender doesn't matter much in*  
387 *in my li... in*  
388 *my relationship with God*  
389 *it doesn't, I don't think*  
390  
391 J: so you never felt God was punishing you or that you had that kind of stuff—  
392 would shake your fist at God  
393  
394 S: no  
395 ...  
396 ...  
397 ...  
398 it actually doesn't matter what religion you are and this one just happened to  
399 suit me and  
400 heaven's in y... God's  
401 infinite  
402 perfectibility and  
403 hugeness don't e...  
404 way transcend  
405 any religious differences  
406 if we could just  
407 see that we could  
408 *I don't a... I suppose I've been through the process of disintegration and*  
409 *reintegration in my own body*  
410 *and so I can see it as*  
411 *calm, yes but as a holy sort of process*  
412 *of reintegration through*  
413 *through*  
414 *the round trip to hell possibly*  
415 *yes, that's about it*  
416 -  
417 ...  
418 ...  
419 ...

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