Bursting the "Transsexual Narrative":

Genre, Form, and Belonging in Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*

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Abstract

Within hegemonic U.S.-American culture and society, transgender people are not only socially, politically, and legally marginalized, but also literarily. The historical prominence of the "transsexual narrative," which prescribes a medicalized and binary understanding of gender identity as well as a linear and isolated timeline of transition, has had devastating effects on (self-) perceptions, (self-)representations, and, thus, the material lives of transgender communities. Building on recent scholarship that interrogates trans literature as a genre, as well as theories on home, worldmaking, and reparative reading, this essay argues that contemporary trans literature may act as a space and medium that ameliorates the affective consequences of this marginalization. Using Kai Cheng Thom's 2016 book *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* as an example, I argue that by bursting genre conventions and narrative forms, critically interrogating the concepts of home and trans community, and imagining alternative endings that deviate from prescribed social narratives of transness, *Fierce Femmes* provides not only a space of hope and belonging for trans readerships but also for trans stories that stray from the "transsexual narrative."

Keywords

Home; Kai Cheng Thom; Reparative Reading; Trans Community; Transgender Literature; Transsexual Narrative; Worldmaking.

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Introduction

When I teach seminars on transgender theory and literature, one of the first things I try to ingrain into my students' brains is that "the trans experience" does not exist, that trans is an umbrella term and encompasses such a diverse variety of identities and experiences, which makes it impossible to boil down a single unifying experience that could be called "the trans experience." Despite these assertions, I would cautiously propose that perhaps there is, indeed, one unifying trans experience, and that would be the initial questioning if one is, in fact, trans at all, or trans enough for that matter. I have come across this act of questioning in many works of fiction, memoir, and academic scholarship, as well as in personal interactions with other trans people, and still find it deeply ingrained into my own gender-processing. Am I trans enough to claim this label? Am I trans at all? Am I just a cis woman who wants attention? Can I not just subsume the mess that is my gender identity and expression under the label "woman"? Would it, in fact, be more revolutionary or "productive" or honorable to blast open the category of woman instead of "abandoning" it for the harbor of the nonbinary label? If I label myself as nonbinary, can or should I also label myself as trans? I don't want to take away from people who are "really" trans. Am I trans?

Kit Heyam points to this exact scenario in their book *Before We Were Trans* (2022), confirming that trans people often feel incredibly isolated with these questions, even though this experience seems to be nearly universal. When Heyam attended their local trans group for the first time, they describe feeling like they were the only one there not at ease with their identity: "'How do you know this is *real*?' asked a persistent voice in my head. 'What if you just *think* you're trans because it makes you feel special? [. . .] What if you've convinced yourself this is right, but you're wrong?'" (23). It quickly turns out, however, that they were not alone with this at all: "Eventually, I managed to ask the question. 'Did anyone else here … when you first came out, did you have problems *believing* yourself?' Every single person in the room raised their hand" (23).

For me, one of these early affirming experiences was when my "Intro to Trans Studies" professor, who was incidentally responsible for my nonbinary awakening, asserted that "if somebody who looks like me is trans," meaning somebody who could easily pass as cis if they wanted to, "then anybody can be trans." After confessing to that professor that I thought I might be nonbinary and them chuckling congratulatorily while offering me their "they" pronoun pin (which I, sadly, vehemently declined at that point because openly wearing my gender still piqued my anxiety), I used the tools I had learned in their class and began a deep dive into fiction that might be able to tell me more about this "transgender thing" and gender messiness in general. A master's thesis on

trans road narratives and an ongoing dissertation project on contemporary North American trans fiction later, I still often question if I am "really, truly" trans, despite the theory and the fiction and other trans people meeting those doubts with an emphatic "fuck yeah, you are." How is this question so persistent and so pervasive within trans communities?

This essay firstly argues that deeply ingrained doubt about one's gender identity is fundamentally connected to the "transsexual narrative," which originated in tandem with the medicalization of trans identity and prescribes a fixed narrativization of trans experience. Secondly, it examines the reading and writing of trans fiction as a possible avenue for amelioration of the "transsexual narrative's" harmful and restricting effects. I continue to use quotation marks around the term to mark how it constitutes a narrative *about* transness rather than originating *from* trans people themselves, although certain writings authored by trans people historically, and sometimes still today, of course heavily played into the narrative as well. Further, since the narrative is firmly tied to the concept of "transsexuality" as it was understood during the late twentieth century, meaning in an explicit medical sense and in opposition to the more social concept of "transgenderism," I use the term "transsexual" despite its status as outdated terminology today, but do so as a citation rather than as my own wording. While many authors writing between the 1990s and 2010s use the term self-evidently, some scholars, such as Trish Salah, still sometimes apply the term to distinguish trans people who have medically transitioned from others in their writing today. I find this practice quite problematic, since this distinction is what often fuels the aforementioned questions of "real" transness and the general idea of transmedicalism, which is the belief that only people who have medically transitioned are "truly trans."

The first part of this essay will sketch the outlines of the "transsexual narrative" and its effects as well as attempt a tentative definition of trans literature as a genre against this historical and conceptual backdrop. The relationship between "transsexual narratives" and contemporary trans fiction also necessitates the discussion of whether the very stance many current trans texts take on the "transsexual narrative" could be interpreted as a crucial marker of an "emerging" genre. The second part will examine how trans fiction may counteract the "transsexual narrative's" marginalization by providing a literary space of home and belonging for an implied trans readership and for texts themselves that previously were, and partially still are, unthinkable within the hegemonic confines of the publishing industry. Building on theories of home, worldmaking, and reparative reading, while also critically interrogating the concept of home itself, this essay positions Kai Cheng Thom's 2017 *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* as an example that provides not only a space of hope and belonging for trans

readerships but also the tools for critical engagement with harmful narratives by bursting genre conventions and narrative forms, critically interrogating the concept of trans community, and imagining alternative endings that deviate from prescribed social narratives of transness.

Genre-Bending as a Disavowal of the "Transsexual Narrative"

Teasing apart and chronologically organizing the different developments during the twentieth century which influenced the establishment of the "transsexual narrative" seems like a nearly impossible task. Consequently, this chapter can only be seen as an incomplete sketch that hopefully at least roughly outlines the problematics of the concept. Anne Mulhall identifies the origins of queer narrative in the "interrelation among the sexologist's narrative, narratives of the self, and literary narratives" (142); likewise, the emergence of the "transsexual narrative" must be understood as intrinsically intertwined with the medicalization of trans identity as well as medical gatekeeping mechanisms that regulated trans people's access to gender-affirming health care. In *Whipping Girl* (2007), Julia Serano traces the roots of the medical gatekeeping system back to the rise of interest in sexology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (115). Sexologists sought to understand both normative and nonnormative variations of sex, gender, and sexuality; however, Serano argues that because of the researchers' biases derived from their environments of systemic sexism, racism, classism, ableism, et cetera, the research on sexology has never been neutral or scientifically objective. Of course, one might argue that complete objectivity is never possible in the first place, but in this instance, it had especially far-reaching effects, as some researchers made it their explicit objective to eradicate genders and sexualities that differed from the norm (115), a goal fundamentally rooted in colonialism and racism (Mulhall 143-4). This is how queer sexualities and transgender identities came to be not only medicalized, but explicitly pathologized (Serano 116).

One of the key figures in the institutionalization of this attitude towards transness was Harry Benjamin (Serano 117), one of the first doctors in the U.S. to work with trans people in terms of providing hormones and surgeries after having studied at Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, published in 1966, became the standard reference for gender clinics for many years. Benjamin's categorization of trans people according to a so-called sex orientation scale is of particular interest. Modelled on the Kinsey scale, which theorizes male sexuality as a spectrum ranging from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality along six steps (Kendall), it divided trans people into six different categories and afforded them medical transitioning options accordingly: "pseudo transvestite;" "fetishistic transvestite;" "true transvestite;" "transsexual,

nonsurgical;" "transsexual, moderate intensity;" and "transsexual, high intensity" (Benjamin 16). The question of who is "really, truly trans" can be traced directly back to this diagnostic practice, and although Benjamin notes that the six types "are not and never can be sharply separated" (15), it is likely that many trans people were denied care because they did not fit the criteria.

The justification for the very idea that categorization by "experts" instead of trans peoples' self-profession constituted the grounds for health care provision is illustrated in the way the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program, founded in 1968, defined a trans person as "confused." Sandy Stone summarizes the program's findings as such:

> A transsexual is a person who identifies his or her gender identity with that of the "opposite" gender. Sex and gender are quite separate issues, but transsexuals commonly blur the distinction by confusing the performative character of gender with the physical "fact" of sex, referring to their perceptions of their situations as being in the "wrong body." (152)

One study from 1979, which was reprinted in *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment* by William Walters and Michael Ross in 1986 despite its only marginally noted questionable scientific merit, describes trans people as "depressed, isolated, withdrawn, schizoid [. . .], immature, narcissistic, egocentric and potentially explosive [. . .], demanding, manipulative, controlling, coercive, and paranoid" (qtd. in Stone 153). This dehumanization and explicit psychological pathologization of trans people served as a justification for stripping them of their agency and relegating the power over gender expression into the hands of cisgender medical and psychiatric professionals.

This dynamic was heightened as mainstream publics became more aware of trans identity, mostly due to fearmongering in the media about trans people in general and gender-related surgeries specifically (Serano 118). While Harry Benjamin had primarily advocated for hormonal and surgical interventions as therapy for gender dysphoria (Serano 118), the focus shifted from alleviating psychological distress for trans people to "protecting" the public from trans individuals (Serano 120). Dean Spade and Julia Serano both aptly illustrate how the practice of accepting certain trans people for medical transitioning options while rejecting others was based on arbitrary, gender-stereotypical categories as well as heterosexuality, and served to uphold the gender binary while discouraging gender-variant expressions (Spade 316; Serano 122). This is where the "transsexual narrative" comes in, as in order to access gender-affirming health care, trans people often had no choice but to

conform to these very specific criteria, which in turn constructed an entire life narrative of having felt "trapped in the wrong body" since childhood, definitely being heterosexual but not engaging in sexual relations due to a deep aversion to one's genitals, and always having exhibited gender-stereotypical behaviors (Serano 123-4). The narrativization of transition, then, as Atalia Israeli-Nevo writes, takes on characteristics of an "extreme makeover" (36) storyline, which portrays an "over-the-top, incredible and almost impossible transformation from one sex/gender to the other [. . .], one moment of somatic change that allows the subject to move to the other side of the gap (without looking back), and change everything" (36). The "arrival" in the "correctly gendered" body is then often configured as "homecoming" (Aizura 144). Jay Prosser summarizes the narrative stages as follows: "suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally the arrival 'home'—the reassignment" (101). The completion of transition as an arrival home will become especially pertinent later when examining the relationship between home and trans identity. Building on Foucauldian analyses of power, Spade concludes that the medical establishment's handling of trans people should not discourage medical transition per se, but rather enforced normative gender performances for both trans- and cisgender people (321). Of course, the rigid application of the "transsexual narrative" also left room for calculated subversion of the gatekeeping system. Stone notes that many trans people seeking care "had read Benjamin's book, which was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community, and they were only too happy to provide the behavior that led to acceptance for surgery" (161).

Interestingly, although perhaps not that surprisingly, autobiographies written by trans people during the 20th century often echoed and reinforced the "transsexual narrative" as well. Since publishers were usually not interested in writings by trans people unless they catered to a cisgender appetite for sensationalism and an "explanation" of trans experiences, autobiographies became the prime genre through which trans narratives were able to be expressed. In one of the first scholarly works which reckons with the "transsexual narrative" from a trans-affirmative perspective, Stone analyzes multiple autobiographies by, for example, Lili Elbe, Hedy Jo Star, and Jan Morris. In concurrence with Israeli-Nevo's earlier mentioned observations, she notes that,

> besides the obvious complicity of these accounts in a Western white male definition of performative gender, the authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There

> is no territory between. Further, each constructs a specific narrative moment when their personal sexual identification changes from male to female. This moment is the moment of neocolporraphy—that is, of gender reassignment or "sex change surgery." (Stone 156)

Stone sharply criticizes these autobiographies' complacency with the "transsexual narrative" as they confirm and uphold harmful constructions of gender and passing. In an attempt to leave behind the "transsexual narrative," to become "posttranssexual," as she puts it, she calls for trans people to "read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself into the discourses by which one has been written" (Stone 168).

In opposition to trans autobiography in the 20th century, the kind of trans fiction which has been appearing since the 2010s—first out of small, independent publishing houses like the now-defunct Topside Press, Metonymy Press, or Arsenal Pulp Press, and more recently out of more mainstream presses such as Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* (2021) with Random House and the ten-year-anniversary reissue of Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) with Farrar, Straus & Giroux—might be interpreted as a new emergent transgender literature written by trans people for trans people, which explicitly avoids catering to the "transsexual narrative's" medicalized, sensationalist cis gaze. Even though any attempt to stabilize a definition of trans literature poses more questions than curating answers, most contributors to the discussion seem to agree on the importance of "work that resonates with or illuminates or otherwise serves transgender communities" (Bellot). Working with this reference point, trans autobiographies which follow the "transsexual narrative" could, on the one hand, be discarded from the category of trans literature as it can be argued that their portrayal of transness serves cisgender voyeurism more than trans communities themselves. On the other hand, the influence of trans autobiographies cannot be disavowed, as Salah emphatically asserts in her essay on "Transgender and Transgenre Writing" (2021). Criticizing the fact that "we hate our autobiography" (186), Salah argues that the dismissal of 20th century "transsexual" autobiography disavows pieces of important history that have made the "emergence" of a "new trans literature" possible in the first place, while simultaneously obscuring other works within this period of "intense cultural production" (187) that have received little to no attention from literary critics so far. She quotes César Domínguez when explaining how the concept of an "emergent literature" is "predicated upon the idea of an 'evolutionary phase of a national literature' as well as upon ideas of 'all non-national and non-canonical literature, whether it be ethnic, regional or minority'" (Salah 178). Salah concludes that "the thinking of emergence then consequently risks a presentist, dehistoricizing rendering of the past as well as a certain telos for the future" (179).

Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* can be read as a hybrid form encompassing both elements from the "old" history of trans autobiography and the "new" developments of trans literatures. As such, it nods to earlier works which created a distinctly trans genre by mixing autobiographical elements with other genres, such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) or Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*, published in 1994 (Prosser 174, 191). Akio Tamura-Ho formulates this "persistent ability of trans people to combine, modify, transform and circumvent generic convention" (4) as remix and analyzes how works following the aforementioned, such as Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* and Grace Lavery's *Please Miss: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Penis (2022)*, "disrupt the binary between research and fabulation, nonfiction and fiction, reality and unreality" (4). In breaking away from the "transsexual narrative," genre-bending thus emerges as a prime strategy through which trans writers are able to convey the complexity and multiplicity of trans experience.

Fierce Femmes follows a nameless protagonist, who is a young Asian trans woman, as she leaves her hometown of Gloom and moves to the City of Smoke and Lights, where she meets other trans women like herself and is integrated into their tight-knit community on the Street of Miracles. Many of the femmes work in the sex industry to survive on the Street. When one of them is murdered, the femmes form a gang and enact revenge on clients that have mistreated them. During a street fight, the protagonist accidentally kills a police officer while protecting another femme, but his body mysteriously disappears into a magical fountain. As the protagonist grapples with her deed, bodily dysphoria, the complicated relationships within her community, and her first romantic involvements, the text continually blurs and questions the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. This is achieved by playing with genre conventions and mixing elements of memoir and magical realism, as well as poetic, epistolary, and dramatic forms, which displays the richness of possibility within transgender cultural production and negates the "transsexual" autobiography's firm generic borders.

The text's subtitle, *A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*, marks the book as memoir, while the words "liar" and "confabulous" signal a casual relation to truth. Opposing the genre marker of memoir is the customary disclaimer that this work is purely fictional and a product of the author's imagination, pointing to the idea that the boundaries between the storytelling of memoir and fictional storytelling are more porous and unstable than clear-cut. These boundaries are further questioned by the fact that the protagonist remains nameless and that her identity seems closely related to the author's, who is also a Chinese Canadian trans woman. The first chapter in the book further takes on a crucial role in blurring the memoir-fiction and

realism-fantasy boundaries, as the first-person narrator describes watching a white trans woman, who bears distinct similarities to real-life Caitlyn Jenner, accepting an award on TV (Thom 2). The protagonist derives her motifs for writing from what she sees in the woman:

> Looking at the ivory face of the trans lady on the TV, I decided then and there that someone had to write us girls a dangerous story: a transgender memoir, but not like most of the 11,378 transgender memoirs out there, which are just regurgitations of the same old story that makes us boring and dead and *safe* to read about. I wanted something kick-ass and intense with hot sex and gang violence and maybe zombies and lots of magic. Which is, you know, pretty much my life, right? So I thought I'd give writing a try. (Thom 3; original emphasis)

The next chapter begins with "the story of how [the protagonist] became a dangerous girl and the greatest escape artist in the world" (Thom 7), suggesting that the text on hand is the product of her writing the story she wanted to and breaking the inferred rule of fiction and literary analysis which preaches that the author and the narrator should never be conflated. Before, however, she describes her anger at the ivory lady and the urge to kick the TV, which belongs to her boyfriend. Instead, she

> blew a kiss at the TV. A spark jumped from [her] lips, skipped off [her] palm, and darted through the air to touch down gently on a close-up of her face. The screen exploded in a glorious symphony of electricity and shattering glass, and a thousand razor shards flew through the air and turned into crimson butterflies that danced through the room on their way out the window. (Thom 4)

The intense juxtaposition of beauty and softness with violence and sharpness that this scene evokes foreshadows the general mood of the text and picks up images, such as the razor and the crimson color, that will become relevant in the story later. Most interestingly, however, one of the final chapters returns to the exposition and reveals that the TV was actually destroyed by the "kiss": "So Josh came home and found his smashed-up TV this afternoon. I wanted to tell him that I didn't break it on purpose, it just kind of happened: I blew a kiss at the screen and the kiss was literally electric. But that would have just sounded like a lie to him. And maybe it would have been" (Thom 184). This full-circle moment not only, again, questions the boundaries between reality and fiction or imagination, but also raises the question of the role of magic within the narrative, which I will return to later.

Creating Transgender Home—Physically, Emotionally, Generically

Stone's conceptualization of trans literature as reading oneself aloud (168) and Tamura-Ho's idea of trans literature as remix (4) converge in Salah's argument that trans genre writing "works to both problematize and collectivize enunciation, which is not to say that the literature is homogenous, but rather that it works 'to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility'" (182). The idea of another, different possibility, whether of narrative, literature, or community, also emerges in Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998). Like Stone, Prosser is extremely critical of trans autobiography as a genre, but he specifically configures the departure from the "transsexual narrative" as a possibility of homecoming for transgender people (174). It might be surprising at first to learn that one of the first academic pursuits into transgender literature as a genre places trans identity into a firm connection with home; at second glance, however, the enmeshment of "transgender" and "home" is less striking, considering how the term transgender historically emerged from the tug-of-war between "transsexuality" (interpreted as folding gender aberrations into cisnormative passing) and queer (interpreted as a deliberate embodiment of difference). Prosser writes that "the relations between these projects often get played out in debates about narrative and territory [. . .], about what it means to cross gender or sex, to share or distinguish identity space, to establish, differentiate, and affiliate plots and movements" (176-77), showcasing how home as a trope arises at the very birth of transgender as a concept.

Home, then, in a trans context, is fundamentally fraught. The "transsexual narrative" points "nostalgically toward home—identity, belonging in the body and in the world" (Prosser 177), promises closure, assimilation, and the "refuge of fully becoming the other sex" (178). In fact, Prosser postulates that every narrative is directed towards home, and if home is nonexistent, this throws into question the entire existence of the narrative as well (205). Consequently, both home and narrative are fabrications, myths (Prosser 205). By giving up both the constructions of home and narrative implicated in the "transsexual narrative," Prosser argues, "we relinquish [. . .] the recognition of our sexed realness; acceptance as men and women; fundamentally, the right to gender homes" (204). Earlier, however, he also proposes that in parting with the right to gender homes, and therefore being in need of new homes, "the queer/posttranssexual/transgendered transsexual comes out and creates home in the transgendered community" (Prosser 174).

Prosser's analysis points to the ambivalent nature of home both explicitly in his writing but also implicitly in the way his argument seems to exhibit a contradicting tension between the need to deconstruct both home

and narrative as myth, but also a desire for home within the trans community. Nael Bhanji articulates his frustration with "the 'imagined community' of transsexual belonging" (157) and the fact that both theoretical and actual journeys are so highly influenced by "our attachments to the perplexing edifice of 'home'" (157). Considering how trans theory has systematically excluded racialized and diasporic trans people, Bhanji asks which kind of home is left, which other home is strived for, and what these directives say about the trans subject undertaking them (158). "Through challenging our own investments in the protective cocoon of homeliness," he writes, "we may envision a trans politics that is critical of its (re)turns to 'home'" (Bhanji 158). If home, within Western hegemonic culture, is conflated with the stability and protection of the nation, of whiteness, and bourgeois family values (Birke and Butter 119), is home something trans subjects even can or should strive for?

While the problematics of home as a concept cannot be denied, I would also like to suggest thinking about what is lost if home is undisputedly relinquished to the hegemonic forces that use it to protect white-supremacist, settler-colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, cisheteronormative, ableist power and values. Especially for trans people, the traditionally homely ideas of safety, coziness, familiarity, and stability could also offer a welcome retreat from the marginalization and suspended liminality of existing within social structures that routinely seek to eradicate their being. Trans people deserve spaces to rest, to be at home with people and narratives that nurture and uplift. Of course, when reading trans literature as a home for trans readerships, crucial questions of which narratives make it into production (writing takes time and money, publishing takes a publisher willing to publish that particular narrative) and which readerships are able to gain access to them (reading takes time, money, and education, which itself also takes time and money) quickly arise—like everything else, trans literature is always already bound up in white-supremacist cisheteronormative cultural-imperialist capitalist structures. And yet, *if* the opportunity arises to find home and belonging in trans literature, should that opportunity not be fiercely grasped?

Home plays a fundamental role in *Fierce Femmes*, in a physical, emotional, figurative, as well as media-practical sense. In "Imaginative Geographies of Home: Ambivalent Mobility in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture" (2019), Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter suggest three lenses through which to analyze home in fiction: first, the representation of home; second, the figurative meanings of home; and third, media practices as forms of homemaking. Within these lenses, they consider aspects such as spatiality and materiality, as well as social, cognitive, and affective dimensions of home (121-2). While this rather neutral lens of analysis provides a good basis, home must be viewed as an inherently fraught complex in queer and trans contexts,

as queer and trans people are, from the outset, usually assumed to be not-at-home, whether this pertains to not being included in the unit of "the heterosexual family, the nation, the homeland," as Anne-Marie Fortier writes (408), or to not being "at home in one's body," as the normative formulation of trans embodiment in terms of dysphoria goes (Prosser 178).

In *Fierce Femmes*, this tension within the concept of home is played out, for example, in the physical houses/homes the protagonist moves in and through; from the house she grew up in in the city of Gloom to a tiny, dingy apartment on the Street of Miracles in the City of Smoke and Lights, and finally to her boyfriend's fancy apartment in a more affluent part of town. Gloom is described as a sad, ugly place suffering from the effects of European settler colonialism (Thom 7), and the protagonist's house of origin similarly seems to be distressed: "I was born in the crooked house whose walls curved and bulged in the middle and narrowed at the top and the bottom, like a starving person with a swollen belly" (Thom 7). The house is not only compared to a starving person, but also to a spider web that trembles, haunts its inhabitants, and eventually swallows them (Thom 42). Contrary to the safety commonly associated with a home, this house "kept you in it, but it didn't keep things out" (Thom 42). The extensive personification of the house works to obscure the actual source of isolation and confinement that the protagonist experiences: her Chinese immigrant parents have high expectations for her academically, keep her locked in her room to study, and physically abuse her when she does not meet their requirements (Thom 9). Like the house itself, they are described as afflicted by "an ever-present feeling of hunger" (Thom 8) for more success and stability than they had been afforded as immigrants. Early on, the protagonist learns to escape periodically by picking locks, and finally decides to leave for good when it becomes clear that her parents would never accept her being a girl.

The City of Smoke and Lights does not seem to be too different from Gloom at first, "the streets are crooked, and the light is heavy, and the air is stained ash grey from the glamorous cigarette lips of hungry ghosts swimming through the fog" (Thom 20). In contrast to Gloom and her crooked house of origin, though, the city offers the freedom to "be anything you want" (Thom 20). Particularly the Street of Miracles is described as beautiful and mysterious, with the languidity of a never-ending night and the enticement of red lanterns and fragrant smells (Thom 37-8). This beauty, however, is laced with the implicit dynamics of exploitation of a place where mainly men seem to go to enjoy themselves, and women, especially trans women, provide the enjoyment. The presence of other trans women has the most alluring effect on the protagonist: "The City of Smoke and Lights is full of fierce, fabulous femmes. Dangerous trans women, hot as blue stars. You can find them

anywhere if you know how to look, and believe me, I am *looking*. Can't take my eyes off them: these visions of what I could be. What I am becoming. My first trans woman friend found me the minute my feet touched the ground here" (Thom 37; italics in original). While Gloom and the crooked house seem altogether an unviable place for the protagonist to live, the City of Smoke and Lights seems more complicated in that it holds beauty and ugliness, safety and danger, longing and belonging at the same time.

This mixture is concretely represented in the protagonist's first own apartment, which is described as "a little tin box that someone decided to charge rent for" (Thom 42). Despite its bleak furnishings, the protagonist immediately feels at home: "Little tin box apartment, I know you aren't strong enough: not to keep me inside, nor to keep monsters out. But I don't care. You have a door that closes, and only I can lock it from the inside. [. . .] Little cocoon apartment, I love how you rattle and shake in the wind. You are mine like nothing has ever been before" (Thom 43). Even though the apartment comes across as physically unstable similarly to the crooked house in Gloom, the crucial difference between them lies in the fact that the apartment, whether imagined as a tin box or a cocoon, gives the protagonist the agency of constructing it as a home herself.

The protagonist's move into her boyfriend's apartment at the end of the book signifies a circling back into the confinement embodied by the crooked house in Gloom, albeit more in the fashion of a "gilded cage." This apartment has a "heavy oak door that opens into a vast carpeted open-concept living room about eleven times the size of my tin box apartment" (Thom 181) and is "furnished with tasteful leather couches, a glass coffee table that looks like a sculpture in a contemporary art museum, a state-of-the-art television, and wall-to-wall windows overlooking the City skyline" (Thom 181). What prompts the protagonist to escape once again in the end, however, is the fancy toilet paper: "There was no toilet paper like that in my house in Gloom, or on the Street of Miracles, I was pretty sure. And it was this tiny thing, this insignificant experience, that finally made it hit me: *I don't belong here*" (Thom 182-3; italics in original). In summary, the protagonist's physical housing situations are only experienced as home when she retains her agency and independence as a trans, Chinese Canadian, working-class subject, which detaches the notion of home from the aforementioned traditional values of whiteness, biological family, and bourgeois affluence. Being at home, then, becomes a radical act of subversion rather than a practice of being folded or folding oneself into the dominant.

Fierce Femmes not only critically interrogates home in a sense of physical shelter and safety, but even more so as belonging within a community. The first friend the protagonist meets in the city is Kimaya, whose smile is

described as evoking notions of home: "Kimaya's smile is a slice of the yellow moon. [. . .] It is a map, guiding the way. It's warm butter, melting on toast. It feels like sisterhood. It feels like open arms. It feels like home" (Thom 40-1). Kimaya's homeliness extends from her smile into her actions when she organizes an open mic night for her community of femmes during a time in which they struggle with heightened police violence. The open mic night is an explicitly t4t event, where the femmes can care and perform only for each other without the constraints of a cis/male gaze: "She spends the whole day calling the girls, telling each one that she's hosting an open mic night—private, just for trans girls. She asks them about their lives, how they're doing in these hard times. She tells them how much she's missed them, how good it would be to see them soon" (Thom 138). For Kimaya, her community's interconnectedness arises from narrative and storytelling: "I've brought us all together on this darkest of nights so we can tell our stories. We live in difficult and dangerous times, it is true. But as long as we have our stories, and we have each other, then we have hope. And this is the greatest magic of all" (Thom 139). Laura Bieger articulates the importance of narrative agency and its entanglements with belonging in *Belonging and Narrative* (2018), where she writes:

> Belonging as I conceive it is an inescapable condition of human existence [. . .], the desire for a place in the world without which both place and world would crumble. To feel and direct this longing we need a mediating structure; narrative is that structure. [. . .] Narrative's sweeping allure (it can be found in any culture) thrives on its promise to give meaning and mooring to our lives. [. . .] Where, how, and to whom we belong depends on the stories we tell (or do not tell) ourselves. (13)

Narrative, then, is not only crucial within *Fierce Femmes* as a glue that keeps the community of femmes together, but also "outside" of the book where trans readerships may experience feelings of home and belonging through reading, and perhaps even read themselves into the narrative.

Trans community is also more complicated than t4t care, however. When the protagonist visits the Femme Alliance Building, a community center, for the first time, she describes a profound sense of isolation: "Except for Kimaya, no one pays attention to me. I hate it, which surprises me, because back in Gloom, being ignored always made me feel safe. Here in FAB, though, being ignored makes me feel small and invisible, makes me hate myself. I long to be a part of the conversations, to talk, to join the glittering flock" (Thom 51). When one of the femmes, Lucretia, calls her "fresh meat" and comments on her flat chest—"She doesn't even have boobs yet! How old are you, kid?" (Thom 51)—the protagonist twists her wrist to gain her respect. Later, the for-

mation of the vigilante gang to avenge the murder of Soraya is preceded by intense discussions within the community over whether the use of violence is an appropriate response to the situation (Thom 74-5), which, in the long run, drives a deep wedge between Kimaya and her partner Rapunzelle. And finally, the gang's leader Valaria illustrates how mentorship and abuse can go hand in hand when she encourages the protagonist to keep fighting back against the violence on the Street, but then kisses her without her consent (Thom 121-2).

In a media-practical sense, *Fierce Femmes* creates a home for narrative outcomes that would seem impossible within the real-world structures trans women have to grapple with. As Soraya's murder illustrates, the femmes are continually faced with violence, either stemming from their clients or from the police. Outside of novels, we are inundated with news of trans women, particularly those who are racialized and/or poor and/or work in the sex industry, being murdered without much hope for justice, with news coverage and posthumous narrativizations often disrespecting their identity even in death (Snorton and Haritaworn 69). *Fierce Femmes* undertakes a rerouting of the narrative tropes that fix trans women of color in a perpetual state of tragedy, isolation, and death. This practice is most explicitly accomplished through a literal rewriting of violence to create a multiplicity of outcomes. When the protagonist kills a police officer in a small courtyard in order to save Lucretia from him, she subsequently remarks:

> "I'm gonna go to jail and get fucking raped and die there all because I saved your stupid worthless bitchy ass," I finish, breathing heavily. For a second, Lucretia just stares at me in total silence. Her beat-up doll face is totally expressionless, except for a slight twitching in her cheek. The moonlight glints off her blue eyes. Then she says, quietly, "You're not going to jail. You're going to be fine." (Thom 113-4)

Lucretia offers to turn herself in for the officer's death since she is white and can pass more easily than the protagonist, when the narrative voice suddenly interjects, jumps backwards, and rewrites the ending of the scene:

> "I'm a pretty white girl, right? Maybe they'll go easy on me." I start to laugh, but it turns into a sob. I want to reach out and hug her. I want to turn and run away. In the distance, I can hear the sound of sirens—
> No, wait. That's not what happened. This is what happened: "I'm gonna go to jail and get fucking raped and die there all because I saved your stupid worthless bitchy ass," I finish, breathing heavily. For a second, Lucretia just stares at me in total silence. Her beat-up doll face is totally expressionless, except for a slight twitching in her cheek. The moonlight

> glints off her blue eyes. Then, suddenly, those eyes widen. Her perfect bee-stung lips part in a gasp. "Look," Lucretia says, pointing behind me with her good arm. (Thom 115)

The vines around the fountain in the middle of the courtyard then begin to move, slowly envelop the officer's dead body, and draw it into the fountain. As the vines retreat, the fountain's statue is revealed as a beautiful and majestic trans woman, who has been mythologized on the Street of Miracles as the First Femme (Thom 116). As evidence of the crime disappears, Lucretia and the protagonist are granted an alternative future, one in which they don't "go to jail and get fucking raped and die there" (Thom 115), as the protagonist had initially predicted, because "whenever blood is shed on the Street of Miracles, it's trans girls who pay, in the end" (Thom 115). The prescribed narrative structure of violence and death that permeates trans women's lives, especially within the sex industry, is thus replaced with a different narrative, in which self-defense is not prosecuted more heavily than the initial assault and where the fierce and protective bonds between trans women prevail in the end, even despite their individual disdain for each other.

A similar scene in which magical intervention aids the protagonist occurs when she bakes a red velvet cake in Kimaya's kitchen at the height of the femmes' struggles with the surveillance and violence from the police. As she pours sugary icing on the hot cake, the scent travels through the open window onto the Street of Miracles, and when she takes the first bite, everything wrong seems to magically right itself instantly: Kimaya and Rapunzelle reconcile, Lucretia likes her appearance in the mirror, Soraya's mother is comforted after the death of her daughter, the First Femme's fountain spits up the police officer's spirit, who ceases to haunt the protagonist's nightmares, and the swarm of killer bees (signifying the protagonist's gender dysphoria) leaves her body through her open mouth (Thom 160-2). In the end, no matter how difficult things are, the magical powers of trans community, embodied in the figure of the First Femme, are able to ameliorate the situation.

This provides a good opportunity to return to the earlier question of the role of magic in Thom's text. On the one hand, the magical elements of the narrative allow room for more positive things to happen to the femmes and keep them safe. On the other hand, the fact that only magic can accomplish this in the story, and that the non-magical narrative strands are set up to end in great harm, can be read as a commentary on how the reality for trans women is indeed so dire that, at this point, nothing from the "real" realm could change the situation. While acknowledging the current, difficult situation for trans people, however, the magical narrative can provide a space of home for trans readerships, an imagination of how things could be better, and a hope

for the results of the magical narrative strands to become realistic as well. In the introduction to *Worldmaking: Literature, Language, Culture* (2019), Tom Clark, Emily Finlay, and Philippa Kelly emphasize the importance of literature in imagining other or more extensive worlds than the present. They write that "worlds are never entirely new; they emerge out of old worlds and reshape them, a prerequisite that means worldmaking is always at least transformative, but also potentially powerful or subversive" (Clark et al. 2-3) and position literary works as a prime vehicle for worldmaking, as they are able to critique and question dominant narratives and continually reshape the old to make something new (Clark et al. 4). Their approach invokes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading by which "selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (35). This reading strategy eschews a more paranoid practice, which focuses on preventing pain by constantly foreseeing and exposing it, and instead opts for an approach that concentrates on the seeking of pleasure and amelioration. Finally, Leslie Feinberg argues that imagination, or fiction, is essential for trans narratives. Reflecting on hir approach writing *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) in an interview, zie asserts:

> We're always being told who we are, either physically or emotionally—strip or be stripped, you know? [. . .] "Let's see your body. We'll find out who you are. Let's hear what your innermost thoughts and feelings [are]." [. . .] I really felt that by fictionalizing the story, that I would be able to tell more of the truth; be more brutally honest than I would if I were telling my own story. (Horwitz 13)

Within a trans context, then, magic and fiction may allow for more truth than realism and fact.

To conclude, this essay has highlighted the problematic nature of the "transsexual narrative" and sketched its relationship to more recent, "emerging" transgender literature that is written by trans authors with trans audiences in mind. I have argued that this genre of "new" trans literature may be capable of ameliorating the harmful effects the "transsexual narrative" has had on trans (self-)perceptions and communities. Kai Cheng Thom's book *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* represents an intriguing example of this practice through its critical interrogation of the concepts of home and community, as well as its use of magic and reparative rewriting to imagine alternative endings that deviate from prescribed social narratives of transness. Therefore, I read *Fierce Femmes* as a narrative that provides a space for trans readerships to imagine themselves as part of the fictional community of femmes and gain

hope that this community and sense of belonging can translate into their real lives. Similarly, a practice of trans reparative writing might be able to restore narrative agency for trans characters, especially in the wake of the histories that have constrained trans stories into very particular formulas. This restoration of narrative agency may then extend to trans readerships and broader trans communities as a concrete tool to affectively work against the psychological effects of social vilification. By rewriting the typical narrative for trans women, as well as the typical way trans stories are able to be told, *Fierce Femmes* ultimately creates a space in which more is possible: more diverse narratives, different possible outcomes for trans women, more truths than one.

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Biography

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