The Stephen Archive:

Readings of Lesbian and Transgender Embodiment in *The Well of Loneliness*

A thesis in Women's and Gender Studies

by

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Abstract

Though Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, has been a site of rich theoretical production for both feminist and queer theory, critical work on the novel has largely remained committed to claiming its main character, Stephen Gordon, as either a lesbian woman or a transgender man. These analyses overlook the historically specific context of discourse around gender and sexuality during the time of the novel's production and publication and instead read back modern notions of queerness onto a body that refuses these categories. Using the work of Heather Love, Judith Halberstam, and Ann Cvetkovich I read constructions of female masculinity which hang upon the novel through an affective lens. I conclude that *The Well* is just as much a transgender novel as it is a lesbian novel; however, it can be useful to both lesbian and transgender archives without claiming Stephen as either a lesbian or a transgender man. Although I apply my methodology mainly to *The Well of Loneliness and* briefly to Kimberly Peirce's 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, it is applicable to other texts featuring ambiguously gendered bodies. I argue that more nuanced questions about gender and sexuality can be explored when critical discussions of ambiguous bodies can escape the impulse to make identity claims on these bodies. *The Well of Loneliness* demands a reading of bodies which are changing, transforming, becoming, and unbecoming without distinct destinations, if any destination at all. A place to start generative and productive theory is by focusing on affect precisely because it resists a discussion limited to identity categories and it refuses binary thinking.

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Introduction

I am interested in a historically situated approach to explore the tensions between feminist theory, queer theory, and gay and lesbian studies through their constructions of female masculinity. My larger question is about ideas and the ways in which they act as undercurrents to push and pull the related movements of theory and activism. The way disciplines negotiate the tensions and borders between proper objects of study has a direct impact on knowledge production and the creation of a whole archive of theory. I have chosen constructions of female masculinity as a site to look at tensions and patterns in theory, because we are still uncomfortable with female masculinity; it remains an unstable site for clear cut identity production, particularly when taking into account the borders between female masculinity and female-to-male transgender identity.

As one of the most widely read and discussed texts concerning female masculinity, I will use Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* to anchor my work. What I am most interested in are the theoretical perspectives centered on female masculinity which hang upon these texts. I will look at how theorists from the disciplines of feminist, queer, and gay and lesbian studies negotiate accounts of female bodied masculine subjects while paying close attention to the historical context in which these theories were produced. This is as much a historical project as it is a theoretical project. I am interested in the potential parallels and disruptions between dominant theoretical movements and the clues of these movements in the theoretical texts themselves.

I am interested in how theorists use female bodied masculine subjects to inform their theory and I am eager to examine how holistic their approach is. I worry that in

serving particular political projects aligned with the general currents of a particular discipline situated in a particular temporal context, theorists will pick and choose certain aspects of the archive of female masculinity at the expense of these subjects themselves and their rich and complicated histories. I cannot help but worry about theorists "who actually seek only to find what they think they already know" (Halberstam 54). What is included and what is left out? Who gets to have a voice?

The methodological basis of my project will be comprised of key theoretical frameworks provided by Heather Love's 2009 publication, Feeling Backward, Judith Halberstam's chapter "Perverse Presentism: The Androgyne, the Tribade, the Female Husband, and Other Pre-Twentieth-Century Genders" from her 1998 book *Female Masculinity*, and Ann Cvetkovich's chapter "Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities" from her 2003 book, *An Archive of Feelings*. These theorists provide new ways of theoretical and historical work that are sensitive to specificity, context, temporality, and avoid reductive descriptions. All three theorists are interested in history, affect, knowledge production, and textual analysis. By weaving together various pieces of their work, I hope to add to the literature by reinforcing a historical approach that presents a reconciliation between the disciplines and gives the current lived experiences of masculine females, transgender men, butches, and others the salience they demand while avoiding the violent disintegration of past subjects and variations in female masculinities.

I will draw on Love, Halberstam, and Cvetkovich to argue that the tensions surrounding identity production in the constellation of female bodied masculine subjects

get read back into texts that resist such categorization because of their historical situation. If not handled with care, modern ideas about bodies, desire, and sexuality can dilute the specificities of these texts. I worry that modern formulations of the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality get projected into a past in which these conceptions would not be intelligible and thus create a violent disintegration of these literary subjects and the women (and others) who lived this way. I am interested in preserving an archive that can inform the present and the future, but this need not happen at the expense of those who lived in the past.

The parallels between theoretical projects and the way we perceive broader movements in history are undeniable. In addition to a misreading of certain identities, when we read certain theoretical perspectives backwards, we fail to recognize a time in history in its entirety, or as close to its entirety as possible. Particularly within the context of queer history, in order to escape a painful legacy, theorists, activists, and politicians tend to focus on what they deem more positive queer pasts and are more reluctant to dwell on the painful aspects of the past. More painful facets of queer experience and queer history, particularly those that evoke negative feelings such as shame and melancholia in modern subjects, are often overlooked in favor of more triumphant narratives. Alternatively, experiences and events which evoke negative feelings are cast in a more positive light in an attempt to reclaim them similarly resulting in important parts of these pasts getting lost. Bodies get misconstructed and at the same time, an entire history is constructed through a modernist lens that solidifies a linear reading of time. The historical development of theory is lost and because theory is in constant dialogue

with the history of movements, we reduce and homogenize the historical moments themselves. Finally, we need to pay close attention to the historical methods we use to interpret the past, particularly if we would like to use them to inform the present. We must do all we can to reduce totalizing and unspecific readings of the past that are removed from context.

Additionally, my work is strongly influenced by Judith Butler's 1994 essay, "Against Proper Objects" in that I will be careful to take account of the context and historical situation in which a text is produced. Constructions of female masculinity are produced within the bounds of disciplinary norms which heavily influence the way certain bodies are analyzed and often remedied. In the following section I will lay out a brief history of Queer Theory in order to illustrate the tensions present in its beginnings that still permeate the work of the discipline.

Feminist Theory, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Queer Theory

The term 'queer theory' was coined in 1990 when Teresa de Lauretis organized a conference to complicate the limiting focus of gay and lesbian studies. De Lauretis saw gay and lesbian studies as constructing universalizing discourses which ignored race, class, culture, and other differences. As Annmarie Jagose lays out, the term first "surfac[ed] as a provocation rather than a position, necessitating a number of attempts to account retrospectively for its intellectual history" (Jagose 158). Queer theory's emergence as a direct critique of gay and lesbian studies therefore demands a self-conscious historicization of gay and lesbian studies itself, a self-reflective examination of its objects of study, its goals, and its critical trajectories. Queer theory itself was intended

to enable unknowable and limitless possibilities for analysis, and a way to deal with the anxieties of the misinterpretations of queer theory as limitable and definable have been answered with a theorizing of queer temporality. Queer temporality is, "a mode of inhabiting time that is attentive to the recursive eddies and back-to-the-future loops that often pass undetected or uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normal life (Freeman, 2007)" (Jagose 158). I am interested in this aspect of queer theory: queer temporality's constant turning and temporal looping, its refusal to be defined as a linear progression.

At the same time, it seems that queer theory is dependent on futurity in its negation of rigid identity politics in favor of the "identity in progress." According to David Halperin, queer identity should be "an empty placeholder for an identity that is still in progress and has yet to be fully realized, to conceptualize queer identity as an identity in the state of becoming rather than as the referent for an actually existing form of life" (1995: 112-13) (Jagose 159). At first it may seem that Halperin is making a progressivist argument, however, I would like to intervene and draw a distinction between the idea of an ever evolving queer place holder and an opposition between the outdated queer and the modern queer. While queer identity as a place holder loops backward and forward and is ever resistant, the outdated v. modern queer imposition creates a temporal fragmentation, thus constructing time as linear and indeed heteronormative. Queer theory's projections into the future may in fact be the first step to theorizing the past. According to Jonathan Goldberg, the "future possibility in the present might mean that

our sense of the past needs to be rethought" (Goldberg, 7007: 502)" (Jagose 159). The past and present must be in constant dialogue.

Removing queer theory from context can give the impression that it was the first discipline to "refuse normative identity categories"; however, this is an oversight because, as Jagose argues, "feminist scholarship had already initiated a radically anti-foundationalist interrogation of the category of women" (Jagose 160). The theoretical strides that are useful to examine the masculine female body and its social construction are present both in feminist theory and in queer theory. Indeed, Jagose argues, "rather than participate in the temporal disciplining of feminist from queer thought that stages them as the before and after of some narrative of critical advancement, thinking feminist and queer theory together can productively occasion a turn away from linear historical time with its implicit prioritization of the present and its reliance on heteronormative tropes of lineage, succession and generation" (Jagose 160).

I lay out a brief description of queer theory as analyzed by Jagose in order to show a macro level version of Heather Love's argument which I will subsequently lay out. Jagose makes the same argument that Love does, but in terms of disciplines and critical advancement instead of bodies and identities themselves. However, the disciplines that Jagose critiques construct the bodies and identities which Love and Halberstam examine. Jagose critiques a focus on linear historical time because of its prioritization of the present. Love does not necessarily critique a prioritizing of the present, in fact it does not seem that she seeks to prioritize any temporal stance. Love seeks a "politics of the past" in which the past informs the present, while Halberstam's

Perverse Presentism is a framework in which the present informs the past. Queer theory provides a space in which both approaches are possible. My contention in illustrating the tangled history of these disciplines is to show the claiming of masculine female bodies and affects are largely reflective of tensions within the disciplines of feminist theory, queer theory, and gay and lesbian studies. Jagose argues that "feminism is both an historical source of inspiration for queer thought and its present-tense interlocutor" (Jagose 160). I would like to suggest that affect is the present interlocutor between the queer past and present and that "bad" affects in particular can serve as a starting point to draw continuities between past and present.

Early gay and lesbian studies sought to avoid stigma and assert gay and lesbian existence as possible. Rather than acknowledging the importance of depressing accounts of gay existence, gay and lesbian studies challenged a social climate of gay and lesbian impossibility by presenting gay existence as viable. However, in the early 1990's, queer studies presented a shift as theorists were more willing to engage in dialogue about the more negative aspects of queer existence. With the emergence of queer studies, theorists and historians began to address different kinds of bodies and more negative feelings which gay and lesbian studies was more reluctant to talk about. According to Jagose, queer theory "focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire" (Jagose). I find the concept of 'mismatches' particularly useful here because it begins to address the source of the queer archive of abjection and shame. It is the mismatching of not only gender and sexuality, or sex and sexuality, but the mismatching of sex and gender that

queer studies takes on as part of its project and this is particularly stark in the case of female masculinity.

Chapter One

"What concerns me is how much this affirmative turn actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as oriented toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that "stops" the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated here with moving up and getting out. I would argue that it is the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear. The demand that we be affirmative makes those histories disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia (as if you hold onto something that is already gone). These histories have not gone; we would be letting go of that which persists in the present. To let go would be to keep those histories present… A concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good."

- *Sara Ahmed, Happy Objects*

This chapter lays out the methodological basis of my project, which is comprised of key theoretical frameworks provided by Heather Love's 2009 publication, *Feeling Backward*, Judith Halberstam's chapter "Perverse Presentism: The Androgyne, the Tribade, the Female Husband, and Other Pre-Twentieth-Century Genders" from her 1998 book *Female Masculinity*, and Ann Cvetkovich's chapter "Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities" from her 2003 book, *An Archive of Feelings*. These theorists provide new ways of thought and historical work that are sensitive to specificity, context, temporality, and avoid reduction. All three theorists are interested in history, affect, knowledge production, and textual analysis. By weaving together various pieces of their work, I hope to add to the literature by reinforcing a historical approach that presents a reconciliation between the disciplines and gives the current lived experiences of masculine females, transgender men, butches, and others the salience they demand while avoiding the violent disintegration of past subjects and variations in female masculinities.

I will draw on Love, Halberstam, and Cvetkovich to argue that reading backwards is damaging at multiple levels. First, individual histories and bodies are misread, secondly, theoretical frameworks get appropriated and extended to subjects they cannot properly describe, thirdly, the entire history of a particular time gets homogenized and misrepresented, and fourth, the methodologies we use to do historical work are skewed.

Heather Love's "Feeling Backward"

Heather Love notes the tension between remembering the past but also overcoming it to escape its legacy, specifically in a queer context. She is interested in "the turn to the negative in queer studies" (Love 2). Love's instrumental use of the concept of "turning" is central (and quite literally pivotal) to her work. Love gives a historical disciplinary account to describe how as early gay and lesbian studies turned to the affirmative, queer studies presented the option of turning backward to a past of depressing accounts and negative feeling.

Love argues that emerging in the 1990's within queer theory was the parallel modernist impulse to "resist damage and to affirm queer existence" so even when queer theory does acknowledge "bad" feelings, it does so in a redemptive way (Love 3). So, as gay and lesbian studies tended to avoid negative feelings altogether, queer studies sought to reframe these feelings. Queer theory was founded on the Foucauldian concept of reverse discourse, which describes how the very same classifications and vocabulary used to oppress a group of people can also be used in subversive ways to reclaim power. This can most easily be seen in the reclaiming of the term "queer" itself. That which was used to condemn homosexuality also allowed for mobilization since the very naming created a

distinct homosexual identity and space for homosociality. We can see how the utopian visions of queer studies struggle against the reality of a queer past of shame, abjection, and hurt, and the way this struggle is resolved is often to coopt these painful pasts and name them as valiant and progressive. The immediate project of looking forward to create a safer world in which queer existence is possible is in tension with looking backward to theorize a past of negative feelings. The idea of modernity posits "progress, rationality and technological advance" as ideal (Love 5). At the same time, ideas of modernity are also bound up in the tendency toward the conception of time as linear.

Often the link between queerness and loss is brushed aside in favor of creating a narrative of "progress" which allows the modern queer subject to turn and look back into the past and measure the ever expanding distance between "then" and "now." Modern LGBT activism focuses on looking forward and the dominant narrative is one of progress, evidence of which can be seen in more recent campaigns like "It Gets Better," but also in Pride culture in general which dates further back. Pride is not just a march or a month, it's a feeling, a state of being that queer people are expected to maintain even in the face of adversity.

Love notes that "although many queer critics take exception to the idea of a linear, triumphalist view of history, we are in practice deeply committed to the notion of progress" (Love 3). The notion of "progress" is problematic in that it creates a false temporal dichotomy between progress and backwardness. On the one hand, Progress is characterized by logic, discourse, accuracy and positivism; it creates a temporal splitting of a distinct past and present, it allows for feelings of pride; and it allows for social

movement and revolution. On the other hand, a backwards view is bound up in emotion, violence, stigma, shame, and hurt. According to Love, a whole archive of affect, emotion and experience is lost when our focus is on modernist ideals of progress. Quite simply put, setting aside these affects denies our history core aspects of human experience.

Depressing accounts of violence, hate, shame, and being in the closet, particularly those on film and in literature, are considered outdated because their content is seen as incompatible with queer progress. For example, works like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* are part of a rich archive of queer feeling and experience from the 19th century, but they have been set aside in favor of more optimistic representations. Often they are considered "internally homophobic, retrograde, or too depressing to be of use" (Love 4). When these texts are acknowledged, it is only to the extent that they can be politically useful to inform praxis or be reframed in a redemptive light to serve queer modernism. The focus of queer activism and discourse is on the affirmative, whereas these books largely represent the antithesis of progress and affirmative politics. These works are the kind that modern queers may pause and have a moment of sympathetic acknowledgement, but there also seems to be a quiet sort of desperation to distance modern queer identity from these tragic tales.

Love critiques a "politics of optimism," or a politics that ignores queer suffering and pain in favor of constructing the past as a valuable but outdated lineage of triumphs leading to the success of modern progressive queer identity. This construction of the past as backwards and modern times as progressive "blinds us to the continuities between the past and present" (Love 29). This approach arbitrarily creates a temporal binary in queer

history between the backwardness of the past and the present era progressiveness, the turn to which is often seen as Stonewall. But what gets lost when we are unwilling to engage with a significant part of queer history because it is simply too depressing, and we are simply "so past that"? Even though we look forward, we feel backward. We run the risk of creating arbitrary temporal distinctions between "then" and "now" in our attempt to distance ourselves from a past of abjection.

We might measure progress by public visibility and legal protections, but what about the things that are not as easily measured, and are perhaps more continuous? I would argue that affect and emotions, or as Sarah Ahmed phrases it, the "sticky" stuff that holds things together, persists. Affect and a whole archive of uncomfortable and "useless" queer emotions have persisted over time despite constantly changing social constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality, particularly in the case of female masculinity. Love names some of these emotions such as "nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, ressentiment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness" (Love 4). These affects have been recorded in accounts of queer existence in literary texts and they are what Love pays attention to in her reading of queer texts spanning the early 20th century. They will also be the affects I pay particular attention to in my work in the context of *The Well of Loneliness.*

Love notes that "despite complaints about their toxicity, such tragic, tear-soaked accounts of same-sex desire compel readers in a way that brighter stories of liberation do not" (Love 3). The affective power of these tragic texts is undeniable. Rather than creating concrete distinctions between past and present, progress and backwardness,

Love's project is to collapse certain aspects of the past into the present in what she terms, "feeling backward." Feeling backward illuminates a continuum of time, affect, and emotion, and a "persistence of the past in the present" (Love 19). The project of her work is "to resist the affirmative turn in queer studies in order to dwell at length on the "dark side" of modern queer representation" (Love 4). To make this move, Love turns to affect theory for two reasons. Firstly, Love asserts that "critics who are interested in the politics of affect often tend to be interested in bad affects – and by that I do not mean simply ones that make you feel bad but also those that seem especially bad for politics" such as shame and melancholia (Love 12). Secondly, and contrasting with Love's interest in affect, is a diagnostic approach to affect.

A diagnostic understanding of affect, as explored by Love through Raymond Williams, presents affect as a potential space to forge political movement and collectives. As I mentioned earlier, the affects that fuel progressive political agendas and social movements are typically anger and fear, whereas emotions like shame, self-hatred, and others that Love points to are abandoned and deemed as "useless." This can also hold true in a diagnostic approach to affect. Williams is a Marxist who sees "public" social structures as inextricable from "private" affects. (This is particularly useful when thinking about homophobic social structures and their consequences on individual psyches and affects). Love agrees with Williams and asserts that, "rather than disavowing such feelings as the sign of some personal failing, we need to understand them as indications of material and structural continuities between these two eras" (Love 21). Material and structural analyses are hardly apolitical. Structural and material realities can

be illuminated by persistent affects and emotions, and we recognize the persistence of certain social structures as the affects they incite persist as well. Only a "politics of the past" can do justice to queer experience (Love 21). Thus, negative affect and politics do not have to be at odds.

However, ultimately Love critiques proponents of a diagnostic approach to affect in that they do not always take account of "useless" affects like shame and melancholia. It seems as though these useless feelings are apolitical, however, what these affects can do is help us as a place to linger and recognize material and structural continuities in a historically contingent way. Accordingly, I will be using Love's work as a methodological tool to explore her provocations through the case study of theoretical constructions of female masculinity. I am curious to see how theorists utilize useless and bad affects in their work and will argue that the use or absence of these affects impacts the way theory is constructed and therefore the way we record history.

Moreover, aside from political action, bad affects are places to start from in forging new ideas and ways of thought. If we stop at thinking of shame and melancholy only as blocks to progress, we cannot think of them outside of this context and consider other ways in which they can be useful. Thinking of these "bad affects" solely in a progressive context only allows us to think about them in a way that will turn us *away* from these affects. Shame and melancholia then get locked into a self fulfilling prophecy as always already useless.

Judith Halberstam's "Perverse Presentism"

As Heather Love argues for a "persistence of the past in the present," in an approach less explicitly concerned with affect, Judith Halberstam calls for a model of "Perverse Presentism." Both theorists are concerned with the persistence of the past in the present in queer experience; Halberstam through embodiment and sexual practices specific to female masculinity, and Love through the more psychic structures of affect and emotion. At the same time, in seeking more of a continuum of queer experience through the late 19th and early 20th century, Halberstam stresses that we cannot risk relying on our modern understandings of queerness or queer identity to interpret the past.

Perverse presentism is a historical approach that "avoids the trap of simply projecting contemporary understandings back in time, but one that can apply insights from the present to conundrums of the past," again showing that there is more of a continuum from past to present (Halberstam 52-53). Halberstam draws on Foucault to formulate her perversely presentist model. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* warns against conventional models of history. According to Halberstam, "These models, which [Foucault] calls presentist, rely on narratives of progression in which all social change contributes to the greater good and arrives at an almost utopian present in which things are always better than they have ever been" (Halberstam 53). Halberstam emphasizes ever changing social constructions of gender, embodiment, and sexuality, but there is still room to read a continuum of emotions, and affect. Even if our social construction of what constitutes a queer body changes depending on the time and place, it is noteworthy that some emotions have persisted over decades as an integral part of queer experience. While

it is inaccurate to say that all 20th century forms of female masculinity still persist today, Halberstam is careful to account for, "the meaning and significance of many forms of contemporary female masculinity [which] seem inextricably bound to earlier representations" (Halberstam 48). Some things persist.

Although Halberstam notices some continuities in female masculinity over the 20th century, she warns against exporting modern conceptions of lesbianism onto earlier forms of gender and sexual variance among women. Those who lived before the emergence of what we now understand as lesbian identity cannot be categorized as such without inflicting violent fragmentations upon their histories. A lack of sensitivity to the different historically situated forms of sexual and gender identity produces an essentialized reading of gender and erases specificity.

The bodies that tend to get lost are those that resist neat categorizations, or rather they are forcibly categorized using modern language and interpretation. Halberstam's analysis is an explicit discussion of female masculinity that specifically focuses on the tribade, the female husband, and the androgyne. These figures of the late 19th century and the early 20th century commonly get categorized as lesbians in a modern reading. Halberstam argues that "the presumption that they simply represent early forms of lesbianism denies them their historical specificity and covers over the multiple differences between earlier forms of same-sex desire" (Halberstam 46). A whole lexicon of female masculinity and variance gets lost when they are simply subsumed under the umbrella term of lesbian. Reading these bodies as proto-lesbians erases earlier forms of female masculinity that are quite unrecognizable when compared to modern conceptions

of lesbianism. Halberstam calls for a separation between masculine women's history and lesbian history. Beyond the concern with the continuities between past and present, more significantly, Love and Halberstam are concerned with those bodies who we cannot draw a direct line from us to them, between the past they inhabit and where we are now. I am curious to see how Stephen Gordon of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* is read by theorists in relation to perverse presentism. These two historically embedded figures refuse neat categorization and resist redemptive readings, begging us to turn back and face them rather than pulling them forward.

Halberstam and Love resist redemptive and reconstructive histories. Love is more concerned with the erasure of "bad" affects, in a queer context of course, while Halberstam is more concerned with historical disservice to gender and sexual identities. Halberstam argues that her approach "construct[s] a framework within which we can study pre-twentieth-century cross-identifying women without reading them always as lesbians who lack a liberating and identitarian discourse" (Halberstam 52). I will take Halberstam's approach one step further and argue that constructing these women as lesbians who lack a liberating discourse is a way for theorists themselves to *create* a liberating discourse while making it seem to have a history. A liberating discourse implies one of progress, an evolution of the pre-lesbian or the proto-lesbian into the modern liberated lesbian. Forms of female masculinity that cannot be traced to the modern lesbian are either forgotten, or most often, as Halberstam notes, subsumed under the umbrella term of "lesbian" in order for theorists to lend their histories to modern queer liberation. The correlation here with Love's work is undeniable. The theorists who

Halberstam and Love critique seek to reclaim the past through an ahistorical lens in order to advance their own political agendas.

And so another sensitivity of my approach motivated by Halberstam's work is to examine theoretical approaches to specificity and the preservation of a multiplicity of female masculinities. A central claim to Halberstam's work is "that what we recognize as female masculinity is actually a multiplicity of masculinities, indeed a proliferation of masculinities, and the more we identify the various forms of female masculinity, the more they multiply" (Halberstam 46). Recognizing a multiplicity of masculinities is key to Halberstam's larger goal of specificity and identifying countless variations and taxonomies of queerness. Halberstam's account in Perverse Presentism centers on gender specificity in nineteenth-century society, and this will be particularly useful for my analysis of *The Well of Loneliness*.

A point of almost direct overlap in Love and Halberstam's work is their concern with continuities in queer experience and the dangers of demanding that progressive narratives of queerness supplant "outdated" forms. Love argues that even though we look forward, we feel backward. She illustrates this in her case of two disparate accounts of the 1995 film, *The Celluloid Closet*. The film is a history of gay and lesbian in Hollywood over the twentieth century which depicts actors, directors, and critics recounting their experiences during that time. Actress Shirley MacLaine reminisces on her lesbian role in a 1961 film called *The Children's Hour* and regrets the tragic portrayal of lesbianism and insists that they did not "do the movie right," a comment that "accord[s] with the progressivist ethos of *The Celluloid Closet*, which presents

stereotypical images as errors on the way to a more accurate and positive reflection of gay and lesbian existence" (Love 16). MacLaine insists that tragic representations of lesbian lives such as her character in *The Children's Hour* are outdated and inaccurate and she deeply regrets her misrepresentation of lesbian subjectivity.

MacLaine's portion is followed by commentary from a sex activist and writer named Susie Bright. Bright has a radically different account of the film and its impact on her as a queer woman. Bright says,

> The loathing she feels, how sick she is with herself … it still makes me cry when I see that. And I think, you know, "Why am I crying? Why does this still get to me? This is just an old, silly movie, you know, and people don't feel this way anymore." But I don't think that's true. I think people do feel that way today still. And there's part of me despite all of my little signs, you know, like, "Happy!" "Proud!" "Well-adjusted!" "Bisexual!" "Queer!" "Kinky!" – you know, no matter how many posters I hold up saying, "I'm a big pervert and I'm so happy about it" – there's this part of me that's like, "How could I be this way?" (Love 16).

Bright is deeply moved by the shame, sadness, and abjection that she sees in MacLaine's queer character and relates to her even though she knows she should not because of what she perceives to be the progressive quality of gay history. Instead, her account aligns her with a whole archive of queer feelings, thus showing continuities between queer past and present. Some affects persist.

Similarly, in the context of female masculinity specifically, Halberstam notices a similar phenomenon in models of sexual identity over time and speaks more broadly about the construction of nonnormative sexual identities, stating:

> a turn-of-the-century model of inversion is completely replaced by a modern model of gender intransitivity, and those who continue to experience their homosexuality as inversion are marginal even within a homosexual community. [Eve Kosofsky] Sedgwick's alternative to the narrative of suppression is a

> denaturalization of the present 'to render less destructively presumable 'homosexuality as we know it today'" (48) (Halberstam 53).

What Halberstam does not explicitly state here is that there is a whole collection of potential affects that come with certain social renderings of identity. The sociopolitical connotations that get attached to queer identities have material consequences that manifest themselves in the body and cannot help but be felt. Not only does the name "lesbian," evoke a set of practices, embodiment, and roles, but it also carries the weight of a history of a whole archive of "bad" feelings. Misidentification with progressive "good" feelings such as pride also leads to alienation within the community as the closeted or ashamed queer becomes an outlier in a group of people who are desperate to just move on. This is not to deny the pride many modern (and past) queers feel about their identity, but it is to say that even if shame and abjection do not constitute the majority of our queer archive of feelings, they are still there and we need to know them. What about the histories of those whose lives cannot, without having serious violence and disintegration done to their pasts, be situated on the continuum leading up to what it means to be queer today? More specific to my project, in the context of female masculinity, what about those who we can't draw a direct lineage to what it means to be a queer masculine woman today?

Ann Cvetkovich's Archive of Feelings

Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* approaches "bad" affects explicitly mentioned in Love's work through her analysis of trauma. She pairs trauma theory with queer theory and finds useful "butch-femme's unpredictable relations between gender, sexual, and bodily presentations" (Cvetkovich 51). Immediately, Cvetkovich's project is

a historical one, which can be seen in the opening of her chapter "Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities". She is concerned with temporality, history, affect, and the role of literature in archiving and begins with a series of linkages:

> Carolyn Dinshaw proposes that histories can 'touch' one another. There are resonant juxtapositions between past and present whose explanatory power is not causal or teleological; instead, the affective charge of investment, of being 'touched,' brings the past forward into the present … For Dinshaw, 'the process of touching, of making partial connections between incommensurate entities' is 'queerly historical because it creates a relation across time that has an affective and erotic component.' (Cvetkovich 49-50).

Cvekovich reframes the "touching" Dinshaw writes of in terms of penetration. She claims penetration links the physical to the psychic, the sexual and the emotional. Penetration is the site she chooses in her affective analysis of queer subjectivity, particularly butch/femme. For Cvetkovich, "the violation of bodily boundaries need not be a literal moment of penetration, but it is experienced as equivalent to invasive physical contact because it is so emphatically a visceral or sensational experience – in other words, an experience of being touched" (Cvetkovich 50). Cvetkovich works with the concept of penetration as not only literal physical penetration, but also as being touched emotionally. As emotions so closely associated with vulnerability that they produce affects as visceral as the sensation of physical penetration.

Cvetkovich uses Freud's definition of trauma as "a breach of boundaries" in order to read butch/femme "accounts of penetration and touch as a theory of trauma" (Cvetkovich 56). Reading butch-femme accounts in light of a definition of trauma as a breach of boundaries avoids more conventional negative and overt definitions of trauma. Cvetkovich seeks to differentiate her analysis from more medical diagnoses of PTSD, but

she also believes her analysis can be useful to inform more conventional theories of trauma. Penetration is the kind of bodily breaching, intersubjective touching that Cvetkovich focuses on because of its association with sexuality as well. Penetration is more commonly thought of as a sexual act, and often a traumatic sexual act, but Cvetkovich "situates penetration within the context of the more general category of touch in order to capture how, as a breach of bodily boundaries, it creates a continuum between the physical and the physic, between the sexual and emotional" (Cvetkovich 51). I would like to read penetration as a parallel to "bad affects" that perhaps goes one step further in not only encompassing many of the "bad affects" that Heather Love discusses explicitly, but also as indicative of what these "bad affects" *do*. These "bad affects" emotionally touch us, and "to be emotionally touched, like being traumatized, is to be affected in a way that *feels* physical even if it is also a psychic state" (Cvetkovich 51). Cvetkovich chooses butch-femme relationships, and more specifically, butch/femme writing as a site to examine both literal and figurative penetration because of its rich archive of emotion.

Butch-femme writing has challenged conceptions of penetration, both emotional and physical, as well as affects such as vulnerability, and the expression of emotions themselves. Butch/femme relationships are often critiqued as imitating heterosexuality with the butch assuming the man's role and the femme the woman's role. Femmes are commonly thought of as subordinate and penetrated; getting fucked is thought of as a negative and traumatic experience. This creates a narrowing configuration in which the points of analysis in theorizing butch/femme are limited to dichotomies of gay/straight, duped by patriarchy/progressive, good/bad, but femmes challenge these binaries. Rather

than trying to deny the negative connotations of getting fucked, butch/femme writing presents a disruption in binary thinking of good vs. bad, or positive vs. negative. For example, Mykel Johnson describe femme sexual experience in terms of receptivity rather than passivity and sees her vulnerability and openness as a difficult achievement. Lyndall MacCowan claims that getting fucked and losing control is a hard won privilege in a homophobic world that constantly rejects butch/femme as pathological and perverse. According to Cvetkovich, this rich archive of femme feeling indicative of an impoverished "language of sexual power, especially the loss of sexual power, [so much so] that it can only be translated into an active/passive dichotomy, where passivity is always stigmatized" (Cvetkovich 59). However, rather than reading this reframing as redemptive, Cvetkovich reads these femme accounts in light of Leo Bersani's essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and ultimately concludes that

> femme accounts of receptivity avoid a redemptive reading of sex, insisting on the fear, pain, and difficulty that can block the way to and be conjured up by making oneself physically and emotionally vulnerable or receptive. Furthermore, the negative affects attached to particular acts cannot be attributed to problems to be resolved by "better" sex, such as nonhierarchical sex, sex without penetration, sex in a culture without homophobia, or any number of other utopian solutions to eliminate "perversion" or pain. An ongoing problem with lesbian/feminist critiques of butch-femme sexuality, which has been addressed by revisionist attention to the pre-Stonewall period, has been the assumption that the supposedly perverse or dysfunctional aspects of earlier cultures can and should be resolved by overcoming internalized homophobia or sexism. What's required instead is a sex positivity that can embrace negativity, including trauma. Allowing a place for trauma within sexuality is consistent with efforts to keep sexuality queer, to maintain a place for shame and perversion within public discourses of sexuality rather than purging them of their messiness in order to make them acceptable (Cvetkovich 63).

Though sexual roles constitute a large part of butch/femme identity, affect and emotional styles remain a key factor in butch/femme sexuality and allow us to see a continuity

between the physical and the psychological. Though femme accounts of sexuality are incredibly powerful, this does not mean that they are stripped of "bad" affects. Perversion, pain, shame, and trauma are maintained and can coexist alongside new interpretations of butch/femme sexuality without the narrative turning redemptive or blindly optimistic. Butch/femme discourse embraces stigma and sexual practices deemed "outdated" by dominant lesbian discourse. These writings do not cater to a narrative of progression or acceptability.

Leo Bersani's essay focuses on gay male experience of the kind of affective "self-shattering" and radical disintegration of the self that Cvetkovich and Love are interested in. Cvetkovich applauds Bersani's work as an example of embracing perversity:

> In a perverse way, Bersani's essay is a celebration of anal receptivity, and, even more importantly, a celebration of the psychic experience of "self-shattering" that being fucked enables. "Perverse" because Bersani's professed desire to argue for the value of "powerlessness" is intended as a theoretical challenge to what he dubs "pastoral and redemptive" sex-positive theories. In its most colloquial form, Bersani's underlying premise is that "most people don't like [sex],: and that its value lies in its "anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving" aspects." Bersani recommends getting fucked for its capacity to produce "self-shattering," which is not strictly reducible to the physical experience of being penetrated but is a more profoundly psychic experience (Cvetkovich 61).

Both Cvetkovich and Bersani use Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Cvetkovich uses Freud's definition of trauma to inform her work and Bersani situates "self-shattering" in Freud's discussion of the death drive. According to Cvetkovich, "Bersani understands sexuality to be fundamentally masochistic, and trauma, in the sense of a disintegration of the self, is one of the organizing principles of sexuality governed by the death drive" (Cvetkovich 62). For Bersani, sex refuses a redemptive analysis that associates it with community, love, and nurturing. Instead, Bersani "defends the sexual

experience of self-shattering in order to challenge universalizing and naturalizing assumptions about the 'innate' positivity of sex" (Cvetkovich 62). Bersani's also vehemently refuses an assimilationist stance and advocates for queers to resist framing gay sex as harmless and inoffensive for a heterosexual audience. Bersani's analysis although in the context of gay male sex, is extremely useful for my purposes in his refusal to subscribe to redemptive readings of queer and nonnormative sexuality, and even sexuality itself. A key point of interrogation in Bersani's work is his analysis of sex-negative theory, particularly that of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Bersani finds MacKinnon and Dworkin's analyses of penetrative, hierarchical sex useful, including their "*moral revulsion* with sex" and "their indictment of sex – their refusal to prettify it, to romanticize it, to maintain that fucking has anything to do with community or love" (Bersani 22). However, Bersani stops there and rejects what he calls their "*redemptive reinvention of sex,*" their attempt to redeem and romanticize sex in a lesbian context (Bersani 22). Therefore, "in order to sustain his argument against sex positivity, Bersani must preserve the traumatic dimensions of getting fucked (traumatic in the sense of the violation of the body constituting a violation of the self)" (Cvetkovich 62).

Crucial to both Love and Cvetkovich's projects is the role of literature, both in exploring female masculinity and taken as a site where reading backwards often happens. (And also Halberstam works with texts like *The Well of Loneliness* even if she does not make the same kinds of explicit claims about the role of literature in exploring female masculinity, she does the work of stating as much by working closely with literary texts).

In referencing Williams's term "structure of feeling", Love pays attention to a passage of his work that directly discusses literature. She notes,

> Williams proposes that the term 'structure of feeling' might have specific relevance to literature in that literature accounts for experience at the juncture of the psychic and the social. The term has also been crucial to queer studies, where the analysis of uncodified subjective experiences is an important supplement to the study of the history of formal laws, practices, and ideologies (Love 12).

For Love and Williams, literature is a site that bridges the psychic and the social, a space to interrogate for individuals' negotiations between the "internal" and the "external". Literature is uniquely liminal as a space for elements of internal quiet desires to push up against socially constructed practices, rituals, and notions of embodiment. Affect and social structures work together in literary accounts, which ultimately serve as a window into the author's worldview. Uncodified experiences of uncodified bodies enrich a queer historical analysis.

Cvetkovich discusses butch/femme writing stating, "its visceral and emotional qualities transform theory's abstractions, bringing into being new possibilities for bodies and their meanings, which have implications not only for queer sexual lives but for others too" (Cvetkovich 52). Butch/femme writing is a space of survival for the affective qualities often lost in more strictly theoretical pieces. It is crucial to preserve an archive of feelings, especially when queer pasts and cultures are susceptible to erasure by the dominant heteronormative culture. Cvetkovich echoes Williams and Love's call for more of a continuum between "internal" and "external," particularly in her observation that butch/femme texts "use the body as a ground for negotiating social relations, finding, for instance, within the sexual intimacy of the couple practices that address experiences of

homophobia, shame, and abjection in the public world" (Cvetkovich 56). There is something to say about the ways in which queer bodies become reservoirs for these "bad affects" and still manage to survive. I am interested how these micro level corporeal disintegrations inform historical disintegration, how theory informs history, and what gets documented in our archives. According to Bessel van der Kolk, "the body keeps the score" (Van der Kolk).

Beyond the scope of just butch/femme or even female masculinity, it is writing's bridging of the personal and the political, the internal and the social that I find useful in the potential for "bad affects" to inform our politics and activism without being cultivated in order to create a progressive narrative. I also cannot help but question the need for affects to be generative and meaningful. Perhaps we need to recognize a multiplicity of affects, some of which resist practicality and the production of affirmation. I believe that these writings and theoretical interpretations constructed upon them are less about looking forward to how to use these bad affects and more about how we read the past, how we construct theory, and how that all informs political activism. After all, activism is built on a belief in futurity, change, and improvement, but that does not mean that bad affects cannot inform these futurities without being disintegrated and triumphalist. The past and present can only be separated if we adopt an uncritical and reductive linear time frame. A narrative of survival and queer possibility need not be eclipsed by a blindly optimistic narrative. I do not wish to seek a simplistic mobilization plan for bad affects. I am treading a line between acknowledging that not all affects are generative or

meaningful while also maintaining a project that does not fall into the trap of being apolitical. For that reason, I am looking at affect as opening rather than restorative.

Chapter Two

> *"In order to reconstitute the history of female masculinity, we actually have to accept that the invert may not be a synonym for "lesbian" but that the concept of inversion both produced and described a category of biological women who felt at odds with their anatomy. The literature on inversion and the medical category of "invert" in many ways collapsed all of the different distinctions between masculine women, distinctions that we can read back into our understanding of sexual variance and gender deviance by examining just a few different kinds of female masculinity from the 1920" (Halberstam 146).*

Feminist and queer theorists have been guilty of projecting modern notions of queerness onto the past in an effort to recuperate and reclaim historical queer texts and bodies. Bad affects which often characterize these texts have been ignored, discounted, or considered a historic relic of "what it was like back then." Histories and bodies get misread in these accounts and the history of a particular time and/or a particular identity category gets homogenized and misrepresented. Instead, in drawing on Heather Love, Judith Halberstam, and Ann Cvetkovich, I argue that we need a model of theory that attends to these texts and bodies with curiosity, care, and the intention of maintaining their integrity. This is particularly so in a historical study of female masculinity as female masculine subjects have historically been given little consideration. Female masculinity has been discounted as a normal phase that little girls go through at a young age and eventually grow out of. Female masculinity has been read backwards to presuppose lesbianism, thus homogenizing lesbian history and a history of female masculinity. And, particularly salient to my argument, early theories of female gender and sexuality were simply theories of male gender and sexuality extended to women in an afterthought. Female masculinity's spotty past would do well to demand a historically specific reading that calls for a holistic account, including its bad affects. I have chosen to anchor my

argument to Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness* because of its significant contribution to the archive of female masculinity as well as its undeniable role in lesbian lives and culture.

The Well of Loneliness tells the story of Stephen Gordon, a self proclaimed female invert living in England in the early 20th century. The novel is an account of Stephen's life beginning before her birth to her father, Sir Phillips, and her mother, Lady Anna. The two are a respectable upper-class couple living in the English midlands in their home called Morton. The story traces Stephen's life through her childhood, her adolescence, and her early adult life. From an early age it is clear that something about Stephen is different. She is unusually masculine and this masculinity is both physically inscribed on her body and characteristic of her behaviors, interests, and desires. From birth she is described as narrow-hipped and wide-shouldered and she is interested in fencing, horseback riding (siting astride of course), and most notably, she falls in love with her older housemaid, Collins. The novel is punctuated by Stephen's three major loves; Collins, her housemaid at Morton, Angela Crosby, her American neighbor, and finally, Mary Llewellyn, a younger woman she meets when she is an ambulance driver in World War I. It is a novel about desire, loss, grief, war, class, family, love, and embodiment. The major causes of grief in Stephen's life are her exile from her home and family, her loss of all three of her lovers to "real men," and her alienation from her body. All of her bad affects can be traced back to the same source: her masculine embodiment. Although Stephen experiences happiness in her life, bad affects such as shame, self-hatred, and of course loneliness, persist in Stephen's life.

The Well has circulated widely among lesbians from its publication to the present. The obscenity trials about the novel shortly after its publication in 1928 ironically helped popularize it and spread it even more widely. Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers A History of Lesbian Life in 20th-Century America* credits Hall's novel with "breaking the silence" around female homosexuality and setting a precedent for more sexually vivid writing by women who loved women (Faderman 113). Faderman notes the novel's importance as a model for young lesbian women in the United States during the 1950's and 60's and its continued formative role in butch/femme dynamics. Faderman writes, "In lieu of real-life models, those who were desperate for images to emulate and lacked contact with other lesbians looked to Radclyffe Hall's depiction of Stephen Gordon… As the only truly famous and widely available lesbian novel for decades, Hall's book, although it was published in the late 1920's, remained important to the '50's and '60's in providing an example of how to be a lesbian among the young who had no other guide" (Faderman 173). Young lesbians looked to Stephen Gordon's female masculinity as a model of how to look and behave, but this model and Stephen's masculinity was confined to a lesbian context. Thus, the novel's lesbian reception helped further sediment the novel as a lesbian novel rather than a novel about female masculinity in the context of inversion. Regardless of the specific content of the novel itself, its reception among lesbian communities and its formative role in lesbian identity throughout the 20th century makes this novel "a lesbian novel" and I do not wish to deny this. However, my intention in this chapter is to expand the reading of *The Well* beyond its lesbian reading to include other queer possibilities of interpretation.

In addition to the wide dissemination of *The Well* itself, feminist and queer theory have been saturated with criticism of and theory produced from *The Well.* Prominent scholars in feminist theory such as Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Kennedy, Madeline Davis, Sheila Jeffreys, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Halberstam, Esther Newton, Sally Munt, and Terry Castle have written on *The Well*. These scholars are widely read and respected, and their work is core to gay and lesbian studies, feminist theory, and queer theory. In effect, they have constructed the novel just as much as the novel has been a key agent in constructing the lives of those who have read and continue to read it. Theoretical constructions of the novel have proliferated not only academia, but the culture at large in determining the way the novel is read. Part of the reason the novel is considered the first lesbian novel is because feminist theory and gay and lesbian studies have claimed the novel as such despite the novel not once mentioning the word "lesbian."

I do not seek to make claims about Radclyffe Hall's intentions in writing her novel. I use the novel because of its ambiguity, untidy identifications, refusal to be categorized, and most importantly, its provocation of discomfort and the affects they inspire in theoretical interpretations. Rather, I find the impact these text have culturally and the way they get constructed and interpreted by theorists in feminist, literary, and queer theory most relevant to my project.

I have chosen Esther Newton's *The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and The New Woman* because of the scope it covers as a widely read article within lesbian studies and feminist theory. The article was first published in 1984 the leading academic feminist journal, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. The article has also

been cited over four hundred times on Google Scholar. Similarly, I chose to use Teresa de Lauretis's 1991 publication, *Perverse Desire: The Lure of the Mannish Lesbian,* because of its wide scope of readership and de Lauretis's prominence as a feminist scholar. The article was first published in an edition of the sixth volume and thirteenth edition of *Australian Feminist Studies*. Newton and de Lauretis are situated in feminist theory and lesbian studies. Lastly, I chose Jay Prosser's reading of *The Well* in his 1998 book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* to engage with a theoretical construction of the novel from a later queer studies perspective focused on transgender representation, rather than lesbian representation. While it is ungrounded to make overarching statements about entire disciplines from just three works of criticism, I hope to illustrate a general loyalty of criticism to the disciplinary knowledge in which they are produced.

I will frame my analysis of two key voices in feminist theory, Esther Newton and Teresa de Lauretis, with Jay Prosser's work to elucidate the confines and limits of feminist theory for the purposes of constructing a historically situated account of female masculinity. I will use Prosser's work to argue that because feminist theory has treated *The Well* as a key lesbian text and stayed within the confines of lesbianism, the history of inversion has been clouded and histories of transgender inverts have been erased. To omit the possibility of a transgender reading of *The Well* is to potentially read back modern notions of lesbianism and female masculinity into the past. Prosser and I diverge in that I will not make a firm argument for reading Stephen Gordon either as a lesbian or a transgender man, whereas Prosser makes a clear argument for a transgender reading.

However, I would like to follow in Jay Prosser's footsteps to expand on a body of transgender theory to argue that a reading of *The Well* that is confined to a lesbian reading is a great disservice to the possibilities of female masculinity and the way we read its history. Jay Prosser's work *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, frames my reading of Newton and de Lauretis as well as my reading of the novel itself.

My other perhaps subtler and more selfish choice in reading *The Well* is that I had resisted reading the novel myself for a very long time. Like most other young women immersed in queer culture, I heard of the novel, but in my understanding it was a relic of the past. I thought there were far many more exciting and relevant texts to read, rather than this outdated and depressing novel. Upon reading the novel though, I was struck by how closely it hit to home. It felt eerily familiar to my own experience, particularly the dynamics between Stephen and her family. Most of the novel was uncomfortable for me to read and I would often feel deflated and still each time I put the book down. My affective experience of the novel helped me to realize that my discomfort was a consequence of the fact that literature helps us see ourselves more clearly. The novel held a mirror up to me and I could not help but gaze back and see what can be so easy to deny as a young women living in a queer culture based upon the rhetoric of transformation, pride, and progress. It forced me to hear the silences and suspicion in my home, and see the seeds of anxiety and shame within me I was really good at burying. And so I would like to honor a novel that made me face myself.

I will assess theoretical readings of *The Well* on two major accounts; first, whether they retain a historically specific reading of the text and ideologies they invoke,

and second, whether the readings intentionally discuss of bad affects and center affect as core in supporting their arguments. Halberstam's work will be key to assessing historical specificity while Love and to a lesser extent, Cvetkovich will ground an affective reading. The methodological basis I will use for this chapter is comprised of Heather Love, Judith Halberstam and Ann Cvetkovich, however, in expanding on an affect centered reading, I will also invoke Elizabeth Grosz's concept of corporeal feminism to help ground the deeper discussion of affect in my first chapter. I will show that although the language of affect is not explicitly used in Grosz's work, it is nonetheless what she is discussing; a focus on embodiment and corporeal feminism links affect and gender.

I will invoke Elizabeth Grosz's concept of "corporeal feminism" to argue for a feminist theorizing of Stephen's body in *The Well of Loneliness* that returns to the body as a primary site without necessarily reverting to a Freudian analysis. I would like to recenter the conversation about *The Well's* mirror scene on embodiment. Sexuality and its meanings can be difficult to parse out, according to Elizabeth Grosz, "as a concept, sexuality is incapable of ready containment: it refuses to stay within its predesignated regions, for it seeps across boundaries into areas that are apparently not its own" (Grosz viii). As such a "slippery and ambiguous term," Grosz lays out four senses of the word: "sexuality understood as a drive, an impulse or form of propulsion, directing a subject toward an object", sexuality as an act, "a series of practices and behaviors involving bodies, organs, and pleasures, usually but not always involving orgasm. Third, sexuality can also be understood in terms of identity… and fourth, sexuality commonly refers to a set of orientations, positions, and desires, which implies that there are particular ways in

which desires, differences, and bodies of subjects can seek their pleasure" (Grosz viii). I am more interested in an analysis of sexuality as Grosz's fourth point illustrates, particularly in a historical sense, and I am less concerned with identity which has been the central focus in feminist theory's claiming of Stephen as a lesbian. Grosz's nuanced description of the complexities of sexuality help me explain the problem I ultimately have with theoretical constructions that claim *The Well* exclusively as a lesbian novel which is the concretization of Stephen's identity as lesbian solely through an observation of her desired object choice without a significant account for her experience of her body.

In this chapter, I show through an account of Stephen's corporeal experience and embodiment, *in addition to her sexuality, The Well* is just as much a transgender novel as it is a lesbian novel. I will also argue that although Jay Prosser's work ultimately claims Stephen as transgender, his account is the only to give Stephen's narrative autonomy, examine her character holistically, and retain historical specificity through treating *The Well* like a case study. In her book, *Volatile Bodies Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz argues, "all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject's corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious" (Grosz vii). While accounts from feminist theorists like Esther Newton and Teresa de Lauretis include a discussion of Stephen's female masculinity and its inscription on her body, their accounts fall from a psychoanalytic framework that emphasizes a split dualism between body and mind and centers consciousness and interiority, locating them in sexuality. De Lauretis does so from a more explicitly psychoanalytic framework with a reformulation

of Freudian analysis in locating Stephen as central to explaining her concept of "lesbian fetishism," however, both theorists very claiming of *The Well* as a lesbian novel reproduce the primacy of mind in a mind/body dualism concretized through psychoanalysis.

The framework of sexology, on the other hand, emphasized corporeality and saw the mind and body, and thus gender and sexuality, as inextricably linked. Prosser's account of Stephen follows a historically specific sexological framework. I will show just as *The Well* has been claimed as a lesbian novel, the fluidity of sex, gender and sexuality, as well as the intangibility of historical categories predicated upon these concepts, will forever mark Stephen's experience of gender out of reach. I show that a transgender reading of *The Well* works through centering the body whereas lesbian readings have worked through centering, and often isolating, the psyche. However, these concepts remain inextricably bound and thus allow for *The Well* to be read as both a lesbian novel and a transgender novel. Despite a focus on tangible aspects like embodiment and corporeality, readers will always be reaching and never quite grasping stories like Stephen's.

First, Prosser creates a historical context for us to examine accurate discursive categories in theory, medicine, and psychology to read *The Well*. Currently, we conflate homosexuality and inversion, looking at inversion as an outdated synonym for homosexuality. Thus, Prosser notes, the conflation of inversion and homosexuality, and the misunderstanding of the meaning of inversion is the basis upon which modern feminist theory has constructed and interpreted *The Well* and the character of Stephen

Gordon and the reason it has done so in a lesbian context (Prosser 138). Prosser argues that, "in configuring inversion as a metaphor for homosexuality, we have left out what sexual inversion in sexology and in Hall's novel are most literally about: that is gender inversion, cross-gender identity. Through sexual inversion sexologists sought to describe not homosexuality but a broad transgendered condition of which same-sex desire was but one symptom, and not vice versa" (Prosser 138). Prosser does not read modern transgender subjectivity back into the past, but rather, he constructs a historically situated analysis of Stephen Gordon that answers directly to early twentieth century sexology and psychoanalysis, as well as centering the role of affect and bodily feeling in her character. Prosser's specificity is essential in creating an analysis which account for corporeality. Grosz argues, "the body, or rather, bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself" (Grosz x). Thus, because social order produces bodies a credible analysis of gender variance in the early twentieth century must use inversion discourse as its starting point.

In tracing how inversion and homosexuality mistakenly became synonymous, Prosser invites us to understand the disciplinary and temporal distinction between sexology and psychoanalysis and the erasure of transsexual personal narrative in stories of gender difference. The erasure of personal narrative as key to understanding inversion happened at two levels. First, sexological theory overemphasized the symptom of same-sex desire in many accounts of inversion. The institutionalization of this knowledge in the

work that "discovered" the invert focused heavily on same-sex desire. Although this erased autonomy from inverts in telling their own stories, it is important to remember that it is this very institutionalization, and later medicalization, that expanded the possibilities of sex change later on. However, the near erasure of the invert's own voice in elucidating their affliction meant "experts" had a more active role in constructing inversion, thus failing to center how inverts constructed their own stories and identities.

Second, was the introduction of psychoanalysis. Sexology was not completely detrimental to the invert because it tended to take the invert's narrative as literal, whereas psychology was more interested in metaphor. Freudian psychoanalysis was the beginning of subsuming transgender under homosexuality (I use the term transgender here to encompass qualities/actions/feelings/aspects of embodiment adopted by inverts from those culturally appropriate of the opposite sex). According to Prosser, "While transgender continues to have a place in psychoanalysis, it is refigured by Freud from gender identities into phantasmic and momentary sexual identifications: pit stops on the way to the development of sexual identities. The narrative of sexual psychopathology does not simply turn from sexual inversion to sexual object-choice; it refigures this inversion as (makes it into a figure for) sexual-object choice" (150). Institutionalized first by sexology and then by psychoanalysis, personal narrative becomes even more obscured. Prosser threads these changes together and argues, "simultaneously with these discursive shifts from transgender to homosexuality, from sexology to psychoanalysis, and from the body to the unconscious, the patient's speech becomes a suspicious text" (Prosser 151).

Hall herself skips over psychoanalysis in her novel in favor of sexology, though at first this might seem like an oversight, Prosser reminds us that not only was Hall familiar with psychoanalysis, but she actually pokes fun of it in *The Well.* Through an interaction between the character Jonathan Brockett and Stephen, in which Hall makes an ironic jab at the work of a student of Freud. Therefore, Prosser concludes that "Hall's use of sexology is not a turn (whether strategic or inadvertent) to homosexuality but a turn away from it, to a condition unambiguously transgendered and embodied" (157). Prosser notes that Hall's insistence on Havelock Ellis's introduction to the novel shows just how adamant she was that her novel be authorized as a sexological focused text.

Prosser puts his critique of the devaluation of personal narrative into practice and turns to a case study of Michael Dillon, a man who medically transitioned before the introduction of transsexual as a diagnostic category. Above all, Prosser seeks to center personal narrative and argues, "when read via personal narratives in case histories, transgender in sexual inversion cannot be reduced to the sexologists' figure for homosexuality but must be seen for some inverts as the grounds for a transgendered identity" (139). Prosser's case history of the first "fully" technologically transitioned man Michael Dillon elucidates both the liminal space before the emergence of transsexuality as a diagnosable category as well as the role of *The Well* as transsexual narrative.

Michael Dillon surgically changed sex before transsexual diagnosis was recognized in the middle of the twentieth century. In this absence, Dillon categorized a difference between homosexual and transsexual in his description of masculine/feminine homosexuals (transsexuals) and mannish/effeminate homosexuals (homosexuals). His

historical and cultural situation led him to maintain both categories under homosexuality, yet one denoted same sex desire while the other denoted gender nonconformity. Prosser notes that "Post Judith-Butler, we might understand Dillon's distinction between homosexuality and transsexuality as between gender performativity and gender ontology" (153). While Prosser explains this in more modern references in invoking Judith Butler, Prosser brings the reader back to his main point that regardless of terminology, the narrative is what remains the same and these narratives are deeply bounded in affect and bodily feeling. Not only is Dillon one example of many individuals who transitioned in one way or another before the establishment of transsexuality as a medicodiscursive category, he actually sites *The Well* in his writings as a transsexual novel that helped him understand his own narrative and identity. Prosser draws together these parallels to argue that "as with Dillon's resistance to all things "psych-" for explaining transsexuality, Hall's eschewal of the more current theories of psychoanalysis for sexology needs to be understood historically as a rejection of the conceptual supremacy of the axis of sexuality over gender and, concomitantly, of homosexuality over transgender" (156). Freud's location of psychoanalysis in sexuality had the effect of obscuring the differences between gender and sexuality. Despite feminist efforts to acknowledge the differences as well as the overlaps between the two, accounts of *The Well* have largely functioned on Freudian assumptions because they give primacy to the dimensions of sexuality in the text.

In addition to an approach that is historically contingent, I am particularly interested in the role of embodiment and affect in *The Well.* For the sake of the scope of

what a project of this kind can encompass, I chose a scene which I read as an affective climax in the novel to ground my work with Newton, de Lauretis, and Prosser: the mirror scene. This scene occurs in the midst of Stephen realizing she is losing her lover, Angela Crossby, to a man named Roger Antrim. She is desperately fighting for Angela's love but realizes she has lost her to Roger, a "real man." The scene reads,

> *"That night she stared at herself in the glass; and even as she did so she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body that must worship yet never be worshiped in return by the creature of its adoration. She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel; it was so white, so strong and so self-sufficient; yet withal so poor and unhappy a thing that her eyes filled with tears and her hate turned to pity. She began to grieve over it, touching her breasts with pitiful fingers, stroking her shoulders, letting her hands slip along her straight thighs – Oh, poor and most desolate body"*
>
> *– The Well of Loneliness Chapter 24 Scene 6*

Not only is this scene charged with emotion, but it is one of the most contested parts of the novel in both feminist and queer theory, and many theoretical projects that have engaged the text are anchored to this scene. It is the reading of this scene that so well shows the disparity between feminist theoretical constructions of embodiment, affect, and sexuality and those of transgender theory. I will now turn to three key theoretical interpretations of the scene from Newton, de Lauretis, and Prosser.

Feminist Readings of *The Well of Loneliness*

Esther Newton:

Newton's "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman" was first published in The Lesbian Issue of *Signs* in 1984. Newton is an anthropologist

and feminist theorist who specifically focuses on gay and lesbians in her work so it comes as no surprise that she claims Stephen as a butch lesbian in her work on *The Well.* In Newton's analysis of the mirror scene, she focuses on external social factors in discussing Stephen's experience of bad affects and their relation to her body. She writes,

> "Her body is not and cannot be male; yet it is not traditionally female. Between genders and thus illegitimate, it represents Every New Woman, stifled after World War I by a changed political climate and reinforced gender stereotypes. But Hall also uses a body between genders to symbolize the "'inverted' sexuality Stephen can neither disavow or satisfy" (Newton 98).

Newton uses Stephen's body as a site to be interrogated solely in terms of symbolism and representation. According to Newton, Stephen's gender disidentification is merely Hall's vehicle for symbolizing the political tensions around the role of women post-WWI. Newton also discounts Stephen as an invert, saying she cannot completely disavow or satisfy inversion. In making this claim, Newton reads inversion as synonymous with homosexuality, only taking the sexuality dimension of inversion into account while ignoring the gender aspect of inversion. Newton fails to account for the historically accurate meaning of inversion proposed by Halberstam's perverse presentism.

Newton's account of the mirror scene describes Stephen's self-hatred and alienation from her body as Hall symbolizing rebellion against traditional gender roles and heterosexuality. She claims that Stephen's cross-dressing "stands for the New Woman's rebellion against the male order" (Newton 99). In this account, masculinity is a way for her to carve out a space to express herself as a lesbian. At the same time, cross-dressing serves a purpose in the realm of sexuality as a "lesbian's desperate struggle to be and express her true self" (Newton 99). Newton frames Stephen's cross-dressing as a

political statement and an expression of lesbian authenticity. Her reading is concerned with visibility and political progress that seeks to connect the nineteenth century invert to modern notions of lesbianism.

However, despite Stephen's unwavering insistence on dressing in masculine clothing, Newton overlooks Stephen's strong aversion to being seen by others and she pays insufficient attention to the role her hatred of her body plays in the novel in ways which are not explicitly tied to sexuality. Certainly, from a public perspective, Stephen's masculinity can be viewed as a rebellious act. However, at what cost is this to her private life?

This brings me to another important point Newton makes during her analysis of the mirror scene. She identifies strong bonds between Radclyffe Hall's personal life and Stephen. Newton claims that "Cross-dressing for Hall is not a masquerade" (Newton 99). If cross-dressing was not a masquerade for Hall, then it certainly would not be for Stephen, however claiming Stephen's cross-dressing as a political statement shades over into the territory of masquerade and performance and a focus on political progress. Additionally, Stephen is shown as strongly averse to being out in public. This becomes especially true when Stephen is with her female lovers, but ever since childhood she expressed a persistent desire to be unnoticed in many cases. Cross-dressing seems less like Stephen's rebellious attempt to bring lesbian authenticity into the public sphere, and more often than not, like a quiet desire to be unseen. According to Love, a key indicator of a redemptive narrative is the need to instill pride into queer pasts. By reading Stephen's cross-dressing as a political statement, Newton does precisely that and

characterizes her masculine presentation as a bold act of pride. In doing so, Newton forces modern notions of queer pride onto Stephen's past.

One of the most private and intimate moments in the novel is the mirror scene, yet little attention is paid to the clear role of affect in Stephen's description of her body in Newton's account. Newton glosses over Stephen's agony in a scene so heavily charged with self-loathing, self-disgust and disavowal of the body. Newton describes this scene as "one of Hall's most moving passages [in which] Stephen expresses this hatred as alienation from her body," but rather than account for the function of these negative affects themselves, she immediately launches into a discussion of the sociocultural symbolism of Stephen's body and its political location (Newton 570).

In the same move, Newton posits alienation from the body as symptomatic of her unsatisfied sexual inversion. The body is not viewed as primary in Newton's analysis, instead, she sites Stephen's sexuality as the primary site of failure. Inhabiting an unlivable body is merely the result of the unsustainability of her sexual object choice and thus sexuality and gender are positioned as a linear process in which sexuality is determinative of gender. I find this move to site sexuality as the primary failure overly simplistic and dismissive of the material reality that although gender, sex, and sexuality are not necessarily determinative of one another, they are inextricable linked and correlated. Thus, sexuality cannot be solely credited as the source of Stephen's inability to live in her body, even though her failed relations with women certainly serve to enhance her self-hatred and hatred of her body later on.

Teresa de Lauretis:

Like Newton, de Lauretis traces Stephen's self-hatred of her body back to sexuality rather than sex itself, or the body itself. For de Lauretis, this novel is about female lesbian sexuality. Stephen's anguish is rooted in her inability to sustain a relationship with another woman and her lack of autonomous sexuality. Her suffering is read back onto her body, but her source of self-hatred is located outside of the body.

What de Lauretis does do, which I find helpful, is return back to the body. The mirror scene cannot help but be read as a meditation on the body. However, for de Lauretis, Stephen hates her body because it is not feminine enough. She claims, if Stephen "hates her naked body, it is because that body is masculine… [and] so phallic. The body she desires, not only in Angela but also autoerotically for herself, the body she can make love to, is a feminine, female body" (de Lauretis 114-15). de Lauretis traces the source of Stephen's self-hatred and abjection to her failed sexuality rather than directly to her body. Because of her positionality as a lesbian she desires femininity in the other that she has in herself, but simultaneously negates that femininity in herself to attract the other.

Feminist theorists have often invoked Lacan, finding his interest in symbolism over literalism more useful for a cultural intervention into stating the source of women's subordination. Lacan rewrites Freud and argues that "sexual difference is constituted in language, or the symbolic, in which the marker of difference is the phallus. Put simply, one either *has* (masculine) or *is* (feminine) the phallus" (Thornham 120). For Lacan, the phallus is the signifier of the literal penis which gives subjects their cultural positions. Thus, although the phallus is not an anatomical penis as it is for Freud, it is a signifier

that produces real lived experiences of power for men and women. In both Freud and Lacan's theories, women are denied an autonomous relation to desire, whether that be the literal penis or its cultural signifier of the phallus. Women are constructed as passive and solely in relation to men's desire. At best, a woman can envy desire or assume a masculine fantasy in order to access it.

De Lauretis uses Diane Hamer who reappropriates the masculinity complex. Hamer sees lesbianism as a psychic rejection of the category of women and feminism as a corresponding political movement that rejects men's superiority over women. Additionally, she sees lesbianism as a refusal to subscribe to the meanings Freud attached to castration. However, de Lauretis argues that a simple rejection of castration leaves no symbolic way to signify desire in the absence of the phallus as signifier of desire. Castration and the phallus as signifier must both be accounted for, she believes Hamer cannot simply disavow one and ignore the other. Therefore, rather than rejecting castration, de Lauretis seeks to follow Hamer's lead and uses *The Well of Loneliness* to "reappropriate castration and the phallus for lesbian subjectivity" based on fetishism (Prosser 111).

Teresa de Lauretis's work in staking a claim for lesbian desire in which the fetish acts as a signifier of desire. According to de Lauretis, the fetish "signifies at once the absence of the object of desire (the female body) and the subject's wish for it" (de Lauretis 117). The fetish functions as somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, the lesbian embodies masculinity that appeals to her female lover, but on the other she

wishes for that which she finds desirable in her lover for herself. According to de Lauretis,

> "Stephen's fetish, the signifier of her desire, is the sign of both an absence and a presence; the denied and wished-for female body is both displaced and represented in the fetish, the visible signifiers and accoutrements of masculinity, or what Esther Newton has called a 'male body drag.' That is the lure of the mannish lesbian – a lure for her and for her lover. The fetish of masculinity is what lures and signifies her desire, and what in her lures her lover, what her lover desires in her. Unlike the masculinity complex, the lesbian fetish of masculinity does not refuse castration but disavows it; the threat it holds at bay is not the loss of the penis in women but the loss of the female body itself, and the prohibition of access to it" (De Lauretis 122).

Put quite simply, she wants to love another woman as a woman. Both the over exaggerated masculinity of the masculine woman, and the femininity of her feminine counterpart act as fetish. However, the fetish is not a stand-in for the penis/phallus in accordance with Freud and Lacan, rather a signifier of desire. In the case of *The Well of Loneliness*, fetish is represented as Stephen's masculine attributes including her "masculine clothes, the insistence on riding astride, and all the other accoutrements and signs of masculinity, up to the war scar on her face, are Stephen's fetish, her fantasy-phallus" (Prosser 121).

De Lauretis reads the mirror scene through a psychoanalytic feminist theory lens. She reads the scene as "intensely erotic" and in her close reading of the wording of the scene suggests that if the reader fantasizes along with the text, it becomes apparent that Stephen caresses her breasts and then follows down along her body to reach her sex. Although de Lauretis describes this scene as Stephen committing "an intolerable act," she does not explicitly state at first whether the intolerability is in Stephen caressing her body

or in Stephen reaching down to touch her sex. Only later in her argument does she explicitly describe the scene as a coded masturbation scene.

De Lauretis sees the clear literal, and perhaps at the same time suggestively metaphorical, groping in the scene as a condensation of the overall message of the novel: "Stephen's groping blind and wordless toward an Other who should provide the meaning, but does not, only leads her back to the real of her body, to a "bitter" need which cannot accede to symbolization" (de Lauretis 114). Her reading of the scene pays close attention to the religious language Hall uses in the proceeding paragraph and argues that it "occludes the body in favor of spirit and, with regard to women specifically, forecloses the possibility of any autonomous and non-reproductive female sexuality" (de Lauretis 114). It is because of Stephen's repeated failure in love, the failure of "an autonomous female homosexuality" that de Lauretis sites as the reason for Stephen's dislocatedness in her body (de Lauretis 114).

De Lauretis talks about the body, but her analysis of the body is always displaced onto sexuality and desire rather than focusing on the affects and experience of the body itself. Given the ambiguity of the movement of Stephen's hands in the scene, it is a bit of a stretch for de Lauretis to read the mirror scene as a masturbation scene. De Lauretis's defense of this reading is convincing only to the extent that it is likely that the final destination of Stephen's hand is her sex. Given her position in psychoanalytic theory, her reading makes sense. For Freud, everything comes back to sexuality and psychosexual development. But even so, this scene does not necessarily represent Stephen's denied autonomous access to her lesbian body. In fact, I would be inclined to read this scene as

Stephen's hand coming into contact with her ultimate betrayal, the most female part of her body, and thus her body itself is her source of anguish, not a denied access to it. This reading posits the body as primary focus rather than desire for another and prioritizes the material reality of the body. After all, Stephen's masculinity is not masquerade. Her masculine attributes are not simply functional in attracting a mate.

Jay Prosser

Jay Prosser argues "no moment conveys this sense of Stephen's corporeal incompleteness, her wrong embodiment, more poignantly than the novel's mirror scene" (Prosser 159). Significantly, Prosser sets up a long list of bad affects Stephen experiences before his analysis of the mirror scene specifically. He writes,

> "Stephen suffers 'some great sense of loss, some great sense of incompleteness' (101); she is 'defrauded' (12,163), her body 'maimed' (104), 'maimed and insufferable' (217), and 'sorely afflicted' (217); she feels 'bodily dejection' (140), she is a 'genius … in the chains of the flesh, a fine spirit subject to physical bondage' (217). The implication is that, as a female, who ought to have been a man, Stephen is incomplete" (Prosser 159).

Prosser's reading is especially concerned with Stephen's bad feelings and he connects them directly to her body as a precursor to his analysis of the mirror scene. He immediately introduces de Lauretis's reading of the scene and critiques it on two fronts. First, he notes de Lauretis's need to extend the scene to a sentence in the following paragraph in order to defend her masturbatory reading. Second, he argues "to claim the scene as a figure for lesbian desire de Lauretis must remove the scene from its sexological context and read it through the psychoanalytic paradigm that Hall opted against" (Prosser 160). As mentioned earlier, Prosser states that Hall disagreed with

psychoanalysis to the point that she ironized it and made a joke of it within her novel. Thus, Prosser critiques de Lauretis for harnessing the very paradigm Hall was so adamantly against in order to make her argument for lesbian fetishism. Additionally, Prosser is clear to point out that to read the scene as a masturbation scene is almost ridiculous given "the absolute unpleasure that infuses the entire passage" (Prosser 161). Prosser situates the scene in its overarching narrative of bad affects and finds a masturbation scene would be out of place and against the grain of the rest of the text.

The context and framing of the scene is crucial in understanding Stephen's source of anguish. Prosser's critique is mindful that the mirror scene occurs just after Stephen is rebuffed by her lover Angela Crosby and leaves her to be with a man, Roger Antrim. Angela even explicitly states that Stephen's failure to be a real man is the reason for their failed relationship. The context of the mirror scene is not simply a failed relationship, but a failure of Stephen to measure up against a "real man". Prosser also sites many instances before the mirror scene in which Stephen is caught in a storm of bad feelings as she is confronted with her lack of "real" manliness starting before her love interest in Angela.

Finally, Prosser draws attention to a scene at the beginning of the novel in which a young Stephen learns that her housemaid, Collins, who she is in love with has a knee injury. Stephen has a recurring fantasy of transferring the affliction to her own body and bearing the burden herself. She repeatedly asks God to give her Collins' bad knee. Prosser asks, "Might not this ambiguity allow the dream to stand as a transsexual fantasy of flesh grafted from one part of the body to heal the female invert's own "afflicted member"?" (Prosser 165). Thus Prosser reads a transsexual fantasy of gender

reassignment surgery onto Stephen. Loss in love is a thread throughout the novel and Prosser reads Stephen handing her lover Mary Llewellyn to a man as an ultimate disavowal of homosexuality and "as an act [that] highlights her disidentification with women and locates her in a masculinist economy in which women are to be exchanged" (Prosser 167). Once again, Stephen loses her lover to a real man.

Love critiques Prosser for reading transsexual subjectivity back to the early twentieth century and reading inversion as its historical foundation. She argues, "Prosser imagines gender inversion as a precursor to transsexual subjectivity, a longing for biological, psychic, and sexual transformation not yet medically available to the subjects in the case histories" (Love 117). Additionally, Love critiques Prosser for not adequately addressing ideology in the novel. She argues, "though Prosser's approach to *The Well* is important in countering dismissive or censuring responses to Stephen's masculinity, his literal interpretation of Stephen's desire to "be a real man" blinds him to the larger place of gender in the novel… in taking Stephen's self-description at face value, Prosser treats her self-description at face value, Prosser treats her self-description as if it were unfiltered by ideology" (Love 117). What Love calls Prosser's treatment of Stephen's self-description at face value effectively removes agency from Stephen's narrative, devalues her reality which she deeply feels and addresses in her body, and renders her experience of her body as a simple product of ideology.

What I find most compelling and central to Prosser's work is that his argument lies in his extensive history of inversion in order to situate the novel in its historical context. He argues, "the value of sexology's case histories and of *The Well* is …

[demonstrating] … that not only did transsexual desires and sex-change subjects exist prior to medical technology but the stories inverts told brought forth the medical narrative of transsexuality" (Prosser 167). I find it an oversimplified misreading of Prosser to claim the bulk of his argument is in claiming Stephen as a transgender man who would have been liberated had he access to medical transition technologies. Rather, I find the value in Prosser's argument to be his emphasis on corporeal experience and his demystification of the meaning of inversion. I also find that Prosser is drawing parallels between present and past through the medium of narrative in order to show continuities between the body's experience of in order to redeem the invert's past from gay and lesbian studies and feminist theory's misreading. Regardless of whether Stephen can be considered a transgender man, Prosser's argument lies in his framing *The Well* as one of many narratives crucial in existing prior to medical technology and distinct institutionalized transgender discourse itself. Prosser does not simply export modern notions of transgender onto early 20th century histories, rather he uncovers a history of gender transition that existed before the discursive institutionalization of transsexuality in the middle of the century. He may be writing in the very late 20th century, but his case studies and information are strictly confined to the beginning of the century.

Prosser work also satisfies Halberstam's methodological call for a separation between masculine women's history and lesbian history, and I would argue he goes beyond that to a separation between female bodied performers of masculinity's history and lesbian history. Perhaps in addition to the tribade, the female husband, and the androgyne discussed by Halberstam, the female bodied invert is another taxonomy of

female masculinity Prosser seeks to shed light on. However, Halberstam critiques inversion and the sexologist's impulse to categorize all forms of female masculinity and female homosexuality as inversion. Halberstam is interested in historical specificity as a way to reclaim a diversity of female masculinities that existed, and continued to exist despite sexology's inversion. She considers the role of aesthetics, sexual practices, and class in her analysis. Halberstam is critical of inversion while missing an account of the role inversion played in shaping some masculine women's lives. Inversion discourse allowed many masculine women a way to both tangibly reinscribe masculinity upon their bodies, and record their narratives through medicine. So while Halberstam argues that inversion discourse erased female masculine specificity, she largely does so through a lesbian lens. She does not account for the benefits of inversion discourse for some masculine women who sought to live more like Michael Dillon and alter their bodies and pass as men under a medical diagnosis. I see Prosser's argument as an expansion of Halberstam's call for a recognition of female masculinity's multiplicity and specificity. Perhaps strictly claiming Stephen as a lesbian homogenizes female masculinity and Prosser's proposal of a transgender reading is merely another way of expanding our archive of early twentieth century forms of female masculinity. The very nature of looking back at identities that are unintelligible by today's standards requires critical accounts sensitive to a multiplicity of masculinities. Prosser illustrates a specific history of inversion thus enriching an archive of multiple masculinities.

While Halberstam is interested in specificity, Love refuses an investment in specific queer taxonomies. Although I find Love's refusal to invest in specific queer

taxonomies a valid trajectory for queer futurity, I wonder about the material effects of not addressing it in specific contexts, particularly in transgender narrative. One small example of what is at stake is Prosser exposes a blind sight in many queer and literary historical accounts that claim transgender experience was an invention of the medical industry. As Prosser shows, fully medically transitioned transsexuals existed prior to the formal institutionalization of the diagnosis. For this reason, I would like to call for a reading of *The Well* that can be read as both a transgender novel and a lesbian novel.

It is undeniable that *The Well* is already a lesbian novel given its ongoing reception by lesbians since the publication of the novel. However, I would like to add to a body of literature that does not limit *The Well* to a lesbian reading and sees it instead as a meditation upon the complex, tangled, and tangible realities of what it means to be nonnormatively sexed and gendered. Although Prosser's reading ultimately claims Stephen as transgender, and he is undeniable reaching back to Stephen through a transgender lens, he does so through accounting for her holistically through her entire narrative. His argument is not as simple as believing had she access to certain technologies her pain and suffering would be alleviated, as he has been critiqued by many including Love. In fact, his argument is far from that, rather it is a close narrative focused reading of Stephen's affects, desires, relationships, and embodiment which situates *The Well* in a tradition of transgender narrative.

Esther Newton framed Stephen's masculine appearance as a feminist rebellion, but does account for affects such as self hatred and alienation in relation to the body. However, the body remains a site of symbolism and representation for the post-WWI

woman. Newton is less interested in corporeal materiality and more in political location. In terms of sexuality, Newton skips over the gendered implications of inversion and instead focuses solely on its dimension of homosexuality. Newton traces her alienation in her body back to sexuality as the primary site of failure. Like Newton, de Lauretis sees Stephen's alienation and hatred of her body as a symptom of her homosexuality. De Lauretis does a lesbian psychoanalytic reading of Stephen in *The Well* based on fetishism and sees Stephen's bodily alienation as a result of her inability to sustain a successful intimate relationship with another woman. Thus in her formulation of lesbian desire as that which is rooted in a feminine woman's desire for a body just like hers, just as feminine, she argues that Stephen hates herself for her failure to perform proper femininity. De Lauretis not only simplifies Stephen's narrative, but she erases complexities of lesbian desire among women and reduces it to a desire for femininity and sameness.

Prosser recovers a past which is often overlooked in favor of a false conception of transgender subjectivity as an invention of modern medicine. I find Prosser's project incredibly useful and in many ways on par with Halberstam's project in her chapter, "Perverse Presentism: The Androgyne, the Tribade, the Female Husband, and Other Pre-Twentieth-Century Genders" from *Female Masculinity*. Both theorists honor the core purpose of Halberstam's chapter which seeks to differentiate between forms of female masculinity in the 20th century. Even more significantly, Prosser wholeheartedly engages with the novel's heightened affect, including the negative affects modern queer, gay and lesbian, and feminist theorists tend to ignore in favor of pride and progress. However,

although Prosser honored Stephen's character by looking at her in a more holistic, affective, and temporally specific manner, he still at times made use of more modern analogies and terminology which circulates in modern transgender communities. Prosser errs on the side of attempting to draw clean lines from subjects like Stephen to modern transgender experience.

There are other moments in the novel that warrant a dual reading of Stephen through both elements of transgender and lesbian embodiment that show the insufficiency of claiming her identity as either/or. For example, theorists often jump to Stephen's first attraction to a woman as a site of analysis and gloss over her childhood. Stephen's childhood is often overlooked as a site where her consciousness and self-perception of herself as masculine emerges differently from sexuality. Even in the womb, Hall constructs Stephen's masculinity as being already legible. Hall writes, "when the child stirred within her [mother] she would think it stirred strongly because of the gallant male creature she was hiding; then her spirit grew large with a mighty new courage, because a man-child would be born" (Hall 12). Sexuality absolutely becomes a significant factor in The Well as soon as Stephen develops feelings for her housemaid, Collins, at a very young age. However, her masculine embodiment is made prominent in the novel much earlier on, before she was even born, in fact.

Similarly, as soon as Stephen is born, her body is instantaneously read as masculine by her mother and father. Hall writes, "Anna Gordon was delivered of a daughter; a narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a baby that yelled and yelled for three hours without ceasing, as though outraged to find itself ejected into life" (Hall

13). The first description of Stephen's embodiment post-birth is by markers of masculinity as narrow-hipped and wide-shouldered. In the same sentence, it is apparent how displaced this masculinity is on a female body and the woe Stephen will experience throughout her life due to this disidentification is foreshadowed by the fierce agony her tiny masculine body experiences upon its arrival into the world. Thus, these passages show early on that Stephen's masculinity does not simply develop as a result of her attraction to women.

Although Prosser does a more holistic reading of the novel and accounts for Stephen's gender inversion in ways not mediated by lesbian identity, he still ultimately reads Stephen through a transgender lens. As stated earlier, *The Well*'s history among lesbian circles makes it a lesbian novel even though I argue that Stephen herself should not be claimed as a lesbian. I also argue Prosser's meticulous reading of the novel makes it a transgender novel as much as it is a lesbian novel. Where I diverge from Newton, de Lauretis, and Prosser is going beyond claiming the novel by merit of its narrative and claiming Stephen's body itself as a lesbian body or a transgender body. Prosser reads *The Well* as part of a transgender archive and thus reads the novel via transgender personal narrative making an intervention to rescue the novel from its lesbian reading and to reclaim popular misreadings of inversion as synonymous with homosexuality. Prosser states, "the value of sexology's case histories and of The Well is in intervening in this representation and demonstrating otherwise: that not only did transsexual desires and sex-changed subjects exist prior to medical terminology but the stories inverts told brought forth the medical terminology but the stories inverts told brought forth the medical

narrative of transsexuality" (Prosser 167). Up until this point, Prosser's reading is one of expansion and is comfortable with ambiguity; however, Prosser goes further to claim Stephen's body as a transgender body unable to reach the point of transsexuality in its progress without access to technologies such as surgeries and hormones.

While *The Well* can inform both lesbian and transgender archives, I diverge from Prosser, de Lauretis, and Newton because they make identity based claims on Stephen's body. I seek to examine narratives and bodies as separate entities and thus, reading *The Well* as a transgender novel or a lesbian novel is different from reading Stephen as a transgender person or reading her as a lesbian. Categorizing long lost bodies that refuse to be dragged forth into present does not allow for historical specificity and these definitive claims on identity constrain the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

As my thesis has shown, feminist and queer theorists have been engaged in border wars over long lost bodies in an attempt to claim them for their own disciplinary purposes, often rooted in identity politics. Contestations over the theoretical construction of masculine female bodied individuals have become a tug-of-war between lesbian identity (typically butch) and female-to-male transgender (FTM). I have argued that ultimately such border wars prove to be a waste of energy and limit discussions of pivotal texts such as *The Well of Loneliness* to fighting over identity categories. Theoretical discussions of *The Well* from Newton, de Lauretis, and Prosser are all focused on knowing *what* Stephen is and how to categorize her. Identity politics are absolutely necessary for pushing legislation and responding to other immediate material realities of existence; however, when limited to their perspectives, we are unable to ask different kinds of questions. I believe that the work I have done in examining these border wars in theoretical work produced on *The Well of Loneliness* can fruitfully be extended to many other texts. To give just one example and suggest some future directions, I would like to conclude with a discussion of how border wars also manifest in a more recent text about female masculinity; the story of Brandon Teena as shown in the film *Boys Don't Cry*. *The Well* was written in the 1920's, and theoretical constructions of the novel since then have largely focused on claiming Stephen as a lesbian, an invert, or a man. *Boys Don't Cry* was produced in the 1990's, yet as with *The Well*, theoretical discussions of the film still tend to focus on making identity claims on the bodies it describes.

According to theorist Jacob C. Hale, "the most visible butch/ftm border war skirmishes have been necrophagic fights over dead bodies such as that of 'Brandon Teena'/'Teena Brandon,'" (Hale 319) which erase the living border dweller's "multiple complexities, ambiguities, inconsistencies, [and] ambivalences" in relation to gender in order to serve particular political agendas (Hale 317). Both lesbian and FTM activists neglect any aspects of the dead that do not fit their own constructions and in doing so, the living refuse to acknowledge that this person existed in a "netherworld constituted by the margins of multiple overlapping identity categories" (Hale 318). Furthermore, he argues the very stabilization of the name "Brandon Teena" on behalf of transgender "political and social goals also worked to harden the borders drawn between butches and FTMs" (Hale 314). According to Hale, self-identification might be the only distinguishing characteristic between butch and FTMs. However, although self-identification takes autonomy and the power in naming into account, it is impossible for figures like Brandon and Stephen.

Self-identification may be the only way to maintain agency in navigating identity borders, and because subjects like Stephen and Brandon cannot speak for themselves, these questions are futile. As Hale describes, border wars occur over lost bodies and thus many of the complexities of their lives are lost in an attempt to categorize them into modern identity categories. The need to fix categories is not a productive of nuanced readings and ultimately it leads to dead ends and infighting. *Boys Don't Cry* represents a modern example of border dwelling characteristic of *The Well of Loneliness*; both texts present alternatives to strict binary identities, if only our questions are not limited to

cramming the subjects they describe into neat categories. These texts actively resist categorization and allow for nuanced questions about desire, affect, location, and gender to be asked unmediated by identity categories.

In my paper, I have critiqued Newton, de Lauretis, and Prosser for focusing heavily on Stephen's sexuality and for only reading her gender with or against her sexuality as a lesbian. In this conclusion, and through a discussion of *Boys Don't Cry,* I would like to take the opportunity to make a distinction between focusing on sexuality as mediated by identity, and discussions of desire that honor its complexities as an affect regardless of the identity of the subjects and objects of desire. It is unproductive to ask question about desire if we are predisposed to reducing the complexities of desire to "lesbian sexuality" or "transgender sexuality." Instead I propose we ask questions about desire that refuse ontological traps of identity categorization. If theory can shift its energy away from border wars, it will be able to engage in much richer discussions about gender and desire unfiltered through sexual identity. I argue we need to focus on *The Well* and *Boys Don't Cry* in ways that privilege a reading which is a meditation on female masculinity because it allows us sit with ambiguity and escape the temptation of getting lost in the border wars.

Decades after the publication of *The Well*, similar skirmishes have occurred over a young queer person murdered in Nebraska in 1993: Brandon Teena. Although his gender remains ambiguous, scholars and activists have largely agreed upon referring to Brandon Teena, born Teena Brandon, with male pronouns and I will also do so in this paper. The story of Brandon's death shook queer communities to the core when he was

brutally raped and murdered by two men for passing as male even though he was born female bodied. Reflecting both on her own experience of learning about Brandon and seeing his story unfold in the media and in scholarship, Judith Halberstam recalls, "the murder of this young transgender person sent shock waves through queer communities in the United States, and created fierce identitarian battles between transsexual activists and gay and lesbian activists, with each group trying to claim Brandon Teena as one of their own" (Halberstam 22). Halberstam refers to Brandon as transgender to describe his crossing of gender borders whether or not he identified as male and would have liked to physically transition using hormones or surgery.

Brandon's story has been a site of contestation on two levels, first, the cultural reproduction of Brandon's life by film makers, and second, theoretical constructions of Brandon by theorists who use these films and cultural artifacts as a basis of theory production. Brandon's story has been represented on film in the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* and 1998 documentary, *The Brandon Teena Story* and both are fragments of what Halberstam calls, "the Brandon archive". Utilizing Cvetkovich's work, Halberstam describes "the Brandon archive … [as] a transgender archive of 'emotion and trauma' that allows a narrative of a queerly gendered life to emerge from the fragments of memory and evidence that remain" (Halberstam 24). Kimberly Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry* has come to dominate the Brandon archive as the most well known representation of Brandon's life.

Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* discusses the film and uses what has been characterized as a "wound culture" in the United States, which finds fascination in

violence and murder, "to build on the flashes of insight afforded by violent encounters between 'normal' guys and gender-variant people in order to theorize the meaning of gender transitivity in late capitalism" (Halberstam 22). Wound culture, in many ways, particularly through sensationalization, can be just as reductive as narratives that gloss over bad affects altogether. However, Halberstam utilizes wound culture as a starting point to construct an analysis of Brandon's story through memory and trauma. Halberstam transforms wound culture in order to "think of the murder of Brandon as less of a personal tragedy that has been broadened out to create a symbolic event and more of a constructed memorial to the violence directed at queer and transgender lives" (Halberstam 23). Thus, Halberstam maintains a meaningful discussion of violence, homophobia, and trauma and uses memorialization and archiving as a political tool to maintain an integrated queer history.

Boys Don't Cry has been a cultural site of contention between theorists, particularly concerning the borders between FTM and butch and represents fragments of what Halberstam calls the Brandon archive. While an overwhelming majority claims Brandon as transgender, there are still border skirmishes over his identity that lead some theorists to stop their analysis at the surface of identity politics. However, some theorists have deepened their work to allow for ambiguities and more complex questions. Jennifer Esposito argues that the film "reinscribes the normative nature of White masculinity by showcasing Brandon Teena's "failed" performance as a performance while allowing the "biological men" to just "be" men" (Esposito 239). According to Esposito, the film did not allow Brandon to dwell in the "borderlands" and resist categorization. Thus she

argues, "the film contains Brandon, categorizes him as 'lesbian.' And even goes as far as to argue that "we, as viewers of the film, are interpolated as border patrols and aid in the lesbianizing of Brandon" (Esposito 229). Brenda Cooper argues that the film "can be read as a liberatory narrative that queers the centers of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity by privileging female masculinity and celebrating its differences from heterosexual norms" (Cooper 2002). Cooper's reading argues that Peirce's work privileges and normalizes female masculinity and gender fluidity challenging mass media's heteronormative gaze and heteroideology. I argue we need to focus more on theoretical constructions of *The Well* and *Boys Don't Cry* which privilege a reading which is a meditation on female masculinity that can sit with ambiguity rather than claiming lesbian or transgender categorizations for Brandon and also Stephen.

Halberstam critiques most influential cultural response to and representation of Brandon's story, *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story* because both "ultimately told a tall story about rural homophobia" (Halberstam 24). Location in rural Nebraska is significant to Brandon's constructed life on screen in that spatial locations carry loaded temporal meanings and implications as well. Obviously Peirce held true to the reality that Brandon lived there; however, her long shots of the rural landscape in the film are an intentional move to emphasize rural location as imbricated within the dynamics of gender and sexuality in the film. In the following section, Halberstam describes a trend in narratives of nonmetropolitan sexuality. According to Halberstam,

> like other narratives about nonmetropolitan sexuality, popular versions of this story posit a queer subject who sidesteps so-called modern models of gay identity by conflating gender and sexual variance. Indeed, in the popular versions of the Brandon narrative that currently circulate, like

> *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon's promiscuity and liminal identity is depicted as immature and even premodern and as a form of false consciousness. When Brandon explores a mature and adult relationship with one woman who recognizes him as 'really female,' that film suggests, Brandon accedes to a modern form of homosexuality and is finally 'free.' Reconstituted now as a liberal subject, Brandon's death at the hands of local men can be read simultaneously as a true tragedy and as an indictment of backward, rural communities. In this sense, Brandon occupies a place held by so-called primitives in colonial anthropology; he literally inhabits a different timescale from the modern queer, and using Johannes Fabian's formulation in Time and the Other, Brandon's difference gets cast as both spatially and temporally distant (Fabian 2002, 16). By reading Brandon's story in and through postcolonial queer theory and queer geography, we can untangle the complex links that this narrative created for the urban consumers who were its most avid audience between modern queerness and the rejection of rural or small-town locations (Halberstam 25).

Thus, ideas about backwardness and forwardness are woven into the very fabric of the film through gaze, camera work, and plot in its association with rural Midwestern culture. The film asserts rural areas are temporally backward and associates them with primitive ideas about gender and sexuality which are characterized by a conflation between gender variance and homosexuality. The narrative reads that gender variance is simply a primitive temporal precursor to homosexuality and that homosexuality eventually displaces gender variance as a result of modern enlightenment. Urban areas are forward, developed and inhabited by homosexuals. Rural areas are backwards, primitive, and inhabited by unenlightened queers who exhibit gender variation. Because rural communities are stuck in the past, so are their inhabitants' consciousness about gender and sexuality. Halberstam argues this is shown in the film through the women who date Brandon. These women are demeaned as immature little girls who choose women who pass as men because they have been deprived of modern lesbian consciousness as a result of living in a backward society and Brandon's only serious relationship is ultimately

coopted into a lesbian narrative at the end. However, as I will discuss later, Halberstam's critique of the scene as claiming Brandon as a lesbian perpetuates the very dichotomy she seeks to deconstruct.

Despite claims on identity with either Brandon or Stephen, this dichotomy between rural and urban is incredibly oversimplified and in many cases proven to be false. For example, even after leaving scenic and isolated Morton, being exposed to cities, and being romantically involved with women, Stephen still exhibits gender variance. I would argue theoretical pieces like Newton's and de Lauretis' are trying to save Stephen from "primitive" inversion, and instead reclaim her narrative as a lesbian one in order to save her from sexology's backwardness in its focus on gender variance. In doing so, they perpetuate precisely what Halberstam warns against in her analysis of Brandon's story. In reclaiming gender variance as merely a symptom of homosexuality, they perpetuate the forward/backward dichotomy between homosexuality and gender inversion that have deep temporal implications both in time and space.

An important component of a holistic analysis of both Brandon and Stephen's stories is that both beg the question of the role of the women in their lives choosing subjects of desire who embody alternate masculinities. Complex questions about desire can only be discussed when the conversation leaves the border wars at the door. Newton, de Lauretis, and Prosser have interrogated desire in their work on Stephen, however they have done so only as relational to particular identity categories: either lesbian or transgender. I will now engage an affective discussion of desire unmediated by identity categories to show that it is not that asking questions about sexuality and desire are

unproductive, but rather we need to ask them unpredisposed to either/or thinking, e.g., man *or* woman, lesbian *or* transgender. Halberstam claims that the Brandon archive,

> provides some important details about the elaborate and complex desires of young women coming to maturity in nonurban areas; the young women who were drawn to Brandon's unconventional manhood must have lots to tell us about adolescent feminine fantasy… all too often such girlish desires for boyish men are dismissed within a Freudian model of female sexuality as a form of immaturity and unrealized sexual capacity; the assumption that underpins the dismissal of adolescent female desires is that the young women who fall for a Brandon, a teen idol, or some other icon of youthful manhood, will soon come to full adulthood, and when they do they will desire better and more authentic manhood. By reckoning only with Brandon's story, as opposed to the stories of his girlfriends, his family, and those two teenagers who died alongside him, we consent to a liberal narrative of individualized trauma. For Brandon's story to be meaningful, it must be about more than Brandon (Halberstam 33).

Halberstam argues we cannot look at narratives like *Boys Don't Cry* and examine Brandon in a vacuum which has the effect of overlooking the role of how he affected others lives, particularly the women who desired him.

I argue that for both Brandon and Stephen, consideration of desire needs to happen without being filtered through an assumed lesbian or transgender lens, and instead the question should be asked, what does it mean to be a woman who desires women who pass as men? de Lauretis approaches such an analysis of desire because she takes masculinity and femininity into account, but her theory of lesbian fetishism presupposes women desiring one another *as women*. Therefore, an analysis of the significant role desire plays in both narratives needs to be considered in terms of female masculinity rather than being limited to dynamics of lesbian desire. What is the role of female desire? What do we make of females who desire and specifically choose women who pass as men? The words that have haunted me throughout my research have

consistently been Halberstam's statement, "Desire has a terrifying precision" (Halberstam 127).

Our fascination with female masculinity has often left the stories of the women desiring them untold. Writers like Joan Nestle seek to center femme and female desire for masculine women in their work, yet do so in the context of lesbian butch/femme desire. *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* is Nestle's attempt to recover butch/femme history through personal narratives, poetry, and theory. Nestle sees butch/femme as "a lesbian-specific way of deconstructing gender that radically reclaims women's erotic energy" (Nestle 14). For Nestle, butch/femme relationships, and more specifically, butch identity represent erotic desire and gender ambivalence. However, she does not expand to analyze female masculinity beyond a lesbian context. I would like to see an archive of female desire not limited to butch femme.

Halberstam argues that the final sex scene between Lana and Brandon drops the transgender gaze and coops the film into a lesbian narrative, and maybe this is precisely the kind of cultural intervention necessary to deconstruct fixed categories of identity. Rather than the transgender gaze constructed by the film up until that scene completely crumbling and being replaced by a narrative which asserts Brandon as a lesbian, perhaps the film proposes a space in which these two identities can coexist, or better yet, where Brandon's gender can remain ambiguous and undefined. Halberstam argues the women Brandon dates are depicted as immature, however, Lana becomes fully aware of Brandon's gender disidentification and still chooses to be with him. Lana has just been made aware Brandon was born female and asks him, "What were you like before all this?

Were you like me, like a girl-girl?" However, the film never insinuates that Lana views Brandon any differently than she did before, and certainly not that she views him or herself as a lesbian. In fact, a previous scene depicting intimacy between the two shows that Lana sees Brandon's breasts are bound and although she is shocked at first and does not quite know what to make of it, she still continues to love him, treat him the same, and be intimate with him. In the final sex scene Lana follows her questions before they make love by simply saying, "I don't know if I'm gonna know how to do it." Although Lana has learned new information about Brandon's past, her desire for him has not changed and the small amount of hesitation she has comes from the fact that it is the first time she will get to see and be intimate with Brandon's body in its entirety. Brandon's identity is the last thing that matters to Lana, and instead of being either heterosexual or lesbian sex, it is simply queer. This interaction is one of love, desire and affect, not one that demands knowing and categorization. Lana does not need to read Brandon as either male of female because that is not what it means to be a desiring being. *Boys Don't Cry* is a film that refuses to dwell on identity categories and instead claims border territory and one of its vehicles for doing so is by engaging with the affective nature of desire.

The Well of Loneliness and *Boys Don't Cry* allow for a reading of bodies which are changing, transforming, becoming, and unbecoming without distinct destinations, if any destination at all. These texts allow for a reading of transgender as a process uncommitted to bodies crossing to and from opposite ends of a binary. The subjects they describe inhabit the liminal spaces of the borderlands in which gender is a process rather than an endpoint and identity categories are not stable. Peirce's film does not name

Brandon as a lesbian or transgender and allows for fluidity as it does not commit to neat categories of identity. *The Well of Loneliness* names Stephen as an invert, but this category itself retains a kind of ambiguity that more modern words like lesbian and transgender do not have. Therefore, trying to slot Stephen into either of the latter two categories will never be sufficient. These texts allow for ambiguity in their own ways, and theoretical constructions of these texts and texts like *The Well of Loneliness* must reflect this ambiguity. A place to start generative and productive theory is by focusing on affect, for example desire, precisely because it resists a discussion limited to identity categories and it refuses binary thinking. Affect and questions about feeling and memory provoke epistemological questions whereas identity politics are stuck on ontological questions of knowing. By refusing to get caught in a trap of either/or identity politics, theory can instead dwell on more generative concepts like questions of desire, location, and the nature of violence rather than its specific motivator.

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