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**When Narrative Studies Meets Trans Studies:
Reflections on Methodology with *Bellies* and *Pew***

Abstract: This chapter takes eight narratological concepts – tense, alternating narration, disnarration, plot, reliability, metalepsis, embodiment, and focalisation – and shows how they can be enriched in their scope and function by considering the insights and concerns of trans studies. Each topic is approached by drawing from perspectives within narrative studies – feminist, rhetorical, cognitive, structuralist, and more – alongside scholarship in trans studies on bodies, visibility, time, language, and social change. Understanding the forms that transness takes is crucial at a historical moment in which the lives of gender-variant people are both increasingly displayed and increasingly threatened. Without needing to abandon an emphasis on questions of embodied identity, justice, care, and material politics that are central trans studies, narrative studies can provide a language that allows us to analyse how trans stories are shaped and constructed. In return, it will find its conceptual tools expanded and re-signified. Two recent novels, Nicola Dinan’s *Bellies* (2023) and Catherine Lacey’s *Pew* (2020), are used here to illustrate how inquiries into form and investigations of gender can collaborate, demonstrating that methodological blending can yield results that take into account the full textual and political dimensions of trans narratives.

Keywords: trans narratology, trans narrative studies, disnarration, tense

While popular discussions of trans literature, media, and art often focus on ‘representation’, trans authors and scholars are deeply invested in narrative form. The last chapter of Kai Cheng Thom’s *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir* (2016) starts with this metafictional reflection:

Oh, please. Don’t look so surprised, now. You knew this was coming.

I told you from the very beginning, way back at the beginning of the book, that this was the story of how I became the greatest escape artist in the whole goddamn world. It is not the story of how I ran away from home like a little trans baby princess Cinderella, got rescued by a handsome transgender prince, and vanished happily into the vast palace of the middle class. (185)

A passage like this has a lot to offer to narrative studies, from the temporality of its direct address to its genre-blending references to story structure. But despite the inventive narrative strategies and formal reflections of trans texts, narratological analyses of them are still few and far between. Understanding the forms that transness takes is crucial at a historical moment in which the lives of gender-variant people are both increasingly displayed and increasingly threatened. Without needing to abandon an emphasis on questions of embodied identity, justice, care, and material politics that are central to trans studies, narrative studies can provide a language that allows us to analyse how trans stories are shaped and constructed. In return, it will find its scope and conceptual tools expanded and re-signified. To illustrate this, I want to generate an encounter between eight narratological concepts – tense, alternating narration, disnarration, plot, reliability, metalepsis, embodiment, and focalisation – and the insights and concerns of trans studies. In discussing these topics, I touch on analyses of narrative from a range of perspectives – rhetorical, cognitive, structuralist, and so on. My approach, however, is most fundamentally aligned with feminist and queer narrative studies in considering how culturally mediated bodies, narrative strategies, and ethical and political stakes interact. A trans narrative studies can emerge out of this tradition if we consider trans knowledges, genders, and modes of sociality as organised by, and in turn organising, narrative structures.

Two recent novels, Nicola Dinan's *Bellies* (2023) and Catherine Lacey's *Pew* (2020), form the terrain on which I orchestrate this meeting between narrative studies and trans studies. In *Bellies*, protagonists Tom and Ming take turns narrating their relationship, which begins seemingly as that of two young gay men and faces a series of changes after they leave university, one of these changes being Ming's coming out as a trans woman. While Ming's identity – linked in some ways to that of her trans author – straightforwardly marks *Bellies* as fitting the definition of a trans narrative, this is more complicated in the case of *Pew*. Here, there is a less explicit connection with transness, as the novel's author is not (known as) trans, and no specific terms relating to trans identity are present in the text. In fact, *Pew* is about escaping and resisting the very attribution of identity: the ambiguous narrative centres around a young person of unknown gender, race, and age, who narrates their arrival into a small town (implied to be in the Southern U.S.) and increasingly unsettles its inhabitants by refusing to give an account of themselves. As I show below, a methodology that combines narrative studies and trans studies can be a productive interpretative strategy however narrowly or expansively we may conceive of what constitutes a trans narrative. For the purposes of this work, I take trans to mean embodying or otherwise revealing gender to be

other than binary, fixed, or determinable in the last instance through a normative reading of anatomical and chromosomal configurations. A trans approach needs to centre the perspectives, concerns, and epistemologies of trans people; additionally, when considering transness, gender cannot be isolated from sexuality, race, and class, which are linked in histories of producing corporeal taxonomies and policing gender transgression. Instead of providing a linear overview of trans studies and its persistent focus on narrative, as I have done elsewhere (Pellegrini 2025),¹ my reflections here draw upon a range of voices from this field. Each of the following sections offers a glimpse of scholarship from narrative studies alongside a glimpse of scholarship from trans studies, gesturing toward how, together, they can open up wide-ranging interpretations of texts like *Bellies* and *Pew*.

Distances and Trajectories: Nicola Dinan's *Bellies*

Tense

Bellies has two narrators, Tom and Ming, who take over from each other every few chapters to tell the story in chronological order. As a reader, I found it easy to identify who was speaking at the beginning of each chapter through contextual clues, usually as the other character was mentioned in the third person within the first couple of paragraphs. Halfway through the book, however, I realised that there was an additional element that should have helped me make this distinction: the narrators were using different tenses. My failure to notice this is itself valuable in analysing how tense operates in this novel. Carolin Gebauer's insight that (present) tense "does not constitute a purely temporal category" (2021, 10) can help account for this. In the case of *Bellies*, the main and perhaps only function of tense-switching is to mark the difference between the two narrating voices, thus constituting 'detemporalization', a situation in which tense usage does not occur 'for a temporal purpose' (ibid., 70). Gebauer also notes an 'immersive use of the fictional present', which "preserves its intensity only if it is constantly contrasted with past-tense narration" (ibid., 98). This does apply here to some extent: what alerted me to the tense-switching in the novel was the juxtaposition between a chapter ending with a particularly unmediated stream of consciousness in Ming's present tense – "My head is groggy. Opening my eyes feels like lifting weights and so I don't. I love it when he holds me" (Dinan 2023, 150) – and the beginning of a chapter in Tom's past-tense narration, which felt like an interruption of the 'immersive' present. For the most part, however, there is little difference in style between the two narrators: where a Ming chapter begins with "I'm sitting in the gastropub toilet" (73),

the following chapter by Tom locates the narrator in a nearly identical manner aside from the difference in tense: “I was packing up my attic room” (87). Even if this difference serves a purely detemporalised structuring function, however, we can still ask: why the choice of the present for Ming and the past for Tom? The answer may lie in a ‘thematic function’ (Gebauer 2021, 120) in relation to trans identity: this reintroduces the question of temporality in this use of present tense even if the latter does not initially seem to serve a temporal function.

While one could attribute to Tom some characteristics that would thematically motivate his use of the past tense as a narrator (his tendency to keep life at a distance, for example), I am especially interested in asking whether the choice of the present for Ming might correlate with trans experience in some way. Time has been a preoccupation of trans studies since its beginnings in the early 1990s, encompassing efforts to decouple trans from the temporality of medico-legal transition as a teleological narrative of progress, and to reveal more temporally layered, open-ended, and multidirectional experiences. Julian Carter articulates a complex relationship between transness and the present: in transition, “a future is summoned into being in and through a body that does not yet exist, and [...] the body that does exist in the present is the medium for the future body’s becoming-form” (2013, 42). Despite the tense assigned to her narration, it is Ming who has to actively live elsewhere than in the present: while transitioning, she continually orients herself toward the future, making decisions in the present (such as undertaking laser hair removal) that take her closer to embodying herself. In the same passage that alerted me to the fact that Ming’s narration is in the present tense, she in fact oscillates between present and future in this way: “His mum told me I’m pretty. She’s so nice. Maybe I will be pretty” (Dinan 2023, 150). Tom, instead, avoids envisioning the future, through becoming stuck in a job and lifestyle he does not want, by hoping that Ming might decide to ‘detransition’ (126), and, after they break up, by finding it difficult to move on from the relationship. While the tenses used in the novel are past and present, the difference between the characters often comes into being through their relationship to the future. Unlike the more straightforward examples that Gebauer uses to illustrate how tense comes to signify thematically, such as present tense usage in narratives that centre on characters that are “either incapable of [...] or prevented from [...] recollecting their past” (2021, 121), the temporal purpose of tense in *Bellies* is more difficult to decipher. A reflection on trans temporalities might be a good place to start.

Alternating narration

The question of what marks the two narrators as different is also connected to the question of who speaks when, how often, and about what. The fact that Tom's narration opens the novel and continues for the first sixty-five pages, meaning that Ming is initially presented through an outside perspective, may go against an intuitive understanding of what it means to 'voice' trans experience. The first sentence of the novel – "I wore a dress on the night I first met Ming" (Dinan 2023, 1) – signals that identification and disidentification will be an important way to measure the distance between the two characters. Here, they are both attending a party in drag, which, in light of Ming's eventual transition, may be viewed as having a different significance for the two. In the first few pages of the text, we see Ming as an object in someone else's narrative. Tom notes that, while they are both wearing a corset, Ming "looked much better than I did" (2); later, he witnesses Ming take off her make-up, describing her face and body in detail (10). It is difficult not to read this act of external observation in connection with Ming's ambivalent relationship, conveyed later in the novel, with her body pre-transition, as well as with the risks associated with being read as trans in public (129). Perhaps it is in order to signal an uneasiness with being seen that the novel has Ming turn the experience of 'looking' back onto Tom in that first chapter: "Ming furrowed his brow. He scrutinized my face. It was awkward being examined" (5). The first time we hear about Ming thinking that she might be trans is in a chapter narrated by Tom as well; after that, Ming takes over narration for a while, until we hear again from Tom, who now for the first time refers to Ming as 'her' (152). Even when Ming does speak in the first person, we still see some amount of regarding oneself in the third person. She talks of 'Michael' (which is her seldom-used first name) as a separate self, "the gay me [...] the me who could live as a boy": "After I came out, I began to see that maybe Tom loved Michael instead, and the question for us was not where Ming would go, but how much of Michael would stay" (144).²

The issue of the gaze here (which I take up again with *Pew*), is related to that of pronouns and (grammatical) persons. The term "alternating narration" is used by Ellen Peel to name a specific way of negotiating women's identity in the patriarchy (1989, 107). The feminist texts considered by Peel employ shifts "between first-person narration by the protagonist and third-person narration about the protagonist" (ibid.) to convey "the female protagonists' uneasy view of themselves as both subject and object, both self and other" (ibid., 108). Presenting Ming both in the first and in the third person may similarly relate to trans people's experiences of objectification and de-personalisation. The tension between agency and (in)validation, avowed identity and (mis)recognition by others, is a dynamic at the heart of

investigations of trans experience. As Travis Alabanza succinctly summarises, a cis world continually says: “I will not let you tell me who you are, instead / will tell *you*” (2022, 133; original emphasis). Ming moves between being told who she is (implicit in Tom’s use of ‘he’ to refer to her at the beginning), wanting to determine herself against what others might tell her (narration as an ‘I’ perhaps best allowing this reclaiming of voice), and hoping to see from others a confirmation of who she is (Tom’s eventual use of ‘she’ being one of these confirmations). Alternating between the first and the third person shows this negotiation. Of course, the ‘third-person’ narration about Ming is also someone else’s first-person narration in this novel. As Ming and Tom co-create each other, it is not objectification that follows being viewed by another, but a relationship of care. For instance, just before Ming comes out to Tom as trans, he senses that this is a moment in which to give voice to her: “I thought we might cry together, but against his tears my own felt awkward, glib, unwelcome, like I was speaking over him” (Dinan 2023, 117). Reducing the distance between the characters, who are otherwise somewhat isolated as separate narrators, remains an aim of the novel even as it stages the pains of being (mis)known by others.

Disnarration

Narrative references to what did not happen are common in trans writing. Consider this passage from Juno Dawson’s *The Gender Games* (2017):

It would be lovely if the story *did* start with ‘Once upon a time there was a little girl...’, but while that should have been the case, it wasn’t nearly so simple. You see, to the rest of the world, Juno Dawson was born a boy. She looked like a boy, she had a boy’s name, she had a boy’s body.

But she was *never* a boy. (Ibid., 3; original emphasis)

‘[I]f the story did start’, ‘that should have been the case’, ‘it wasn’t nearly so simple’, ‘to the rest of the world’, and ‘she was never’ are all expressions that refer to what is not the case. Transness has a particular relationship with counterfactuality, which can take the form of imagining a world in which one had been assigned a different gender at birth, transition was not delayed, or one was free of the pressures of a transphobic world. Beyond individual life, an effort to bring into being disavowed narratives characterises trans historiography, as seen for instance in C. Riley Snorton’s attention to black gender-non-conforming figures in the archive, appearing as “shadows [...] by way of obstruction” against the visibility of mainstream narratives of trans identity “as corporeal freedom” (2017, 143). Since certain stories have been erased, they can only be referred to in the negative and the hypothetical.

The kind of disnarration I want to focus on in the case of *Bellies* is a particular form of referring to an 'other' narrative, serving the function of what I have called 're-narration' (Pellegrini 2025): the signalling of a departure from canonical narratives of transness which at the same time recognises that they present powerfully intelligible ways of structuring one's experience. This relationship to the narrative that could have been is less of a 'this did not happen' and more of a 'I feel like you think that this is what happened: this both is and is not the case'.

In *Bellies*, Ming writes plays, which – as is usually the case with intradiegetic creations – have metafictional effects. In a meeting with her co-author Lisa to brainstorm ideas for a new play, Ming glances at Lisa's notebook: 'she's only written four words. *Honesty. Ming's journey. Transness.* I release an inaudible sigh' (Dinan 2023, 135). A conversation about this note ensues:

'So we should write something about my transition?' I ask.

'We don't need to write it together. I could take a slightly different role. But maybe we could work some stuff out. You're so amazing, Ming, and you're going on this incredible journey –'

'What aspect of transness?'

She suggests surgery. I say it is probably not worth writing a play about my nose job. It's just not a big enough deal. I also haven't had it yet. Also, lots of trans people can't afford them. It's tone-deaf! [...] She suggests something about trans medicine, and I tell her I jumped the queue because I could pay to go private. Again, tone-deaf. (135)

What is being dialogically disnarrated here are events or topics that Ming feels would not be representative of her experience or that of others. What is also implied is that some of Lisa's ideas derive from a clichéd understanding, based on other narratives, of what a trans story should look like. The reference to surgery seems to indicate this: associating transness with surgery will likely prompt at least some readers to think of genital surgery, the traditional narrative climax of stories about trans women. Instead, Ming provides a reminder that the only surgery she is getting is a nose job. Importantly, Ming's actual experience *is* narrated; the disnarrated serves less as a stand-in for what cannot be said and more as a way to measure the distance between what is told and what could have been told. If the function of the disnarrated is to signify that "this narrative is worth narrating because *it* could have been otherwise, because *it* usually is otherwise, because *it* was *not* otherwise" (Prince 1988, 5; original emphasis), the question of what is 'usually' otherwise is especially important in trans writing. As it now becomes more possible to narrate what was left out by the conventions

established by a very small canon of trans narratives, it seems that it is still necessary to acknowledge these conventions through some form of disnarration.

Plot

Feminist and queer narrative studies have long been invested in gendering plot patterns, showing how the combination, progression, and succession of textual elements is linked to ideological orderings and corporeal logics. But what do trans narratives teach us about plot? Lisa's suggestion that Ming is going through an 'incredible journey' recalls this reflection by Juliet Jacques, an author who has repeatedly shown ambivalence toward the imperative to write autobiographically about trans experience: "I wanted to explicitly mention a problem I had with the media – transition being portrayed like a mythical hero's journey. To me it didn't feel like that, rather a bunch of hoops to jump through while working in boring jobs" (2015, 294). Thinking about plot in trans studies has most often entailed a focus on articulating and critiquing the persistence of narratives that hinge on transition as a journey (see for instance Aizura 2012). Conventionally, this journey is not only imagined as extraordinary, as is alluded to by both Jacques and Dinan, but also as a process with distinct steps. This is seen in *Bellies* when Ming and other participants in the trans support group she attends use metaphorical language that implicitly conceives of transition as a forward trajectory, such as "But it must feel like a step forward" (Dinan 2023, 138) or "it's natural to sometimes have thoughts about going back" (139). In a more general sense, however, the novel asks what kind of trajectories and mobilities are enabled, distorted, or impeded by Ming's transition. When considering writing a play based on the relationship with Tom (which at this point has not yet ended), Ming reflects: "There's no *Ming's Journey* in our relationship. Tom has strapped himself on to a plane with a faulty engine, and it's not interesting because the plane has yet to crash" (136; original emphasis). As metaphors of travel are used at specific points in the novel, they reveal how the larger plot structure involves departures, destinations, and diverging routes.

The jacket blurb of *Bellies* promises intersecting and interrupted trajectories: it states that the novel "begins as your typical boy meets boy", that this premise is soon hijacked despite Tom having "already mapped out their future together", and that the protagonists "face shifts" that cause them to proceed in separate directions until they are "forced to confront the vastly different shapes their lives have taken". Plot progressions, conventional metaphorical understandings of life, and genre expectations are invoked together by this language. We can think of the text's movements and patterns as intersecting forms, as articulated by

Caroline Levine: “Forms will often fail to impose their order when they run up against other forms that disrupt their logic and frustrate their organizing ends, producing aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects” (2015, 7). In Tom’s view, the relationship with Ming is a matter of forms disrupting each other: what happens when “someone’s vision of happiness” is “moving away from the version of themselves you loved” (Dinan 2023, 178). Travel and the impossibility of travel structure the narrative not only metaphorically but also more literally: the couple first moves to London together; Ming moves to New York after the break-up, but is unexpectedly forced to return and confront Tom again; Ming’s transition marks the impossibility of returning to Malaysia, the country where she grew up. With all of these movements, *Bellies* disrupts what Aizura calls the capitalist, middle-class, and colonialist understanding of transition as a “journey-out-and-return-home narrative” featuring trips “abroad” for gender confirmation surgery and reintegration into the workforce at “home” (2018, 39). But even if we just focus on transition as a closed individual form, outside of its interactions with other elements of the plot, it is itself shown to be changeable in the kind of pattern or whole that it constitutes:

Transitioning feels like submitting to the forces I long resisted. Letting the flood take me. Sometimes, though, it feels like the opposite. Like I’m suspended by hooks rather than in water. My body on display for doctors and surgeons and for people with opinions not worth sharing but which they share anyway. (Dinan 2023, 289)

While *Bellies* shows the blending and clashing of forms, a trans temporality of suspension is what we find in *Pew*.

Apprehending the Body: Catherine Lacey’s *Pew*

Reliability

At the beginning of this novel, when a stranger is found sleeping in a church pew, a small community decides to take them in. They call them Pew because their name, like many other details about them, is unknown. Their sex and gender are among these details. The town’s reverend explains why this is a problem:

I’m sorry if this is embarrassing to be asked, but we will need to know if you’re a boy or a girl [...] it’s simply not clear to us which one you are and you have to be one or the other, so unless you want us to figure it out the hard way, I think you should just tell us which one you are. [...] Now, you might know that some people these days like

to think that a person gets to decide whether they are a boy or a girl, but we believe [...] that God decides if you're a boy or a girl. (Lacey 2020, 25; original emphasis)

Pew, the narrator, witnesses this speech but does not respond, and does not explain anything to us readers either. Does Pew equivocate because it would be impossible to answer? Or are they hiding something? Using narratological notions of reliability and trustworthiness to answer these questions raises particular problems when viewing the matter through the lens of trans studies. Regarding with suspicion someone's discourse about themselves is a fraught ethical situation when attribution of gender is involved: trans people's ability to tell the truth about their own identity is routinely dismissed in cis society, and they are viewed as disguising themselves as the 'wrong' gender or as unable to understand what their gender 'really' is. Historically entrenched and systematically enforced transphobia operates as epistemological invalidation: the pervasive demand to conform to a version of reality that runs counter to what the trans person knows to be the truth. Talia Mae Bettcher calls 'reality enforcement' the act of exposing a trans body when "public gender presentation and private genitalia are construed as misaligned" (2014, 392). When the reverend in *Pew* mentions finding out 'the hard way', this is alluding to an act of reality enforcement – in this case, the misalignment existing not between two 'different' genders, but between an appearance that does not signal a gender and a hidden body that 'must' have one.

Can Pew's refusal or inability to tell or show their gender lead to them being read as unreliable? Or does their silence provide a vantage point from which to undermine the reverend's worldview? And, if the latter was the intention, would a reader who shares the reverend's ideas – and I am sure we can all think of some – read against this intention? When Goodreads reviewers use 'she' or 'he' to refer to Pew (I found at least one example of each), they might be indicating that Pew's only statement about the reverend's questions - "I had nothing to say" (Lacey 2020, 26) – is not the truth: they do have something to say, and they are not saying, so readers must fill in the gaps and assign a gender themselves. The question of filling in gaps comes up in discussions such as James Phelan's on the difference between "unreliable underreporting" and "reliable *elliptical narration*" (2005, 52; original emphasis). If elliptical narration is a "telling that leaves a gap that the narrator and the implied author expect their respective audiences to be able to fill" (ibid.), it is not entirely clear if this is what occurs in this novel. Information about Pew's body and its possible classification is certainly constituted as a gap. In one sense, we are not supposed to fill this gap: trying to guess whether Pew is (in whatever way) a boy or a girl would align us with the

behaviour of the townspeople, behaviour which is often presented as invasive and causing distress to Pew. But, in another sense, we are supposed to 'fill the gap' to the extent that we are asked to understand that it must stay unfilled, honouring Pew's refusal to tell. We could read the author's endorsement of Pew's silence as creating a "bonding unreliability" (Phelan 2007, 223), either in the form of "literally unreliable but metaphorically reliable" narration (ibid., 228) or "naïve defamiliarization" (ibid., 229). However, the question of whether Pew is, intentionally or not, unreliable, and to whom, is not easily resolved. Trans studies can help us to unpack the ethical and political dimensions of interpreting omissions and avowals about sex and gender.

Metalepsis

Pew's narrative, before their arrival in the town, begins with a series of hypotheticals: "If you ever need to – and I hope you never need to, but a person cannot be sure – if you ever need to sleep, if you are ever so tired that you feel nothing but the animal weight of your bones" (Lacey 2020, 3). Eventually, this gives way to the 'I' telling us about their own tiredness, which leads them to find a church in which to sleep. The start of the novel can be read as the use of a generic 'you', but also as an appeal to an addressee/audience, involving us as witnesses seemingly not to be called upon again. As the narrative concludes, two-hundred pages later, we are invoked once more: "No one knows where I went, and I don't know where I went, and I don't know where Annie went or where *you* went" (206; emphasis added). The 'you' appears one last time, a few sentences before the end of the novel: "All is quiet now; the sky is uncertain. I am moving, perhaps I am moving toward *you*" (20; emphasis added). This kind of address can more or less straightforwardly be read as an instance of rhetorical metalepsis. If metalepsis is the crossing of a barrier between diegetic worlds (Pew being in the story and 'you' being outside of it), then the crossing here is not particularly substantial. As Marie-Laure Ryan puts it,

Rhetorical metalepsis opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries. This temporary breach of illusion does not threaten the basic structure of the narrative universe (2006, 207).

But what are we to make of the possibility that Pew is 'moving toward you'? If, unlike rhetorical metalepsis, "ontological metalepsis opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination" (ibid.), is this what might happen when

Pew completes this movement? And might a certain 'contamination' happen even without a clear crossing?

Trans studies has much to say about crossing. In an often-cited reflection, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore urge to think beyond a simple meaning of "trans-" as crossing "horizontally between two established gender spaces" (2018, 13). They propose the notion of "transing" as "a practice that takes place within, as well as across, or between, gendered spaces", recognising that genders are "potentially porous and permeable spatial territories (arguably numbering more than two)" (ibid.,12). If a boundary is permeable, if spaces are multiple, open, or overlapping, it becomes less clear what counts as inside, outside, staying, or breaching. This might also be the case in narrative. The question of what constitutes crossing seems to be asked, in parallel and hitherto separate ways, by narrative inquiries into diegetic levels and by trans reflections on how one relates to identity boundaries; delineating territories can sometimes be an equally inconclusive operation. Even when metalepsis does not occur, Monika Fludernik notes, there is a "transgressive quality" to the pronoun 'you', as the latter "seems to be directed to the real reader rather than remaining safely confined within the realms of fiction" (2011, 117). Metalepsis may then find itself on a spectrum of narrative transing, among other forms of crossing and reaching. When Pew 'does not know where you went' or is 'moving toward you', both participants, across blurry narrative boundaries, are almost as undefinable as each other: the elusive identity of the narrator mirrors the unknown (and equally ungendered) position of the you. The crossing of categories, then, happens within, across, and between these figures, in a transing of identity and narrative. And even if we are called upon the scene of the story, we cannot see very well, since much of Pew's appearance, history, and thoughts are hidden from us as they are from the characters. The narrator's reaching toward a 'you' seems to go beyond the question of looking – rather than Ryan's 'glimpse', it is a blinder kind of proximity. We do not see Pew clearly, and we do not know whether they can see us.

Embodiment

But how does 'not seeing' Pew work in the text? In some ways, they are a highly embodied character, as they are the perceptual centre whose sensory impressions and corporeal orientations parse the storyworld for readers. For instance, their first morning in the town begins in this way:

I woke up on a pew, sleeping on my side, knees bent. I did not move. I felt the warmth of another body near my head. I looked toward the floor, saw navy blue pant legs and

two pale brown shows. Above: the underside of a stubbly jaw. A large voice in the room like faraway thunder. My joints ached. (Lacey 2020, 13)

Here, the narrator is located with respect to the objects around them in minute detail: we follow their restricted field of vision, become aware of their perception of temperature and sound, are told about their physical sensations. On the other hand, passages that involve Pew's body as a more direct object of the narrative blur visual apprehension and confuse location:

In a cracked mirror I saw these legs, saw these arms. I shut my eyes and tried to remember that body, but under shut lids the mind saw nothing [...] It must be that I – whatever I am – am lying on the floor of a canoe, lying here, looking up at the sky. [...] Sometimes I hear people speaking to the canoe as if they are not aware that I am in here. (7)

The body becomes defamiliarised here, and its position shifts perplexingly in relation to the deictic centre ('these legs', 'that body', 'the mind', 'in here'). This discontinuous embodiment is sometimes – but not enough to make a conclusive connection – alluded to be the result of a traumatic past, possibly involving physical abuse. While this is a past to which we do not have access, the experiences that we do see Pew go through in the novel consist in persistent attempts to decipher and classify their body, which they clearly try to resist. Contradictory corporeal presence might then be the form that this resistance takes. In this way, the novel resonates with trans theorising of the body, in which liminality, ambiguity, and uncertain location are sometimes depicted as painful and sometimes as liberatory.

Suspicious of promises of 'post-transition' wholeness and harmony, trans scholar Hil Malatino asks: "Who experiences such unity between feeling and perception, given how radically thrown – nonsovereign, out of one's control – modes of intersubjective corporeal perception are?" (2019, 640). Instead, Malatino describes trans experience as often characterised by "consistent dissonance, misgendering, and misrecognition" as well as "the anxiety and fear that one cultivates as a product of living through such (routine, quotidian, incessant) moments" (ibid.). If *Pew* is providing a solution for escaping the precariousness of intersubjective perceptions of the body, with the dissonance and misrecognition that it entails, this solution seems to be to centre the body as directing narrative attention, while simultaneously directing this attention away from that very body. When Pew is being questioned by the reverend about gender, and later during a medical examination, we can see how the character anchors 'joint attention' – "the process through which readers' attention is drawn to the unfolding of events and, at the same time, the pointing gesture

itself" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 56). In the hospital room, as Pew is "not getting undressed, not putting on the paper gown" (Lacey 2020, 92), we instead follow their gaze to observe the movements of an insect on the floor, who "jumped every few seconds, but landed on its back, the hard shell ticking against the floor" (ibid.). The narrator explains: "[i]t kept my attention. I could not think in any other direction" (93). Similarly, as Pew listens to the reverend's questioning, readers' attention is directed away from the bodies involved in this (one-sided) conversation and toward other elements of the diegetic world mediated through Pew's senses: "The insects sang in the heat around us. I looked back into the house through a window. Through two open doors I could see the edge of the parrot's cage, could watch the parrot side-stepping along its perch" (25). The bodies of animals, caged or unable to move in desired directions, are being centred as perhaps telling us something more about Pew than a description of their own body would. In this way, the animals participate in fleshing out Pew as embodied character beyond their anatomy and the gendered readings we might make of it.

Focalisation

Visibility is a central concern in trans studies. Noting that the "increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has been brought about by solidifying the line between who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable", micha cárdenas asks,

What does 'trans visibility' mean? For trans visibility to be a reality, there would have to be an essential trans identity to make visible, but there is not. How could one make visible an identity that begins with the claim: 'I am not what appears to be; I know this because of a feeling I have; I am my vision of my future self.' (2017, 170)

While being understood, included, and affirmed as existing are not rights that can be given up by subjects who are yet to fully obtain them, visibility is viewed critically because it can bring with it objectification, over-simplification, and the disavowing of what is rendered less visible. *Pew* seems to reflect along similar lines: "I shut my eyes and imagined a life in which only our thoughts and intentions could be seen, where our bodies were not flesh but something else" (Lacey 2020, 70). Aside from such explicit conclusions, the way in which a text handles focalisation can tell us where it stands on the politics of visibility. While this novel focalises through its eponymous protagonist – put simply, we perceive what they perceive –, it never focalises through other characters. What focalising through other characters might entail in first-person narratives can be seen in this passage from Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019), in which the trans narrator makes themselves visible through

the eyes of a lover who sees their body for the first time: “He saw the scars under my pecs. I watched his eyes work down my body. No penis” (Winterson 2019, 118). Exposure of the body to other characters correlates with exposure of this body to readers. In *Pew*, we almost have the opposite situation: most of the body remains hidden to everyone, with extra care taken to give readers as little as possible to see. *Bellies* exists somewhat in between: while we often see Ming clearly, some characters have access to details that are not described to us, especially in relation to parts of the body that are traditionally the object of cis audiences’ curiosity about trans people.

The only moments in which we might gain a sense of what others see when looking at Pew is when we hear what these others say about their body: “Once someone said I had a slender neck, a woman’s neck, they said, a woman’s neck growing from the thick shoulders of a man, but maybe it was the other way around – slender shoulders and a thick neck” (Lacey 2020, 7). In the debates that accompany any discussion of focalisation in narrative studies, such as whether it has to do with seeing, whether it refers to the point of perception of the area being perceived, whether narrators can be focalisers (and I have implicitly picked sides in most of these matters in the previous paragraph), one question becomes especially relevant here: that of the relationship between speaking and seeing. The fact that Pew reports what others say, but not what they see, about their body makes the image of this body more uncertain for readers. If the passage I have just quoted were to read, in the vein of *Frankenstein*, ‘once someone saw my slender neck’, this would fix a sense of what the narrator’s body looks like more firmly than the passage currently does. At the same time, as Peggy Phelan points out, “within written narratives seeing is also saying” and “focalization exposes the deeply entwined relationship between perceiving and saying” (2015, 82). Readers can perceive only to the extent that narrators ‘say’. In this novel, seeing and saying are tied when both visibility and speech are being coerced out of Pew, and when Pew refuses to satisfy the demands for both. Pew’s silence elicits an effect that unsettles the community in the same way in which their ambiguously signifying corporeality does. In articulating his suspicions about Pew, one of the townspeople explains, “*We all talk together, don’t we? We all discuss things out loud, as that is the way our culture has taught us, isn’t it now? Storytelling. Sharing*” (Lacey 2020, 135; original emphasis). In the same way, the reverend has explained to Pew that, according to the values of the community, one cannot simply opt out of being visually recognisable as male or female. Reporting or staying silent about what others see can then encode ideological views on what the appearance of bodies can tell us about gender, as well as on how much explaining one owes to others.

Conclusion

When narrative studies meets trans studies, the result is a hybridity of methods, objects, and conclusions. Meeting is not the same as blending: narrative studies and trans studies, already internally heterogeneous fields, do not form a unified map that allows us to perfectly locate narrative and social phenomena in relation to each other. Rather, they are two sometimes overlapping and sometimes incompatible lenses that, when used together, form a picture of the formal, ethical, affective, cultural, and political dimensions of texts and genders. In attending simultaneously to the experiences, needs, and politics of a group marginalised for their embodiment and to the workings of language, structure, and processes of writing, reading, and publishing, we may not always gain the tidiest results, but we will produce insights that are more wide-ranging than the ones we would have obtained if we had not strayed beyond disciplinary boundaries. Each of the sections I have presented above is a point of departure that could and should lead to a more in-depth exploration of the particular intersections that I have illuminated. What I have aimed to show is that, when narrative studies meets trans studies, some shared objects of inquiry will emerge: looking, speaking, boundaries, presence, truth, time, space. These points of encounter are productive sites for interpreting trans narratives however we may define them – written by, read by, written for, being about, or otherwise having an affinity with trans people, or with transness as an experience or political operation that goes beyond particular embodiments and identifications. Through dialogue with trans studies, narrative studies may then become better equipped to help us understand, when it comes to these narratives and their contexts, the links between form, representation, and real-life stakes.

Notes

1. See also the articles collected in Mejeur and Pellegrini (2024). For those new to trans topics, Stryker (2017), Fey (2021), and Salah (2021) are a good starting point.
2. Susan Lanser's question about whether differently gendered selves in trans narratives may fight for textual space, in the way in which separately embodied characters do, can begin to be answered here (2024). While Ming is undoubtedly given primacy over 'Michael',

the fact that the latter occasionally surfaces is a reminder that transition involves grappling with some amount of identity fragmentation.

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