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**Representations of Transgender Young Adults in Multiple Medias, or
The Transgender Success Story**

by

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**Representations of Transgender Young Adults in Multiple Medias, or
The Transgender Success Story**

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For all those whose stories have not yet been told.

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Abstract

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

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Adolescence is not experienced in the same way by all individuals or communities; individuals who cannot find harmony between their sense of identity and social norms often have a much harder time during this period. In this vein, there is an especially strong need for transgender adolescents to be able to locate themselves in the world around them. I examine current transgender representations available to (and specifically marketed towards) young adults through three venues—literature, television, and the Internet. The amount of material that deals directly with any instance of transgender or transsexual identity is minimal. I will argue at the very least that these representations are important for transgendered adolescents to find someone with whom they can identify but that more than likely, it is important for all adolescents to have exposure to representations of transgender individuals. I closely analyze the young adult novel, *Parrotfish* (Wittlinger 2007), and the CW television show, *America's Next Top Model*, for narratives of success that are applied to transgender subjects. I also briefly analyze three websites and compare them to the previous texts, identifying key similarities and differences. I end with suggestions for future growth in all three areas.

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Introduction

WHY TRANSGENDER?

In this thesis, I argue that representations of transgender young adults in literature, on television, and on the Internet, are important for their positive identity development. In making this argument, I assume transgender identity is not a problem to be fixed, but rather an identity to be understood and embraced. I would like to offer a “definition” of transgender from Stephen Whittle’s Foreword to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006):

A trans identity is now accessible almost anywhere, to anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or who has a gender identity at odds with the labels “man” or “woman” credited to them by formal authorities. The identity can cover a variety of experiences. It can encompass discomfort with role expectations, being queer, occasional or more frequent cross-dressing, permanent cross-dressing and cross-gender living, through to accessing major health interventions such as hormonal therapy and surgical reassignment procedures. It can take up as little of your life as five minutes a week or as much as a life-long commitment to reconfiguring the body to match the inner self. (Stryker & Whittle xi)

These are the words I choose to take as my starting point, but I must acknowledge, also from the onset, that this is not the definition accepted by all. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), the definition of transsexual is, “transgender people who live or wish to live full time as members of the gender opposite to their birth sex” (APA *Answers*). The dissonance between these two definitions is part of the reason this research is so important. Recall that until 1974, homosexuality was still considered a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (commonly referred to as the DSM, published by the APA), and gender identity disorder remains in the DSM-IV today as a mental disorder (APA, *DSM-IV* 532).

We may never be able to get an accurate estimate of the number of transgender individuals living in the United States and world-wide. The most recent publication from the American Psychological Association states:

It is difficult to accurately estimate the prevalence of transgender people in Western countries. As many as 2-3% of biological males engage in cross-dressing, at least occasionally. Current estimates of the prevalence of transsexualism are about 1 in 10,000 for biological males and 1 in 30,000 for biological females. The number of people in other transgender categories is unknown. (APA, *Answers* 1)

It should be noted that the data has changed considerably over time and can be expected to continue to change. The 1994 version of the DSM suggests that 1 per 30,000 adult males is male-to-female transsexual and 1 per 100,000 adult females is female-to-male transsexual (APA, *DSM-IV* 535). In their book for mental health, medical, and educational professionals, Cohen-Kettenis and Pfäfflin discuss the difficulty in getting accurate data: “Prevalence estimates of transsexualism among adolescents and adults (that is 15 years and above) are usually based on the number of transsexuals, treated at major centers, or on responses of registered psychiatrists to surveys concerning their number of transsexual patients within a particular country or region” (Cohen-Kettenis and Pfäfflin 65). Although they are a small minority, they still deserve representation in society.

Now I will speak to the unique challenges of individuals in adolescence who may be for the first time coming to realize their identity, which is something my paper aims to address. The concept of adolescence as a unique developmental stage was first introduced by G. Stanley Hall in 1904 with his work *Adolescence* and has since been a huge field of study in psychology. There are five recognized psychosocial issues that teens deal with during their adolescent years: establishing an identity, establishing autonomy, establishing intimacy, becoming comfortable with one’s sexuality, and achievement

(Lerner and Steinberg). Psychology supports the need to study cultural factors in the development of identity: “Whereas puberty and cognitive development are largely biologically determined, the greater part of psychological and social development will depend on environmental and sociocultural influence” (Viner & Christie par. 13).

There are multiple theories within psychology on the development of gendered characteristics and behavior, which fall into three broad categories: biological, social learning (socialization), and cognitive theories (Galambos 236). In the *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, Galambos argues that these three approaches have “become more complex and more considerate of the probability of multiple, interactive influences from many levels of analysis (both within and outside of the individual) on gender-related behavior. Indeed, in some cases, proponents of one approach have acknowledged and incorporated elements of other approaches in their own evolving views of influences on gender development” (239). Galambos gives many examples of evidence for a developmental systems approach as a “superordinate perspective that may be able to integrate elements of [these] theories and to guide future research on gender development in adolescence” (236).

Psychological theories of gender identity development are contradictory, but most would agree that culture plays at least *some* role in identity development processes (Galambos).¹ There is not one established theory of exactly what happens in gender identity development during adolescence, and evidence can usually be found for and against any one theory, but one active theory is that of gender intensification:

During adolescence, gender roles become salient for men and women.
Adolescence has been referred to as a time of gender intensification (J. Hill &

¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to give adequate treatment to psychological theories on gender identity development. For an in-depth overview of this topic, see the *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (Lerner & Steinberg).

Lynch, 1983). During adolescence, boys become increasingly concerned with adhering to the male gender role and girls become increasingly concerned with adhering to the female gender role. These concerns arise in part from outside forces: adolescents feel increasing pressure from society to adhere to their gender roles. (Helgeson 524-525).²

In an attempt to reconcile developmental and social psychological approaches to gender development, Eckes and Trautner discuss the interrelated nature of the physical and social factors in adolescence: “Reaching puberty, when boys and girls begin to face the developmental task of engaging in romantic and sexual relationships and, at the same time, experience stereotypic expectations concerning how to attract or approach members of the other sex, new adaptations of gender attitudes and gender-related behaviors ensue” (426). It seems clear from these sources that the role of biology is one of the key reasons why gender matters in adolescence in new ways from childhood. There are literal, physiological, hormonal changes taking place. There is consensus, however, that outside factors also play a role in shaping identity, including our gender.

For more than one hundred years now, adolescence has been identified as a crucial time in human development; it is when the individual comes into awareness of their identity. It is also a biologically noteworthy time, as the onset of puberty causes significant physiological changes. Gender (presentation) plays a large role in an adolescent’s success or failure at adapting to society’s expectations. Adolescence is not experienced in the same way by all individuals or communities; individuals who cannot find harmony between their sense of identity and social norms often have a much harder time during this period. In this vein, there is an especially strong need for transgender adolescents to be able to locate themselves in the world around them. Transgender individuals may make up a small percentage of the population, but they are also possibly

² I do not claim at this point to have found a psychological consensus on the issue of gender development. From my research so far, the topic is widely debated and has only recently really seriously been investigated, especially with regards to adolescence. This is one area where I still have much to learn.

the most misunderstood and at risk. I examine current transgender representations available to (and specifically marketed towards) young adults through three venues—literature, television, and the Internet. The amount of material that deals directly with any instance of transgender or transsexual identity is minimal. I will argue at the very least that these representations are important for transgender adolescents to find someone with whom they can identify. A thirteen-year-old transgender person in rural America (for example) has limited resources to be a part of the transgender community in any tangible way and literature, television, and the Internet are accessible avenues this person has to explore and come to understand their identity.

The dearth of materials for adolescents dealing with transgender issues should concern anyone in education, information and library sciences, mental and physical health services, adolescent literature studies, and anyone who considers his or herself an advocate for social justice. Currently there are minimal representations of transgender adolescence and those that do exist are inconsistent in quality and scope. The importance of transgender adolescents having a mirror of their own feelings and experiences means that literature, television programs, and websites must explicitly deal with issues unique to this group. Although the body is a site of anxiety for all adolescents, this period of change is especially difficult and confusing for transgender adolescents, who may for the first time be forced to grapple with their identity in a society which offers them no clear way to understand themselves (Burgess 40). At a time when individual transformation may be hard for any adolescent, imagine the pains of a young adult whose physical transformations do not align with their internal sense of self. Quality literature and media for young adults can help them sort through questions about their changing bodies and identities. I argue that there is an especially strong need for transgender adolescents to be able to locate themselves in the world around them.

This study is important to Gender Studies because transgender issues highlight the issues feminists traditionally struggle with—gender, sexuality, identity, and the body. Queer and transgender theory allow for the possibility of multiple genders and sexualities not limited to the binary system. The sex and gender binaries are not reality but a social construct and furthering alternate ideas is beneficial to the well being of society. To once again quote Stephen Whittle: “in order to hear the voices of trans people, as justice demands, one has to acknowledge the limits of sex and gender and move into a new world in which any identity can be imagined, performed, and named” (Stryker & Whittle xv). Adolescents must be a part of this new world. At a time when they are undergoing intense physical change and finally have the cognitive abilities to (try to) comprehend the changes that are taking place, adolescents are looking for their voice.

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

I will begin my analysis with literature, more specifically the young adult literature genre. Young adult literature is defined as “books that are published for readers age twelve to eighteen, have a young adult protagonist, are told from a young adult perspective, and feature coming-of-age or other issues and concerns of interest to YAs” (Cart & Jenkins 1). YA literature is a burgeoning genre, and queer-friendly novels have been carving a niche for themselves. YA novels with trans content are a relatively new development. I will analyze *Parrotfish* (Wittlinger 2007), to investigate the models of success offered in one trans text. *Parrotfish* is the first YA novel told from the perspective of a transgender character. I will follow this analysis with a call for more literature and suggestions for the future growth of the young adult genre.

TELEVISION

Transgender adolescents are ironically the least visible on television. After a brief history and review of transgender representation on film and television, I will use one case study for the majority of my analysis. *America's Next Top Model*, Cycle 11, featured a transgender contestant for the first time in the fall of 2008. *America's Next Top Model* airs on the CW Television Network, which is meant to appeal to women 18 to 34 years old, and is consistently among their most successful shows. Because there is such a lack of visibility of transgender issues on television, I will investigate what work *America's Next Top Model* is doing through its choices of representation. I will include televisual analyses of portions of the show, drawing on film theory. Though transgender representations on television are deficient (at least in number), they have the highest likelihood of reaching a large and wide audience. I propose that representation of adolescent trans bodies in literature, on-line, and on television is important for positive identity formation for transgender adolescents, and also to further the integration of transgender experience into mainstream culture. Television is the site where this integration is most likely to happen, at least of the three media I investigate in this study.

THE INTERNET

Because the Internet is an open forum, virtually anyone can “publish” materials there. This accessibility is a key factor in making the Internet a stronghold in representations of transgender individuals. On the positive and productive hand, the much less stringent standards allow voices to be heard that can't find an outlet elsewhere, but on the other hand, they allow the dissemination of unchecked and incorrect information. While Transgender individuals may be able to express themselves online in a healthy, productive fashion, they may also find misleading, damaging, or confusing information.

These statements, it is true, could be equally valid when applied to any group of people, but the stakes are elevated in this case because of the general lack of knowledge and cultural insensitivity (or even disdain) surrounding transgender issues. Add to this the previously discussed difficulties of adolescence and the general comfort young people today feel using the Internet and we can see the importance of studying the information and representations that are being marketed to transgender adolescents on the Internet. I will focus my Internet analysis on three websites that are meant to represent three different categories of websites I have discerned.

Through close analysis of isolated texts, I wish to illuminate some of the ways young transgender adults are being encouraged to succeed. What is considered a transgender success story? How does it differ from other versions of success stories, if at all? Are there common elements found in different media approaches? I will address these questions and more in my thesis.

Chapter One:

Young Adult Literature

I began my project setting out to reveal literature's importance to identity development. After my research led me to Education, Sociology, Psychology and many other fields, I thought I might be in the wrong discipline. Then I remembered that in the discipline of English, I don't need to prove that literature affects those who read it; this is an assumption on which the very field is based. I finally realized that my project should then be to try to uncover the intricacies of one text. I hope to delve deeper into my research interests by continuing my education beyond my Master's degree but for now, I hope to add a thoughtful and useful close analysis of a text that has yet to be examined academically, Ellen Wittlinger's *Parrotfish* (2007).

Analyzing transgender representation in young adult literature is an intersection of multiple fields of study. We as humans are constantly being shaped by our surroundings—especially our culture and its expressions. Sociology, psychology, education, race, and gender studies all interrogate and often employ the relationship between the individual and their environment and examine the ways in which individuals interact with and are shaped by culture. The wide variety of fields points to the complexity of the interaction—it is very difficult to show direct causation between one cultural expression and a resultant aspect of identity. Because there is a reasonable chance that literature contributes to gender identity development, young adult literature should treat the subject responsibly. I argue that the risk of low self-esteem (often leading to worse) in transgender adolescents is enough to motivate their inclusion in young adult literature.

Young adult literature as a genre has not been around as long as the concept of adolescence, but has recently been receiving critical attention. I focus on young adult (YA) literature here because of its unique qualities and audience. If literature does affect the individual, then we need to meet the particular needs of people at different stages in their development. YA literature is a burgeoning field specifically aimed at helping twelve to eighteen-year-olds navigate the problems of adolescence. The almost self-help nature of the genre implies a greater responsibility for YA authors to write with their audience's needs in mind. Most scholars of adolescence agree that the main dilemma of adolescence is the finding of one's self, or the development of an identity (Mertz 179; Browning xii).

I take my definition of high-quality YA literature from the *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents, and the Media*. The authors of this encyclopedia recognize young adult books as being able to assist adolescents in their social and moral development:

First, literature must be written from an adolescent viewpoint to ensure that readers will identify with the characters. Second, adolescent characters should be free from parental restrictions, allowing them to take credit for their accomplishments. YA books should also be written about a variety of subjects and have fast-paced narratives that complement adolescents' lives. Likewise, YA books need to include stories about characters from diverse ethnic and cultural groups, including characters of varied socioeconomic status, race, ability, gender, age, religion, and sexual orientation. Moreover, books for adolescents must be generally optimistic, with adolescent characters making worthy and believable accomplishments that the readers will respect. Finally, YA books should deal with emotions that are important to adolescents—achieving emotional independence from parents, preparing for sex, accepting physical changes in one's body, and developing personal morals and ideology. (Arnett 2007, 126)

Most of the definition concerns itself with the structural and stylistic conventions of the genre, with the last sentence promoting content themes. Although they don't correspond exactly, the emotions authors should deal with in the content of YA literature

are closely related to the five psychosocial issues adolescents face.³ In my introduction I spoke briefly about some of the issues adolescents deal with as part of the search for identity and how these issues are further complicated for transgender adolescents.

The uniqueness of transgender experience may mean the definition of high-quality YA literature that includes transgender characters should be different from our current definition. I do not want to suggest that transgender adolescents do not face the same problems as other adolescents, because in fact they do. But representations of non-trans characters dealing with the problems of adolescence may not reflect the reality of a trans adolescent's life at all. Take for example something like, "accepting physical changes in one's body," (Arnett 126) which is an entirely different issue for a transgender adolescent. Due to varying degrees of understanding or differing ideologies, authors of YA literature may treat this problem in hugely disparate ways.

There is sufficient evidence to support that adolescence is a particularly trying time for transgender people. Just like any teen reader, what transgender teen readers are looking for is not a manifesto on gender, but a mirror of their own feelings and experiences to which they can relate (Rockefeller). I have already shown that trans adolescents have unique anxieties with which to deal. The specific needs of trans adolescents supports my argument for including transgender narratives in young adult literature. I will also argue later that these narratives are important for all adolescents to read.⁴ First, I will show that there is a current lack in the literature of the types of narratives I am calling for.

³ Briefly, these are: establishing an identity, establishing autonomy, establishing intimacy, becoming comfortable with one's sexuality, and achievement (Steinberg 1999).

⁴ This argument will appear in the "Closing Thoughts" section of this chapter.

In Cart and Jenkins' review of YA literature with GLBTQ content, they analyze the texts using a model adapted from Sims Bishops' three-part model for African-American representation/inclusion in children's fiction (Cart and Jenkins xix). The three categories are homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, and queer consciousness/community. As you can see, even the model used does not quite describe transgender experience. "Homosexual visibility" stories involve a character coming out or being outed; the resulting social disruption and response is the dramatic substance of the story (Cart and Jenkins xx). "Gay assimilation" stories assume a melting pot of sexual and gender identity and include characters who just happen to be transgender the same way someone " 'just happens' to be left-handed or have red hair" (Ibid.). Stories of "queer consciousness" represent GLBTQ characters in the context of their communities of GLBTQ people and their families of choice and/or origin and are meant for any audience, not just readers "within" the culture (Ibid.). In their review of 187 titles (and they only reviewed YA fiction with GLBTQ content), there are only seven with transgender characters. Four of these fit into the "Homosexual visibility" category, one in the "gay assimilation" category, and the rest are unclear because they are short story collections with multiple categories represented. None of the full-length novels present the transgender character in the primary narrative role (Cart and Jenkins 177-184).⁵

Elsworth Rockefeller, a young adult services librarian, overviews and categorizes many of the existing young adult works of fiction with transgender characters—a more up to date and focused study. Rockefeller affirmed my own findings that very few novels exist that constructively deal with transgender issues and the few that do are often narrowly focused on gender and can come across as didactic. Rockefeller analyzes how

⁵ Cart's book covers material published from 1969 until 2004 and therefore does not include *Parrotfish*.

these characters are treated within the literature, paying attention to pronouns, attitude, and tone (Rockefeller 520). It should be noted that there is a healthy (and ever growing) canon of trans literature available outside of young adult fiction (i.e. Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, Judith Halberstam), but the expansion of transgender literature for the adult audience does not preclude the necessity of a more inclusive young adult genre as well.

Cart and Jenkins argue that “YA literature with GLBTQ content itself has begun to move...toward assimilation; moving, that is, from being an isolated or ‘ghettoized’ subgenre to becoming a more integrated part of the total body of young adult literature” (128). To make their point they “consider eight important trends that have informed the growth and enriched the content of YA literature in the first five years of this new decade” (Cart and Jenkins 128-129). The first of these eight trends is “crossover titles” but importantly and not surprisingly, the seven titles they list as examples of either YA novels that appeal to adults or adult novels that appeal to young adults (have young adult themes and/or characters) are overwhelmingly about gay characters (some of which are only secondary in the listed novels), with one instance of a lesbian character among them (Cart and Jenkins 129). There is no mention of transgender characters within the crossover titles trend.

There is a similar pattern in the remaining seven trends of literature Cart and Jenkins site: literary fiction, new narrative techniques, short story renaissance, poetry renaissance, internationalization of young adult literature, graphic novels and comic books, and historical fiction. It is no mistake that transgender representation lags behind in its maturation; while the “first young adult novel with gay content, John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Will Be Worth the Trip*, appeared in 1969,” the first young adult novel with transgender content appeared in 2004 (Cart and Jenkins xv). If history is replicated, then

it may be another thirty years before young adult novels tell stories of transgender assimilation. Or, noticing this pattern, we could learn from history and authors could proactively push the boundaries of what may seem a “natural” progression to publishers.

Of the fifty items included in an annotated list of “An Essential Core Collection of LGBTQ Fiction, Nonfiction, and Non-print items,” in *Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Teens: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians*, ten of the fifty items include transgender contents, though some of the narratives only include background or secondary characters (Martin and Murdock). This is an improvement, though, and it reflects the authors’ criteria for selecting this core (and not exhaustive) list, which were: “(1) strong personal opinions that any collection should have these items; (2) validation of these opinions by other librarians, reviewers, and most important, teens; and (3) these items are still in print and teens are actively reading them now” (Martin and Murdock 139-140). Although the authors claim these items “constitute the ideal queer YA collection” (Martin and Murdock 139), ideal seems the wrong word; it is the best of what’s available, but for trans teens, much of what’s available is not ideal, and what would be ideal is not available.

PARROTFISH

The parameters of success in a young adult novel are easy to distinguish—“achieving emotional independence from parents, preparing for sex, accepting physical changes in one’s body, and developing personal morals and ideology” (Arnett 126). My analysis is not attempting to evaluate the “success” of a transgender character at being transgender, or passing as one or the other gender. However, gender may be a factor in the estimation of the larger success of these characters as evaluated by themselves, the

public, or the reader. The text will reveal to us the complicated nature of success for our transgender character.

To my knowledge, *Parrotfish* (Wittlinger 2007) is the first and only full-length young adult novel narrated from the perspective of a transgender teenager.⁶ This in and of itself may be enough to make it a good choice for analysis, but it is also a critically well-reviewed novel. The novel is very recent, which is not surprising considering that the genre of queer-inclusive YA literature is exceptionally young and as such, the pickings are meager (Rockefeller). If the trajectory of transgender YA literature follows that of gay YA literature, then the more time passes, the more inclusive and representative texts will become (Cart and Jenkins; Rockefeller 526). I can confirm from my reading of YA literature with transgender content that this is true. The mere fact that *Parrotfish* has the first transgender narrator and is the first to feature a female-to-male transgender adolescent is an example of this growing inclusion. The focus in *Parrotfish* on a female-male transgender character makes the novel especially noteworthy.

I will briefly summarize the plot of *Parrotfish*. The story begins with our protagonist who is still known as Angela to his family and friends, though it is understood he has already told them of his transgender identity. In the opening chapters he makes the transition from being called Angela to Grady. The reactions Grady receives run the gamut. His childhood best friend (a girl) is confused and unable to be supportive; his family is passively accepting; his school is the site of both the worst and best reactions—bullies who abuse him physically and verbally and a few open-minded individuals who only become more interested in Grady as a result of his transition.

⁶ Rockefeller corroborates this in his own research, though we would both point out the novel *Choir Boy* (Anders 2005) whose narrator tries to castrate himself in order to keep his high-pitched voice. Readers may imagine that this character will identify as transgender in the future (Rockefeller 522).

Although the substance of the narrative is concerned with Grady's transition and the ensuing related drama, there are simultaneous story lines that supplement the central plot.⁷ Grady's father is the driving force behind a family tradition of decorating their house and lawn each Christmas. The Christmas ritual culminates in a live performance by the family in the front room of their house that the neighborhood gathers to watch from outside. Grady's mother, sister, brother, and Grady himself have all come to detest the tradition and struggle with how to break the news to the father. At school, Grady meets and falls for the amazingly popular and kind Kita Charles, who is on-again, off-again with one of Grady's new friends, Russ Gallo. Another plot line that is more closely tied to Grady's transition is his tenuous relationship with his former best friend, who has fallen in with the crowd led by one of Grady's bullies, the relentlessly cruel Danya. The novel's overall tone is optimistic and feel-good albeit with a tension that runs throughout due to Grady's struggles.

Within the text, we can identify three different narratives of success: Grady's own sense of success, the "public's" estimation of his success, and the reader's own feelings about Grady's success (or failure). Inevitably, each of these three groups will have different criteria for measuring success. A question that remains is which narrative, if any, is privileged and thus encouraged for the reader to adopt. The reason the reader's account of success remains distinct is because the subjectivity a reader brings to the text affects how they will interact with it. Because the story is in first-person, examining Grady's sense of his own success is a great place to start.

⁷ *Parrotfish* would belong in the "homosexual visibility" category of Cart and Jenkins' analysis (xx).

GRADY

The story begins against the backdrop of Grady's aunt having a baby boy. His nephew's birth inspires Grady to ponder over the early division of the sexes, which he resents: "Not all of us fit so neatly into the category we get saddled with on Day One when the doctor glances down and makes a quick assessment of the available equipment" (Wittlinger 3-4).⁸ From the beginning Grady is questioning binary divisions, asking, "...why does it have to be a simple answer? One or the other?" (Ibid.). Yet he also knows that the general public does not share his feelings and that there are expectations for him to be more than just "healthy" (Wittlinger 4).

Already we can see that Grady probably judges his own success by different measures than dominant society. Grady even explains his choice of name to the reader; he likes that it is gender-ambiguous. He also likes "*the gray part of it...not black, not white. Somewhere in the middle*" (Wittlinger 6). Grady's internal monologue foreshadows the end of the novel and is a concise expression of Grady's current gender identity. Grady represents a queer understanding of transgender identity—he is willing and actually desires to remain somewhat ambiguous, somewhere in the middle. Although gender neutrality has always been a possible position, some have noticed an increasing trend towards a fluid understanding of transgender identity, especially in young people (Brill and Pepper 219; Haritaworn 105; Regales 87).

Yet Grady does identify as transgender and as a boy. He is adamant that he is "not a girl" and never has been: "...inside the body of this strange, never-quite-right girl hid the soul of a typical, average, ordinary boy" (Wittlinger 9). Grady wishes there was not so much emphasis on his gender performance: "Why was it such a big freaking deal *what*

⁸ In quoting from *Parrotfish*, I will use italics to signify that a character speaks the quotation. Any other instance of italicization, such as one italicized word in an otherwise unitalicized sentence, maintains the originals italics of the text.

I looked like or acted like? I looked like *myself*. I acted like *myself*. But everybody wanted me to fit into a category” (Wittlinger 9). Again, though Grady claims an ambiguity, he does have some ideas of where he’d like to fit in. He purchases second-hand men’s clothes, cuts his hair short, wraps his chest, and when a store clerk calls him “sir,” he is delighted. Grady clearly longs to pass as a boy, so he does not fully disrupt binary categories of gender (Stone 231).

Becoming more successful requires equipment, which requires money. Grady notes early on that he is definitely going to order a chest binder he saw recommended on a website (Wittlinger 38). His mother even offers to buy him men’s clothes, despite not being on board with his transition. The wardrobe Grady has created for himself is from Goodwill and his mother emphasizes that, “[w]e can afford to buy you decent [clothes]” (Wittlinger 37). Grady’s family is well off and their affluence contributes to his ability to successfully transition. As Grady says, “The process was nerve-wracking, but it was a huge relief to know that my appearance was finally going to match my sense of who I really was” (Wittlinger 19). Not all people with similar feelings to Grady have the means to make their appearance match their inner sense of self.

The young transgender people Cris Beam works with and writes about in *True Selves: Love, Family, and Living the T with Transgender Teenagers* are an example of Grady’s urban, less-privileged counterparts (though the two are not mutually exclusive). Many of these Los Angeles residents are in foster care, homeless, or wanderers, with a few in stable homes or supporting themselves. Economic instability changes the conditions of their transformation, but by and large, they have the same questions as Grady: “...how far would my transition go? Did I want to take hormones? Would I eventually have surgery to make my body fit my soul? When I met new people, should I

tell them the truth right away? What about girls I was interested in?” (Wittlinger 285). These are (some of) the questions with which transgender adolescents grapple.

Although Grady will not answer these questions within the novel, he does grow more comfortable with his changes by the end of our time with him. The body is a particular site of anxiety for transgender adolescents and we see this anxiety in Grady with his relationship to the mirror. At the beginning of the novel Grady is trying to describe how he looks: “...I don’t trust the mirror for this kind of information. Girl? Boy? The mirror can’t even tell me that” (Wittlinger 8). There is nothing wrong with gender ambiguity, but Grady seems to be disconnected from his own image. Many adolescents feel alienated from their own bodies, but for transgender adolescents, puberty can be extremely difficult (Brown and Rounsley 51-53; Brill and Pepper 65).

Near the end of the novel Grady prepares himself for a school dance. By this point he has the “new, more comfortable binder” he ordered online: “When I dared to look in the mirror, the effect seemed pretty good, and I left the house feeling better in my clothes—and in my skin—than I had in ages” (Wittlinger 239-40). The effect is based on both what he sees in the mirror and an inner sense of confidence. Grady’s ability to feel confident despite his ever-present binder is a portrayal of his comfort with his position on the border of the binary. Grady imagines a football field of gender, with the extremely feminine on one end and the extremely masculine on the other: “...the more I imagined that field, the more I knew I did belong [...] right on the fifty-yard line [...] And maybe that was a good thing. Even if capital-M Man and capital-W Woman weren’t goals I was likely to reach—were those the only acceptable goals? I was a boy who had once been a girl. I was some of each. Which was beginning to feel okay” (Wittlinger 227).

Wittlinger’s choice to leave many of Grady’s questions (about hormones, surgery, etc., see above) unanswered allows for myriad possible success narratives. Grady is

happy to hang out on the fifty-yard line, but his choice to wear a binder and be hailed as a male suggest he really belongs at least a few yards towards the masculine field goal. Grady's sense of success is not solely based on his gender identity, however, but also gaining the support of his family and an established friend group. Most importantly, Grady's sense of success at the end of the novel is because he feels he can finally be himself. Regardless of gender identity, this self-acceptance is a message from which all adolescents can benefit.

THE PUBLIC

In *Parrotfish*, the story is told from a first-person limited omniscient perspective, so the only way we have to evaluate the public's judgment of Grady is through his eyes. The only direct account we have of any character's feelings are in the form of dialogue. We can get a general sense of how Grady is viewed just by looking at the names by which he is hailed (Freccero 18).⁹

If a transgender adolescent making the transition in high school did not face at least a small amount of opposition, some special circumstances would have to be explained. The novel therefore has a few requisite bullies. Two of these bullies are large, male jock-types (Kleinhorst and Whitney, their last names) who purposefully spill milk on Grady, saying, "*Oh, I'm sorry sir...I seem to have spilled my milk!*" (Wittlinger 79). In case the reader does not pick up on their sarcasm, they make themselves clear. When Sebastian speaks up in Grady's defense, one responds, "*that's no he; she's just a sicko with penis envy. But maybe that's all you can get, huh, midget?*" (Wittlinger 80). Not

⁹ For a more complete discussion of Althusser's concept of interpellation, also called "hailing," please see the section on "The Public" in Chapter Two of this thesis.

only do the bullies imply Grady is mentally deficient, they attack Sebastian's sexual prowess; the bullies have labeled them both as failures.

The three people who come to Grady's aid in this situation all do so by attacking the supposed success of the bullies. Consider this scene from the text:

Sebastian was red-faced now, and shouting, *I suppose you think you're the standard we should all measure ourselves against!*

Yeah Kleinhorst, a male voice yelled out. *I wanna be just like you! Ignorant and wasted!* A ripple of laughter swelled around us.

A girl's voice said, *It'll be a sad day when Kleinhorst and Whitney are our standards of excellence!*

The audience hooted and laughed in agreement. (Wittlinger 80-81)

The attack on Grady (which incited stares but no laughing) is diffused by the large reaction to the attacks against Kleinhorst and Whitney. It is not their gender identity that is attacked however, but their ignorance and drunkenness. The fact that the "audience" (other students) does not laugh in agreement when Grady is attacked could be interpreted multiple ways: they do not agree with Kleinhorst and Whitney's assessment of Grady as a pervert and sicko; they dislike or are intimidated by Kleinhorst and Whitney which generally silences them; or the discussion makes them uncomfortable to the point of silence. These interpretations are not exhaustive, but point to the ambiguity of the general student body this scene portrays.

The previous scene does not encompass Grady's largest opposition, the biggest bully of all, the seemingly popular queen bee Danya. Danya assaults Grady with some of the most hurtful names. She openly calls him a "freak," "mutant," and "pervert" in a similar lunchroom scene to the one described above which actually occurs the day before that one (Wittlinger 58-59). Danya similarly calls into question the sexuality of someone associated with Grady, his former childhood best friend Eve: *"I'm talking to your*

boyfriend *here, Eve. How could you ever have been friends with this mutant?*” (Wittlinger 58). Though neither Eve nor Sebastian date Grady (or Angela), by mere association with him, their sexuality is called into question.

The novel’s bullies make it clear that they consider Grady a failure because of his non-conformity to the sex and gender binaries. Because of the common conflation of sex, gender and sexuality, it is not surprising that the sexualities of those close to Grady are called into question, suggesting they must be “deviant” themselves to associate with such a deviant. The alternative would be to question their genders or sexes and in the case of Sebastian, his masculinity is already a source of ridicule. This situation could also be a representation of the oversexualization of transgender people in the popular imagination (Butler, *Gender* 135; Shrage 189). Either way, Grady’s transgender status is enough for them to write off any possibility of success for him.

Expectations to meet gender norms come even from Grady’s biggest ally, his friend Sebastian; he is the school geek, who eats the dreaded hot lunch at a table with only his books for companions (before Grady joins him, that is). Sebastian’s school nickname, Tiny Tim, suggests he is not exactly the definition of ideal masculinity. But after a run-in with the bullies who spilt milk over Grady’s back, Sebastian says, “*You know...if you’re gonna be a boy now, maybe you oughta get some more muscles. Like, work out or something. So if people push you around, you can push back*” (Wittlinger 90). Grady is not “*too interested*” in getting buff, however, and he’s a pacifist (Ibid.). Though Grady will not literally “push back” his bullies, he does push against the societal expectations for a male with his interests and his very existence.

Not all of Grady’s friends measure his success according to his transgender status or ability to meet gender norms. Kita Charles, “the definition of cool at Buxton Central High School,” tells Grady at a coffee shop, “*I really admire you [...] You’re such a great*

person, and so, kind of, adorable” (Wittlinger 197; 202). Kita later enumerates on why she likes Grady—he’s “[i]nteresting and funny and cute as hell” (Wittlinger 248). And of course, he’s nice. Other than this instance of a budding romance, most of the positive estimation of Grady seems based on his qualities of strength and sense of self, as evidenced by his decision to come out as transgender in high school.¹⁰

Grady is not given much of an identity in the novel outside of his transition narrative. The other place his identity seems most rooted is in his film and television class. It is not surprising then, that those who think of Grady as a success do so in the context of his transition. His friend Sebastian tells him he’s a strong person, while his sheepish friend Eve says she wishes she could be more like him (Wittlinger 206; 214). Grady’s sister, Laura, who has previously been less than pleased by Grady causing such a fuss when all she wants to do is fit in at high school, shares the most heartening measure of success yet:

Really, Grady, most kids think it’s pretty cool that you aren’t afraid to be who you really are. I mean, they’re a little confused about how it happened, but they think it’s cool that you just put it right out there. ‘I’m a boy now—deal with it!’ This girl in my art class even told me she thinks you’re cute. (Wittlinger 219)

As I have previously noted, the novel is optimistic but not free from tension. Grady especially struggles with his mother throughout the novel, though it is mostly passive and not in the form of direct confrontation. In the end, the most recognition Grady’s mother gives him is by calling him her son. It is from Grady’s aunt that he learns more about his mother’s feelings on his transition: “...*your mom is confused by it, maybe even shocked, but not disappointed. Just last week she said to me, ‘I don’t know where Grady gets the courage.’ She’s proud of you, honey. She really is*” (Wittlinger 233). As

¹⁰ Grady’s sister’s account of his success also includes a nod to his romantic capabilities, as seen in the final quotation in the following paragraph.

indirect as it may be, this is more love and support than many transgender adolescents actually receive (Beam). The overwhelmingly positive feedback Grady eventually receives is one way the reader can judge Grady's level of success in the novel.

THE READER

Though each reader will judge Grady's success on their own terms, we can locate the elements of traditional success that Wittlinger attributes to her protagonist. Key among these are Grady's ability to present as his chosen gender, his desirability to a beautiful girl, his successful integration at school and with a group of friends, and his acceptance by and bringing together of his family. Grady's successes correlate quite nicely with Arnett's suggested young adult content, so a common reader of young adult literature would likely recognize these conventions, even if only implicitly (126).

Even if gender presentation means nothing to the reader, they will recognize at the very least Grady's satisfaction with his appearance, which seems average to high for a teenager by the end of the novel. The reader cannot *see* Grady, but must imagine him, and Wittlinger gives us scant information to work with. Grady's description of himself follows: "...what do I look like? Kind of skinny. Kind of tall. Brown hair, shaved at the neck, floppy in the front. I look like everybody and nobody. Am I invisible? Probably not, because people sometimes stare" (Wittlinger 8). If the reader yearns for more, they will have to be satisfied with the accounts from Kita and a girl in Laura's art class that Grady is cute...as a boy.

The subject of Grady's cuteness brings us to another measure of Grady's success, which is his desirability to the female sex. Kita Charles tells him she would want to be with him if she wasn't still working on her relationship with Russ. However, Kita's

attraction to Grady is not based on his smashing success at “passing” as male; she tells him, “*I would be crazy about you no matter what gender you were*” (Wittlinger 250). The reader is encouraged to think of Grady as a sexual success even though he doesn’t get to be with the girl he desires. And although Kita may not be attracted to Grady because of his gender, Grady himself is attracted to girls and a similarly fluid sexuality is not suggested for him. This signals Grady’s “preparedness for sex” (Arnett 126).

Another trope of success that will be highly recognizable to the young adult novel reader is the triumph over the bully. It may seem harsh to the reader when Grady calls Danya a “*soul-sucking Bitch*” but as he himself points out, she probably likes it (Wittlinger 97). Later in the story Danya plans a cruel trick on Grady but his former friend Eve tips him off and the prank gets rerouted. Danya is also suspended for three days as a result. In case there is any confusion as to whose side the reader should be on, Laura clears it up:

I am so glad Danya got suspended. You know, a lot of people really hate her...Everybody thinks she’s awful. She’s so manipulative. We’re all tired of her getting away with it...she’s hurt a lot of people. I mean, if it came down to choosing between you [Grady] or Danya, most kids would much rather be your friend. (Wittlinger 219)

So not only has Grady triumphed over his bully, he’s done a service to the whole school by putting her in her place.

While Grady may not be surrounded by friends, this last claim by his sister conveys that his school at least perceives in him an air of general likeability.¹¹ His friend group does grow by the end of the novel: “I had four friends now: Sebastian, Eve, Kita, and Russ. I’d never had four friends in my entire life! Four friends was a group, a crowd,

¹¹ Though being more likeable than a “soul-sucking bitch” may not be much worth noting.

a *posse*” (Wittlinger 253).¹² So the reader knows that Grady will have a posse to hang out with at high school, two members of which are good-looking, popular seniors. Standing his ground against Danya and finding peers who agree with him demonstrates Grady is “developing personal morals and ideology,” another of Arnett’s dictums for young adult literature (126).

The penultimate chapter contains Grady’s family’s annual Christmas production, only the script this year has been revised by Grady and Sebastian. What ensues is a feel-good, somewhat heavy-handed wrap-up of all of the tensions that have been present in the family dynamic. Grady carefully chooses presents for each of his family members and presents them to the family, while narrating to an audience outside their home. Grady’s meaningful gifts that show he is a thoughtful, important member of the family. He also brings an end to the Christmas tradition that everyone other than his father abhors, but even his father is not disappointed as it is implied he will be happier making more productive use of his time at the local theatre as an actor and set designer (the suggestion to do so is Grady’s present to him). One of Grady’s lines in the production sums up for the reader how Grady can be considered a success: “*Things as they should be, Father, are not things unchanging*” (Wittlinger 268). Not only has Grady achieved “emotional independence” from his parents, he has become almost an emotional guide for the family (Arnett 126). Unless a reader is prejudiced against Grady from the start (in which case they probably wouldn’t make it to the end of the novel), there are ample reasons for them to view him as a success given the narrative conventions of the young adult novel genre.

¹² It is worth noting that Grady was home-schooled until his sophomore year of high school and at the time of the story is a junior.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I presume that reading and literature have a significant effect on an adolescent's gender identity development. This effect may be even greater for someone who is unable to find self-representation in the literature they read, in that it will cause further feelings of isolation and confusion. I would like to make a call for the inclusion of a wider range of narratives in YA literature, not just transgender narratives. The inclusion of a breadth of developmental narratives should affect what books librarians choose to purchase, what bookstores carry, and what gets taught in literature classrooms. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) made some curriculum recommendations in their publication *HATRED IN THE HALLWAYS: Violence and Discrimination Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students in U.S. Schools*:

- Integrate age-appropriate discussion about gay issues into relevant core subject areas, such as literature, history, and current affairs
- Include information that is specific to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in health education on sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases. Such information should not be presented with the implicit message that being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is itself a health problem
- Evaluate materials currently in use to ensure that they do not present outdated information or stereotypical messages. (HRW 13)

I would add on to their recommendations by changing the first suggestion to be “integrate age-appropriate discussion about GLBTQ issues...” The report does not clarify why in this case they refer only to “gay issues,” but it seems in line with the rest of their report that lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues would be equally important in the curriculum. Educators themselves have also considered literature a good place to incorporate GLBTQ topics. Swartz suggests that these issues be brought into the classroom as any other multicultural issue—through literature, discussion, and writing

(12). If children are to benefit from education, the normativity and naturalization of heterosexuality and gender norms must be challenged. The inclusion of these issues is part of the goal to end all forms of oppression (Swartz 13). Transgender narratives not only combat hetero-normativity and gender norms, they are integral to raising awareness and inclusion of transgender individuals in our society.

As I said above, I support a wider range of narratives in young adult literature, beyond transgender narratives. In order for literature to have an impact on young readers, it must reflect their ideas about reality. This includes representing even more gender fluid identities that may not be encompassed in the current representations of transgender individuals (Brill and Peppern 219). There may be skepticism about the benefits and repercussions for all young adults of reading this type of narrative. I argue that the inclusion of a wide range of narratives will have a positive impact on trans and non-trans youth. Using narratives of difference to think about our own identities is a good practice for all children. Themes of gender and the body belong in young adult literature because many adolescents experiencing puberty have anxiety around these issues. The fact that they may in the meantime empathize or identify with characters different from themselves only serves to promote acceptance. It has been noted that it is often not adolescents themselves, but parents and teachers who have anxiety about incorporating diverse narratives into the curriculum (HRW). Further research on adolescent reading practices and identity formation—surrounding gender, sexuality, race, ability, and more—could change the way we think about literature’s place in the classroom. At the very least, however, we should understand the desire to identify with the protagonist of our favorite story. Seeing that a protagonist looks, thinks, and/or feels like you validates that you are indeed the protagonist of your own (life) story. And that is something that every person deserves.

Chapter Two:

America's Next Top Model

The history of transgender representation on film and television reveals an unsurprising lack of actual transgender subjectivity. Many critics have found that until recent decades, the representation of the transgender subject (or object) is largely confined to two characterizations—the comedic and the horrific (Phillips 5). The comedic takes the form of the “temporary transvestite film” which is not about transgender individuals at all, but uses the trope of cross-dressing to elicit laughter from the audience (Straayer 36). Though I pause to consider this part of transgender history, these images are connected to transgender subjectivity in the popular imagination. The same goes for the representations often found in horror films—cross-dressing and transsexualism are depicted as perverse or hysterical symptoms of a psychotic condition and transgender or transsexual individuals (or cross-dressers) are depicted as monsters (Phillips 85).

Not until the 1990s does mainstream Hollywood begin to depict more complicated transgender narratives. Films such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *The Crying Game* (1992) explore the sexual desire of transgender characters in more depth than previous films. However, despite sympathetic approaches, popular artistic representations of the transgender subject still reveal an underlying ambivalence. There is a burgeoning field of trans-friendly films that make the film festival circuit, but these films have a difficult time gaining wide distribution (Abele A7). *Transamerica* (2005), an independent film that grossed just over nine million at the box office, is the most commercially successful of these films since *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and it has also received academic attention (Yahoo and Baseline “Transamerica (2005)”; Caster and Allison). The history of the transgender figure on television is less documented, but GLAAD's most recent

survey found that in fall of 2008, two transgender characters were being represented on broadcast networks, and three on cable networks, which is an all-time high (Hibberd 6). Transgender characters often appear as one-show cameos, with uneven quality of representation (Taormino 126). It has not been uncommon for transgender individuals to appear on talk shows, usually narrating their transition, but this is often at the cost of being “freakified” as Sandy Stone has said (Fruth 43).

In the fall of 2008, the CW television network aired its eleventh season of *America's Next Top Model*. Before the show had even aired, the buzz had started. For the first time, a transgender contestant would appear on *America's Next Top Model* (Marikar; “EXCLUSIVE;” “America’s”). The CW television network gears its programming towards women and young girls. *America's Next Top Model* (when airing) is consistently their top billing Wednesday night programming (Gorman, “Top CW Primetime Shows”). Compared with all broadcast networks, *America's Next Top Model* consistently pulls the largest audience of females age 12-34 and does well with adults in the 18-34 range (Seidman, “Ratings for Premiere Week;” Seidman, “CW Finishes First”). When the transgender contestant Isis was on the show, between 3 and 4.5 million viewers were tuning in (Gorman, “Ratings Wednesday, September 3;” Gorman, “Ratings Wednesday, September 10;” Gorman, “Wednesday, September 17;” Seidman, “Ratings for Premiere Week”). While there is no way to confirm what each viewer takes from the show, I will establish that Isis’s transgender status is impossible to miss and in fact, the viewer is directed to follow this narrative as a main plotline.

Isis is firmly established in the first episode as the transgender contestant. In this episode, the viewer gets to see part of the elimination process, which includes individual

interviews with Tyra and the judges.¹³ The show sets up Isis's narrative as an important one, spending three and a half consecutive minutes on her story.¹⁴ The average time spent on each girl during this "interview" process is forty-five seconds. Tyra begins the interview with a narrative that is meant to set Isis up to explain herself, asking, "So what is different about this girl?" ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). She asks Isis when she became aware of her gender identity, how she feels about surgery, and what her "presence in this competition would do for the Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender community?" ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). After this barrage of questions, the following scenes show multiple groups of contestants having conversations about Isis; some of these conversations include Isis and some don't. Three contestants address Isis's transgender status in private camera confessionals within this three and a half minutes ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). Of course Banks is trying to sell a product and please a television network so differences and conflicts tend to get highlighted, especially at the beginning of the show.¹⁵ Banks clearly uses Isis's transgender status as a point of interest on the show, but what ideologies does *America's Next Top Model* endorse?

The show is not single-minded in its representation of Isis, which is not surprising considering the ambivalence towards transgender issues in our society. Freccero explains: "Popular culture representations [...] often bear contradictions within them and send very mixed political messages, covert messages, or even unconscious messages, so that a variety of people can consent to them" (Freccero 16). By choosing Isis to be a contestant

¹³ For the purpose of clarity, "Tyra" will be used to refer to the "character" of Tyra on the show, while "Banks" will be used to refer to her position as producer. In the case of a meaningful blurring or duality of these two roles, "Tyra/Banks" will be used.

¹⁴ For a partial transcript of these three and a half minutes, please see Appendix A.

¹⁵ Contestants also tend to be turned into a "type," only allowed to represent a single, easily recognized identity. Tyra's lack of attention to Isis's race and sexuality for example, seem like a blaring oversight, but there simply isn't room in the show for such complication. Britney is the racially diverse girl and Elina is the lesbian vegan girl ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen").

on the show, Tyra/Banks reinforces Isis as a woman. By making Isis' transgender status a plot line of the show, Tyra/Banks promotes Isis' image as transgender. Beginning in the first episode, the judges' comments support Isis as a model. The conversation/dialogue of other contestants sometimes reinforces Isis as a man ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). So to what standard(s) of success is Isis held?

America's Next Top Model promotes a success narrative consistent with the American Dream. The American Dream, as defined by film theorists Pramaggiore and Wallis, combines the ideologies of "unfettered capitalism and individualism [...] to posit that, in America, any hardworking individual will be able to rise above humble circumstances and become successful, perhaps even famous" (Pramaggiore and Wallis 70). Reality television itself is a symptom of this ideology and Banks fittingly loves to promote this narrative in *America's Next Top Model*. The title itself suggests the narrative—an upward ("top"), forward-moving ("next") climb that is American by nature ("America's"). Because the show is not entirely scripted, multiple narratives may be present besides those intended by the producers. Although these narratives will always be controlled by the process of editing, we can uncover counter narratives through close reading. Which narratives of success are applied to Isis? Is she singled out or treated as all the other "girls" are?¹⁶ What narratives might exist that subvert or uphold the constructed narratives? Can we uncover Isis's own beliefs and feelings about success?

There are three sections to this chapter; each examines a distinct viewpoint for measuring Isis's success (in a similar fashion to my analysis of *Parrotfish*). The first section will consider the role of the producers of *America's Next Top Model*. The next

¹⁶ Although the young women on *America's Next Top Model* range in age from eighteen to twenty-three, they are consistently referred to as a group of "girls" by Tyra, the other judges, and Jay Manuel, who serves as the creative director of their photo shoots. I self-consciously use this imperfect term as a way of enacting, while pointing out the constructed-ness of, the world of the show. We can also imagine the label "girls" speaking to the intended audience of the show.

section will consider the public's role. My use of the term *public* can refer to other characters or actors in the texts, but also the audience of the text. The final section will consider Isis's own estimation of her success. Prammagiore and Wallis' film theory, Freccero's cultural theory, Lacan's theories of ego and the ideal, and Butler's gender theory will all supplement my analysis.

THE PRODUCERS

Let's begin by examining the role of the producers in this text. Banks serves as an executive producer and with the other producers and editors, shapes the story in *America's Next Top Model*. Although this is a reality show, the producers have the final say and the show presents ideologies largely through the process of film and sound editing.¹⁷ By choosing what to include and what to leave out, Banks creates an image of Isis (and the other contestants) that she presents to the viewer.¹⁸ Isis has little to no control over the production of images representing her, and as an underrepresented minority this could be extremely damaging. As Freccero points out, struggles for power between the disempowered or marginalized and dominant culture are often conducted through representations (Freccero 14). Let's look at the dimensions of success created by Banks in the world of *America's Next Top Model* and how Isis is held to this ideal.

Banks and the other producers project their ideal image of a transgender woman as one who strives for the American Dream. More so than many of the contestants, Isis is

¹⁷ One might argue that the producers construct all the narratives I discuss in the following sections. I would argue that, due to the "reality" nature of the show, the producers construct and *manage* narratives. Short of calling the participants of the show robots or puppets, I must (choose to) assign *some* agency to these human subjects.

¹⁸ My occasional use of Banks as a stand-in for the larger group of producers and editors is due to her two positions with the show. Unlike the other producers or editors, Banks is also a character on the show and the show is viewed as her show.

a perfect candidate for Banks' narrative of achieving the American Dream. On the first episode, during the judges' interview of Isis, Jay Manuel says to Isis, "You were the diva in cycle ten's first photo shoot in the homeless shelter. You were one of the girls from the shelter who participated in our shoot in the background as an extra. Let's face it, there's a reason you're here because you know how to give me couture" ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). The narrative presented is that Isis was essentially discovered by Tyra/Banks. Already Isis has risen in life—she was homeless and now she is on *America's Next Top Model*. Isis's homelessness is not dwelled on, but serves to create a greater distance between her beginning subject position and the ideal achievement—being America's Next Top Model. Isis's motivation for doing the show is an important part of her success. As Jay Manuel says, "I like that Isis does not have an agenda. She really just wants to be a model" ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). Isis's intense desire to be a model is integral to fashioning a clean-cut, family-friendly transgender narrative. And although Isis admittedly does not have a larger agenda for being on the show, leave it to Banks to create one anyway.

Although Isis does not succeed in reaching the position of America's Next Top Model, Tyra/Banks uses her transgender status as proof of her success: "...if you want to be a model you can and you're already an inspiration for the gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual community" ("Fierce Eyes"). Not only does she construct Isis as a clean-cut trans, she presents Isis as the ideal trans, holding Isis up as an ideal others should strive towards.¹⁹ Tyra/Banks avoids presenting Isis as a failure even when dismissing her from the competition (and consequently, the show). Tyra often gives constructive criticism rather than flatly tell someone they cannot model, but not every contestant is lauded as an

¹⁹ This includes endorsing all of Isis's specific ways of being trans. The narrator in *Parrotfish* is an example of a queerer trans subjectivity. I will discuss this in greater detail in my concluding remarks.

inspiration. Historically, Tyra/Banks highlights contestants that represent minority subject positions as an inspiration for their imagined community of peers. This has included plus size women, women of color, women with autism, and so forth. Banks imagines herself to be a champion of social justice and the transgender community is her latest project.²⁰ What needs to be recognized is that Banks' views cannot possibly be inclusive of all trans subjectivities, especially when only working with one trans individual. I do not wish to condemn Banks or criticize her intentions, but it is important to identify which ideologies are presented through the promotion of specific narratives of success. For example, we do not hear the part of Isis's story that took place in house and ball cultures in New York City ("Video: Transgender *America's Next Top Model* Speaks, Works It"). This would associate Isis with a queer culture that does not align with dominant expectations for success.

It may be coincidence, but it is not irrelevant that the transgender woman chosen for this very public role wants to have sex reassignment surgery "to become the woman" that she is, as Isis puts it ("Top Model Inauguration"). Isis is aligned with the transsexual narrative rather than queer ideals (Prosser). This view of transsexuality is much easier for the public to swallow because it is less challenging to the binary organization of sex and gender (Stone 231). This way one could concede that perhaps it is possible to be born in the "wrong body" without having to question the essential existence of only two genders and two sexes. It is significant that Isis's choice for attaining the American Dream is through modeling, a display of hyper-femininity. Her transgenderism is not meant to challenge the binary; she wants to embody a female subject position. In other words, one

²⁰ Although I may have a skeptical tone, Neil G. Giuliano, president of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation has said, "When audiences see real gay and transgender people facing many of the same ups and downs as everybody else, it helps to change perceptions and break down stereotypes [...] The casting of Isis on such a popular show offers a groundbreaking opportunity for a community that is historically underrepresented on television" (The Associated Press par. 7).

could question the inherent radical quality of a trans individual on *America's Next Top Model* (as opposed to another show). There is a reason the network chose to air this show when it may be less apt to create a strong, permanent trans character in a drama (for example). With a fictional program, the network would incur added responsibility for the *creation* of a character, whereas reality television can be written off as “real life.” We have already discussed the implications of editing in the production of a reality television show, reality television is definitely *not* reality, but Isis is a real person. When Isis puts herself in the position of a contestant on a modeling competition reality show, she subjects herself to another type of success scrutiny.

Tyra/Banks and the producers and editors of *America's Next Top Model* have the power to shape the ideal for these young women whom they consistently refer to as “girls.” Contestants generally range in age from eighteen to twenty-three. As hopeful models, these “girls” are very concerned with their image, trying to attain an even more specific ideal than the average person. Butler can help us understand Freud and why his theories of the ego are so resonant with *America's Next Top Model*. There are three distinct levels of ego: the ego, which creates the ego-ideal in a sacrifice of narcissism, and the super-ego, which watches and measures the ego against the ego-ideal, always finding it wanting. Butler remarks that, “If the watching agency described by Freud is figured as a watching judge, a judge who embodies a set of ideals, and if those ideals are to some large degree socially instituted and maintained, then this watching agency is the means by which social norms sear the psyche” (*Bodies* 181). The judges on *America's Next Top Model* are an embodiment of this super-ego not only for the contestants, but for the viewers, judging them against a model's ideal and finding them wanting: “She's not extra-ordinary in any way” (“Fierce Eyes”). The ideals on the show *sear the psyche* of

viewers, who imbibe this highly critical super-ego and become their own judges, watching themselves from this point of view.

On the fourth episode of the show, the makeover episode, Tyra says, “Every young girl deserves to be pretty” (“You’re Beautiful, Now Change”). Tyra/Banks chooses an ideal model image for each of the “girls.” The “girls” are then made over by a team of stylists according to Tyra’s/Banks’ directions—the “girls” have no say in their makeover, which is usually restricted to hair changes (cuts, dye jobs, weave, etc.). Isis is given very little camera time in this episode, with Tyra saying merely, “Isis, what a lovely girl. But I think her hair needs to be longer” (“You’re Beautiful, Now Change”). The episode that is most overtly about changing one’s image, which frequently causes identity crises for contestants, is the episode where Isis appears the least. Why would this be? Banks and the producers seem hesitant to show the masquerade aspect of Isis’s femininity that she has in common with the other contestants, instead drawing a distinction between them. It is implied Isis has more to risk if we see the putting-on of her femininity, for she is not a “natural” woman.²¹ Alternatively, the viewer sees Isis inject her hormones in another episode. The choice to include this (and not her “makeover”) points to a voyeuristic quality of the show.

Tyra/Banks and the show are in a unique position to influence the viewer’s mind and opinions. This applies to their standards of beauty and their feelings on transgender issues, among other things. Though *America’s Next Top Model* may seem progressive at times, Freccero reminds us, “all these cultural productions are involved to some extent in technologies of social control” (Freccero 21). A critical viewer may question or disagree with the ideologies presented to them through a text but cultural productions may be the

²¹ I will speak more to this phenomenon in the next section of this chapter.

only exposure some people have, especially of an underrepresented minority like a transgender individual. From this perspective, it seems the producer's interests strongly shape the narrative, but let's see who else participates.

THE PUBLIC

Isis relies on the public to affirm her identity. She must convince the judges that she is a model. Isis is referred to as “diva,” “girl,” “drag queen,” “chick,” “she,” “transgender,” “he-she,” “man,” and “Isis” by the other contestants in just the first two episodes (“The Fierce Fourteen” and “Top Model Inauguration”). Though Isis may not hear many of the things said about her, there is a larger audience for the show. It does not matter if Isis is visually presented as these things; hailing her is enough to create (or continue, as is often the case) an association for viewers. Some of these comments are damaging to the transgender community. In this section, we will question the relationship between the individual and society—how the public impacts the performance of gender and how these texts have the power to shape the public.

The French philosopher Louis Althusser argues that language actually constructs our subject position in the social order. Interpellation constructs individuals according to a specific ideology. Freccero furthers: “It is in this sense that ideology has the effect, as Althusser argues, of constituting individuals as subjects, and it is also in this sense that their subjectivity appears ‘obvious’” (Freccero 160). If Althusser is right and we are hailed by our social order, which is constructed in language, then derisive language actually plays a role in the oppression of people (Freccero 160). Isis might as well hear the other contestants’ comments because she exists in an unpopular transgender subject position, whether she wants to or not. The show contributes to the interpellation of Isis

and all transgender women watching the show. No matter how Isis may regulate her gender performance, certain people simply treat her like less of a person because of their ideological beliefs about transgender individuals. Some of these people are represented on *America's Next Top Model* and their comments contribute to the oppressive beliefs regarding transgender people.

This is not to say that I fully endorse Althusser's notion of interpellation, for we must leave room for a critical subject position. Repeated images or associations (such as "transgender" with "he-she") shape the expectations and understanding of people by creating dominant ideologies. The life experience of some people may directly contradict these ideologies however, and they can circulate subversive images and associations to promote their alternative ideology.²² A frequent challenge to Althusser's own example is the subject who is hailed by the police officer as "Hey you!" but simply does not respond because he or she knows they have not done anything wrong. As I have said before, a critical viewer can thus challenge or refuse the ideologies being presented to them, but this does not necessarily put them in a position of power to stop the proliferation of images, narratives, and discourses supporting said ideologies. The power discrepancy is why it is possible to identify dominant ideologies and less prominent alternative ideologies in our society's cultural productions. *America's Next Top Model* is one such production.

The show presents multiple and competing narratives surrounding Isis, which reflects an ambivalence that is most apparent in the opinions of the other contestants on the show. The "girls" on the show also serve as stand-ins for the viewers, who may share this ambivalence. If we apply Pramaggiore and Wallis' theories on popular film to

²² These images and associations are "subversive" merely in the sense that they may disagree with or undermine dominant images and associations.

popular television, then *America's Next Top Model* must have a “profound relation to how and what [people] think and feel about the world around them” (Pramaggiore and Wallis 334). In this instance of reality television, multiple ideologies are represented.

There are disparate ways in which Isis's peers judge her success. Clark, one of the other “girls,” says, “In the real world of modeling, I just don't see Isis being booked because of the way her body is now, still very manly. Like the hands, the feet and the waist. I think it's about time for Isis to go home. Modeling's just not for her.” (“The Ladder of Model Success”). Though Clark has previously referred to Isis as a “man” and “he-she,” here she seems to identify Isis as a female, though a deficient female at best, and certainly not a model. Other contestants belie their own claims through their use of pronouns. Shauran says, “This is the funniest thing that's in my head, her like trying to be sexy. Reality is...she's a man!” (“Top Model Inauguration”). This last pronouncement speaks to the difficulty many of the “girls” have with reconciling Isis' identity with her biology. While Shauran is adamant that Isis is a man, she uses feminine pronouns to refer to her. Her statement follows a scene in which Shauran has been an extra during Isis's photo shoot; Shauran heckles Isis during the shoot, saying, “Damn Isis, you need to shave...you're sweating a lot, all over your body.... She needs some heat to burn off all that hair” (“Top Model Inauguration”). Clark and Shauran's statements, when we read them against the grain, are one place to start looking for a counter narrative.

Certain people are unwilling to look beyond biology, or desperately point to biology—*Look! Look! I am a real woman and he-she is just an imitation of me. I do not perform my gender. It is natural.* But in fact, someone like Clark or Shauran cannot be a “natural” woman without transgender women and without her denial of any similarity to

them.²³ Kacey, another contestant, shows this through her assertion, “I don’t see Isis as competition, I’m being completely honest. I mean, I’m not discriminating against her, but I’m sorry honey, no” (“The Notorious Fierce Fourteen”). These “girls” seem to be pointing to Isis’s failure not only at being a model, but her failure at being a woman, which they highlight by declaration (or insinuation) of their “natural” gender. What evades them, but what the critical viewer may discern, is the performativity of their own gender (Butler, *Gender x*). In fact, I suspect it is the dawning recognition of this fact that causes certain “girls” to act with such disdain towards Isis.

Lacan’s theories of the phallus and identity can help us analyze the discomfort some contestants have with Isis. Leader and Groves tell us, “Whereas Lacan puts having on the side of man, he puts being on the side of the woman. Being the phallus in this context means being a signifier, which explains, for example, the propensity to masquerade which Joan Rivière had seen as the key feature of femininity” (Leader and Groves 95). All of the contestants are engaged in a grand masquerade of femininity during *America’s Next Top Model*. Through this masquerade, they hope to gain something, to achieve the American Dream—fame and wealth. But *being the phallus* after all is simply being a signifier, which ultimately “signifies desire and the dimension of what we do not have, what is lacking” (Leader and Groves 98). In their very process of signifying the phallus, the desired, the “girls” signify the lack of the desired. Isis also represents this lack through her performance of femininity, but it is even more disturbing because she *has* a phallus (literally male genitalia) but does not want it.

The disjunction between Isis’s “body” and “image” sheds light on this relationship for all the “girls.” Isis points out merely by existing that all of them are made

²³ Adapted from Butler’s argument in *Bodies That Matter* that John Bellew in *Passing* “cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them” (Butler 171).

into models *and* women. She could be more feminine or sexy than some of them. I believe all of the contestants are aware of this phenomenon on some level, but certain people are more consciously tuned in to it. In a conversation in the bathroom of their house, Isis says “A lot of women, I’ve found, are intimidated,” to which McKey replies, “Because you do girl better than most girls” (“Fierce Eyes”). McKey’s response is not a question, but a statement. She is not uncomfortable with the idea of gender performance; she is a self-avowed “fighter girl” (“Top Model Inauguration”) who does mixed martial arts *and* wants to be a top model. McKey says, “Isis is a pretty cool chick...She’s not going to hide who she is from anybody. I’m this big fighter girl and I think she’s like ten-fold more [...] brave than I am” (“Top Model Inauguration”). McKey’s comfort with her own performativity allows her to judge Isis by abstract qualities like honesty and bravery and admire her for her success in these areas.

Other contestants express similar evaluations of Isis: “The best person for this competition is going to win. What should matter is your spirit and how much you want to be here [...] For Isis to be so brave and so secure with who she is and being able to not let anything bother her—it’s very commendable” (“The Notorious Fierce Fourteen”). The positive evaluations of Isis by her peers do not measure her success by her ability to model, but by her ability to remain true to herself in the face of adversity. This is another narrative of transgender success the text can offer besides the American Dream narrative.

Isis faces more resistance from her peers due to her transgender status, though the judges recognize that she is actually quite successful at performing the role of *model*: “Isis, I think she’s actually the only one that really knew her stuff. But that being said, there’s something about Isis that was very unusual” (“Top Model Inauguration”). On *America’s Next Top Model*, Isis highlights that gender distinctions are not based on any inherent biology, but the self one performs through speech, action, and dress (“unusual”

indeed). By presenting multiple ideologies, the text invites a large audience to identify with it. The effect of cultural ambivalence for Isis, however, is that she may feel herself to be in an unstable position in society, questioning her identity and even her safety. In the next section we will see how Isis's measures of her own success compare to those we have seen thus far.

ISIS

Isis's minority subject position complicates even her own understanding of success: "I'm proud to be somebody to represent other people but I've come here for myself because it's just something that I've really worked hard for and I've been practicing and I really, really want it" ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). In Isis's case, we have knowledge of a previous desire to model from her participation as an extra for *America's Next Top Model* in season ten as well as her aforementioned remark. She comes back as a contestant on the show to further her modeling career, and is ready to do whatever it takes to impress the judges. When the other contestants ask her, "What happens if...we have to do a nude scene?" Isis says, "I'll take care of it" ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). As the first quotation illustrates, Isis's conscious judgment of her own success is through her performance as a model (and a woman, one might argue). Whether it is due to constant reminding or through her own tendencies, Isis's success seems wrapped up with her transgender status.

As we saw in the section on the public, some people see Isis's transgender status as an automatic inability to succeed. Isis seems aware of this and as a result, her posturing success often comes with an affirmation of identity not seen in the average contestant: "My eyes are on the prize, no matter what people may think of me or not. I'm here, this is

myself, this is how I've always been. Transition or not, I'm me" ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). Clips like this (said in a confessional-style, solitary setting) are edited to follow disparaging comments about Isis made by other contestants. This sets up a narrative of success that a viewer may detect if they are sympathetic to Isis. When Isis says, "I'm not letting any of these girls bother me. I know what I'm here for. This is the person I am. Either take it or leave it," the viewer may interpret that Isis's purpose on the show is to *be* "the person [she is]," not model ("The Notorious Fierce Fourteen"). It may be that this is a response to adversity, but the result is that Isis is successful merely by being herself and not compromising her beliefs.

Just as some of the contestants measure Isis's success or failure based on her ability to pass as a woman, Isis herself takes this into her account of success. Although the show does not let us forget that Isis is transgender, Isis refers to herself in terms of femininity and modeling. In the second episode, Isis expresses her delight at feeling feminine: "It was like, the first swim that I had as Isis, as who I really am, I was like, oh my hair and my bikini top. Just real dainty. Oh, it's fun" ("Top Model Inauguration"). Isis has fashioned herself as female, to the extent that she has been taking female hormones for a year prior to the show ("The Ladder of Model Success"). Although she is certainly prompted by questions, Isis also shares that, "I want to have the surgery to become the woman who I am" ("Top Model Inauguration"). Isis is still pre-op and this may cost her her ultimate success at being a model.

Is Isis unsuccessful because her body is abject and unlivable according to the dominant ideology (Butler, *Bodies* xi)? Even Isis wants the surgery to be "who she really is" and have her body align with her gender. From the beginning, Isis is a convincing model—striking and knowledgeable—but through the process of the show, she loses some sense of herself and turns into a somnambulist. Ironically, she leaves the show

because she does not stand out enough. Isis is confident in the face of questioning peers and asserts her skill: “Say whatever you want, but when I’m on that runway...you can’t tell me nothing” (“Fierce Eyes”). But when it comes to doing a photo shoot of her eyes where she must be in a bikini in the pool, she is self-conscious: “Until I have my gender reassignment surgery, there’s some things that I have to do extra that the other girls don’t have to. I have on like three pair of undergarments just in case the tape did peel off because of the water. I’m so nervous about that” (“Fierce Eyes”).²⁴ Isis has to deal with the extra discomfort of feeling she is in the wrong body. If this in and of itself is not enough to make Isis uneasy, there is also the constant focus on her transgender status, which contrasts her professed beliefs.

Isis makes clear on the first show that “[s]ome people might say that I’m transgender, some people might say transsexual. Personally I prefer born in the wrong body, meaning I was born physically male on the outside, but everything else about me was female” (“The Notorious Fierce Fourteen”). Although this is what she prefers, what the viewer hears her repeat on the next episode is “I’m transgender” (“Top Model Inauguration”). It seems Isis’s preferences get somewhat obscured through the process of the show in order to have a *transgender* success narrative, which unfortunately may be to appeal to the voyeurism of some of the viewers. At the very least, it speaks to our need to label everything.²⁵ Isis makes it clear that she is not using the show to promote a platform

²⁴ This is actually not the first time Isis has had to appear in a swimsuit. In the third episode, the “girls” do a photo shoot in bikinis on the beach and the shots are of their entire bodies (“You’re Beautiful, Now Change”). On the next episode, one of the judges says, “Isis...had some awkward moments in the photo [shoot]” (“Fierce Eyes”). The reader may question for themselves if it was mere coincidence that there were two swimsuit shoots within the first five episodes. Without doing an analysis of the ten cycles leading up to this one, I will not make any claims here.

²⁵ Even this thesis participates in inscribing Isis as a transgender subject. I choose to highlight Isis’s own subjectivity as a reminder that this is a study of transgender representations. *America’s Next Top Model*’s appropriation of Isis for a transgender role model proves Freccero’s point that minorities often don’t control representations of themselves (14).

but Tyra/Banks uses her as a symbol for the transgender community anyway (“The Notorious Fierce Fourteen” and “Fierce Eyes”). She is simultaneously a symbol for upward mobility, which is part of the American Dream narrative that Tyra/Banks likes to promote through *America’s Next Top Model*. Tyra/Banks constructing Isis as a role model may get in the way of Isis feeling successful, but her own evaluations are not so simple.

Although Isis does not get what she sets out to achieve, she does not express any regret and promises us that she will make her dreams come true:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to come here and shine. It was so many, so many obstacles. So many obstacles but this experience was, this experience was wonderful [...] I feel like I’ve developed a strong backbone, strong sense of character. I want to go out there and make my dreams come true, and that’s what I’m going to do. (“Fierce Eyes”)

It is worth remembering the power of the editor here. The final words the viewer hears imagine Isis’s eventual success, maintaining the American Dream narrative even outside the world of the show. I cannot know the unedited version of Isis’s final message, but given the information available to me as a viewer, I surmise that Isis, too, really believes that her American Dream will come true.

Isis might have brought transgender issues to public attention, but she simultaneously reinforces dominant ideologies. Isis and the other contestants are striving for the American Dream through participation in the beauty industry. And yet Isis’s participation calls into question the definitions on which the industry is built. Judith Butler’s remarks on Clare Kendry’s death in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* illuminate Isis’s departure from the show. Isis does not die or even become incapable of modeling. She is not able to survive the contest, however, and we might imagine this marks the continued success of “a certain symbolic ordering of gender, sexuality and race,” just as Clare’s

death does in *Passing* (Butler, *Bodies* 183). But her very presence on the show has also marked a site of “potential resistance” (Ibid.).

As much as Tyra/Banks may use Isis to stand for a group, she is one person who, for better or worse, uses the show to further her own career. She may not hold the title of America’s Next Top Model, but this does not preclude the possibility for her success. Not only does Isis transform her body with the aid of modern technology, she transforms her career with the genre of reality television. Isis extends her public exposure by appearing on Tyra Banks’ daytime talk show, *The Tyra Show*, once in November 2008 and again in March 2009 in a special episode that follows Isis’s reassignment surgery (“The Tyra Banks Show, 18 November 2008;” “The Tyra Banks Show, 30 March 2009”). These texts are rife with material as well, but I will save them for another time in order to concentrate on the narrative of the one television show. In my concluding remarks, I will consider the two texts—*Parrotfish* and *America’s Next Top Model*—next to each other and see how they speak to one another, as well as look to other modes of expressing transgender narratives.

Conclusion

Two different versions of transgender subjectivity are represented in *Parrotfish* and *America's Next Top Model*. *Parrotfish*, a young adult novel, represents a somewhat queer representation of transgender subjectivity, although still distinctly transgender and not gender fluid. *America's Next Top Model* represents a more traditional transsexual narrative, with the importance of sex reassignment surgery as a marker for the desire to completely transition from the birth sex. These texts are not necessarily representative; I would argue there are no such representative texts at this point in the maturation of the transgender canon. Rather, these texts offer an understanding of some of the transgender representations currently in circulation. There is a surprising amount of similarity between the two texts, especially in the type of success narratives that are applied to the transgender subjects. I will speak more these similarities at the end of the conclusion.

The apparent shortage of artistic material dealing with transgender subjectivity is not necessarily due to its nonexistence, but speaks to the difficulty in getting such material published. The Internet is the final media I gesture towards as a potential site of expression for subversive ideologies. In an earlier manifestation of this project, I was interested in the Internet as a source of e-literature, as I called it. The Internet makes much more sense when considered as a *text*, though what kind of text is less readily decided. In some instances I think it would be appropriate to study the genre of e-literature, but in this case I will look more broadly at the Internet as a text and use individual websites as the objects of my study. I am interested in young people and the texts available to them to sort out and make sense of their identities, which in and of itself is a clear reason to investigate the Internet and the multiplicity of texts found within. I

hypothesize that the Internet is a wellspring of transgender representation because of the dearth of representations of transgender adolescence found elsewhere.

There are multiple types of websites available to transgender adolescents but there is not room to analyze all of them here. I will primarily concern myself with websites or pages specifically aimed at transgender adolescents. Though it can be reasonably assumed that transgender adolescents frequent websites aimed at transgender adults or individuals (with no age qualifications), this would result in a less-focused study. It is just as likely transgender adolescents frequent innumerable websites with various subjects having nothing to do with (explicitly) transgender issues. This is not a study of transgender adolescents' Internet use, however. It is unfortunately a separate question how used (employed and visited) and useful these websites may or may not be to actual transgender adolescents. As with literature and television, I am not interested in policing representations and marking them as *good* or *bad*, but exploring the ideological work these representations might be doing.

There are three main genres of websites I have discerned: personal websites, including blogs; social networking or chat forums and sites; and resource sites, maintained by organizations and individuals.²⁶ I will concentrate on the latter of these three for multiple reasons. Personal websites and blogs, which I distinguish as being largely personal narratives, though they occasionally contain advice or information on transgender issues, are constantly in flux—changing, appearing, and disappearing. An

²⁶ After much consideration, I am using the term “genre” for the following reasons: these types of websites apply not only to transgender websites, but are types of websites that can be found for almost any subject matter or interest group; it further upholds my choice to treat websites as distinct *texts* and applying the term “genre” to them, it recognizes them as texts; because I have identified groupings within these genres, it is helpful to have distinct terms for semantic clarity (rather than using “categories” and “sub-categories,” for example.

anthropological study of these websites at any given moment in time would be quite interesting indeed, but that is not the task at hand.

Social networking sites and chat forums are mainly distinguishable from personal websites by their communal nature—content is similar but it takes the form of conversations or postings amongst multiple individuals. Both of these groups also have the attribute of being about individuals whose identity is non-verifiable for the most part.²⁷ Informational sites, on the other hand, are not about the individual, but about collective identity when they are about identity at all. I will further outline the contents of resource sites below.

The websites within the resource site genre can be further divided into three categories. These categories are: sites maintained by individuals or small groups of individuals who have no affiliation with an organization; sites maintained by trans-affiliated organizations; and sites maintained by non-trans-affiliated organizations. I have done my best to locate all of these sites and document them, but this will inevitably become inaccurate. For the purposes of my paper, I have chosen one site from each of these three categories to further analyze. I will begin with the category of site I have found most frequently—sites maintained by trans-affiliated organizations, meaning the organization that publishes the site includes transgender individuals somewhere in their mission statement or title.

An example of one such organization is OutProud, The National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth, which publishes the site “TransProud” (2009). Three out of eleven links to internal pages are broken, which is not uncommon

²⁷ Although the ethics of the Internet are still contended, at this time I am not interested in making claims based on e-identities, as I call them. Though this certainly has value in its own right, it is distinct from working with transgender adolescents in person and could be a source for interesting future work by myself or my colleagues.

for trans sites. Four of the remaining eight links are associated with the larger organization and are not trans-specific, but general to the GLBT community. This is also an aspect commonly found on such sites and speaks to the desire of many pre-existing groups to include the transgender community without perhaps knowing how or having the resources to do so. One of the four most recently mentioned links is embedded in the text, “Visit Benji and Mike on the road and hear the latest as they meet with queer youth throughout Young Gay America” (OutProud).²⁸ I was disturbed to find that this link takes the browser to a page that must have been sold to a new domain because the site “YoungGayAmerica.com” is most definitely a “dating” site and not at all intended for transgender adolescents and I sincerely hope not intended to be promoted by the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth.

The remaining four pages that apply specifically to transgender individuals and are in working order are advertised as follows: “Perspectives for parents who's [sic] children have come out as transgender,” “Read the FAQ for answers to your questions about transgenderism and transsexualism,” “What every transgendered person needs to know about the journey of sex reassignment,” and “Explore the world of transgender sites on the World Wide Web - resources, magazines and more” (OutProud). The first three pages listed are unattractive, plain pages with simple block text and scant information. The frequently asked questions are meant for non-trans individuals, as is evidenced by questions such as “How do I deal with a transgender person?” (OutProud). The page covering sex reassignment is under 700 words, which is nowhere near enough to cover the topic and the number and quality of sites it gives for further information is insufficient (Ibid.). The resources page is the most in-depth portion of the site, with

²⁸ The underlined portion of the quotation is as it appears online and this signals where the hyperlink appears.

seventeen working links to websites relating to transgender issues, though only five of these are marketed to youth (Ibid.).

The website has a couple of redeeming qualities. The browser can download for free a PDF of Just Evelyn's book "Mom, I Need to Be a Girl!" which is directed more towards parents of transgender youth than at transgender youth themselves (Lindenmuth). Even better is the news feed that is constantly updating to the eight most recent stories with any reference to the word "transgender." Although this can be a crapshoot, and there is no archive of the stories, meaning they are essentially lost to a browser once they are past the most recent, it is a distinctive feature that could be improved. The aesthetic of the site is simple almost to the point of being gaunt, neutral in tone, with a black, red, and yellow color theme against a white background. The upshot of this is that there is little to offend potential browsers. I wish I could say "TransProud" is a horrendous example because of its technical and aesthetic challenges and its content limitations, but in fact it is one of only a few general resource cites aimed at transgender adolescents and they all share similar flaws. One cause for hope is the nature of the Internet, which allows these sites to grow and improve with nothing necessary but the time and care (and some knowledge) devoted to do so.

It may not be surprising then, that the websites maintained by individuals offer the most information and evidence of user participation. A prolific presence in the online transgender community is "The Antijen Pages," which will reach its fifteenth-year mark on May 11, 2009. The aesthetic of the site is not traditionally pleasing—there is no unifying theme or consistency, each page within the site has a different design, and despite twenty-two links in the menu bar, information is scattered across the homepage in no particular order. The site takes advantage of external linking for some unique features, such as on "Online Comics" page, which has working links to seven online-only comics

featuring transgender content (The AntiJen Pages). There is also a page with links to thirty newspaper articles about young transsexuals (The AntiJen Pages, “Various Papers Referencing Young Transsexuals”). The Antijen Pages does not fit strictly within the resource website genre, but has many crossover features with the social networking genre.

The distinguishing feature I want to highlight about “The Antijen Pages” is the available user-participation element. Eight of the twenty-two previously mentioned pages encourage browsers to e-mail Aunt Jenny with their stories so that they can be added to the website. This includes a page of “Letters TS’s sent to their Parents and Families” (The Antijen Pages). Many of these other participatory pages have prompts like “Share your experiences. I will only use your first name when I post the info. Help change the world for the future” (The Antijen Pages, “What do I want from life?”). This is the clearest example of transgender adolescents voicing their own subjectivity and offering alternatives to dominant ideologies. Space for sharing personal narrative is a common feature of websites maintained by individuals, in addition to chat boards and forums for discussion. This gives users a chance to construct a “sense of self-identity by creating a ‘coherent’ self-narrative,” which is even more important for transgender adolescents, whose self-identity may be uncertain in the face of dominant ideologies (Cheung 60).

The final category of the resource site genre is harder to locate—in all my research I have only come across two of these websites. My inability to find them does not mean other sites do not exist, but they are likely buried in the pages of websites that cover larger subjects (possibilities would be library sites, individual school sites, and many more). It is important to remember I am primarily concerned with representations of and aimed at young adults, which is another factor that greatly limits my search. I think this category of website is an important one, however, because its existence signals

an inclusion of trans issues by the wider public, which also speaks to its ability to reach potentially wider audiences. One of these sites is Discovery Health's "Transgender Teens" website (2008). As part of a much larger, corporate-owned website, "Transgender Teens" matches the aesthetic of the rest of the site—a simple orange and blue color palette, black text, clean lines, and good organization. All four internally-linked web pages with text are written by the same author, Christina Breda Antoniadou, which gives the impression that the site was probably her project. The fifth internally-linked page is a resources page, with external links to other websites with information for transgender individuals.

The first three of the internally-linked pages are "Understanding What 'Transgender' Means," "LaVonna's Story: Reaching Out to Transgender Teens," and "A Parent's Perspective on Transgender Identity." All of these pages are written in question and answer format, which lends a professional and informative tone. Alternatively, it creates distance from the subject and does not privilege the transgender voice. It is also worth noting that none of the interviews are actually with transgender teens, but with a health professional, an adult transgender woman, and the mother of a transgender teen. The fourth internally-linked page, "Transgender Teens Follow Up," is a brief (284-word) follow up with the two transgender teen subjects of a Discovery Health production, *Transgender Teens*.²⁹ However, this page is *not* in interview format, but summarizes for the teens using a few short quotations. One of the young women could not be found, but there is no explanation for the lack of space given to the other.

Another seemingly incongruous detail of this website is the resource page. Although there are fifteen sites that cover a wide range of topics—legal, health, and work

²⁹ Although it is mentioned on this website, I could find no other record of this production and when it aired.

included—none of the sites are specifically geared towards teens. The only text on the page other than the links says, “If you're a transgendered person, find resources and support no matter where you live” (Antoniades). This quotation speaks volumes about the “Transgender Teens” website in general—there is little about it that seems specifically marketed towards teens, though transgender teens may often be the subject of discussion. If we apply the structural tools of the young adult literary genre to the internet, then this site is failing to fit within what could be called a young adult website genre.

I think Charles Cheung’s arguments about the emancipatory qualities of the personal homepage apply to the websites I analyzed as well: distinctive medium characteristics make the website an emancipatory media genre, but due to any number of factors in daily life, the emancipatory potential is often limited or not fully exploited (53). Cheung is discussing producing personal homepages and I imagine the limitations of creating a resource website is even more challenging—rather than trying to represent just yourself, the creator(s) is trying to convey important information for an entire group. The additional workload could help explain the deficit in strong websites for transgender adolescents. Websites are not a complete anomaly, but one media we interact with regularly as part of our cultural experience. How do the websites I analyzed compare to the other texts I examined?

Some narratives of success depend on technologies of body modification—for Grady it is a chest binder and for Isis it is gender reassignment surgery. These narratives are found in some aspect on all of the websites as well, often through discussion of surgery, but also in the form of “how-to” or beauty tips. Another way both Grady and Isis are viewed as successful is simply be being themselves, another common theme of transgender adolescent websites. The dominant image on the “TransProud” website is the “TransProud” logo with “Be Yourself.” directly under the word “Proud” (OutProud). The

AntiJen Pages features a narrative about being true to yourself shared by one user as advice from her grandmother. The text is a permanent feature on the homepage, on a right-side ledger; it ends with these words in bold: “Be yourself, and be the best you can be!” (The AntiJen Pages). A notable narrative missing from the websites I reviewed is that of failure due merely to a transgender identity.

If only for the absence of bigoted narratives, I would evaluate the Internet as the most representative of actual transgender subjectivities. Young adult literature and television still play important roles in the everyday lives of trans and non-trans adolescents, however, so they should work to be more representative. The existence of both resource websites and what I perceive to be an abundance of transgender personal homepages demonstrates a desire on the part of their creators to offer definitions and images contrary to the dominant ideologies surrounding transgender and transsexual issues. These alternative representations have to be sought out, however, and there is still a need for dominant representations to diversify and multiply in order to offer more constructive, realistic picture of transgender subjectivities (which are diverse and multiple) to the general public and transgender individuals.

Appendix A:
America's Next Top Model Partial Transcript

Jay Manuel: (13:45) You were the diva in Cycle Ten's first photo shoot in the homeless shelter. You were one of the girls from the shelter who participated in our shoot in the background as an extra. Let's face it, there's a reason you're here because you know how to give me couture.

Tyra: It blew me away. And I tell my staff, I'm like, "This girl is absolutely amazing. She's got to come back for *America's Next Top Model*. I said, "This girl" and my staff said, "Tyra, there's something a little different about that girl." So what is different about this girl?

Isis: I was born physically male, but mentally, everything else I was born female.

[in confessional] Some people might say that I'm transgender, some people might say transsexual. Personally I prefer born in the wrong body meaning I was born physically male on the outside, but everything else about me was female.

[...]

Tyra: Tell me about when you knew that you were a girl?

Isis: As long as I can remember. It's not something I chose, it's just who I've always been.

Tyra; So let's talk about surgery.

[...]

Tyra: What do you think your presence in this competition would do for the Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender community?

Isis: I'm proud to be somebody, you know, to represent other people but I've come here for myself because it's just something that I've really worked hard for and I've been practicing and I really, really want it.

Isis: [in confessional] My eyes are on the prize, no matter what people may think of me or not. I'm here, this is myself, this is how I've always been. Transition or not, I'm me.

Jay Manuel: I like that Isis does not have an agenda. She really just wants to be a model.

[...]

Kacey: But Isis, I thought she looked a little manly. I have small boobs too, but her boobs are, she has no boobs.

[Kacey summons Isis over to a group of girls talking on a couch]

Isis: Y'all wanna figure me out, right? Y'all are smart, y'all are talking, it's okay.

Kacey: So is it true?

Isis: Is what true?

Kacey: Are you—all female?

Isis: Physically, was I born female? No.

Kacey: [in confessional] In my mind I was like, What girl, how'd you—ain't this supposed to be a girl competition? How did you get through the door?

Unidentified contestant: What happens if, like, we have to do a nude scene?

Isis: I'll take care of it. I'm here to win. [in confessional] I'm not letting any of these girls bother me. I know what I'm here for. This is the person I am. Either take it or leave it.

Sheena: [speaking to other contestants] The best person for this competition is going to win. What should matter is your spirit and how much you want to be here. [in confessional] For Isis to be so brave and so secure with who she is and being able to not let anything bother her—it's very commendable.

Clark: [in a group of girls] She said that she used to be a man. (Analeigh shown laughing)

Unidentified contestant: She confirmed it? And now she's on America's Next Top Model?

Clark: [in confessional] If I have to get along with Isis, I will. But then again, if it comes between me and my goal, I'll stomp that man right out of the competition. (17:00)

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Vita

Adeline Jocelyn Smith, also known as “Josie,” was born in Ames, Iowa on March 2, 1984, the daughter of Barbara Redshaw Harding and Scott Marriott Smith. Her parents now also include Billy Joe Harding and Richard Lee Joens. After graduating from Theodore Roosevelt High School, Des Moines, Iowa, in 2002, she entered Washington University in St. Louis (Missouri). She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Women’s and Gender Studies from Washington University in St. Louis in May, 2006. There she published multiple poems in student journals and opinion editorials in the student newspaper. In August, 2007, she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin, where she assistant taught English 316K from August, 2007 until May, 2009.

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