

# (RE-)NARRATING TRANSGENDER PASTS, PRESENTS, AND FUTURES IN CASEY PLETT'S *LITTLE FISH*

**Steph Berens**

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

## ABSTRACT

In Casey Plett's novel *Little Fish* (2018), the protagonist Wendy faces multiple life-changing events at the same time. After her grandmother passes away, she finds out that her Mennonite grandfather might have been a trans woman and grapples with the way her family narrativizes and remembers him. In the midst of this journey, her friend Sophie dies by suicide and Wendy is left to piece together Sophie's past, navigate a present of mourning, and imagine a future without her. Building on theories of queer and trans temporalities, Kit Heyam's recent work on trans histories, Susan Stryker's Foucauldian reading of trans as a subjugated archive, and Margaret Middleton's concept of 'gaydar as epistemology,' this paper explores how cisnormative narrations of transness and transitioning hold trans subjectivities in a constant temporal bind and, in turn, how *Little Fish* interrogates this bind through a (re-)narration of transgender pasts, presents, and futures. The temporal bind within cisnormative temporalities and narrations of transness is rooted in medicalization and pathologization and configures trans identity as a temporary phase on a linear transitioning path from a traumatic childhood in the past to the curing of a wrong body in the future. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that *Little Fish* is able to challenge the cisnormative narrative by de-subjugating trans archives and utilizing specific, embodied knowledge of transness to come to an interpretation of the past that negates presupposed heterosexuality and cisnormativity, and instead opens the possibility for the complexity of queer and trans existence.

**Keywords:** transgender literature; Casey Plett; queer temporality; de-subjugation; trans archives.

## INTRODUCTION

In November 2022, the online magazine *them* launched "Trans Futures Week," a series spotlighting transgender community activists and celebrity media makers in conversation about trans futurity (Sanders 2022). These conversations included artist Syrus Marcus Ware and writer adrienne maree brown speaking about post-binary communities; journalist Imara Jones and producer Zackary Drucker talking about the future of trans stories; historian Jules Gill-Peterson and Dr. Jerrica Kirkley, co-founder of a virtual gender-affirming care organization in the United States called Plume, thinking through future transition discourses; performer ALOK and actor Brigette Lundy-Paine contemplating a world that has seized to center gender presentation and passing; and activist Miss Major and ACLU lawyer Chase Strangio talking about the

future of organizing for trans rights. Wren Sanders (2022), *them's* community section editor, writes that "Trans Futures Week" was created in response to the dire situation trans communities in the United States find themselves in and as a supplement to Trans Awareness Week: "Increasingly, these past few years, I've wondered whether more *awareness* is really what we need. It's hard to say. What I do know is that this week often feels more about cis people than it does about us--correcting their ignorance about our lives, fulfilling their curiosity about our stories, requesting their compassion for our pain" (par. 4). Sanders (2022) emphasizes that "Trans Futures Week" is not meant to replace this focus on awareness, but elevate trans community, needs, and interests at the same time: "More than that, it's a testament to the insufficiency of merely stating, 'trans and nonbinary people exist in the future.' Rather, we believe that because of our innovation, our fearlessness, and our paradigm-shifting willpower, there is no future without us" (par. 5).

Keeping this assertion at the forefront of our minds during the onslaught of violence, erasure, and death on trans people, especially those who are multiply marginalized, seems crucial. As *them* turns to public trans figures to produce an imagination, and indeed a reality, of trans futurity, I would like to turn to transgender fiction, specifically to Casey Plett's 2018 novel *Little Fish* for an examination of the construction of trans pasts, presents, and futures. As a novel by a Canadian author set in Canada, *Little Fish* refutes the idea that Canada presents a haven for trans people while anti-trans legislation in the United States makes life for trans people increasingly unviable (Dalwood 2023) and mirrors many of the anxieties that come with being trans in the United States. At the same time, however, many works of trans fiction published in the past years seem to have exceedingly flourished from Canadian small and independent presses, such as Metonymy Press in Montreal and Vancouver's Arsenal Pulp Press, demonstrating how these specifically Canadian spaces have been able to bring about trans narratives that imagine and literarily secure a future of and with transness. *Little Fish* centers on Wendy, a white trans woman in her thirties, who grapples with the entanglements of pasts, presents, and futures as she learns that her deceased Mennonite grandfather Henry might have been trans and navigates her life

within her Winnipeg community after her friend Sophie, also a white trans woman, dies by suicide. I examine how Wendy reconstructs her grandfather's and Sophie's past and read this process as a de-subjugation of trans archives which opens important questions about trans histories and epistemology. Further, I argue that the novel exemplifies how cisnormative constructions and narrations of transness hold trans subjects in a constant temporal bind and interrogates this bind through a re-narration of transgender pasts, presents, and futures. Ultimately, *Little Fish* not only declares, 'there is no future without us,' but also, 'there has been no past without us' and 'there *will* be no past without us.'

I see a crucial difference between there being no past without us and the assertion that there *will* be no past without us--the former emphasizes the fact that phenomena of transing gender have always been around, despite discourses claiming transness to be merely a trend, a passing fancy. The latter is a declaration of intent, of refusal to accept these discourses, a refusal to accept the erasure of trans histories, presents, and futures, a digging in the heels, or, in Sara Ahmed's (2014) terms, a conscious embodiment of willful subjectivity, a turning back to and nurturing of our personal as well as collective pasts in order to sustain our presents and guarantee our futures. The assertion of trans existence, and in the best case, flourishing, throughout the past and present and into the future becomes especially necessary when considering how cisnormativity places trans identity into the aforementioned temporal bind. To understand this bind, we must first dive down a rabbit hole which concerns the construction and institutionalization of temporalities.

#### THE CISNORMATIVE TEMPORAL BIND<sup>1</sup>

Hegemonic temporalities are modes of structuring life that have become regarded as normal in Western cultures (Freeman 2007, 160). Linearity often features prominently in institutionalized temporalities, for example in heterosexual time. Jack Halberstam

---

<sup>1</sup> Author, unpublished master's thesis, 2020.

(2005) describes how heterosexual time revolves around reproductive temporality, which is tied to notions of the normal and of white middle-class respectability (4). Reproductive temporality centers heterosexual reproduction and biological family structures on a timeline of life that is marked by birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (Halberstam 2005, 2), and dictates certain time frames in which the achievement of marriage and reproduction are appropriate and desirable (5). Marriage and reproduction are relegated to the time of adulthood, which is reached by traversing “the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence” (Halberstam 2005, 4) in order to achieve maturation. Heterosexual temporality’s focus on reproduction, biological family structures, and the associated inheritance of wealth and values from one generation to the next emphasize the importance of longevity and stability—not only for the nuclear family itself, but also for the family as a stand-in for the nation (Halberstam 2005, 4-5). This timeline constructs adolescence and adulthood as opposite temporal spaces, and maturation as a linear process. The importance of longevity and stability implied within heterosexual time means that lifestyles which lack long periods of stability are viewed as immature and threatening (Halberstam 2005, 5). Heterosexual time thus marginalizes individuals who refuse to or are unable to center heterosexual marriage and reproduction in their life.

Those who refuse the structuring of their life according to heterosexual time may then fabricate “new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (Halberstam 2005, 2) by following what Halberstam calls queer temporality. The construction of this term presupposes that queerness is not only tied to sexual identity but can be understood as a way of life marked by “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (Halberstam 2005, 1) as well as “subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being” (1). Halberstam admits that queerness and transness are, of course, not inherently tied to unconventionality and that “not all gay, lesbian and transgender people live their lives in radically different ways from their heterosexual

counterparts” (1), but they do emphasize the potential that queerness has to imagine life apart from heterosexual structures of temporality.

While heterosexual time focuses on the future and the preservation of the family and the nation, queer temporality is more concerned with the present (Halberstam 2005, 2). Halberstam argues that the emphasis on the potential and possibility of the present moment emerged during the AIDS crisis, where queer and trans futures were uncertain or abruptly terminated, and people formed alliances around disease and death (*ibid.*). This temporal shift, even though born in a time of risk and desperation, led to “a hopeful reinvention of conventional understandings of time” (Halberstam 2005, 3) that imagined forms of life outside of biological family structures (2). This turn toward the present is not unproblematic though, considering how queer people, and especially those who are also racialized, are already configured as stuck in the present. José Esteban Muñoz ([2009] 2019), for example, argues that “it is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity” (95) because futurity is never guaranteed for racialized and queer people in the first place. Halberstam (2005) also demonstrates this point, noting that a celebratory notion of turning towards the present does not equally apply to racialized and poor people, as “the premature deaths of poor people and people of color [...] is simply business as usual” (3-4). Further, Blackness has often been configured as an “arrested adolescence” (Halberstam 2005, 176). Stacey Patton (2014) writes that Black adults are cast as “stuck in a limbo of childhood, viewed as irresponsible, uncivil, criminal, innately inferior,” while, paradoxically, Black children are seen as older and more mature than they are due to adultification bias (Epstein et al. 2017; Patton 2014). In similar fashion, Freeman (2007) illustrates how queer people are often viewed as having no future, “no children, no succeeding generations, no meaningful way to contribute to society, no hope, no plans” (165). At the same time, they “have been figured as having no past: no childhood, no origin or precedent in nature, no family traditions or legends, and, crucially, no history as distinct people” (162). Halberstam (2005) adds that psychoanalysts have historically conceived of homosexuality as an adolescent phase, a stage of development on the way to becoming an adult, normal, productive member of society (174). Queerness is thus already situated

between past and future, within a present that is imagined as fleeting and impermanent, and thus as an illegitimate form of life that is unable to produce longevity and stability. While queer temporality does intervene by putting a more positive spin on this situation in the present, Michelle Wright (2018) argues that the present can also be experienced as stasis, as a deliberate hindrance of the movement of queer bodies (290), and stresses that not all queer bodies experience this hindrance equally (291).

Nevertheless, the turn towards the present can hold the potential to reimagine queer and trans existences decoupled from reproduction and linearity. In some instances, for example, queer temporality seems to reclaim the image of queer life as stuck in the present by offering a notion of “stretched-out adolescence” (Halberstam 2005, 153). This notion functions as a counternarrative to the supposedly inevitable maturation from the “unruly period of adolescence” (Halberstam 2005, 4) into the stable and responsible time of adulthood. Halberstam (2005) locates forms of stretched-out adolescence in queer subcultures such as punk rock, drag balls, and slam poetry (154)–today, one might add queer fandoms or online platforms such as Tumblr. These subcultures not only offer alternative ways of life, but also “transient, extrafamilial, and oppositional modes of affiliation” (ibid.) that are not dependent on biological kinship or other more static forms of community centered within heterosexual temporality. The notion of a stretched-out adolescence is also evident in terms of the closet. In contrast to their cisgender/heterosexual peers, queer/trans people often spend their teenage years in the closet hiding their identity for safety reasons (Sisselman-Borgia 2017, 31-32), and may not be able to openly engage in the exploration of their identity until they come out in certain contexts. Therefore, queer and trans people may be more likely to engage in activities normally relegated to the period of adolescence throughout their adulthood. Some trans people literally go through a second puberty when they hormonally transition, and those who do not medically transition may “also experience some of the joys and frustrations associated with adolescence as they begin to explore life in a new gender” (Bailey 2012, 56).

The linearity of heteronormative temporality also lays the groundwork for cisnormative temporalities. Atalia Israeli-Nevo (2017) writes that the conventional

narrative around transgender bodies and transition has characteristics of an “extreme makeover” story line, which portrays an “over-the-top, incredible and almost impossible transformation from one sex/gender to the other” (36). This narrative presupposes a binary understanding of gender as well as an oppositional relationship between the former gender and the new gender (Israeli-Nevo 2017, 36). Transition, then, is configured as “one moment of somatic change that allows the subject to move to the other side of the gap (without looking back), and change everything” (ibid.). Aren Z. Aizura (2011) similarly writes that the journey of transition is usually imagined as “a one-way trajectory across a terrain in which the stuff of sex is divided into male and female territories, divided by the border or no man’s land in between” (140). Meanwhile, the completion of transition, which implies an ability to pass as cisgender (Israeli-Nevo 2017, 36), is configured as the arrival, a “coming home’ to one’s new body” (Aizura 2011, 142). These conceptualizations of transition perpetuate the notion that transition is a one-time event that takes place all at once (Aizura 2011, 146). They also presuppose that “an appropriate, or normal, gender identity is always available” (Aizura 2011, 145), and thus relegate transgender identity to a realm of foreign and exotic, as well as to a position of the abnormal, which needs to be rectified (142). According to Aizura (2011), containing gendered indeterminacy that accompanies transition by relegating it to a temporally enclosed as well as spatially foreign location “works to render transsexuality intelligible within the logic of binary gender” (144). The concept of journeying to the foreign and returning home to the familiar becomes even more problematic when it is framed within “discourses foregrounding (upward) social mobility as the key to successful reinvention” (Aizura 2011, 149). Transition then becomes a journey of self-improvement with the goal of “the protagonist returning ready to take their proper place in the social field” (ibid.), which implies a goal of maximizing an individual’s capacity to be productive within capitalist society (152). The conceptualization of transition as a self-improvement project thus disarms the threat that the existence of transgender identity may pose towards cisnormative social structures by rationalizing transgender identity through the language of hegemonic forces.

This particular imagination of transition originated within the medical and psychiatric establishment in the mid-twentieth century, when medical professionals began to favor granting hormone replacement therapy and gender-confirming surgery to those trans individuals who they thought would best be able to pass as cis (Serano 2016, 119). Accordingly, such a person would exhibit a normative gender expression and sexuality, meaning that trans women would dress and behave feminine, and trans men would dress and behave masculine, all while being heterosexual (Serano 2016, 122). In order to access healthcare, trans people were forced to internalize these protocols, whether they subscribed to them or not. According to Julia Serano (2016), these approaches particularly targeted trans women, as “male femininity” (127) would be considered more psychopathological than “female masculinity” (ibid.). Serano describes the requirements trans women were expected to follow in order to attain treatment:

Most trans women understood that they needed to show up for their psychotherapy appointments wearing dresses and makeup, expressing stereotypically feminine mannerisms, insisting that they had always felt like women trapped inside men’s bodies, that they’d identified as female since they were small children, that they were attracted to men but currently avoided intimate relations because they did not see themselves as homosexual, and that they were repulsed by their own penises. (123-24)

Even today, some healthcare providers still evaluate trans people based on oppositional sexist stereotypes (Serano 2016, 119) and expect them to conform to cisnormative standards of gender expression after they transition (124). This illustrates Israeli-Nevo’s (2017) point about transition being constructed as a one-time, fundamental transformation from one end of a binary gender spectrum to the other (36). Aren Aizura (2011) similarly concludes that the “expectation that transition ought to happen all at once” (146) implies the belief that the importance of medical transition does not lie in the easing of gender dysphoria for the trans individual, but rather in their ability to pass as cisgender and not upset notions of binary gender. Dean Spade’s (2006) essay “Mutilating Gender” corroborates this argument. He posits that the practices of accepting certain trans people for body alteration while rejecting others on the grounds



of arbitrary, gender stereotypical categories upholds the gender binary and discourages gender-variant expressions (316).

Spade (2006) illustrates how the construction of trans identity as a mental illness and the establishment of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) as a diagnosis also invented a very specific life narrative for trans people (318). This narrative usually involves having felt ‘trapped in the wrong body’ since childhood, definitely being heterosexual but not engaging in sexual relations due to a deep aversion to one’s genitals, and always having exhibited gender-stereotypical behaviors (Serano 2016, 123-24). Those individuals who adhere to this narrative are more likely to gain access to body-altering interventions, as they confirm the gatekeepers’ ideologies of gender dichotomy and compulsory heterosexuality. However, this does not mean that all trans people who manage to gain access have had a life like that—some might have internalized the gatekeepers’ standards and fashioned their life narrative accordingly, or merely mimic this narrative in order to get the care they need (Spade 2006, 318). Spade (2006) concludes that the construction of transness as an illness in turn constructs cisgender identity as healthy, and that gaining access to body-altering interventions depends on successfully performing gender in a normative way (319). Building on Foucault’s theories on power, he thus reads the medical establishment’s handling of trans people not as a repressive force to discourage gender-related body alteration, but rather as a regulatory mechanism that enforces normative gender performances—not only in trans people, but in cis people as well (Spade 2006, 321). In favor of creating cis-passing subjects in the future, cisnormative medical narratives thus seek to overwrite trans pasts and histories. Similar to how heterosexual time constructs queerness, transness is configured as a present phase on a linear transitioning path from a traumatic childhood in the past to the ‘curing’ of a ‘wrong body’ in the future. This imagination clearly separates pasts, presents, and futures, and co-opts transitioning as the key to passing from a volatile and ‘sick’ present into a stable, cis- passing, ‘healthy’ future.

Because the normative narrative around transition situates the ‘old’ gender in the past and the ‘new’ gender in the future, while imagining a clearly defined, linear movement between the two (Israeli-Nevo 2017, 37), Israeli-Nevo argues that this

conceptualization can be interfered with through a deliberate focus on the present (37), for example by taking time with transition and allowing, or even encouraging, indeterminacy (38). Indeterminacy forces the onlooker to engage with the fact that their visually coded understanding of binary gender models is flawed. Israeli-Nevo (2017) writes that “the fact that I can pass at the same time as a man, a woman, and something in-between, creates an excessive affective moment, in which the person in front of me is temporally delayed and pulled into the mindful present, forced to recognize his/her confusion” (39). The shift of focus onto the present instead of the future is reminiscent of Jack Halberstam’s (2005) concept of queer temporality and its refusal of futural heterosexual time.

Again, shifting the focus onto the present is not wholly unproblematic though. Israeli-Nevo (2017) herself admits that gendered indeterminacy can be dangerous, especially for racialized people (45), and that a delay in transition can also be an unwanted outer circumstance due to unstable economic situations or lack of access (ibid.). Ruth Pearce (2018) adds that the present may be an uncomfortable state for trans people, one marked by an anticipation of violence and the wait for access to treatment (120). This constant anticipation of the future “can be experienced as an unpleasant ‘limbo’ by many trans people” (Pearce 2018, 123). She therefore proposes notions of trans temporality that refuse linearity but do not negate futurity and conceptualizes an “embodied coexistence of past, present and future” (124). For instance, she references Julian Carter’s conceptualization of transitional time as movement that is simultaneously directed “forward, backward, sideways [and] tangential[ly]” (Carter 2013, 141). Pearce (2018) reads this as an “embodied coexistence of past, present and future” (124) and a refusal of linearity that does not negate futurity (ibid.). Another example is Laura Horak’s (2014) concept of hormone time, which is described as “linear and teleological, directed toward the end of living full time in the desired gender” (580). Horak (2014) notes that hormone time is not a queer temporality, but rather “appropriates the ‘straight’ temporality of progress for radical ends” (581). Instead of employing futurity and linearity as a means to achieve reproduction and the sustainment of the nation, hormonal time envisions “expansive trans subjects and

Steph Berens |

communities” (ibid.). In sum, both heteronormative and cisnormative temporalities hold subjects in a temporal bind of linearity. *Little Fish* aims to narrate trans identity outside of this bind and explore temporalities that more accurately reflect the messiness of gender embodiment.

#### (RE-)NARRATING TRANSNESS OUTSIDE THE BIND

Whether turning towards and/or reimagining the present or the future, the goal of expansive trans subjects and communities seems to be a universal one when it comes to queer- and trans-centered temporalities. The need for liberation from cisheteronormative temporal binds becomes especially clear as *Little Fish* illustrates how these temporal binds are not only a theoretical concept but have a real-life, and quite a harsh impact, on trans lives. Wendy experiences this impact as a recurrent failure to satisfy the cis gaze, since she repeatedly gets verbally assaulted by strangers who become aware of her trans status at second glance (Plett 101, 124). Despite being on hormones for over eight years, having had a vaginoplasty, and displaying a feminine gender expression, Wendy does not always pass as cis and is therefore unable to inhabit the post-transition future that cisnormative temporal constructions of transitioning intend. These incidences in which strangers assert she is a man happen so regularly one might compare them to clockwork. I read these interactions as a prime example of the temporal bind that cisnormative temporalities create for trans people: on the one hand, a clear directive towards a certain future, on the other, repeated, violent relocations to the past when this directive is not adhered to. Reflecting on these instances, Wendy thinks of what her friend Sophie would say about them: “You can’t play their game. You never win by playing the cis game. You can win on so much, but you’ll never win that” (125). (Re-)narrating Henry’s past as well as actively participating in the construction of Sophie’s remembrance after her suicide can be read as Wendy’s refusal to play the cis game and instead blast open the tight boundaries within which the possibilities of trans existence are thought to be possible. Through this approach, the novel expands the interventions of queer and trans temporalities in linear cisheteronormative temporal constructions by suggesting lines of flight into all directions, not merely from the future

to the present, and embraces the present and the future and the past as unstable and static, restricting and liberating, malleable and rigid concepts.

The cover of *Little Fish*, for one, suggests a refusal of steady linear progression and instead seems to convey a sense of stasis. The cover art depicts a wintery scene of crooked, crammed wooden houses with snow piling on top of their roofs and icicles hanging off the porches. Knotty, dark tree trunks climb towards the sky and puncture the porches here and there. The ground is covered in snow, and faceless people with heavy coats and boots trudge through it, shovel snow from their cars, or sit outside drinking and smoking. The scene suggests sluggish, inhibited movement; the gray and blue coloring invokes freezing cold. As the narrative takes place in November and December, the story can either be interpreted as one that pauses to reflect on the past, perhaps before a new beginning in a new year, or as a deliberate break from the rush and consumerism that typically haunt this time in Western cultures, giving Wendy the opportunity to grapple with much more meaningful and urgent changes in her life. Suggesting both an unpleasant limbo but perhaps also a sense of comfortable drowsiness, the cover thus embodies the way the text later contends with the experience of temporality as fundamentally multilayered and potentially oxymoronic.

The centrality of temporality, and lines of flight into the past specifically, is unfolded in the very first chapter, numbered as “0” and taking place the night before Wendy’s grandmother passes away. Wendy and her friends Raina, Lila, and Sophie are at a bar and Sophie begins talking about how age is different for trans people compared to cis people (11). The others chime in with aspects such as trans age also meaning the time since one started taking hormones, or how hormone replacement therapy makes trans people look much younger, or how trans people often do not reach higher ages as they die sooner due to violence or suicide (ibid.). Sophie continues that “the difference with transsexual age is what can be expected from you. Cis people have so many benchmarks for a good life that go by age. [...] Cis people always have timelines. I mean, I know not every cis person has that life, but--what are the cis people in my life doing? What are they doing in your life? Versus what the trans people in your life are doing? On a macro level. Ask yourself that” (12). Raina then says, “I wonder if cis people think

about their past in the same way we do,” (ibid.) but the question remains unanswered as Wendy leaves the table and sits “sipping from a mickey of whiskey in the bathroom, calmly thinking” (ibid.). This opening chapter sets the tone for the rest of the narrative, foreshadowing not only Sophie’s eventual death but also Wendy’s prime coping mechanism of numbing herself with alcohol throughout the profound changes she experiences.

Among these changes is the revelation that Wendy’s deceased grandfather Henry might have been trans. Wendy first gains knowledge of this idea after her grandmother’s passing, when a family friend named Anna calls and hints that Henry was like Wendy herself (21). At first, Wendy dismisses the idea, but in the following days and weeks she repeatedly finds herself preoccupied with the question. In a subsequent phone call, Anna clarifies that she meant Henry might have been gay and not trans, which disappoints Wendy a bit (73), until one of her friends mentions that most people did not know the difference at the time, and the possibility might still stand (107). Wendy then begins an effort to discover her grandfather’s history, using old photo albums from her grandmother’s house, information from Anna, conversations with her friend Sophie’s mother, who grew up in a Mennonite community as well, memories her dad Ben tells her about, and her own experiences with Henry as a child. These passages convey two fundamental issues when considering trans histories, whether personal or communal: that of the subjugation of trans archives and the problem of knowledge.

Susan Stryker (2006) references Foucault’s concept of subjugated knowledge when describing the work of transgender studies as excavating and recontextualizing “blocks of historical knowledge that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked” (Foucault qtd. in Stryker 2006, 12). In other words, trans knowledges are usually subjugated, as they may be present within archives but are often obscured or misread. Finding and recontextualizing these knowledges constitutes a form of renarration, which according to Stryker (2006), leads to “new stories about things many of us thought we already knew” (13). In this context, Wendy’s work reads as a reexamination of archives and the renarration of her grandfather’s history. De-subjugating her archive is hard work for Wendy, as her prime informant Anna

frequently and deliberately leaves gaps and silences in her narrative of Henry and relies heavily on religious beliefs to explain much of his behavior (Plett 2018, 259). Furthermore, what works against the de-subjugation of possibly trans material from an archive in general is, as Kit Heyam (2022) describes it, the assumption that trans people are too biased by their own experiences to make scientifically objective judgements about trans material (20), which obscures the underlying premise that a cisnormative perspective, in fact, does constitute an objective evaluation of material.

Intimate knowledge of being trans and the common experiences many trans people go through, then, can be used as a tool to question cisnormative interpretations of archives. In Wendy's case, her knowledge of trans experiences leads her to a particular interpretation of the fact that Henry is completely missing from photo albums during the early eighties (Plett 2018, 80). When she asks Anna about this, Anna explains that Henry was deeply devoted to traditional Mennonite teachings who regarded the use of cameras as a form of vanity (152). Wendy is clearly frustrated with this answer though: "That's not why he avoided cameras, Anna, she thought nastily, it was never about fucking religion" (ibid.). Wendy finds the explanation that Henry was trans and perhaps did not like seeing himself in photos more plausible than Anna's explanation that Henry was simply very religious. In similar reasoning, Wendy also notices that in the pictures Henry does show up in, he's always wearing large gray men's shirts, and concludes: "That fits, though, she thought. Wear the same outfit day after day, your brain gets numb to how it looks or feels--" (24). Without this intimate knowledge, which helps Wendy deconstruct and reconstruct Henry's narrative, Henry's story would remain in a bind which always presupposes cisgender identity and heterosexuality. The act of *knowing what to look for* echoes Margaret Middleton's (2022) argument that knowledge through experience is an essential tool for interpretation. Frustrated with museum curators who omit queerness or potential queerness from their exhibitions, Middleton (2022) advocates to reconsider notions of expertise and evidence to include possibilities of queerness: "Imaginative queer possibility values queer experience as expertise and gaydar as epistemology" (433). Similarly to having gaydar, Wendy knows how to look for "clues" of transness due to her own experience as a trans woman.

Another instance in which the specificity of queer knowledge leads Wendy to a radically different conclusion about Henry's life than Anna's occurs when Wendy learns from her dad Ben that during the early eighties, Henry would often spend time in the city, allegedly to take his father to doctor's appointments (Plett 2018, 87). However, Ben once saw Henry walk into a bar, briefly talk to the bartender and leave (88). Sophie's mom confirms Wendy's suspicion that Henry might have frequented gay bars when she recounts that it was not unheard of or even strictly punished within Mennonite communities when men went to the city, as it was assumed that they had to "get things out of their system" (139). The narration of Henry's potential gender transgressions as something that took place outside of the Mennonite community in the city reflects how the cisnormative temporal bind of trans subjects also adds spatial fixity to temporal fixedness and echoes Aren Z. Aizura's (2011) argument about the relegation of transness to the realm of the outside, foreign, and exotic (144). When Anna then mentions that Henry had a friend from the city who died around this time but stays silent about the cause of his death (Plett 2018, 259), Wendy assumes that Henry might have had a lover who died from AIDS and mourns for Henry's inability to ever share this pain with other people (260). Finally, Wendy musters the courage to ask Ben if Henry might have been gay, to which Ben simply replies, "Oh yeah! Well, there were rumors" (285). Ben's exclamatory affirmation of Wendy's thoughts and yet the immediately following qualification of his statement demonstrates the slipperiness of new interpretations within the de-subjugating process. Any new interpretation suggests renarration instead of firm confirmation; the process of renarration points to the fallacy of cisnormative objectivity, but simultaneously leaves the narrative open for possibility, rather than enclosing it within a new fixity.

Kit Heyam (2022) demonstrates the importance of open narratives: "This is the problem: the trans histories that we point to most often are the easy stories. [...] They tend to be those that are easily, uncomplicatedly recognizable according to these modern Western ideas of what it means to be trans" (9). Heyam (2022) uses the story of John Sullivan, who was arrested while drunk and wearing women's clothing in 1847 East London and later tried for the theft of said clothes, as an example of the "difficult,

complicated stories from the history of gender that we don't have a good way to talk about" (9-10). The fact that most historical evidence of gender transing stems from legal and medical documents feeds into an extremely narrow narrative of what trans identity is and erases the messier stories that do not easily match first-hand testimonies of people who lived stably in a different gender than the one assigned to them at birth, who accessed the expected medical transitioning options, whose gender fit modern Western understandings and thus became legible to us today (Heyam 2022, 9-11). As a result, the archive of historical trans stories becomes extremely narrow, but, as Heyam (2022) personally demonstrates, our trans presents are put into question as well: "Anti-trans campaigners are not simply arguing, 'Trans people are new.' Instead, they're arguing, 'Trans people are new, *and that means they're not real.*' And by coupling our historicity with our *realness*, they've managed to tap into one of the most profound anxieties of trans communities today" (23). This pressure then gives way to narrow narratives:

When you're faced with a political landscape that says 'you're not real'--and when you're working in an exhausting, hostile political environment characterized by orchestrated online pile-ons and immediate Twitter amplification of out-of-context statements, which leaves no room for nuance--the overwhelming temptation is to avoid mentioning these messy aspects of trans experience altogether: to stay 'on-message,' which, in Jacob Tobia's words, 'generally means catering to the least common denominator, watering down your community's story.' (Heyam 2022, 25)

To demonstrate their argument, Heyam recounts attending a meeting of their local trans group and asking, "Did anyone else here... when you first came out, did you have problems believing yourself?" (23) to which all attendees agreed.

Within these contexts, knowledge of oneself and knowledge of others becomes a particularly tricky undertaking. At the same time, Wendy's renarration of Henry's past also demonstrates that the boundaries between knowing and imagining can, should, and sometimes must be fluid. Wendy's musings about Henry culminate in a dream in which she and Henry are sitting on a couch together. Using she/her pronouns for Henry, Wendy describes how Henry "leaned forward on her knees in her long billowy clothing



looking at Wendy, and she laughed with her radiant, pure lit-up smile getting bigger and bigger until both of their faces were almost touching with light light light shining from all of Henry's soft lotioned body, until they were so close, Henry now silent and smiling at Wendy deep and big and light, and neither of them moved" (Plett 2018, 289). More powerfully than her reinterpretation of Henry's past based on archival evidence, Wendy's imagination of Henry in her dream allows for a continuation of the deep sense of kinship she felt with her grandparent when they were still alive and for the possibility of Henry living on in her mind as the woman they might have been.

In contrast to Henry's case, where Wendy only has incomplete and scarce scraps of information to work with, she is flooded with stories from Sophie's past after her friend's death, as old friends and acquaintances share their memories of Sophie on Facebook: "Lila and Raina and Wendy were showered with condolences and queries and, strangely, friend requests. Them being physically closest to this woman who had made friends everywhere [...] Or at least people who claimed to have been her friends, or at least people who were desperate to share the stories and feelings they had. Their Facebook feeds became newspapers of mourning" (167). As Sophie's archive fills up quickly, Wendy is overwhelmed while she pieces together details of Sophie's life before they had become friends. The stories about Sophie's life soon fuse into one large, fragmented narrative, which presses on unstopably without any punctuation and at times obscures the legibility of Sophie's story for the reader to the point of seeming nonsensical, thus emphasizing the intimacy between Sophie and her kin:

*We had a presentation one day in Queens you were dating Raina if you had asked me about her last week I would have told you I'd vowed never to speak to Sophie again she was the first trans woman I ever met I would've told you about the time she ghosted me not the first or the second that she taught me chess I don't think it's unfair to say or at least many wouldn't disagree Sophie was fascinated by people jump to them like a grasshopper had the stupidest things to say and would never let you go of them she could be so quiet and god that girl loved to drink she was so fun I always had fun with her she could get her fucking paws into collected people in that sense in uni she drove me in the middle of the night to Grand Forks to get my mom never let me pay for her hormones not a year ago I just started hormones yesterday surprise everyone btw and I wanted her to be the first one to know I don't know what else to say I just met her two weeks ago fuck her I'm done with her we*

*never stood in line waiting at the door in rain for hours joke of hers was she did this for me she did this to me (ibid.)*

While it is highly probable that Wendy's renarration of Henry's life mainly serves her own life narrative by recuperating their possible transness and their significance to Wendy (since Henry himself is no longer in a position to benefit from it), the renarration seems to manage to leave a certain openness for possibility. This passage in which Sophie is memorialized emphasizes that the narration of the dead's life serves the mourners by locating and contextualizing the passed individual within their own life narratives.

While Sophie's new friends construct a fragmented, open, and messy narrative of her, however, her relatives seem to resort to a more fixed portrayal. At Sophie's funeral, her aunt recounts Sophie's past as a little girl and how she grew to be a young woman (168). While the projection of Sophie's trans gender identity onto her past can be read as an affirming process of renarrating, recontextualizing, and reframing a history, the aunt also fixes Sophie into a very particular narrative that ties her to a neoliberal trajectory of success and the religious community of her family: "Even during the time she was out of touch with our family, I always knew, I always just knew in my head the Lord was looking after her, that she was making something fantastic happen. She had such a pure soul, a soul that was too pure to stay with us. I never realized how much pain she was in—I prayed for her every day, and I will continue to pray that she is with God" (169). As Wendy remarks, the stories told by Sophie's family at the funeral are all "light, beautiful, melancholy stories, stories both adjacent to and a thousand miles away from tragedy" (ibid.), which obscure the full complexity of Sophie's life. After the service, alone in the church bathroom, Wendy seems to attempt a recovery of Sophie's messiness and complexity, as "she silently prayed, *Lord, please keep this woman with you, and may she rest in peace*. She said out loud, 'Fuck you, I'm not joining you for a long time. [...] You better be getting drunk now, you cunt'" (ibid.). And, looking at her own vulva, she reinstates Sophie into the messy and 'unholy' realm of trans experience and tough-love trans kinship: "'Man, you stayed alive, you coulda had one of these!' She hiccupped. 'You stupid dumb fucking *bitch!*'" (170).

## CONCLUSION

The novel ends with a calm wintery scene that takes up the cover art's sense of stasis but simultaneously points towards a potential future. As Wendy exits a client's hotel after providing sex work, the narrator remarks:

By the elevators in front of the open staircase, Wendy looked through the window expecting a storm, but it had stopped snowing. Under an arch she could see a parking lot and an old gilded apartment building across the way. The street was pristine and quiet and footprint-less. She walked through the reflecting marble lobby. The roads outside were empty sheets of blue and white, ice stretching far, far away, looking like outer space. She put on her headphones as she walked through the revolving doors into the night. She felt okay about where her life was headed. (Plett 2018, 293)

The last sentence of this passage feels ambivalent and captures a possible co-existence of a hopeful gesture towards the future and a resignation about the limited possibilities within this future—given that she just experienced an eviction yet also quickly found a new place to live in with Raina (Plett 2018, 284), she has lost one of her best friends but still finds a deep sense of kinship with people like Raina to “keep [each other] company through this miserable winter” (ibid.), (a winter which can be read literally but also metaphorically as a difficult, harsh time), she has recurring dreams about being sexually assaulted after actually being sexually assaulted (288), she expects to not have any employment options besides sex work but also has enough money stashed away to survive the winter months after Christmas in which business would be low (282), and she still definitely has an alcohol problem but is becoming aware of it and is trying to manage her drinking (287). This messiness and openness mirrors Wendy's renarration of Henry's archive and creates potential for a trans future while simultaneously acknowledging the difficulties within the present.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that cisheteronormative temporalities and timelines hold trans subjects in a fixed temporal bind, which *Little Fish* challenges by reevaluating narrations of the past, critically examining the present, and pointing to the prospects of the future. These challenges are accomplished by de-subjugating trans archives and utilizing specific, embodied knowledge of transness to come to an interpretation of the past that negates presupposed heterosexuality and cisnormativity

and instead opens the possibility for queer and trans existence. While the renarration of Henry's archive leads to the possibility of a kinship that crosses generations and the boundaries of life and death, the memorialization of Sophie points towards the importance of open narratives and the need for critically interrogating the sources and motives of narratives-after-death. In the end, *Little Fish* holds space for the complexity and messiness of trans narratives and presents a counterpoint to the "transsexual narrative" fabricated within a cisnormative medical context.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *Willful Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Aizura, Aren Z. 2011. "The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives." In *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*, edited by Trystan Cotten, 139-56. New York: Routledge.

Bailey, Louis. 2012. "Trans Ageing: Thoughts on a Life Course Approach in Order to Better Understand Trans Lives." In *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Ageing: Biographical Approaches for Inclusive Support*, edited by Richard Ward, Ian Rivers, and Mike Sutherland, 51-66. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Dalwood, Charlotte. 2023. "Is Canada Actually a Viable Safe Harbour for Trans People Fleeing the U.S. and U.K.?" *Xtra*, February 17, 2023. [www.xtramagazine.com/power/canada-trans-immigration-petition-245702](http://www.xtramagazine.com/power/canada-trans-immigration-petition-245702).

Epstein, Rebecca, Jamilia J. Blake, and Thalia González. 2017. "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood." *Georgetown Law: The Center on Poverty and Inequality*. [www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf](http://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf).

Freeman, Elizabeth. 2007. "Introduction." *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13 (2/3): 159-76.

Halberstam, Jack. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.

Heyam, Kit. 2022. *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender*. New York: Basic Books.

Israeli-Nevo, Atalia. 2017. "Taking (My) Time: Temporality in Transition, Queer Delays and Being (in the) Present." *Somatechnics* 7 (1): 34-49.

Steph Berens |

Middleton, Margaret. 2020. "Queer Possibility." *Journal of Museum Education* 45 (4): 426-36.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

Patton, Stacey. 2014. "In America, Black Children Don't Get to Be Children." *Washington Post*, November 26, 2014. [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-america-black-children-dont-get-to-be-children/2014/11/26/age24756-74ee-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-america-black-children-dont-get-to-be-children/2014/11/26/age24756-74ee-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b_story.html).

Plett, Casey. 2018. *Little Fish*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Sanders, Wren. 2022. "Trans Futures Week." *them*, November 2022. [www.them.us/trans-futures-week](http://www.them.us/trans-futures-week).

Serano, Julia. 2016. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. New York: Seal Press.

Sisselman-Borgia, Amanda. 2017. "Adolescence and Gender: Overview." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender*, edited by Kevin L. Nadal, 29-34. Los Angeles: Sage Reference.

Spade, Dean. 2006. "Mutilating Gender." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 315-32. New York: Routledge.

Stryker, Susan. 2006. "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1-18. New York: Routledge.

Wright, Michelle M. 2018. "Queer Temporalities: Space-ing Time and the Subject." In *Time and Literature*, edited by Thomas M. Allen, 288-304. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Steph Berens** is a PhD student at the Graduate School Language and Literature Munich (Class of Literature). Their dissertation examines literary reworkings of harmful cultural tropes about transgender people in contemporary North American trans fiction. Steph completed their master's degree at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany, with a thesis on transgender road fiction and attributes their interest in gender, queer theory, and trans studies to the semesters abroad they spent at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby and Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. E-mail address: [berens@amerikanistik.uni-muenchen.de](mailto:berens@amerikanistik.uni-muenchen.de)