

Steph Berens

On Repair and Worldmaking. Literary Reworkings of Cultural
Tropes in Contemporary North American Transgender Fiction

Dissertationen der LMU München

Band 111

On Repair and Worldmaking

Literary Reworkings of Cultural Tropes in
Contemporary North American Transgender Fiction

by
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Erstveröffentlichung 2026

Zugleich Dissertation der LMU München 2024

Druck und Vertrieb im Auftrag des Autors:

Buchschmiede von Dataform Media GmbH, Julius-Raab-Straße 8
2203 Groöbebersdorf, Österreich

Kontaktadresse nach EU-Produktsicherheitsverordnung:

info@buchschmiede.at



Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet abrufbar über <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

Open-Access-Version dieser Publikation verfügbar unter:

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:19-374709>

<https://doi.org/10.5282/edoc.37470>

ISBN 978-3-99192-999-4

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Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without a bunch of people I feel extremely privileged to share life with.

To my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Klaus Benesch, thank you for your eternal support for the whole of my time at LMU, for hiring me as a tutor and student assistant as a Bachelor student, for letting me give my first conference presentation in Venice during my Master's, for nonchalantly offering me my dream job as a research assistant and lecturer in 2020, for letting me run wild with my project and still providing support and advice whenever I needed it, and trusting me and my work throughout the entire process.

To my secondary supervisor, Prof. Dr. Juliane Prade-Weiss, and my third examiner, Prof. Dr. Annette Keck, thank you for your continued support and valuable advice throughout my time at the Graduate School Language and Literature Munich, for your encouragement during the colloquia, and for your tireless work to make the Class of Literature such an engaging space for graduate research.

Many thanks go to Carole Martin, Annika Wiedemann, Mara Gibis, and my parents Thomas and Rhoda Berens for providing much appreciated feedback to chapter drafts.

Klaus's colloquium brought together many amazing people, whom I am proud to call my teachers, colleagues, and PhD siblings; I couldn't be more grateful for the time and community with you all. Thanks to Sakina Shakil Gröppmeier, Carole Martin, Mark Olival-Bartley, Bryan Banker, Giorgia Tommasi, Anna Flügge, Kathrin Hartmann, Lore-dana Filip, Patrick Geiger, Ines Ghaleb, Daniel Rees, Andy Estes, and Anita Vrzina for the enthusiastic discussions and emotional support, as well as the fun times we got to spend together in Munich, Venice, and Feldafing.

Thank you to everyone at the Amerika-Institut for your support throughout the entire ten years I got to spend there; to Renate Krakowczyk for the patient admin assistance and delightful office chats; to the late Thea Diesner, whom I will always remember for her kindness and humor. Thank you to Sascha Pöhlmann for believing in me and

my work since day one. Thank you to the late Christof Decker for the eternally profound advice and guidance. Thank you to Amy Mohr, who has always been a rock of support and encouragement.

Thank you to my students at the Amerika-Institut for showing such interest in queer and trans literature, for the engaging discussions, for creating community in the classroom. Your input had a profound impact on this project, my teaching, and my general outlook on life. The kids are truly alright.

Thank you to everyone at the Graduate School Language and Literature Munich, and to all my fellow colleagues from the Class of Literature I was lucky enough to share this journey with, especially Qingyu Cai, Marlene Reich (NYU), Hannes Mittermaier, Tina Werner, Jorge Centeno, Michi Lorper, Simone Guidetti, Mohamed Gouffe-Dedji, and Claire Schleegeer. Thank you to Markus Wiefarn and Fabienne Imlinger for your work in coordinating the graduate school and supporting all of us throughout.

Thank you to the Graduate Center at LMU for the essential financial support through the Completion Grant during the last three months of this project.

Thank you to Cara Tierney for introducing me to transgender studies at Carleton University in Ottawa in 2019 and for being a vital role model for both my academic and personal life.

Thank you to all the trans authors out there working to build a different world through literature, especially Kai Cheng Thom, Casey Plett, Julian K. Jarboe, and A.K. Blue, whose art is discussed in detail in this project. Reading these works has fundamentally destroyed me in the best way and caringly built me back up at the same time.

Thank you to my wonderful parents and my sister for always supporting my academic dreams and endeavors. Thanks to our late doggo Nelly for the companionship during writing sessions at home in the Bavarian countryside, and my sweet doggo Willa for the boops and mlems while preparing this mess for publication.

To my dearest friends, Mara Gibis, Annika Wiedemann, Sabi Luttenberger, Sophia Hörll, Verena Kramer, Alex Brackebusch, Lisa Bauer, and Amelie Käßer, thank you for listening to all my rants about academia, nerdy deep dives on trans literature, and anxieties about the

future. Your friendship makes my life that much richer and filled with love, and I cannot express how much you mean to me.

Finally, my endless thanks go to Caro Martin, my partner in academic crime. I could not have done this without you, and I don't know where I would be without your friendship. From our emails during the early Covid-19 pandemic to our first in-person meeting at the Isar, to sharing an office at the Amerika-Institut, to the time we jump-started an entire conference within only a few months and fused our subjectivities to the point where we were unable to write emails on our own, to sharing our mutual brain cell during virtual writing sessions throughout "the end times"—thank you for always holding the difficult stuff just as much as the beautiful and hilarious and joyful moments. I love you in the platonically queerest way possible.

What I can't offer is that which would, in any case, follow the kind of projective logic that queer cultural productions so often derail: a neat translation of theory into policy, a program for better and more radical living. Instead, I offer the most complicated gamble on tomorrow and thereafter—writing. To write, after all, is only to hazard the possibility that there will be a future of some sort, [...] in which the act of reading might take place somehow, somewhere.

Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*

1 A Complicated Gamble on Tomorrow

In these present times, the future is a complicated gamble. Being trans right now and envisioning a future in which trans and gender nonconforming people may be able to live and breathe freely is to hazard a possibility that seems to be displaced further away every day. In April 2024, the United Kingdom issued a ban on gonadotropin-releasing hormone analogues, so-called puberty blockers, for trans patients under the age of eighteen (Perry). The ban follows recommendations made in the Cass Review, which was commissioned in 2020 to report on the state of gender-affirming health care for minors in the UK. The review, however, has been heavily criticized for faulty methodology, problematic handlings of evidence, promoting “exploratory therapies” akin to conversion therapy practices, and a deliberate exclusion of trans health-care experts from the review process whereas some research team members had known links to anti-trans groups (Pearce, “What’s Wrong”). In the words of sociologist Natacha Kennedy, the Cass Review “is attempting to establish [...] an all-enveloping ambient conversion therapy approach to trans children, removing their autonomy, freedom of expression, mental health, helpful support and healthcare. [...] If imposed it will, in my view, result in the deaths and deterioration in mental health of many trans children.” In the United States, lawmakers have attempted to ban or succeeded in banning health care for trans minors with such

increased frequency and intensity over the last few years that it has become difficult to keep track. According to the Movement Advancement Project, twenty-six states currently ban “best practice medication and surgical care for transgender youth,” while six states have made the provision of this care a felony. While bans may have been temporarily or permanently blocked in some states and fourteen states as well as the District of Columbia have issued “shield laws” which protect access to trans health care, the current political climate is clearly determined to make a livable future for trans youth as improbable as possible. Other anti-trans policies include infamously targeting visibly gender nonconforming individuals’ usage of public bathrooms (Laviates) as well as transgender women’s and girls’ participation in sports (Barnes). Reports continue to surface of yet another Black trans woman murdered by an intimate partner or person within their social circles (Human Rights Campaign Foundation), or yet another gender nonconforming teenager bullied and assaulted by their peers at school (Mandler).

Being trans in the present moment is to be inherently queer, “queer not as being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live,” as bell hooks puts it (*The New School* 1:27:40–1:28:00). Adopting a reparative reading and worldmaking practice among this onslaught of violence and calculated, systematic eradication of trans livability seems nearly impossible, but remains crucial to trans survival and resilience. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading intends that “selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (35). This strategy eschews a more paranoid reading practice, which focuses on preventing pain by constantly foreseeing and exposing it, and instead opts for an approach that concentrates on the seeking of pleasure and amelioration. A reparative reader may be better equipped for dealing with the inevitable loss, pain, and oppression the world has to offer “because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present” (24). The practice of worldmaking may establish a reparative and subversive approach to hegemonic power forces, with the act of writing taking

center stage to “re-invent, shape and widen the parameters of existing worlds” (Clark et al. 4). Creating a place to thrive, extracting sustenance and re-inventing worlds, even in a hostile culture, is possible, as social scientist Finola Farrant reminds us:

Systems of power that operate around dimensions of class, gender, ethnicity, age and so forth may not be experienced as a solid unrelenting block. Destinies can be shaped—although strong forces of power are exerted upon us. Crucially, it is frequently in the cultural sphere that new possibilities and different ways of being and understanding are played out. It is important to recognize [...] how various structures that shape us are permeable, amorphous; they absorb, resist and are open to change. Dominance and power have subversion and challenge written into them. (7)

While these approaches might seem feeble in the face of the many threats against trans lives, they might at least serve as an initial anchor upon which to attach a hope that other worlds are possible.

Against this backdrop, *On Repair and Worldmaking* examines the role of contemporary transgender fiction published in the United States and Canada in dealing with harmful cultural tropes about transgender identity that have been circulated within North American scientific and popular discourses since the mid-twentieth century and are centrally responsible for the direct, structural, and cultural violence exerted upon transgender people. This project centrally argues that works of trans fiction engage in practices of worldmaking as well as reparative writing, while encouraging reparative reading approaches and a sense of belonging for transgender readerships. Three main chapters spotlight Kai Cheng Thom’s work *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*, Casey Plett’s novel *Little Fish*, as well as two short stories, Julian K. Jarboe’s “I Am a Beautiful Bug!” and A.K. Blue’s “God Empress Susanna,” and elaborate on the literary and cultural strategies these texts employ to rework discourses such as the transsexual narrative, the medicalization and pathologization of trans identity, linear conceptualizations of transition timelines, trans-exclusive epistemologies, and the demonization of trans people as monsters and deceivers. Through these analyses, *On*

Repair and Worldmaking implicates broader questions within literary theory, such as the politics of engaged literature, the politics of authorship, of readerships, and of genre demarcations, as well as the entanglements between literature and affects, attachments, aesthetics, and politics. Why and how do we read trans literature? What does reading trans literature as its own genre implicate aesthetically and politically? How does trans literature affect trans readerships, how does it shape culture, and vice versa?

The understanding of trans literature central to this project hinges on the importance of agential transgender self-representation. Between roughly the 1950s and 1990s, literature dealing with trans identity was almost exclusively published in the form of memoirs (Stone 155; Prosser 103) which were mostly aimed at cisgender readerships with the goal of explaining transness to those without any connection to it, often playing into the sensationalism these audiences seemed to crave (Serano, *Whipping Girl* 2). Other literary works featuring transness were until rather recently often written by cisgender authors due to systematic exclusions of trans people from spaces of media production (Bellot). While, in theory, cisgender writers are certainly capable of producing accurate narratives about transness, practice has shown that, more often than not, these stories perpetuate the exact harmful narratives which narratives written by trans people themselves aim to refute (Bellot; Plett, “Rise”). For these reasons, *On Repair and Worldmaking* understands trans literature as works that refuse to participate in the tradition of catering to audiences that expect narratives of transness to conform to the norms of cisgenderism. While this conceptualization of trans literature does not inherently depend on transgender authorship, in practice, because trans-centric and -affirmative narratives have only recently been able to be published at all, in practice, it usually comes down to trans authors writing explicitly for trans readerships—a t4t¹ model of literature, as it were. Chapter Two provides an extended dis-

1 The term “t4t” emerged from personal ads on Craigslist in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in which trans people would look for sexual partners who were also trans. In more recent years, it has morphed into a shorthand that signals intracommunal networks of care, love, and support among trans people, a political statement that asserts the beauty and lovability of trans bodies, and the importance of “looking out for our people first” (Hall).

cussion of trans literature as a genre and the implications of defining trans literature in the first place.

The importance of trans authors writing for trans readers is reflected in the reading lens underlying *On Repair and Worldmaking*, which is primarily informed by Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature*. Felski examines, inter alia, the practice of engaging with texts through recognition, which produces "a flash of connection [...] between text and reader; an affinity or an attunement" (23), "a sense of illumination" (33), of knowing something again (24), "a moment of self-reckoning" (33). She begins with one of the most famous queer instances of literary self-recognition, describing how the character Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness* reads through Richard von Krafft-Ebing's work in their father's library and realizes they are not the only one with "weird" feelings around gender and sexuality: "They come to see themselves differently by gazing outward rather than inward, by deciphering ink marks on a page" (23). Reading for recognition plays an especially vital role in queer and trans contexts. Felski writes that "literature comes to play a mediating role in this drama of self-formation [...] when other forms of acknowledgement are felt to be lacking, when one feels estranged from or at odds with one's immediate milieu" (33), which aptly echoes bell hooks' definition of queer mentioned earlier. This notion of the reader recognizing their self in literature is not merely an individualistic approach, however, but may extend into an "ethical and political claim for acknowledgement" (36). Arguably, trans literature is a particularly well-suited example for this, as it not only provides a realm for trans readerships to connect themselves with broader, affirming discourse about transness, but also constitutes these readerships as political groupings with rights and needs within society. Felski laments that "theoretical engagement with recognition is hedged round with prohibitions and taboos, often spurned as unseemly, even shameful, seen as the equivalent of a suicidal plunge into unprofessional naïveté" (26); similarly, the present project's arguments around reparative reading and worldmaking practices, which basically hinge on the basic argument that representation in media remains important for minorities, may strike some as naïve. I would argue, however, that literary scholars who deem the concept of reading for recognition unprofessional or too simple perhaps just

have the opportunity to recognize themselves in so many works of literature that they have no need to pay special attention to or mark that recognition.

The idea of “unprofessional reading” ties into Felski’s arguments about the standards of “critical distance” customarily exercised within the field of literary studies. She writes that “the default position of contemporary criticism is best described as one of ‘standing back’ [...], driven by a nervousness about literature’s awkward proximity to imagination, emotion, and other soft, fuzzy ideas” (57–59). Especially in a trans context, where, historically, researchers in medicine and social science tended to stand back and “neutrally observe” trans people, which has caused and continues to cause immense epistemological, structural, and psychological harm, as will be shown in the subsequent chapters of this work, closeness and an affective relationship to the examined literature seems especially apt. If one’s livelihood is essentially invested in how one’s community’s stories are told, standing back and observing becomes less of an option, as one is already personally embroiled in the middle of it.

Similarly, Elizabeth Freeman identifies close reading as an affective practice, one that is “the queerest commitment” of her work: “the decision to unfold, slowly, a small number of imaginative texts rather than amass a weighty archive of or around texts, and to treat these texts and their formal work as theories of their own, interventions upon both critical theory and historiography” (*Time Binds* xvii). I aim to treat my primary works much the same, to read the two novels and two short stories selected for this project as theory, in conversation with each other and within the larger context of trans literature as a genre.

Remembering the early stages of the AIDS crisis, Freeman contends that the connections of queers among each other and towards their narratives have always been close in defiance of marginalization and violence, writing that

queers have, it is fair to say, fabricated, confabulated, told fables, and done so fabulously—in fat and thin art, and more—in the face of great pain. This is the legacy I wish to honor here, that of queers as close enough readers of one another and of dominant culture to gather up,

literally, life's outtakes and waste products and bind them into fictitious but beautiful (w)holes. Because in taking care of our own we have also been forced to stay close. (xxi-xxii)

Reading closely, gathering outtakes and waste, and creating beauty from them is also essentially the reparative practice Eve Sedgwick writes about; of being willing to see both the ugly and the beautiful, and relate to literature (and life) with caring, loving, and grateful solidarity, rather than attachments produced through rejection, fear, anger, or correction (Schultermandl et al. 17). Through this approach, narratives become "practices of knowing, physical as well as mental, erotic as well as loving 'grasps' of detail that do not accede to existing theories and lexicons but come into unpredictable contact with them," producing "close readings that are, for most academic disciplines, simply too close for comfort" (Freeman, *Time Binds* xx-xxi).

Standing close to literature also connects to Dean Spade's theories, who aims to deconstruct the unmarked, supposedly neutral, and objective stance of the researcher by including auto-theory and explicit reflections on his positionality in his work. In his essay "Mutilating Gender," he writes that,

the choice to use personal narrative in this piece comes from a belief that just such a combination of theoretical work about the relationships of trans people to medical establishments and gender norms and the experience of trans people is too rarely found. Riki Anne Wilchins describes how trans experience has been used by psychiatrists, cultural feminists, anthropologists, and sociologists 'travel[ing] through our lives and problems like tourists... [p]icnicking on our identities... select[ing] the tastiest tidbits with which to illustrate a theory or push a book.' In most writing about trans people, our gender performance is put under a microscope to prove theories or build 'expertise' while the gender performances of the authors remain unexamined and naturalized. I want to avoid even the appearance of participation in such a tradition. (316)

Since Spade wrote these words in 2006 much has changed, and finding a book about trans theory without the author reflecting their own gen-

der identity is quite rare—which pertains to the fact that the number of cisgender authors writing about trans people from a cisnormative perspective seems to have decreased due to the extensive interventions of trans theorists into this practice. Within trans studies, theory seems to be increasingly entangled with personal narrative, which reflects the reality that trans theory, perhaps more so than other theoretical writings, is fundamentally connected to the material lives of not only the authors that write it, but of trans people in general. Grace Lavery’s *Please Miss: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Penis* or KJ Ceranowski’s *Suture: Trauma and Trans Becoming*, for example, cannot be read as belonging to one genre but blend theory, memoir, psychological self-reflection, fiction, and poetry into a mixture that makes it impossible to separate singular elements from each other. In the tradition of Spade and others who have sought to loosen the imagined boundaries between the personal and the political, theory and lived experience, reality and fiction, *On Repair and Worldmaking* thus includes personal reflections alongside theoretical interventions and literary analyses.

Examining cisnormative narratives about trans identity, which range from oversimplifying to outright hostile, quickly leads to the conclusion that these narratives mainly function to keep cisgenderism, and by extension, cis people who do not bother questioning their experience of gender as a norm, or a specific and individual experience at all, safe. These narratives promise safety for cisness through a denial of complexity and variety to retain the comfort of the illusion of binary gender stability; through the association of “trans” with a supposedly inherent negativity or tragedy; and through the allusion that “trans issues” remain a niche topic that concerns but only a marginal fraction of the population. This project seeks to debunk these constructions and highlight literary investments in worlds where trans livability and flourishing is prioritized over cisgender comfort. Concomitantly, the arguments in this thesis are distinctly devoted to the pockets of trans joy and resilience, t4t care and community, and gender euphoria that always exist alongside the violence, exhaustion, and anguish brought about by hegemonic systems of power. As Grace Lavery aptly puts it, “trans people are exposed to increased risk, and are targeted for violence and oppression, but we are not doomed—trans life is wild and joyous

and sometimes you just cry at a friend at the surprising possibility of it all, for hours, and that is your Saturday” (82).

Emma Heaney’s book *The New Woman* is a prime example of how practices of reparative reading—in a very literal sense—can be vital to unearthing and restoring such pockets of trans joy and community, which have always existed, but have been deliberately buried and misinterpreted in the archives. Heaney re-examines case studies from Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) and concludes that the interviewed trans women’s self-descriptions of their gender experiences do not match the way sexologists in the early twentieth century commonly interpreted them. Analyzing the studies on Subjects 128 and 129, Heaney posits that “neither woman’s experience conforms to this now-familiar formulation of mismatched bodies and minds. Rather, these women define female embodiment on the level of organs and sensations in terms that do not conform with cis understandings of womanhood” (3–4). Subject 129, for example, describes in detail how she experiences her genitals as vaginal, vulval, and clitoral sensations and thus “insists that her body grounds her female identity, but this does not require her to conform to the cis understanding of what vulvas and vaginal orifices look like. She offers an understanding of genitals that requires the cis reader to transform her understanding of clitorises and vaginas” (160). Heaney’s reading emphasizes how a cishnormative interpretation of bodies completely misses the point that these women already have female bodies and experience them as such, and that medical transition options do not constitute a defining “switch” to womanhood for them but simply a tool to live more comfortably (157).

Further, these women experienced a profound sense of joy around their bodies and especially around the sociality with other women and gender nonconforming people. Subject 128, for example, details how “in the society of gentlemen I am silent and embarrassed while in the society of those like myself I am free, witty, and as fawning as a cat” (156). About Subject 129, Heaney writes that it seems as though “cis women friends, lovers, and coworkers acknowledge and affirm her at every turn” (161). Heaney thus posits that the affirmation of these women’s gender stemmed not from medical interventions but was fundamentally sourced from the social bonds with other cis and trans women or

gender nonconforming people, thus refuting the assertion of sexologists that the biological family unit is the essential origin of psychological well-being (156). Given the extent to which trans and gender nonconforming identities and experiences are still stigmatized to this day, it is astounding to find out that an entire century ago, trans women expressed a self-understanding that was rooted in joy, love, and solidarity among women of all kinds.

The striking difference between Heaney's reading and the sexologists' interpretation of this source material shows how complicated archival material is in trans contexts—even though this information has been available all along, determining the material's legacy depends on who interprets it and what agenda that person has. The discrepancies in interpretation highlight that, instead of diagnosing these trans women with pervasive psychological disorders, the words of Subjects 128 and 129 could simply have been trusted and “could have been a conduit to spread the good news that women have various kinds of genitals and can be trusted to declare and live their sex, with or without the medical services that doctors can offer” (161). Heaney reminds us that the marginalization of trans and gender nonconforming identities and experiences was not an inevitable development but instead a result of deliberate steps by individuals within the medical establishment who were more invested in upholding cisnormative and patriarchal power structures than simply observing and accepting the great variety of bodily forms and corresponding psychological experiences.

Paul Preciado makes a similar point in *Testo Junkie*, as he sketches the forces behind the invention of gender and with it the binary, mutually exclusive categories of man and woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. Prior to this construction, humans were categorized into either “sperm carriers” or “egg cell carriers” (104); with the aid of new biotechnologies, however, this dichotomy could be transcended, resulting in more individual agency over reproductive power (104). Preciado argues that the subsequent reaction within medical and political discourses was not at all inevitable, but “nothing other than desperate (and violent) measures to reinforce a shattered epistemology” (103). “Instead of collectively producing an alternative (multimorphic) epistemology for understanding bodies and desires,” Preciado writes, “the 1950s medical, bio-