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CONTRASTING TRANSNESS: KAI CHENG THOM'S *FIERCE FEMMES AND NOTORIOUS LIARS* AND THOMAS PAGE MCBEE'S *MAN ALIVE*[1]

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, a growing corpus of trans memoirs has expanded the literary representation of trans lives. These memoirs normally explore trauma, transition, confrontation with their pasts, and personal healing. Within this context, this article examines the portrayal of transfemininity and transmasculinity through a comparative study of Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* and Thomas Page McBee's *Man Alive*. Thom and McBee construct their trans identities through different narrative strategies: Thom emphasises transfeminine identities as bodies intersected by multiple axes of marginalisation, whilst McBee presents a more solitary trajectory that interrogates masculinity and its entanglement with violence. Firstly, I situate both memoirs in relation to the conventions of trans autobiographical writing, tracing how each text simultaneously adopts and subverts narrative tropes to reconfigure different modes of representation. Secondly, I analyse the tropes that permeate these texts, such as geographical displacement, (non)linearity and temporality as central devices in the articulation of trans experience. I argue that both authors reconceptualise transness as an ongoing process rather than a fixed arrival, navigating tensions of pathologisation, community and shared history. In this sense, these memoirs operate as critical interventions within trans studies, reorienting dominant narratives and discourses surrounding trans embodiment and identity.
Keywords: Kai Cheng Thom; Thomas Page McBee; trans discourse; trans narrativity; trans studies

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CONTRASTANDO LO TRANS: *FIERCE FEMMES AND NOTORIOUS LIARS* DE KAI CHENG THOM Y *MAN ALIVE* DE THOMAS PAGE MCBEE

Resumen: Desde la década de los 90, un corpus cada vez más extenso ha ampliado la representación literaria de las vidas trans. Estas obras suelen explorar el trauma, la transición, la confrontación con el pasado y los procesos de sanación personal. En este contexto, el presente artículo examina la representación de la transfeminidad y la transmasculinidad a través de un estudio comparativo de *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* de Kai Cheng Thom y *Man Alive* de Thomas Page McBee. Thom y McBee construyen sus identidades trans mediante diferentes estrategias narrativas: Thom enfatiza las identidades transfemeninas como cuerpos atravesados por múltiples ejes de marginación, mientras que McBee presenta una trayectoria más solitaria que interroga la masculinidad y su entrelazamiento con la violencia. En primer lugar, sitúo ambas memorias en relación con las convenciones de la escritura trans, rastreando cómo cada texto adopta y subvierte simultáneamente dichas convenciones para reconfigurar distintos modos de representación. En segundo lugar, analizo los tropos narrativos que atraviesan estos textos, como el desplazamiento geográfico, la (no) linealidad y la temporalidad, entendidos como dispositivos centrales en la articulación de la experiencia trans. Argumento que ambos autores reconceptualizan lo trans como un proceso en curso más que como un punto de llegada fijo, navegando entre las tensiones de la patologización, la comunidad y una historia compartida. En este sentido, estas memorias operan como intervenciones críticas dentro de los estudios trans, reorientando las narrativas y los discursos dominantes en torno al cuerpo y la identidad trans..
Palabras clave: Kai Cheng Thom; Thomas Page McBee; discurso trans; narratividad transgénero; estudios transgénero

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, trans autobiographical writing has become one of the most productive arenas for trans representation and visibility. This corpus ranges from early works such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) to contemporary texts including Thomas Page McBee's *Man Alive: A True Story of Violence, Forgiveness and Becoming a Man* (2014), Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018). These narratives frequently engage with questions of trauma, transition and belonging, emphasising the body as a locus of inscription and negotiation within a cisheteronormative social order.

The growing corpus of such memoirs not only broadens understanding of trans identity and embodiment but also intersects with the theoretical and political concerns of

what has come to be known as trans studies.[2] Emerging in the early 1990s, this field builds upon dialogues with feminist and queer theory, establishing a framework through which to analyse gender. Among some of the foundational texts, one could find Sandy Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1987) and Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix" (1994), alongside early cornerstones of queer studies including Gayle Rubin's essay "Thinking Sex" (1984) and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Queer and trans studies, though often in productive tension, provided the theoretical framework for rethinking embodiment, performativity and trans subjectivities. While both fields share genealogies of feminist and poststructuralist critique, queer theory has often universalised gender variance under the rubric of sexuality, whereas trans studies recentre materiality and lived experience. Within trans studies, transfeminine experiences have generated substantial critical attention, whereas transmasculine narratives remain relatively understudied, particularly in comparative contexts. This article fills this critical gap through a comparative analysis of Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* and Thomas Page McBee's *Man Alive*, foregrounding how both reimagine trans memoir as a space of discursive and narrative experimentation. Thom's hybrid, fabulist narrative intertwines sisterhood, community and race, while McBee's text interrogates masculinity through trauma and reconciliation. In this article, I argue that these memoirs reveal trans experience as a heterogeneous condition continuously conditioned by intersecting forces of oppression, self-perception and the role of community. I further show how these dimensions are mediated through discursive frameworks and narrative tropes.

Although sharing a common ground, Thom, a Canadian trans woman of Chinese descent, and McBee, a white American trans man deviate significantly in their narrative approaches; Thom's text follows the journey of an unnamed trans woman who escapes from the city of Gloom to the city of Smoke and Lights in an effort to construct a selfhood apart from an abusive family environment. Her memoir operates as both a literary and political intervention, foregrounding the lived experiences of racialised and marginalised trans women. From the outset, Thom rejects the normative narratives of suffering and

[2] Also referred to as trans* studies.

redemption that dominate trans representation, mocking "this sort of tragic, plucky-little orphan character who is just supposed to suffer through everything and wait, and if you're good and brave and patient (and white and rich) enough, then you get the big reward" (2). McBee's *Man Alive*, by contrast, centres on a more introspective and individual process of transition, distanced from community yet deeply engaged with the interrogation of masculinity. McBee situates this inquiry within the context of personal trauma, recalling his experience of sexual abuse by his father: "I told her, then, about Dad's fingers in the pool, . . . when he knew no one would come for me" (McBee 10).

Both authors mobilise what Cáel Keegan terms "transmigration," a concept that represents "the trans person as both a geographical and gender migrant-moving through uncharted territory and between the poles of intelligible gender" (2). This notion encapsulates the intertwined processes of corporeal transformation and displacement that underpin both Thom's and McBee's memoirs. In *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*, the very structure of the text performs this migratory movement: the opening section, "Runaway," signals both literal flight and symbolic rebirth, evoking the diasporic dislocation of the self in search of new modes of belonging. The narrator's journey from the oppressive City of Gloom to the City of Smoke and Lights thus becomes a rewriting of self-exile. In *Man Alive*, chapters like "Freeze" and "Flight" structure a journey from the immobilising effects of trauma toward the embodied possibility of becoming. In both texts, the trans narrative seems to be irreparably connected to a geographical movement, a deliberate act, potentially even a rite of passage, through which the trans individual sheds their former self to fully engage with the new social roles and experiences associated with their identified gender. Here, transmigration does not arise from trauma; rather, the two experiences run alongside each other, intersecting at the level of narrative structure and shaping how each author articulates their processes of becoming.

In Thom's memoir, the representation of trauma is deferred, disrupting the linear progression of narrative time. This becomes evident in the chapter titled "The Lesson of the Bees," where the bees function as a metaphorical device that evokes a repressed traumatic experience from the character's childhood:

> They landed on me, covered me with their vibrating bodies, crawled inside my lips and up my nostrils, into every orifice, and they drank up all the nectar they could hold. . . . I lay there clutching the sheets in my fists, and waited for it to be over. . . . They are still inside me. They will always be. (Thom 17-18)

Thom reconfigures trauma as a catalyst to negotiate sexual reconciliation with the self in a state of dysphoria. If the bees operate as affective agents that sustain and circulate a traumatic memory, the subsequent chapter introducing "Ghost Friend" suggests self-pleasure as a reparative action through which self-touch becomes a site of spectral encounter, as illustrated in the following passage: "Anyone driving by the cemetery . . . would have seen a crazy Asian boy muttering to himself . . . But really, I was a girl being miraculously touched by a ghost" (Thom 26). Such event finds resonance in Sandy Stone's seminal text, where she observes:

> Into the 1980s there was not a single preoperative male-to-female transsexual for whom data was available who experienced genital sexual pleasure while living in the "gender of choice". The prohibition continued postoperatively in interestingly transmuted form, and remained so absolute that no postoperative transsexual would admit to experiencing sexual pleasure through masturbation either. Full membership in the assigned gender was conferred by orgasm, real or faked, accomplished through heterosexual penetration. (Stone 4)

Thom resists these historical prohibitions, rendering self-pleasure not as a source of shame, but as a legitimate and even liberatory experience through which the trans body asserts its empowerment and negotiates self-acceptation

2. Transitioning and Cispassing

While the preliminary chapters of both books offer a brief glimpse into the characters' pasts, the following chapters mark a significant turning point, portraying the initiation of hormonal treatment as a step toward aligning their physical appearance with their identified gender. At this stage, the narratives trace the bodily and emotional complexities that follow this process. McBee, for instance, researches the potential side effects of testosterone: "lower voice, facial hair, easier muscle gain, redistributed fat. I watched endless videos of guys a decade younger than me, injecting a one-inch needle into their thighs. Risks included liver problems, cancer, diabetes. Relationships" (57). His physical transformation becomes intertwined with marital concerns. He fears that his transition might jeopardise his marriage. This anxiety surfaces in his direct question to his partner: "You think I'd be a Good man?" (62). In this moment, the narrator reveals a common misconception, one that presumes hormonal and physical changes with a personality shift. This aligns with Borck and Moore's observation that dominant narratives of testosterone in trans males rely on normative arcs of masculinisation,

reinforcing the cultural association between bodily change and legitimate manhood: "the masculinization process appears to occur rapidly . . . the narrative arc is normative-aspirational. Men become leaner and more muscular, never fatter or less capable, and they are made happier, freer, and more able through testosterone" (Borck and Moore 638). This clearly reinforces a stereotype in which trans men's sense of alignment with their gender begins upon initiating hormone replacement therapy, but rarely before it.

Thom's protagonist, conversely, asserts that bodily modifications do not constitute womanhood, challenging the biomedical logic that underpins McBee's narrative. She rejects surgery and hormones as prerequisites for being a woman. Her exchange with her physician underscores this stance: "So tell me about why you want to become a woman," he says. "Well, I am already a woman" (Thom 57). This stance disrupts the melancholic narrative of trans authenticity identified by Keegan, in which the "trans body is traditionally a tragic or melancholic body precisely because its gendered feelings cannot materialize in the world" (2). While the melancholic body remains operative in McBee's text, Thom destabilises this paradigm by asserting instead that the trans body inhabits authenticity in itself, without "the eventual acceptance of a humanized and fully transitioned transgender character" (Keegan 2), conventionally reserved for the narrative resolution in this genre. As Keegan notes "[t]he transgender figure is moved out of dysphoric affect and toward a place of authenticity that mimetically resolves the problem of trans difference . . . which operates as a form of narrative resolution" (2). Within such narratives, medical transition functions as the mechanism through which the trans subject achieves narrative and ontological coherence. In this framework, the trans body only becomes legible as congruent with the identified gender and imperceptibly trans—a phenomenon commonly described as cispassing, defined by Riley Snorton as "the practice of moving from an oppressed group to a dominant group, that is, from black to White, female to male, transgender to cisgender" (79).

Passing operates as another axis of divergence. In Thom's memoir, the term "fish" becomes a double-edged metaphor for cispassing and, therefore, privilege: "You, my dear, are a fishy, pretty girl. . . . You may not want to see it," she says, "but you were born to a certain privilege, dear'" (61). McBee's relationship to passing, however, is fraught, with fear and exposure: "I knew they thought I was gay, or—I couldn't decide which was scarier—they'd read me as not-male" (McBee 31). This passage illustrates an awareness of the risks embedded in non-normative gender presentations, where queerness threatens

both physical and social safety. The scene underscores how cispassing operates as a mechanism of survival. As Dias *et al*. observe, "one of the most important functions of passing is protection against violence, occurring both in a context of transphobia and in the context of peer exclusion and rejection" (695). Therefore, passing becomes the coveted affirmation of gender recognition, a shield that assumes and performs a cisnormative guise, while simultaneously diminishing trans visibility and vulnerability.

McBee's character inability to feel "fully masculinised" until confronting his abusive father further reinforces the tensions between masculinity perceived as inherently violent and the fact of being a trans man navigating gender expectations: "I tried to read the in-flight magazine and not think about Roy or my chest. The two felt connected, like I couldn't allow my body to masculinize without confronting him in real life" (McBee 83). He also struggles with passing while masculinising his body: "I learned to lift properly under the guidance of a white-bearded trainer named Mike . . . He didn't call me "brother," but he didn't "ma'am" me either" (McBee 81). This exemplifies what Sonny Nordmarken describes as "in-betweenness":

> I live in the in-betweenness of genders and in the borderlands of oppressions. I live as different kinds of "oppressor" and as different kinds of "oppressed." . . . As a transgender being, my gendered shifting moves me into more betweennesses. I am *queerly between*: I occupy multiple positions at once, and different positions at different times, depending on how people read me. (Nordmarken 38; original italics)

This resonates with Susan Stryker's conception of the trans body as analogous to the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: "Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well" (Stryker 245). Building upon Stryker's legacy, Paul B. Preciado similarly appropriates the figure of the monster to articulate his own subjectivity, claiming that "[t]he monster is one who lives in transition, one whose face, body, and behaviours cannot yet be considered true within a predetermined regime of knowledge and power" (24). Although there is no explicit reference to monstrosity within the memoirs analysed in the present study, Thom's invocation of hybrid creatures—what Hidalgo-Ciudad terms "tranimalities" (94)—extends this lineage of transness inextricably linked to hybridity and difference.

3. Sense of Community and Transcestors

One of the key points of divergence between the transfeminine and transmasculine narrative frameworks lies in their relationship to community, lineage and collective memory. As noted above, McBee's memoir unfolds along a markedly solitary path without a trans community by his side, in contrast to Thom's protagonist, whose anonymity is deeply symbolic, representing a dismissal of individuality in favour of collective identity and experience of trans women, also self-identified as *femmes* in the book. This reaches its most poignant expression when a member of the femme community is brutally murdered, the femmes rise in protest and the protagonist accidentally kills a police officer. As they attempt to dispose of the officer's body in a fountain "the vines cocooning the shape at the centre of the fountain unravel and fall away, revealing what they've been hiding" (Thom 116), revealing the statue of the first femme. This moment embodies resistance to institutional violence that has claimed countless trans lives:

> A trans girl is found dead at least once every year in this city. I can hear some of their names filtering through the murmur of the crowd: *Marilene. Lotte. Ilsa.* Names of women I never knew but feel connected to, in some terrible way. (Thom 65; original italics)

Through this invocation of names, the narrator reclaims these lives from statistical anonymity, offering a form of remembrance that affirms both dignity and collective memory. As Shika Khandpur notes, the statue that emerges in this scene operates "as a symbol of trans lives lost to transphobic violence" (53). In this way, Thom employs the figure of the First Femme's statue as a witness and potential ameliorative force in the face of this tragic event:

> The statue's eyes open. Lucretia and I scream and grab each other, but the First Femme doesn't move. Her expression remains serene and understanding. Water begins to run down her stone cheeks . . . It gushes over the curves and valleys of her body, and into the well, which fills up impossibly quickly. (Thom 116)

Thom sacralises trans history, turning the First Femme into a transcestor, a mythic foremother who embodies collective history. In sharp contrast, McBee's *Man Alive* unfolds as an introspective navigation through masculinity and trauma, where the presence of a trans community is conspicuously absent, as illustrated in this passage:

> I'd been reading about manhood rites, rituals almost always related to war: piercings, tattoos, feats of bravery . . . No matter the culture, you had the separation phase—where the boy walks alone; the liminal time when he is neither man or boy, but between; and

> the reconnection—when he returns to his community and is recognized as a new man. (McBee 85)

McBee's journey rarely intersects with other queer or trans lives in meaningful ways. The figure of Brandon Teena, for instance, is evoked not as a communal ancestor but as a spectral warning: "Then there was Brandon Teena—the trans man raped and killed in Nebraska by his girlfriend's brother and his friends, back when I was in high school. He hung like a specter, another man that could have been me" (McBee 85). Brandon Teena's memory haunts the narrative as a reminder of the vulnerability of trans lives, a genealogy of trauma rather than kinship.

These accounts not only reflect differing subject positions and gendered experiences within the trans community but also foreground the plurality of trans storytelling itself. One asserts the power of communal memory; the other bears witness to the lonely labour of self-becoming. Together, they delineate the broad, multifaceted terrain of trans life-writing, illuminating how differently transness can be inhabited, narrated, and made legible. Notably, Thom never references a trans man, and McBee never references a trans woman—a mutual silence that underscores the historical asymmetry of transfeminine and transmasculine narratives. It also highlights that violence against trans men is not the same to that perpetrated to trans women, reinforcing a disparity between transmasculine and transfeminine experiences, particularly in this case, where McBee's identity as a white trans male likely shields him from certain forms of discrimination faced by racialised trans women.

4. HEALING

A pivotal moment arises in Thom's memoir when the narrator confronts the internalised belief that trans women's lives are bound to marginality and suffering: "[m]y head spins with all the terrible and true things . . . said, especially the part about girls… being destined not to live normal lives. I mean, everyone already knows that, but aren't we supposed to hope for something more?" (Thom 152). Thom resists narrative closure, gesturing toward a more expansive horizon, one that refuses to equate trans life solely with survival and instead affirms its capacity to thrive and to continuously reconfigure the boundaries of what is possible.

This epiphanic moment is marked by the narrator's recognition of the need to relinquish the burdens of her past, a precondition for personal transformation. As

previously discussed, the recurring motif of bees operates as a symbolic representation of childhood trauma. Her decision to confront and ultimately release this symbolic weight is expressed in the question: "How do you catch a swarm of bees?" (Thom 155). The narrator decides to bake a cake to see "if I can catch a swarm of bees" (Thom 158). The act of baking a cake becomes a ritualised gesture of healing, and it also evokes the narrator's family history: "My parents had been hungry for so long that it filtered into all of their emotions and all of their dreams" (Thom 8). This hunger also stands for trans life that transcends the limits imposed by society. The cake thus becomes a complex emblem of nourishment, bridging personal trauma and collective aspiration.

Following this chapter, the protagonist begins a romantic relationship with a young trans man named Josh. Their date takes place in a cemetery, which is significant as it was the place of her encounters with Ghost Friend—the spectral figure through whom the narrator first experienced forms of self-pleasure. This scene reveals the narrator's internal conflict in confronting being touched by another. Her response is a torrent of conflicting emotions: "Tears sting my eyes. Even now, I can't do it. I can't let someone else touch me. I can't I can't I can't I can't . . . I don't know someone help me know what I want" (Thom 171). This sexual intercourse implies the burial of Ghost Friend, alongside sexual inhibitions with other partners. Ultimately, through a process of self-acceptance, the support of the femmes and meaningful interpersonal relationships, the protagonist reaches a state of well-being that might suggest a narrative resolution. However, Thom intentionally resists conforming to a narrative arc of trans redemption of cisheteronormative closure. Instead, she subverts the "happy ending" trope through pointed satire: "we'll get married and be Transgender Power Couple, and have Transgender Children and raise them on a cloud of Transgender Happiness" (Thom 179). This ironic distance is reinforced in a subsequent epiphanic moment, in which the narrator reflects on her life with her boyfriend, now living in a luxurious apartment. It is not through conflict, but through the absurd softness of a trivial domestic detail—the toilet paper—that she unsettles her comfort:

> It was the softest, silkiest, almost sensual toilet experience—like, something beyond imagining. . . . There was not toilet paper like that in my house in Gloom, or on the Street of Miracles, I was pretty sure. And it was this tiny thing, this insignificant experience, that finally made it hit me: I don't belong here. (Thom 182-183; original italics)

This narrative resonates with Sara Ahmed's concept of being "happily queer," a joy found in deviating "from the straight lines of happiness scripts" (115). Thom's narrator, in rejecting the domestic ideal of romantic fulfilment and material comfort, likewise rejects the "straight lines" of normative happiness—those rooted in cisheteronormative expectations of success, partnership, and futurity. Rather than seeking legitimacy through proximity to those ideals, the narrator embraces the possibility of becoming *happily queer*—which, as Ahmed elaborates, entails "explor[ing] the unhappiness of what gets counted as normal" (117). In doing so, the memoir resists closure and reorients the narrative toward open-ended becoming to see "if I know who I am, what I might still become, so I can find my way back" (Thom 186). This gesture toward futurity—unfixed and self-determined—embodies a refusal of prescribed narratives. By the end, the protagonist's letter to her sister, Charity, reads as follows: "Maybe what matters is the story itself: what kinds of doors it opens, what kinds of dreams it brings" (Thom 187). Thom thus rejects medicalised or redemptive arcs of trans narrative. In doing so, she expands the epistemological boundaries of trans life-writing, affirming that non-normative forms of storytelling are themselves acts of resistance.

In *Man Alive*, McBee's decision to rename himself Thomas functions as a performative gesture through which identity is both affirmed and rewritten. More than a nominal choice, the act of naming becomes a site where kinship, memory, and embodiment intersect. By selecting a name associated with his deceased uncle, "the only man in my family that I look like" (89), McBee reclaims a lineage from which he had been symbolically excluded, inscribing his masculinity within a familiar genealogy rather than outside it. The name Thomas, meaning "twin," further encapsulates the memoir's preoccupation with duality: the coexistence of two selves—the child marked by trauma and the man forged through transition—who must learn to coexist within one body. For McBee, healing manifests through renaming, an act that reconciles past and present selves. This process of self-affirmation culminates in his decision to visit his father, Roy, without disclosing either his transition or his new name. McBee reflects:

> There was a child inside me, afraid of men, and I wanted that kid to see that we could meld into one being, that I could be all of my selves at once . . . "I don't know if I want to get into the whole trans thing with him . . . I want him to face me the way I look now, the grown-up version of the kid he hurt. It feels important. (McBee 91-92)

In this scene, the encounter with the father operates as both confrontation and catharsis—a moment in which McBee seeks closure not only with the figure of paternal violence but also with his own fractured self. The memoir constructs a dialectic between two internalised selves: the pre-transitional self, still burdened by trauma, and the emergent self, "Thomas," who embodies reconciliation and transformation. Becoming Thomas, then, entails an integration of these fragmented identities—a reconstitution of the self that bridges past and present, boy and man, victim and survivor.

The culmination of McBee's narrative coincides with the stabilisation of his dysphoria, articulated in the following passage: "[e]ach morning, I gave myself a hard look in the scratched mirrors . . . For the first time in my life, I wasn't passing as a man, I was becoming one" (108). This specific excerpt warrants close analysis due to its significance within the narrative. It serves as a pivotal element not only for the story's development and closure but also for its contribution to the archetypal trans experience depicted in literature: the mirror scene.

Keegan identifies the mirror scene as a symbolic device often used to elicit sympathy for transgender subjects: "The manufacture of sympathy is a classical element of moving literature and film but takes on specific political implications in relation to the pathologized position of trans people in society" (2). Similarly, Jay Prosser has argued that the mirror in trans narratives conventionally signifies "the trans person's movement toward self-acceptance and into an integrated, newly gendered personhood" (Prosser, qtd. in Keegan 2). McBee's mirror scene engages these conventions while subtly subverting them. The moment of self-recognition is not predicated on visual confirmation but on the physiological change signalled by testosterone. Thus, it becomes the locus of authenticity, the marker of a self finally legible to himself.

Yet McBee's narrative reinscribes the notion of legitimacy as a male gendered subject is secured through medical intervention. By privileging the hormonal threshold as the definitive marker of manhood, it centres a medicalised model of authenticity that excludes alternative modes of identification and becoming. Ironically, McBee himself reflects: "What makes a man? A man makes himself" (McBee 109). This answer aligns with the "Self-Made man" myth in American culture and the reappropriation of the term

by trans males.[3] Later in the memoir, McBee articulates his experience of "becoming a man" in a sensorial and related terms: "Becoming a man felt bright and bracing, like a cup of strong coffee, . . . It felt brutish and graceful, like boxing, the physical dance of my transition . . . I called my brother, Scott . . . my transition has erased years of awkwardness and sealed us" (113). Transition emerges as both an embodied awakening and a social reconnection—a process that reconfigures familial intimacy through shared masculinity, leading to a feeling of wholeness. The first physical changes he experiences are juxtaposed with many of his friends, who were new moms: "people as obsessed with their bodies as I was, calculating the changes and their costs . . . [t]hey were afraid and excited and underprepared and universes unto themselves, like me" (McBee 113). McBee's analogy emphasises the shared terrain of the transmasculine subject and the new mother as inhabiting bodies in flux while confronting the materiality of change though the metaphor of rebirth. However, it ultimately yields a more ambivalent self-interrogation. McBee reflects: "No man like me. I was a trans man, an invisible man. I'd have to make peace with not being able to be all my selves at once . . . I could only be my own man" (114). The tension between multiplicity persists; becoming a man entails not arrival but the perpetual negotiation of partial selves. McBee's resignation, expressed in the line "I could only be my own man" reflects what Sara Ahmed identifies as the cultural scripting of queer and trans unhappiness. For Ahmed, "queer fiction in this period could not give happiness to its characters as queers," as doing so would render queerness "good" and assimilable within normative paradigms (88). McBee's memoir exemplifies this paradox: whilst transition promises self-realisation, it is haunted by the impossibility of achieving the happiness reserved for cisheteronormative subjects. Ahmed further suggests that "queers are rewarded with happiness in return for approximating signs of straightness" (115). The trans subject can claim selfhood only by relinquishing the promise of normative happiness.

By the final pages of the book, McBee describes himself as "androgynous, a little untranslatable" (120). This anticipates that "by next year, I'd be Thomas, no longer between selves. But for now I was only exactly the man I was, smooth and hairless around

[3] Self-Made man is being commonly reappropriated by the trans men community. A few examples of this are the autobiography by Kevin Thompson entitled *Self-Made Man: Autobiography of a Black Transgender Man* (2019); Paul Hewitt and Jane Warren's *A Self-made Man: The diary of a Man Born in a Woman's Body* (1995).

my pecs" (120). This reflection encapsulates the text's negotiation of trans temporality—the oscillation between being and becoming, between the immediacy of embodied experience and the imagined coherence of a future self. The act of diving into the ocean, often read as symbolic resolution, instead articulates a refusal of closure, positioning trans embodiment as a state of fluid self-relation rather than arrival at a fixed identity.

This retrospective assertion reframes his earlier narrative of transformation, rejecting the medicalised trope of being "trapped in the wrong body" that has long structured trans representation. Yet, even as *Man Alive* gestures toward this more expansive understanding of embodiment, it remains entangled in the discursive framework of cisheteronormative masculinity. McBee's vision of manhood is defined in dialogue with, and sometimes in deference to, normative models of masculine becoming. The memoir's final movement thus performs a paradox: it dismantles the rhetoric of bodily wrongness while still seeking recognition within the very structures that produce such categories.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* and Thomas Page McBee's *Man Alive* to explore how transfeminine and transmasculine memoirs reconfigure embodiment, trauma and selfhood. McBee's narrative traces a solitary process of reconciling trauma and redefining masculinity, while Thom's text charts a communal and imaginative path toward healing and self-affirmation. Read together, these memoirs expose the diversity of trans life-writing and challenge any universal model of transition.

Through a comparative reading of narrative strategies, such as geographical displacement, the mirror scene, and the dynamics of passing, embodiment and healing, this study demonstrates that these motifs are not fixed stages of trans experience but narrative strategies that negotiate legibility, authenticity, and belonging. Thom's narrative subverts medicalised and linear accounts of transition by centring collective resistance and affective solidarity. McBee's memoir, conversely, situates masculinity within cisnormative frameworks, revealing that his transmasculine identity remains entangled with the very discourses it seeks to transcend. Ultimately, this comparative analysis foregrounds that transfemininity and transmasculinity cannot be read as symmetrical or interchangeable but as distinct modalities of subject formation shaped by race, gender,

and passing. Thom's narrative affirms collectivity, sisterhood, and the radical potential of becoming "happily queer," while McBee's memoir rearticulates masculinity within, rather than outside, hegemonic frameworks.

By placing these memoirs in dialogue, this article contributes to the broader field of trans studies scholarship by establishing a framework that attends to the asymmetries and intersections between transfeminine and transmasculine experiences. It demonstrates that trans memoirs are not mere chronicles of transition but are critical interventions that reconfigure narrative conventions, resist pathologising discourses and propose alternative epistemologies of embodiment. In doing so, it foregrounds the necessity of comparative analysis to apprehend the multiplicity of trans experience and demonstrates how representation itself participates in the reproduction or subversion of normative discourses. Thom and McBee collectively expand the literary and theoretical horizons of trans writing, transforming the act of narration itself into a practice of survival, resistance, and continual becoming.

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