Narratives of Tomboy Identity in Fiction and Film: Exploring a Hidden History

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SUMMARY

This thesis is an exploration of the tomboy figure across a range of literary and cinematic texts from the nineteenth century to the present day. The tomboy may seem to be a familiar cultural archetype, but my study also examines lesser-known, often marginalised aspects of the figure, with the intention of bringing to light new dimensions of tomboys and what they signify. Reaching beyond well-known stories, I have looked at tomboy representations outside the Eurocentric and North American versions, bringing in examples from the Caribbean, South America, Asia, and from within the postcolonial diaspora.

Exploring these various hidden tomboy histories has meant engaging with work on how the tomboy figure might ask us to rethink settled notions of childhood gender identity, of the queer child, and the very concept of childhood itself as a queer temporality.

Moving from a study of *Wuthering Heights* and nineteenth-century children's fiction, I consider more recent tomboys in a small number of international films (drawing here on concepts of embodiment, materiality and the sensuous experience of cinema) before investigating how tomboy figures relate to questions of ethnic subjectivity in novels by Jamaica Kincaid and Catherine Johnson.

By covering such a wide range of historical periods, genres and texts, the aim is to trace the complexities of the tomboy, a child figure that has always had strong connotations of gender transformation and gender rebellion, and is often associated with a playful and

empowering otherness while conversely carrying with it the suggestion of reaffirming patriarchal, binary gender identities.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an exploration of the lesser-known side of the tomboy and the phenomenon of 'tomboyism' in cultural representation. By examining the significance of the voices that have often been silenced and left on the margins of the North American and Eurocentric version of the tomboy story, and those that have traditionally been privileged within the telling of the tomboy tale, I have aimed to reveal new dimensions to this familiar cultural archetype.

Uncovering a hidden history of the tomboy has entailed purposely centring the narrative of the marginalised tomboy, a figure that has traditionally received little such critical attention. This endeavour has entailed focusing my research on tomboys whose identities are formed on the marginalised intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and disability, and emphasising those tomboys who have often been ignored.

This cultural positioning of the tomboy will also offer an exploration of different ways of engaging with film, including methodologies of dis-identification, phenomenology, and affect – exploring embodiment, materiality, and the sensuous experience of cinema in relation to the queer subject. Fundamental to this research is an examination of the tomboy and the temporality of childhood, specifically the cultural representations of queer childhood identities.

Structurally, this thesis contains chapters that look at the tomboy within the context of the past, the present, and the future. I draw on a wide cross section of tomboy-related texts and films that encompass some of the key developmental changes that have defined, reconstructed and represented the tomboy character, drawn from a number of decades to the present day. I feel that this approach is essential to show the complexities of the tomboy – a figure that has always had strong connotations of gender transformation, gender bending, and associations of a playful and empowering otherness and gender rebellion, but which conversely also carries with it the suggestion of reaffirming patriarchal and binary gender identity norms.

Exploring what is meant by the concept of the queer tomboy, for me, also entails acknowledging the idea of the queer child and the argument that the very concept of the child is itself queer, or that childhood itself is a queer temporality. This is a vision of these early developmental years as a queer time and space, a place in which a child can be queered by many factors such as race, class, disability, geographical location, history, psychology, and any number of differing combinations of these categories intersecting with each other.

The thread of queer childhoods runs strongly throughout each chapter of this thesis, but the concept of the child as a symbol of innocence is treated to a more expansive deconstruction in the fourth chapter, in which I discuss the films *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* (2005) and *Stray Dogs* (2004). This chapter aims to further expand upon the figure of the queer child that has been a central theme in both the first and second chapters of this thesis by examining the tomboy's position within the discourse on the queerness of childhood innocence. As with Chapter Three, which looks at the films *XXY (*2007) and

Tomboy (2011), twenty-first-century cinema is also explored here, with the difference being that *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* and *Stray Dogs* are both transnational and centre the narratives of two tomboys of colour. Both films use landscape and cinematic spatiality to disrupt, disorder and destabilise expected forms of sexualised, gendered, nationalised and ethnicised space in the context of the temporality of a tomboy childhood.

Genealogy of the Tomboy

Who or what is a tomboy? My own wide-reaching and political understanding of what a tomboy might be is one informed by a transfeminist perspective that is committed to the decolonisation of essentialist race and sexual norms. The ethos that underpins this thesis is the view that gender is a social construct rather than a biological fact, and that the definition of the word 'tomboy', when used in the context of this project, is one that encompasses any self-identified female individual who enjoys stereotypically 'masculine' pursuits or interests. It is important to note that in this thesis my understanding of masculinity itself is that it is a contestable, non-fixed, unstable categorisation dependent on many factors.

Outside of this expansive concept of the tomboy, how has the tomboy been represented and understood within popular culture? As Lynne Yamaguchi and Karen Barber, the editors of the anthology *Tomboys! Tales of Dyke Derring-Do* (Fletcher, Barber & Yamaguchi, 1995), explain the difficult issue of how to define the tomboy when selecting contributions for their tomboy anthology:

> *Tomboy* seems to be so familiar a concept in contemporary North American culture that it needs no definition. We defined the term not at all in our calls for submissions, yet the hundreds of responses we received

presented a virtually uniform picture of a girl who – by whatever standards society has dictated – acts like a boy. (Fletcher, Barber & Yamaguchi, 1995: 10).

When tracing the genealogy of the tomboy it is interesting to start with the etymology of the word 'tomboy', and the idea that what the tomboy *is* has numerous differing and nuanced connotations globally. The etymology of the word 'tomboy' in its English language incarnation dates back to 1553 (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989) where it was used by the English playwright Nicholas Udall in his comic play *Roister Doister* – "Is all your delite and ioy (sic) In Whiskyng and ramping abroade like a Tom boy?" (Udall, 1553). In this very early context the tomboy is gendered as being male, a male who displays many of the socially accepted traits of a particular kind of traditional, binary gendered, Western European boyhood: stereotypical masculine characteristics such as being energetic, animated, and enjoying physical freedom. From the short segment of Udall's play we can decipher that the character in the text is being humorously berated for acting like a 'tomboy' – they have displayed behaviour that is physically active, flighty, and overtly confident. From looking at the wording of this text we can decipher that, in 1553, the word 'tomboy' already epitomised certain comically stereotypical boyish behaviours.

It was also at this point in English history that the word 'tomboy' began to allude to a person working in the sex industry (Holder, 2008). This use of the word may have come from the reputation of male felines, i.e., "Tom n. the male of various animals" (Merriam-webster.com, "Tom"), which was an allusion to the nickname Tom for Thomas, used in Middle England for a common man, and which had by around 1303 (in Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*) been applied to a male kitten (Mannyng, 1303). This was possibly further influenced by "Tom the Cat", the male hero of a popular anonymous work entitled

The Life and Adventures of a Cat, published in 1760 (Dictionary.com, "Tomcat"). Perhaps 'tomboy' was also a pun on the word 'tumble', another word with rather slapstick connotations suggestive of physical activity (Barnhart & Steinmetz, 1999).

A transformation of the word to mean 'female sex worker' is found in the Shakespearian play *Cymbeline*: "[t]o be partner'd with Tomboyes hyr'd with selfe exhibition which your owne coffers yeeld" (Shakespeare, 1611). Again, to be associated with a tomboy, in this case a sex worker, is spoken of with derision in this theatrical context. With this transformation of gender came an overt sexualisation of the figure – the tomboy is no longer a young boy, or even a young girl, but labeled as a sexually active woman. The 'tumble' that this version of the word 'tomboy' takes is no longer borne out of impatience, but instead viewed as a moral tumble, a fall from grace.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century in the UK and North America, the tomboy was rendered as a socially acceptable identity: it was gendered as female, and was now viewed as a natural stage in the development of some young girls, as this excerpt from one of Joseph Ashby-Sterry's poems, "The Little Rebel", shows: "Careless and joyful. Pet in short petticoats – Truly tomboyful!" (Ashby-Sterry, 1887). There is a clearly sentimental and patronising attitude shown towards the tomboy in this quote – even the use of the word 'pet' speaks of a kind of taming.

There is also a strong visual element to the popular cultural representations of the tomboy. As well as a shared a desire to take part in typically 'boyish' activities, tomboy characters have often been defined by the way that they dress, which has usually implied 'boyish' fashions. Visual, literary and popular cultural images of the tomboy have often

had an immediately identifiable and recognisable quality in the stance and pose of girls and gender nonconforming young people; these have included gendered social and cultural historical fashion signifiers such as baseball caps, shorts, trainers, sports clothing, t-shirts and loose-fitting casual 'outdoors' style clothing, often accompanied by a steadfast refusal to wear dresses. Another iconic part of the classic tomboy visual image is the short haircut. In 1622 the tomboy, still gendered as female, begins to physically take form in a recognisably contemporary way: "Of such short-haired Gentlewomen I find not one example either in Scripture or elsewhere. And what shall I say of such poled rigs, ramps and Tomboyes?" (Stoughton, 1622). In this definition the tomboy is described as having a short haircut. This subtle yet significant change in style could be where the figure begins the association with a style of self-presentation that still strongly defines the tomboy today.

Another concept that is explored widely through each chapter of this thesis is the idea of the boy in the word 'tomboy', and the promise of freedom that proximity to masculinity endows. J. Jack Halberstam, who has written about the phenomenon of the tomboy in white, North American, mainstream popular culture, proposes in *Female Masculinity* (1998) that there should be a wider definition of the term 'masculinity', a definition that includes alternative masculinities, putting forward the argument that female masculinity, rather than an inferior reproduction of normative masculinity, is actually a performative subversion of the concept of masculinity and, as a result, calls into question the idea of the gender binary altogether. Here Halberstam makes the case that a consciousness of, to use their term, 'female masculinity' allows for a better understanding of the wider social, global, racialised, economic and cultural structures that underpin the ways that different forms of masculinity are constructed. The continual power struggle to define an

'authentic' masculinity means that many forms of female masculinity have been maligned and devalued. This has resulted in the dominant, white, masculine ideals in the global North remaining unchallenged and secure in a primary position as the authentic, 'real' thing. Masculinity, Halberstam suggests, can be performed by a variety of bodies across different temporalities regardless of one's socially designated gender.

This rethinking of masculinity has obvious connotations for how the tomboy and tomboyhood are understood. It is clear that the tomboy encounters many of the challenges to their identity and gender expression that a gender nonconforming adult might, but because they experience these challenges to their gender identity within the temporality of childhood there are the added complications of the vulnerability, dependence and disempowerment that differing experiences of childhood often bring. This is especially true in a capitalist kyriarchy where investments in individualism are often elevated above those of community building, thus adding to the social isolation of gender nonconforming children (particularly young transgender girls of colour) who experience multiple marginalised identities.

A Queer Childhood Temporality

My idea of what or who the tomboy can be is not always limited to the child, but throughout this project my critical engagement and preoccupation has mostly been with the temporality of childhood and the figure of the tomboy as a child, particularly the controversial concept of the queer child, and of a queer childhood, and the ways that the queer tomboy functions within this queer space.

Who or what is the child who occupies this queer childhood? And what can this act of recognition tell us about the queer tomboy? Firstly, to understand what is meant by the concept of the queer tomboy, we naturally have to acknowledge the idea of the 'queer child' and the argument that the concept of the child is itself queer, or that childhood itself is a queer temporality: a queer time and space, a place in which a child can be queered by many social and cultural factors. In an essay in the anthology *Curiouser – On the Queerness of Children* (Hurley, 2004), Kevin Ohi identifies the fear that adults have in recognising the queerness of the child: "To say that children aren't queer is a way of asserting that we know what children are and that we therefore know what adults are" (Ohi, 2004: 82). That there is a vested interest in reinstating the myths, the inherent certainties, in both the concepts of childhood and adulthood only further works to deny the existence of the possibility of a queer child. This denial of the queerness of children is something the social consciousness – or perhaps, to put it more accurately, the Western social consciousness – has invested in greatly since the invention of the concept of childhood in the 1900s, with the concept of inherent childhood innocence and the semiotic motif of the innocent child. To believe in the possible existence of the queer child would be to puncture and deflate this carefully constructed fantasy of heteronormative childhood innocence.

The aim of this thesis is not to suggest that the tomboy is fundamentally always a queer character, but is instead to look at the tomboy through the lens of queerness. It is important to note that the term 'queer' is itself a contestable, ever-changing one, and at times, depending on the context, a problematic one; my use of the term in this thesis is indebted to José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer futurity, outlined in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Muñoz, 2009). Muñoz himself came from a

background of art and performance created by, and heavily indebted to, the work of queer artists of colour. Muñoz critiques the inherent white, able-bodied privilege and class privilege in queer theory tropes of the anti-social and the negative, as witnessed in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Edelman, 2004). I have also engaged with Muñoz's transformative strategy of disidentification throughout this thesis to consider the ways that the marginalised tomboy uses non-conventional and often self-protective strategies to navigate through a narrative.

Disidentification is a practice named by Muñoz in his book *Disidentifications – Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Muñoz, 1999), and works as an empowering way for those on the margins of mainstream popular culture to use elements of majority culture in provocative and radical ways in their own creative practice, whether that be art, music, film or performance. Disidentification is a way for queer artists of colour, particularly, to retain agency over their creative endeavour whilst also subverting and challenging that culture.

I have employed this strategy of disidentification most fully in the chapters that explore the multiracial tomboy experience, and also at some length in my chapter on tomboy misrecognition and ways to queer the viewing experience retrospectively. The vision of 'queerness' addressed throughout this thesis is primarily one grounded in the struggles and creative endeavours of those that experience multiple marginalised identities.

Another key text that has greatly expanded upon my understanding of the concept of a queer childhood and the queer tomboy is Kathryn Bond Stockton's exploration of queer childhood identities in *The Queer Child – or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*

(Stockton, 2009). Stockton's concept of the trajectory of sideways growth can be seen to permeate through every chapter of this thesis, and has greatly helped me to envision many of the different and radical ways that the queer tomboy child might navigate and grow aside from socially expected gender norms and restrictions. The theory of sideways growth suggests a way to challenge the conventional idea of growing up as a forward moving trajectory or 'process'. Instead, Stockton posits a radical rethinking and rejection of this straightforward ideal of child to adult development entirely,

> By contrast, "growing sideways" suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing "adults" and "children" into lateral contact of surprising sorts. (Stockton, 2009: 11)

I found Stockton's theory to be a particularly useful way to engage with the idea of the tomboy and disability in the second chapter, which looks at the idea of sideways growth and the physically disabled tomboy in Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (Coolidge, 1872). I also show how this concept of sideways growth shows how the tomboy character itself subverts the conventional bildungsroman journey of conventional Westernised social progress, sometimes temporarily, sometimes forever, to enable the tomboy to navigate their lives imaginatively on their own terms.

When thinking about acts of tomboy resistance I shall briefly explore the significance of the bildungsroman and its particular relevance to the novel *Annie John*, explored in the final chapter of this thesis. In common with most of the tomboy narratives that have been examined throughout this thesis, *Annie John* is part of the bildungsroman subgenre, a genre of novel that originated from eighteenth-century Germany, a coming of age narrative that follows the maturation of a young male protagonist and "is a very popular form of storytelling whereby the author bases the plot on the overall growth of the central

character throughout the timeline of the story. As the story progresses, the subject undergoes noticeable mental, physical, social, emotional, moral, and often spiritual advancement and strengthening before the readers' eyes" (Literary-devices.com. "Bildungsroman"). The bildungsroman itself has a very particular place within Caribbean literature because it is a genre that focuses on a character's development towards self-sufficiency and, in a wider sense, the story becomes emblematic of the Caribbean's own urge to shake off colonial dominance and find independence. The way that Annie's story negotiates conversations between different spaces, such as the external, global, political, and at the same time the personal, creative and internal, while trying to retain the central tomboy character's sense of personal agency, complexity and quest to define herself outside of numerous systems of oppression, makes the novel a unique contribution to the bildungsroman genre. *Annie John* could also be understood as a complete alternative to the Westernised bildungsroman altogether – as Karafilis suggests in 'Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the "Bildungsroman" in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*' (Karafilis, 1998):

> *Annie John* may indeed be read as an anti-bildungsroman. The novel opens with images of death instead of birth and closes with an image of evacuation and loss instead of the expected fulfilment, harmony, and absorption into a larger social body. (Karafilis, 1998: 65).

This reversal of the themes of the traditional bildungsroman also enriches the tomboy narrative, giving new meaning to the performance of tomboy rebellion as also an act of decolonisation, one of a small, yet important and accumulatively powerful display of self-regenerating rebellion – what Halberstam terms "different forms of refusal" (Halberstam, 2004: 192) before going on to explain one form such a refusal might take: "The affirmation of alternative girl masculinities may begin not by subverting masculine power

or taking up a position against it but by turning a blind eye to conventional masculinities and refusing to engage" (Halberstam 2004: 192).

Personal Reflection on my Connection to the Tomboy Character

Because this is a project that engages the concept of the personal narrative, among many other subjects, it is important for me to contextualise my own longstanding feeling of kinship towards the tomboy, a figure that has weaved its way throughout many strands of my own personal, creative and academic development. My affinity for the tomboy character was already subconsciously beginning to take the form that has gradually emerged within this thesis when I undertook a Master's degree in Fine Art, during which period I used my critical studies writing to explore the numerous ways that my conceptual art practice was fundamentally grounded in my childhood tomboy identity. My other interest at this stage was in the queer symbolic potential of the temporality of a gender nonconforming childhood, and so it was the process of writing about the visual impact of the tomboy on my own early art practice, as well as on Western popular culture, that encouraged me to give plenty of thought to the recurrent themes of childhood, the queer child and the power of self-authorship.

As I began the process of gathering research for this thesis it became very clear to me that quite a few of my ideas and feelings around the tomboy as a popular cultural figure were autobiographical, social, and also very political in nature. Focusing on these three interconnected themes seemed like a natural theoretical path for me to take, given the fact that my interest in the subject was informed by the particularities of my own personal encounters with the character in literary and visual culture within the comic books,

television shows, films and novels of my youth. This search to reengage with tomboy identities formed on the margins of mainstream popular culture was also influenced by the fact that I am a transgender man whose own personal formative experience in childhood was often one of being viewed by others as a tomboy, and who rarely – if ever – saw important aspects of myself as a brown child reflected in the tomboy stories with which I was surrounded and which I myself read. In this research I have endeavoured to question the absence that I always felt existed and yet, for many complex reasons, the lack of which I was not always able to fully articulate in my formative years.

When I was younger my fluid gender expression was sometimes more tangible to others than myself. I was a dress loathing, photograph scowling, football kicking, tracksuit wearing, Doc Marten scuffing tomboy. All, or some, of the clichés of the conventional tomboy narrative were intact, but there were also plenty of less obvious elements to my tomboy story. I was also a sensitive and sentimental arty boy, a pencil wielding, shy tomboy who was as comfortable nurturing and caring for his cuddly toys as he was running around in his Batman suit. These gender ambiguities that caused much confusion to others during my childhood, and much awkwardness to me, have become incorporated into the multidimensional richness of my gender expression in adulthood. It is only with hindsight that I realise that many of my childhood role models themselves inadvertently taught me how to be non-binary: my mother, my grandfather, my sister, my brother, and countless others, though all cisgender, seemed to occupy degrees of unnoticed fluid gender space themselves, often moving between many non-conventional gender expressions, mostly invisibly and often with relative ease. This observation suggests to me – and this is also the central argument of this thesis – that the binary notion of gender is more a myth than a fact. As a mixed race trans person I feel that, for me, the act of

identifying as non-binary is a deliberate and consciously radical political gesture in a society where the erasure of non-binary gender identities fits into a wider discourse of racial, gender and sexual identities and those who choose such classifications, of which Eurocentric societies have been seemingly uncomfortable, or at some level fearful.

One of the daunting aspects of trying to review and contextualise my interest in the tomboy character is the fact that my investment in the tomboy has been grounded in (though not always reliant on) my own very personal connection to the subject of the gender nonconforming child archetype. This connection has been a non-static relationship – one that has constantly shifted in different and surprising ways, particularly during the years of writing and researching this thesis.

The educational and advocacy website Nonbinary.org states that,

> (n)onbinary gender is an umbrella term covering any gender identity or expression that does not fit within the gender binary. The label may also be used by individuals wishing to identify as falling outside of the gender binary without being any more specific about the nature of their gender. (Nonbinary.org, 2015)

Those of us who are not conveniently one thing or the other, who are not able to hide that fact and pretend otherwise, who have visible so-called 'differences', stand as a potent reminder that life is complex, rich and often unknowable. In this project the relationships between the personal and the private, the creative and the academic, the binary and the non-binary, have often been challenging spaces to negotiate because of concerns about ideas that have occasionally been instinctual or emotional, being construed as vague or undisciplined by conventional academic standards; yet conversely, it is also such uncertainties about place and content that have seemed to form such a pleasing alliance

with my thesis's themes, ideology, philosophy and methodology. This is a project that has been underpinned by an ethos that constantly engages with and embraces states of uncertainty, ambiguity, indefiniteness and the nonlinear, while contesting the confinement of binary systems and historically established Westernised social boundaries and hierarchies.

This multi-non-binary identity perspective is explored in greater depth in the fourth chapter, which looks at the queer positioning of the interracial tomboy subject in a literary context. Here I centre the British young adult novel *Hero* (Johnson, 2001) to trace how the mixed race tomboy protagonist emerges from the margins of the tomboy canon, suggesting that non binary identities are discoverable within the innate social, cultural, and racial instability inscribed in multi-racial literary spaces and hybrid literary identities.

At first I imagined that my PhD research on representations of the tomboy in popular culture would follow a somewhat familiar path that would begin by charting the evolution of the tomboy in Western literature and film in a chronological way. After beginning to make a list of books and films that featured tomboys I soon began to realise that such a straightforward approach was not going to be intellectually personally fulfilling or stimulating enough for the kind of project to which I wanted to dedicate a number of years. I had become a little too complacent and narrow-minded about the tomboy, a figure I had previously thought I had completely understood. I felt a new sense of disconnect from most of the tomboy characters that had immediately come to mind when compiling my list – they almost felt too familiar and too obvious to me. I began to rethink my idea of the tomboy, and also what I wanted to gain from critically engaging with the tomboy figure.

When thinking about the gaps that I discovered in the work of other writers who engage with the subject of the tomboy I began to notice that there was a lack of in-depth engagement with the most marginalised tomboys in popular culture in many critical writings and studies on the tomboy. Whilst the child of colour or the working class child would often be acknowledged in the feminist and queer theory texts that I read, such children would often invariably be used symbolically in a peripheral or tokenistic way to illustrate vulnerability or abjection, whilst my aim has been to centre or re-centre these children and their many complexities in an intersectional way that engages with them as multidimensional beings. With an awareness of this perceived lack I began to consider the ways in which my own research on the subject could help to highlight the narratives of these overlooked tomboys.

Finding source material that centred tomboys that were intersex, transgender, gender non-binary and disabled at first proved to be a difficult task. It was also challenging to find literary and cinematic material that had not been authored by white, middle class, heterosexually identified, able-bodied, or cisgender authors who came from a Euro-Western academic or literary tradition. This lack of source material, though frustrating to begin with, actually became one of the strengths of the project because it allowed me to be much more selective in the criteria when setting the boundaries of the thesis. Because a number of writers and academics had already written about many aspects of the white, Western European and able-bodied tomboy, I decided to take up the mantle of an exploration of tomboys that do not always fit into such a narrow category.

This thesis has taken up the gauntlet that was laid down by Michelle Ann Abate (2008) in her expansive study of the cultural legacy of the American tomboy. Abate explores the way in which historical, political and social constructions of whiteness have played an important part in underpinning the relationship between tomboyism and white womanhood in a North American context.

The limited scope of my investigation, however, ought not to imply that female gender rebellion that draws signifiers of race and ethnicities that exist outside of the black/white divide does not merit attention. The frequency with which adolescent tomboys are characterised as metaphoric "wild Indians" throughout children's literature, for instance, constitutes just one instance of the need for such work. (Abate, 2008: xxix).

In my study I have taken up the baton from Abate to make my own further exploration of the way that the white Euro-Western tomboy figure has often been depicted as a character that has appropriated certain aspects of the racialised other. I do this not by solely concentrating my attention on the white female tomboy, but by dedicating complete chapters to examining the complexity of racial and cultural appropriation when applied to the tomboy child of colour. This discussion is also contextualised by considering the way in which biographical constructions of the self connect with larger emerging neo-liberalist narratives of individualism and self-determination – primarily, observing how the tomboy is historically placed in connection to the hierarchical social power structures of the capitalist kyriarchy, as well as the symbolic possibilities of imagining the tomboy character in relation to rising global movements of resistance, anti-assimilation, and non-binary gender, sexual and racial identities.

Discussions about the tomboy and race, and the endeavour to make whiteness and the structures of white supremacy visible, are themes that deeply permeate this thesis. The history of tomboyism, particularly in nineteenth-century North America and Europe, is one that is steeped in the ideals of white cultural supremacy, and also, in an American context, one inextricably immersed in the legacy of white settler colonialism. Culturally, the white Euro-Western tomboy figure from the global South has often been a character that has appropriated elements of the racialised other to bolster and solidify this tomboy character's own whiteness and white gender identity, so it is also interesting to explore the tomboy (as middle class and white) in the vicinity of the disabled 'other'. This also positions the tomboy in nineteenth-century America as the champion of middle class, white, feminine health, where tomboy traits of a love of the outdoors and physical activity were often celebrated to further the cause of white womanhood in the nineteenth century. This obsession with a particular kind of white femininity was also celebrated by "the cult of true womanhood", as discussed by Abate (2008: 4), popular at this point in American history.

Reading Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's seminal theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) has also helped to equip me to understand the ways in which female masculinity and non-binary gender and sexual identities operate within the power structures and cultural influences of race, class and location. I do not believe that it is possible to think in other than an intersectional way if we aim to envision a fully inclusive, independently empowered and truly diverse queer community free from the tyranny of single-issue politics. In *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches* (Lorde, 1996) Audre Lorde sums up the deceptive nature of such a narrow focus within feminism and the limiting implications that this has for the queer community and the wider world:

Somewhere on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythic norm which, within our hearts, each one of us knows "is not me." In America, this norm is usually defined as white, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythic norm that the trappings of power reside within society. Those of us who stand outside such a norm often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing. By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word 'sisterhood' that does not in fact exist. (Lorde, 1996: 116)

I agree with Lorde's assertion here while also remaining mindful of the limitations that intersectionality sometimes has. I believe that, even within marginal groups, there should still be room for nuanced meta-narratives and a consciousness of all our unique lived histories even within the wider intersectional categories of race, class, gender and religion. At the same time I remain critical about a problematic Westernised arrogance inherent in an assumption of a universal shared experience.

Returning again to my own personal connection with the character, it is possible for me to trace my creative fascination with the tomboy even further back, to my very earliest childhood in the South Wales valleys of the 1980s. This was a time when I was introduced to, and also enjoyed reading, many of the classic books from the Western European and North American tomboy canon. More specifically, many of the tomboy books that I read were usually historically placed either in the post-American Civil War era of Louisa May Alcott's influential tomboy text *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868), or in a British pre- and post-war context such as Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series of children's books (Blyton, 1942–1963). The tomboys depicted in these novels were usually both middle class and white, and the narratives were usually, and often none too subtly, rather

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moral tales that often commenced with the gender nonconforming tomboy character being redirected towards a reassuringly heteronormative and cisnormative future.

Although the figure of the child, the queer tomboy child, has emerged as the central concept within this thesis, it is interesting to note that only two of the texts that I have looked at, *What Katy Did* (Coolidge, 1872) and *Hero* (Johnson, 2001), were intentionally written with a child or young adult audience in mind. It is important to keep this in mind as the tomboy is depicted in different ways depending on who is presumed to be reading or watching them. Despite the tomboy having been viewed by many feminist thinkers as an emblem of rebellion and social nonconformity, in a Western European, North American or Colonial context, when the tomboy has been explicitly aimed at a child audience there has often been a socially normative and moralistically didactic agenda.

Even dating as far back as the post-American Civil War era, the gender nonconforming white tomboy was often positioned as a binary marker within heteronormative popular literature and film as a representation of masculine girlhood, and mainstream cultures both conservative and liberal used this tomboy character for educational, moral and social purposes, often with the intention of exercising patriarchal control over white femininity. This led to the emergence of stories in which the tomboy is depicted as returning to femininity and stereotypical, socially respected, feminine pursuits at the onset of adolescence. Such notable examples of this familiar tomboy story arc of social community at the cusp of adulthood can be seen in numerous tomboy narratives, including Alcott's *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868).

Another familiar theme that could be interpreted as a rather ominous morality lesson that often appears in the Euro-Western tomboy story is that of the tomboy who remains unchanging, eternally within the realm of childhood. These tomboys stay suspended in time, their stories often left without conclusion. George, the tomboy from British children's author Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series of children's adventure books (Blyton, 1942–63), is one such character, forever on the cusp of adolescence, holding adulthood at bay, their tomboy future unimagined and never resolved.

Halberstam (1998) sees this issue of the tomboy's refusal to grow up as a defence against an adulthood that lacks choices for the healthy development of masculine young women. That any girls do emerge at the end of adolescence as masculine women is quite amazing. The growing visibility and indeed respectability of lesbian communities to some degree facilitate the emergence of masculine young women. But even a cursory survey of popular cinema confirms that the image of the tomboy can be tolerated only within a narrative of blossoming womanhood; within such a narrative, tomboyism represents a resistance to adulthood itself rather than to adult femininity (Halberstam, 1998: 6).

Taking into consideration the aforementioned ways in which children's literature and film have employed the tomboy in this controlling and patronisingly didactic way when aimed at a supposed child audience, it is fascinating to consider how the figure of the tomboy operates when placed in films and books that have been geared towards adults. I explore this idea further in the thesis by considering the cinematic experience as a way for the queer adult to reconnect and reengage retrospectively with the remembered sensations of a queer childhood. This exploration is most fully realised in the third chapter with the films *XXY* (2007) and *Tomboy* (2011). In *Tomboy*, this reengagement with childhood

energy pervades many aspects of the film, and there are many scenes that make the memory of childhood both familiar and strange.

The Ordering and Selection of Texts

"A wild, wicked slip she was" – A Twenty-first-century Rethinking of the Tomboy Identity of Catherine Earnshaw

This chapter was initially inspired by my personal interest in the Brontës as a literary family and as writers of juvenilia. When I began to consider different ways to think about the tomboy and gender identity, Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 1847) allowed me to explore how the tomboy functioned in a text that was already familiar to me.

In what seemed like a twist of good fortune it was at the period I began writing this chapter that Andrea Arnold's remake of *Wuthering Heights* (2011) had just been released in UK cinemas. Even though I had decided to write about Catherine Earnshaw before seeing this new version of *Wuthering Heights*, it was watching Arnold's vivid, gritty and realistic depiction of Cathy's childhood years that encouraged me to reconsider Cathy as a tomboy. The child Cathy as realised in Arnold's film seemed to be more fully rounded, more naturally 'childlike' and sensual than we have been used to seeing the character depicted. Themes of race and gender are tackled boldly in this version of *Wuthering Heights*, and the Cathy in the film also seemed to me to be truer to the rough-hewn

sensuality of the novel, as well as being truer to the biographical details that are known of Emily Brontë.

I have focused purely on the childhood gender identity of the character Catherine Earnshaw. Using a twenty-first-century intersectional feminist theoretical perspective I have used this chapter to introduce many of the themes that are engaged with throughout this thesis – such themes as the figure of the queer child, queer childhood, the gendering of childhood, queer identities, queer sexualities. Each section of the chapter is broken down into explorations of the gendering of language, gendered space, and haptic visuality in a cinematic context. Centrally, my intention has been to explore the way that these larger concepts of gender, sexuality and class intersect with constructions of race in a nineteenth-century Colonial and post-Colonial Western context.

"My legs feel so queer" – The Physically Disabled White Tomboy in *What Katy Did*

The tomboy archetype has rarely been imagined as immobile, but has occasionally been depicted growing sideways in a queer trajectory. In this chapter, as throughout this thesis, I shall be evoking Stockton's imagining of a different kind of growth (Stockton, 2009) as a way of thinking about the tomboy figure in general as an embodiment of the ideas of energy and resistance. Using the example of the novel *What Katy Did* (Coolidge, 1872), I shall think of this queer childhood trajectory as a resistance to the sentimentalised depiction of the disabled body, and the disabled child, as well as resistant to normative gendered ideas of disability and physicality because, to quote Stockton, "The child who by reigning cultural definitions can't 'grow up' grows to the side of cultural ideals" (Stockton, 2009: 13).

The tomboy character is portrayed in a strikingly unsentimental way in *Wuthering Heights* when compared to the overt sentimentalisation of the tomboy figure in *What Katy Did*. It is important to note that Coolidge's book was explicitly written for children, and the author purposely constructs an extremely nostalgic version of a middle class, nineteenth-century, white American childhood. The portrayal of the sentimental in Coolidge's work forms part of a larger didactic moral message within *What Katy Did* which, unlike *Wuthering Heights*, was a book chiefly aimed at a child audience, the demographics of which were likely to have reflected the author's own background and cultural heritage. Both *What Katy Did* and *Wuthering Heights* offer a different approach to the subject of the tomboy childhood as authored by white, middle class writers who were working under different cultural manifestations of what bell hooks would call the nineteenth-century Anglo-American "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1994: 197). Unlike Brontë's novel, which caused great national outrage when it was eventually published, *What Katy Did* (Coolidge, 1872) is a text that fits into the canon of a kind of nineteenth-century American sentimental domestic fiction. Such fiction often situated its characters through what Lori Merish terms "the depiction of material and bodily signs of certain conventional emotional states – signs that include weeping, blushing, and fainting, as well as the "refined" material of an individual's domestic environment – and they often encode clear ethical resistance to a more nuanced, modulated psychological realism" (Merish, 2000: 164).

The first two chapters of this thesis bring together an analysis of two well-known characters, the literary tomboys Katy Carr from *What Katy Did* by Susan Coolidge (1872), and Catherine Earnshaw from Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847). I have endeavoured to highlight the way that these two novels offer a different way to

observe the emergence of the tomboy in nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature at a time when, particularly in North America, the tomboy and the concept of tomboyism was beginning to take central position as a 'new' kind of archetype of prepubescent, white femininity that was implicitly associated with, among other things, the outdoors, adventure, health and activity.

The Tomboy Guise – Misrecognition, the Queer Childhood, Sensation and Sound within Two Twenty-first-century Tomboy Films

This chapter was also borne out of a personal connection to the films that I chose to explore. *XXY* (2007) is the story of Alex Kraken, an intersex teenager who lives with their family in a small fishing village in Uruguay, and *Tomboy* (2011), which tells the tale of Mikäel, a gender nonconforming child who moves with their parents and sister to a suburb of Paris. These are the most overtly 'queer' stories that I have written about in this thesis.

The aims of this chapter are to continue to engage with the subject of the tomboy in relation to the core themes and concepts of this thesis such as queer childhood gender and sexuality, non-binary identities, and cinematic affect, to consider these issues in a twenty-first-century context in the representation of the gender nonconforming child and the intersex young person in film. This entails exploring the sensory experience of the queer child/adolescent, queer filmic space, the temporality of ambiguity, misrecognition, childhood identities and cinematic temporalities. I am not looking for any concrete answers, solutions or resolutions here, but rather my intention is to raise a variety of fresh questions in this chapter, as well as reflecting the mutability and non-static nature of the

misrecognised, ambiguous, non-binary identities, and cinematic temporalities suggested within the chapter's primary title.

The Currency of Cuteness – Innocence, Interval of Animal and Landscape: Depictions of the Adorable Tomboy in Transnational Cinema

Is cuteness queer? Is cuteness gendered? Is innocence queer? Is adorability infused with queerness? In this chapter I shall prod and poke all these questions and more, sometimes playfully, and at other times with a more serious intention. Child's play, after all, is often a very serious business. And it is the child with which this chapter is concerned, to be more precise, the innocent child, the adorable child, the cute child – the child in transnational film, neorealist film, the tomboy child. This tomboy is to be found sometimes clothed in rags or practical clothing, tough and physically capable, dirty-faced and stoical, as sidekick, alone, or as part of a family, but often undeniably adorable, and often with an equally raggedy and adorable animal in tow. The narrative and trope of the tomboy and beloved pet is to found endlessly throughout the history of Western cinema, but in this chapter we shall explore this animal and human kinship as it appears in the context of two transnational twenty-first-century films, *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* (2005) and *Stray Dogs* (2004).

This chapter was, initially, greatly inspired by a reading of James R. Kincaid's intriguing study of the eroticisation of childhood (Kincaid, 1998). One of the elements that I felt was lacking in Kincaid's captivating text was a more expansive and nuanced exploration of the particularities of the position of the child of colour in relation to historical images of innocence and adorability; these were issues that I wanted to expand upon in this

chapter by looking at the child in transitional cinema. My aim has been to further expand upon the figure of the queer child, which has been a central theme in both the first and second chapters of this thesis, by examining the tomboy's position within the discourse on the queerness, and at times unsettled, nature of childhood innocence.

As with my chapter on the tomboy and temporalities of misrecognition in a twenty-first-century cinematic context, cinema is also explored here, the difference being that these films are both transnational, and the lead tomboy characters in the films are non-Western cute tomboys who are younger in age than those explored in the previous films.

"Some People Think Little Girls Should Be Seen and Not Heard, But I Think Oh Bondage Up Yours!" – From Invisibility to Heroism: the Multiracial Tomboy in Young Adult British Literary Fiction

When beginning to think about writing a chapter on the theme of the tomboy and multiracial identities, I had the good fortune to discover the work of writer Catherine R. Johnson and her novel *Hero* (Johnson, 2001). Working as a contemporary author of young adult literature, Johnson has intentionally made children of multiracial backgrounds central characters in her novels.

I revisited the British crime drama *Tiger Bay* (1959), a story in which the central protagonist is Gillie, a tomboy who lives with her aunt in Cardiff's Tiger Bay. Watching the film I was struck by the way that the story is centred upon a white tomboy. The whiteness of the main character was made all the more noticeable because the film itself was named after, and filmed in, Tiger Bay, an area of Cardiff that has had, uniquely for

the United Kingdom, a long history of racial mixing and cultural exchange because of its geographical location and history as a thriving international seaport.

Watching this film, I was able to name the discomfort that I felt watching whiteness from a more objective and critical perceptive as it became more visible to me. I began to imagine, given the multiracial and multicultural history of Tiger Bay itself, how the film might have looked and been received if the central tomboy character had been a mixed race child. This retrospective reimagining of the mixed race tomboy helped to facilitate this chapter's exploration of multi-non-binary temporalities through the figure of the tomboy who is queered by a multiracial identity. This includes an analysis of the history of post-racial and multiracial exceptionalism, the erasure of the multiracial identity, the intersections of childhood, race, gender, radicalised gender identities, sexuality and the meaning (and contestability) of queerness in twenty-first-century British young adult literature and popular culture. In this chapter I position the multiracial tomboy temporality as a disruptive and unapologetic aesthetic, one born out of a multicultural British identity, while also reframing the tomboy bildungsroman as a particularly mixed race 'coming of age' experience.

"My steady gaze" – Tomboy Acts of Decolonization and Personal Resistance in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*

The aim of this chapter was to explore the representation of the tomboy character in a postcolonial literary context, again re-engaging with notions of how the bildungsroman and autobiography are constructed in ways that have often erased an already implicitly marginalised tomboy character. This entailed critiquing the concept of the personal story

and autobiography in the context of postcolonial tomboy subjectivity, identity politics, neo-liberalist individualism, race, class, masculinity patriarchy and structures of power, self-determination, and anti-assimilation. My intention was that this chapter should be a way of thinking about the marginalised tomboy as an empowered figure rather than as an abject one, and as a character that operates outside Western, colonial conventions of sexuality and gender.

When reading Lury's analysis of the positionality of the child in cinema (Lury, 2010) I was particularly struck by a sentence in the chapter about the way that many Western cinematic narratives have both heavily invested in, and privileged, the figure of the little white girl to the expense of the little black girl who, historically, has remained discarded by mainstream cinema. As Lury explains, "While there have been successful black child performers in popular music and television (mostly boys), the little black girl it seems, has been lost and nobody is looking for her" (Lury, 2010: 33–34).

In this thesis the intention is to truly look for this little black girl, and to prioritise 'looking for' all the marginalised tomboy characters that I have selected. The search for the depiction of a complex and empowered black tomboy is most fully realised in Chapter Six, in which I examine the Jamaica Kincaid novel *Annie John* (Kincaid, 1985). In this chapter I allowed myself to be guided by Annie John's voice as she tells her own story in an unflinchingly candid first-person narrative in which Annie gives the reader a snapshot of particular moments in her postcolonial early life as a black tomboy. Orientated by Annie's tale of her how she had experienced moving through childhood to adolescence in 1950s and 1960s Antigua enabled me to reengage with the tomboy bildungsroman, and to consider the tomboy subject from a postcolonial perspective. This

also connected the chapter to the larger themes of the project through opening up a critique of the personal story, or autobiography, and the way that such personalised narratives connect with *Annie John*'s postcolonial tomboy subjectivity.

This chapter works to solidify many of the themes of the overall thesis and brings many of the arguments made within the thesis full circle.

CHAPTER ONE

"A wild, wicked slip she was"

A Twenty-first-century Rethinking of the Tomboy Identity of Catherine Earnshaw

Is Catherine Earnshaw from *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 1847) a tomboy? This is a deceptively simple question. Certainly, throughout *Wuthering Heights* Catherine Earnshaw is depicted as being a wilful, physically energetic, outspoken and independent girl – many of the attributes that conform to a historically Anglo-American interpretation of what constitutes a tomboy. This definition of the tomboy is one ideologically based in the white kyriarchy that has traditionally had very narrow and binary ways to enforce gender and sexual norms that leave little room for understanding those perceived as female who enjoy pursuits that have been deemed masculine. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the tomboy is a figure that has, historically, gone through many transformations. In 1622 the tomboy, still gendered as female, begins to physically take form in a recognisably contemporary way. In the definition below the tomboy is described as having a short haircut. This subtle yet significant change in style could be where the figure begins the association with a style of self-presentation that still strongly defines the tomboy today.

In 1656, again, the extreme physically active connotations suggested by the word are again emphasized: "Tom-boy, a girle or wench that leaps up and down like a boy" (Blount, 1656). That women at this time were viewed as "emotional and libidinous"

(Warnicke, 2007) and incapable of controlling their own affairs and their own bodies, suggests a kind of national social anxiety, an anxiety with the emphasis on the idea of a lack of physical control – a lack of control sometimes criticised, sometimes celebrated, and often projected on to the concept of the tomboy. Also, the use of the phrase "like a boy" stands out as contextually important, and raises questions of gender and authenticity – the tomboy only bares "some" resemblance to a boy, the tomboy can't be a "real", authentic boy. The suggestion is that the tomboy is merely performing a version of childhood masculinity.

In many cinematic and television adaptations of the novel, Catherine Earnshaw has been strongly defined by her romantic affiliation with her childhood companion Heathcliff. This investigation shall give a more nuanced and intersectional reading of this popular literary figure in context of gender, class, and race, specifically exploring the figure in the context of white heteropatriarchy and white femininity in the last half of the eighteenth century. I will examine the way in which Cathy's position as a middle class, white woman enabled her to resist and renegotiate conventional gender roles at a period when British imperialism and colonialism instigated a hierarchical system of white supremacy, class privilege and binary concepts of gender and sexuality.

1.1 Emily Brontë: A Genderless Soul

The reasons for wanting to make space in this thesis for an analysis of such a well-known literary figure are my own appreciation for Brontë's novel as a literary work, and because I have a curiosity about the part that gender identity plays in both her novel and her autobiographical private writing. The many complex power dynamics of autobiography

and self-authorship play an important role within *Wuthering Heights,* and also in the surviving fragments of Brontë's journal papers. This connects with themes of the tomboy figure and narratives of agency that are explored in greater detail in other chapters of this thesis.

From the beginning of the novel, Catherine's behaviour in childhood and adolescence is depicted as contrary to the usual behavioural ideals set forth for a white, middle class girl of her era. The novel begins in 1801 and the central story occurs thirty years before that, at a time when a young woman from a landowning family would have been expected to adhere to the strict moral codes of the day. In an essay exploring portraits that depict upper and middle class girls and young women in an eighteenth-century Anglo-American context, Leslie Reinhardt analyses the restrained compositions of white girls posed with dolls and other overt symbols of idealised white femininity from this time and makes the observation that,

> [p]aintings staging the female path to virtue addressed an underlying fear that women had innate, unruly passions—in sexuality, independent behaviour, and dress—so threatening to the social order that they must continually be countered and curbed. These images described a road to perfect womanhood with dangers lurking at every turn. (Reinhardt, 2006: 33–34).

Unlike this racialised and exalted image of purity and restraint of both the physical and the moral self, Brontë chooses to portray the young Cathy as a wild and unapologetically physically active human being. There are elements of Catherine's refusal, and privilege to refuse, such limited gender roles mirrored in the constant social change that was becoming ever visible in many areas of British society at the period when *Wuthering Heights* was first published. It was at this time, and inspired by the World Anti-Slavery Convention in the United States, that white social reformer Anne Knight published the

first leaflet on the suffrage of women. And it was merely five years later that the abolitionist and black American feminist activist Sojourner Truth would make her iconic "Ain't I a Woman?" speech (Truth, 1851) that called for equal rights and full citizenship for women of all races, and not just white women, as had often been the case.

It is important to note that these gradual and on-going societal changes in attitude and the ensuing legislation, protection, human rights and economic reward that went along with them would most often benefit those women in society who were already the most economically advantaged. As an author, although not financially wealthy, Brontë's proximity to white patriarchal power, her social position and access to education, placed her in the ideal position to create the narrative of a white tomboy figure that was able to cast aside some of the social constrictions of white patriarchal gender roles.

There are elements of Catherine Earnshaw's childhood gender nonconformity that have often been overlooked or misconstrued. It is useful to follow the literary trail through what is known of Brontë's gender expression, and unconventional personal belief system, to both trace, and reimagine, some of the elements that helped to create the unsentimental literary portrayal of Catherine Earnshaw's tomboy girlhood. Here it is important to contextualise the usage of the term 'tomboy'. The word 'tomboy' has often been a negative label applied to women and girls who do not fit in to normative cultural conceptions of femininity, whereas 'queer' and 'female masculinity' are about active expressions of troubling established gender boundaries. There are numerous ways to give expression to masculinity, ways that destabilise, subvert, and upset the traditional gender binary understanding of who or what is able to perform masculinity.

Prior to the American Civil War, just 27 years before the publication of Coolidge's novel *What Katy Did*, across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom, the Whig Party had come to power, the Great Famine continued to ravage Ireland, and Brontë's novel had just been published in England. *Wuthering Heights* was published under the mysterious, androgynous, and unassuming pseudonym of Ellis Bell.

Emily Brontë, much like her entire family, had taken an avid interest in national and global politics from a very young age. Unlike the popular myth of a family of fragile and retiring unworldly literary recluses, each Brontë sibling had a fully formed and highly informed independent take on world events.

Emily Brontë's father, the Reverend Patrick Brontë, a self-educated man, had grown up in poverty in rural Northern Ireland. Circumstance, opportunity, and a talent for self-reinvention had enabled Patrick Brontë to win a scholarship at Cambridge University.

The American Northern European tomboy literary cannon often depicts a strong bond between the tomboy and father or father figure. Brontë's father was an important formative patriarchal figure in her life in much the same way as Catherine Earnshaw's father had been to her. It is often noted that, of his three daughters, Emily was the one that Patrick Brontë seemed to treat as an "honorary son" (Davies, 1994: 19). He taught Emily to shoot with pistols when he commenced his own somewhat eccentric daily ritual of shooting at the Parsonage spire. Much like Catherine Earnshaw, Emily Brontë and her sisters' middle class privilege allowed them easy access to books from their father's personal library. Patrick Brontë "sought education for his daughters as a way of fitting them for economic independence; and left them to themselves" (Davies, 1994: 19). This

important formative, paternal educational encouragement, which was somewhat unusual for the time, seemed to nurture instead of hinder Brontë's literary creativity, and the gender exploration within her written work.

Stevie Davies gives a lengthy examination of Emily Brontë's employment of a masculine persona as a creative tool: "But the way into the world of creativity was through the assumption of maleness […] Hence, Emily Brontë could 'be' a boy. On the other hand, she could 'be', by virtue of her power to imagine and act, anything or anyone at all" (Davies, 1994: 35). Davies' assessment of Brontë's performance of masculinity is that it was simply a doorway into creativity, a writer's tool, and that Brontë was not confined in this creative world by just one gender identity.

The suggestion seems to be that Brontë's imagination allowed her freedom, as a writer, to move through genders, and any other identities of her choosing. Such freedoms were also dependent on both her class and race advantages. In this chapter my intention is not to reinforce the idea of the gender binary by simply proving that Cathy conformed to culturally stereotypical masculine behaviour, but rather to explore the ways that Emily Brontë depicted Cathy as a character that moves through a tomboy childhood, and how Cathy also at times resists the gender binary, and the subsequent social pressure to conform to expectations of white, middle class femininity, or indeed masculinity.

Jean E. Kennard (1996) explores the problem of definition when it comes to trying to understand British imperialist and colonialist nineteenth-century concepts of non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities retrospectively. The speculative conclusion that Kennard reaches is that Emily Brontë might have experienced both her sexuality and

her gender identity as an inversion, which was a popular term at the time. Kennard's argument here is predicated on the connotation *inversion* has of a "much wider range of cross-gender behaviour" (Kennard, 1996: 19). Sexual inversion in women involved both transvestism and "masculine" behaviour. Although we have become used to associating this essentialist view of sexual inversion with such late nineteenth-century sexologists as Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing, these writers were in fact formalizing, medicalizing, what existed much earlier (Kennard, 1996: 19).

It is this concept of a broader range of cross-gender behaviour discussed in Kennard's text that enables the present-day reader to imagine that there was indeed a margin of gender nonconformity that counteracted the established, socially held, binary view of gender and sexuality, even within white, middle class Victorian society. The way that communities and individuals experienced these opportunities for gender nonconformity and gender freedoms would, of course, have been dependent on factors such as race, social position, class, and location.

A notable feature when reassessing twentieth-century critiques of *Wuthering Heights* from a twenty-first-century standpoint, is the way that the selection of British Eurocentric critical writers from the 1920s to the 1960s have used the sometimes inadequate language, ideology, and critical conventions of British imperialist and colonialist ways of thinking to describe the 'otherness' that they perceive in the text. What we may now perceive as 'lack' is only to be expected given that language and meaning are ever changing constructs though culture and time. However, it is possible to read a contemporary queer understanding into the otherness that these writers detect in the book: an understanding which manifests itself in their language as a description of strangeness,

undercurrents of something 'unnameable', a suggestion in Brontë's novel of the kind of love, of sexuality and relationships, that were still not spoken openly about in the mainstream of Western culture in the first half of the twentieth century, where there were limited opportunities to discuss non-heteronormative, and non-binary, sexualities and gender identities in mainstream writing. I suggest that it is relevant to survey a selection of the criticism that discusses Catherine Earnshaw's childhood, femininity, gender and sexuality to discover how Catherine's queerness and tomboy identity were viewed and discussed in a pre- and early postcolonial era of social constraint, a time when the Gothic literary "trope of the "unspeakable" (Sedgwick, 1985: 94) meant that any queer undertones in a text remained unnamed, and any conceptions of a queer childhood were unthinkable. In 1925, Virginia Woolf, who was in a relationship with author and poet Vita Sackville-West that lasted throughout the 1920s, wrote of the liberated and unconventional love that she envisioned in the novel. "But there is no I in *Wuthering Heights*. There are no governesses. There are no employers. There is love, but it is not the love of men and women" (Woolf, 1925: 101).

Woolf seemed to be writing of a concept of a love with no traditional class power structures and, importantly, a love that goes beyond any gender binary rules, not male or female. Unlike Woolf, many critics seem intent to frame *Wuthering Heights* as a heterosexual dyad between Catherine and Heathcliff, seen as irrevocably tied together and interconnected, one making sense of the other. Yet Arnold Kettle (1968) departs from a reading of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship as primarily romantic, as he describes Heathcliff's reaction at the scene of Cathy's death, and recalls the early bond formed between them as children:

> What is conveyed to us here is the sense of an affinity deeper than sexual attraction, something that cannot simply be defined as romantic love. This affinity is forged in rebellion and, in order to grasp the concrete and unromantic nature of this book, it is necessary to recall the nature of that rebellion. (Kettle, 1968: 190–191).

Kettle puts emphasis on what he views as the unromantic nature of the whole novel: "They are not vague romantic dreamers" (Kettle, 1968: 191). Instead he reads meaning into a relationship forged in shared rebellion. Catherine is no longer Heathcliff's lover, but rather a comrade, and fighter with him against the common foe of patriarchal authority. This recasting of a young, upper middle class, white female from the early nineteenth century, as a rebel paints a different picture of Cathy from other mid-twentieth-century re-imaginings of the character where she was still being depicted, in cinematic versions of the story, as the lovelorn, slightly bratty girl. In Kettle's review Cathy becomes a heroic action hero:

> [b]ut it is also natural to look for some illuminating distortion in the elder Cathy, with whom Emily Brontë so identified. Here the central oddity-and for me it seems the major one of *Wuthering Heights* – lies in Cathy's attitude towards Heathcliff and Edgar Linton, as expressed both on the evening of her engagement to Edgar and in her behaviour after Heathcliff returns. The oddity is that Cathy expects to "have them both," finds this expectation entirely "natural," and is enraged because neither Heathcliff nor Edgar will consent to such a ménage à trois. (Kettle, 1968: 216).

Albert Joseph Guerard (1968) describes the relationship between Heathcliff, Edgar and Cathy in almost operatic terms: this *ménage à trois*, he states, is the most peculiar aspect of the novel, but this framing of the complex connections between the three characters seems to obscure and dismiss the importance that childhood, particularly the importance Cathy's childhood plays in shaping the story.

It is curious to juxtapose the "distortion" that Guerard has observed in the older Cathy with the way that the writer views the young Cathy's love of "rough and tumble" as less problematic, non-sexual and unthreatening. This non-observance of the young Cathy's tomboyism seems to reflect a denial of the importance of childhood, as well as the possibility of sexual desire in childhood. If there is indeed a key to understanding Catherine Earnshaw and her motivations, I would suggest that understanding her childhood is an integral and informative part of how to access a vital interpretation of the character. In his dismissal of Cathy's earlier rough and tumble years, and thus also her tomboy development, Guerard's position is reminiscent of Lockwood fearfully and dogmatically shutting out the apparition of the child Cathy even as she makes the case for the importance, relevance, and continued existence of her own extended childhood: "'Begone!' I shouted. 'I'll never let you in, not if you beg for twenty years.' 'It is twenty years,' mourned the voice: 'twenty years. I've been a waif for twenty years!'" (Brontë, 1847: 25).

If we are to understand "waif" in this context as meaning orphaned child, then Cathy, who died at age 19, has been a child longer than she was an adult. Brontë's exaggeration of the traditionally brief stage of childhood in such a way serves literally to remind the reader that this stage of development is perhaps more vital than her adulthood, and is not to be easily dismissed. In the end the reader is left tantalisingly uncertain if Cathy would develop to be a heterosexual woman, or even identify as a cisgender woman at all. There are many tantalising possibilities about the futurity of the queer childhood. The figure of the ghost child Cathy returns determinedly to haunt the critic – in this case the male critic – trying to arrest the projection of a heterosexual, cisgender future. Cathy remains a child suspended forever in her tomboyhood.

1.2 The Fathered/Motherless Tomboy

If the father, and a culture of middle class white patriarchy, is a central presence in the novel, then it is the spectre of the absent white mother that looms over *Wuthering Heights* and Cathy's childhood. The lack of a mother as a result of her death has often been a characteristic of the tomboy trope. "The mothers of Nancy Vawse in Susan Warner's *The Wide World* (1850), Frankie Addams in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and 'Scout' Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) passed away when they were young" (Abate, 2008: xvii). These are only few of many examples of motherless tomboy characters that appear throughout literature. Holland looks at the complexity of the father-daughter relationship and poses the question,

> So how is the daughter, how am I, to learn to live finally? If not from the mother, who must be transcended (since, like Oedipus, Antigone can only return to the Mother/womb/cave at the price of her own death), and not from the father, who would not allow me to speak/live in my own name, from whom? (Holland, 2001: 67)

This is a question that has much relevance for Cathy as she tries to develop a sense of her own gender identity while growing up in an environment dominated by white patriarchal rule. This was an environment where her performance of a particularly brutalised and socially sanctioned form of white masculinity was often punished in turn by violence or rejection, because such behaviour was viewed as unacceptable coming from a young woman, even a middle class woman such as Catherine Earnshaw.

Holland (2001) goes on to explain the way that Cathy's independence was still greatly restricted by patriarchal English law, in a society that was increasingly centred on the

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demands of wealth and commerce. "There is an inheritance after all, from father to daughter, in the West most often in the form of a dowry, but it is a three-part relationship, not the simple line of father to son or master to disciple, or even master to slave" (Holland, 2001: 67). But there was no inheritance for Emily Brontë in the mid-nineteenth century when she wrote her novel. With an ailing and elderly father, a brother who had succumbed to addiction, and no marriage on the horizon, Emily and her sisters' main concern was how they would support themselves financially. Circumstance had freed Brontë from the traditional middle class gender role. Brontë was also fortunate to have a father who was open-minded to the education of women, due to the educational opportunities that he had received, and also his own literary aspirations that he was able to live out vicariously through his talented offspring.

Catherine Earnshaw's own relationship with her father is characterised as often being a power struggle. Even when Mr. Earnshaw is gravely ill, Nelly tells us how Cathy takes great pleasure in trying to get a reaction of some sort out of him: "His peevish reproofs wakened in her a naughty delight to provoke him" (Brontë, 1847: 43). Cathy, it would seem, was looking for acknowledgment from him, and she does this by taking on a combative stance, using the one thing that she knows will provoke her father, "showing how her pretended insolence, which he thought real, had more power over Heathcliff than his kindness: how the boy would do her bidding in anything" (Brontë, 1847: 43). Later that day, when Cathy comes to repent her previous behaviour, her father replies by using his position as a parent to withdraw his love from Cathy: "'Nay, Cathy,' the old man would say, 'I cannot love thee, thou'rt worse than thy brother. Go, say thy prayers, child, and ask God's pardon. I doubt thy mother and I must rue that we ever reared thee!'" (Brontë, 1847: 43). "That made her cry, at first; and then being repulsed continually

hardened her, and she laughed if I told her to say she was sorry for her faults" (Brontë, 1847: 43). Mr. Earnshaw's choice of words seems to hold Cathy to different standards of behaviour than those of her brother.

This example highlights that even though both had received marginally similar upbringings, in which they had both been indoctrinated in to middle class, white masculinity to differing degrees, it was Cathy who was expected to 'know better', to be more 'ladylike' in her behaviour. Such restrictions ultimately only make Cathy more defiant in the face of such repression. The determination to retain all aspects of her gender identity in the face of continual efforts to discipline her are reflected in a particularly poignant exchange between father and daughter as Nelly continues her tale to Mr. Lockwood: "I remember the master, before he fell into a doze, stroking her bonny hair—it pleased him rarely to see her gentle—and saying, 'Why canst thou not always be a good lass, Cathy?' And she turned her face up to his, and laughed, and answered, 'Why cannot you always be a good man, father?'" (Brontë, 1847: 43). This time Cathy quickly counteracts her father's response to her seeming insolence by a quick reversal of gender roles: "But as soon as she saw him vexed again, she kissed his hand, and said she would sing him to sleep" (Brontë, 1847: 43).

1.3 Cathy and Heathcliff – The Tomboy and Sissy Boy Alliance

Within the Anglo-American white tomboy narrative arc, the tomboy is often depicted in the companionship of her male counterpart. This companion was also represented as a gender nonconforming child archetype, an effeminate male character.

Abate (2008) gives an interpretation of the dynamics of this relationship informed by present day queer theoretical thought:

> Forshadowing contemporary queer interpretations of tomboys as proto-lesbians and sissies as proto-gay men, their friendship does not contain an erotic charge. In addition to destablizing gender codes, therefore, the tomboy/sissy dyad also disrupts heteronormative ones. (Abate, 2008: xvii).

Undertones of this kind of tomboy/sissy dynamic can be interpreted in the friendship of Cathy and Heathcliff, as well as, perhaps, more conventionally in the relationship between Cathy and Edgar Linton. This dyad is also found played out in Emily Brontë's own history, with local curate and close friend of the Brontë family William Weightman, as well as in the reversal of gender roles documented in Brontë's relationship with her brother Branwell.

Cathy's ability to conform to particular forms of white, English, colonial, patriarchal masculinity is revealing of the way that the tomboy is privileged within the kyriarchy. In a culture that values and privileges recognisably normative ideals of masculinity, the tomboy is less likely to be viewed as a threat to the social order. The sissy boy meanwhile has, historically, rarely been depicted in a positive way in Western popular culture, and is consequently subject to the most extreme and violent societal gender policing in almost every area of society. The hatred of the sissy is embedded in femmephobia, misogyny and homophobia. "At the root of the stigma attached to sissies is the fear and hatred of homosexuality and, to a lesser extent, of women. Certainly, much of the anxiety aroused by boys who are perceived as sissies is the fear (and expectation) that they will grow up to be homosexuals" (Hayes & Summers, 2006: 1).

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When Heathcliff is re-examined as a more peripheral figure within Cathy's narrative, instead of a dominant and powerful figure, then his character begins to take on a different, more nuanced and spacious reading. As Stevie Davis notes, "he is all but passive in relation to her, not active but reactive" (Davies, 1994: 215) and Brontë makes it clear to the reader that Catherine herself is conscious of the reversal of gender roles played out in their friendship and also of the subordinate position that Heathcliff has often had within their relationship. Cathy imagines that she is addressing Heathcliff when she tells him with aggressive disdain, "Be content, you always followed me!" (Bronte, 1847: 127).

If this casting of Heathcliff in the role of a sissy boy seems outlandish, it is important to revise entrenched ideas of the novel in which "the misrepresentation of Heathcliff as primary transfers to him Cathy's dominance and constructs him in a patriarchal image" (Davies, 1994: 215). It is Heathcliff who is defined in the novel by Catherine, not the other way around, and in childhood the quiet and passive aspects of his personality are rewarded by the approval of two of the primary adult figures in the book, Nelly Dean and Mr. Earnshaw. Heathcliff's more acceptable behaviour allows him their sympathy and understanding and is contrasted with the more unruly Earnshaw children, especially Cathy who, as a young female, is held to a higher set of behavioural standards. Even Nelly seems to show a degree of sentimental affection when reminiscing about the young Heathcliff: "I will say this, he was the quietest child that ever nurse watched over. The difference between him and the others forced me to be less partial. Cathy and her brother harassed me terribly: he was as uncomplaining as a lamb; though hardness, not gentleness, made him give little trouble" (Bronte, 1847: 38).

As the Bronte myth casts Emily as the son her father had always wanted, the son that his biological son Branwell could never really be, could it be that Heathcliff was the daughter that Mr. Earnshaw had always longed for? This hypothetical reversal of gender roles would make sense of another meaning of the word 'sissy', as sister. Instead of an adopted brother for Cathy, it is entirely possible to read Heathcliff as Cathy's sister and Catherine as Heathcliff's brother or, in a complete reversal of the conventional romantic narrative of *Wuthering Heights*, it is also possible to read Catherine and Heathcliff as the same entity. "Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being. So don't talk of our separation again: it is impracticable" (Brontë, 1847: 82). Rather than a romantic declaration of shared love, we could interpret this statement that Cathy makes to Nelly as Cathy's sudden awareness and acknowledgment that the gender divide between them is merely a social construct, implying that Cathy has always been Heathcliff and Heathcliff has always been Cathy.

The language surrounding Emily Bronte's own friendship with the curate William Weightman also reflects the traditional tomboy and sissy dynamic. It has been documented that both individuals were complicit in re-gendering the other through a playful and knowing disturbing of traditional gender pronouns, in which Weightman gives Emily an alternative name based on aspects of her gender expression, as Winifred Gérin notes, "Her Vigilance earned her the nickname of 'The Major' from Mr. Weightman, an attention which caused her as much quiet satisfaction as his own fancy name—'Miss Celia Amelia'—gave him" (Gérin, 1971: 108). Daphne Du Maurier (1960) explained that this type of imaginative gender subversion also extended to the rest of the family, "Charlotte alluded to the curate as 'she' and 'her'" (Du Maurier, 1960: 121).

It is unusual that Charlotte should choose a feminine pronoun to address Weightman in this way. Historically this type of re-gendering of language had traditionally been a feature of mainly gay subcultures in metropolitan areas, as Rictor Norton (2011) has revealed in his studies of eighteenth-century, London-based Molly subculture, "The most striking feature of the eighteenth-century 'Female Dialect' was that gay men christened one another with 'Maiden Names'" (Norton, 2011).

It is possible that Brontë was already quite familiar with this sort of subcultural re-naming. In nineteenth-century Britain the use of the name "Nancy" when referring to men to mean "effeminate man, homosexual" was common from 1883, a shortening of an earlier term "*Miss Nancy*, perhaps from the nickname of vain, fashionable actress Miss Anna Oldfield (d.1730)" (Harper, 2012). It would seem that Brontë's friendship with the curate, and the subsequent disrupting of gender roles and gender hierarchies through language that went along with this relationship, would have made Emily Brontë acutely aware of the blurring of gender dynamics. It is a fascinating supposition that Brontë may have borrowed this anarchic gender dynamic as a literary device for some of the male/female pairings in *Wuthering Heights*, thus enabling many of the characters to inhabit different gender roles and gender dynamics at different points in the book. For example, Nelly Dean is both subservient as the maid but also strategically placed in a position of power as the storyteller at pivotal points throughout the novel.

Another way in which the relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff is comparable to the narrative pairing of the tomboy and the sissy boy is the way in which both characters have been traditionally presented in the many popular interpretations of the novel.

Heathcliff has been typically viewed as a hypermasculine, brooding stereotype of a romantic hero, while Cathy's feisty tendencies have often been toned down, which has allowed for the kind of containment of gender transgression that Abate describes as,

> Contrary to expectations, these figures frequently police each other's gender transgression rather than serving as company in which in to safely display them. In numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives, tomboys often help masculinize effeminate boys: they teach their weak counterparts to be adventurous, assert themselves and even fight. By the close of the novel, the previously sissy boy has been transformed by his tomboy friend into a strong and even powerful man. (Abate 2008: xvii)

1.4 Revealing the Domestic and Acknowledging the Incomer

There is a conscious subversion of gendered space to be found in the subtext to *Wuthering Heights*, much of which can also be detected in the author's own philosophy towards her environment. Much of Brontë's own life was characterised by negotiating spaces that have had traditionally heavily gendered associations: for example, she has been depicted as comfortable, and as being 'at home' literally and metaphorically within the internal domestic everyday world of the parsonage, taking pleasure in being an important part in the daily running of the house, with all the cooking and cleaning duties which that involved, she "conserved herself in an environment which she could control" (Davies, 1994: 12). Whilst in parallel, she also had the freedom of the natural world, and the ability to cast aside the restrictions of the indoor life for the sprawling landscape behind her home, as well as the academic and artistic freedom of education and music – a privilege of her middle class background.

Emily Brontë did not seem to draw a hierarchical gender distinction between these different worlds, instead allowing the multi-gendered qualities of these environments to

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work together in a degree of harmony. The constant of everyday domestic rituals and tasks is a theme that permeates an important and very visible layer of the narrative of *Wuthering Heights*. This usually hidden 'feminine' business of the preparation of meals and keeping the household going are on full display in the novel, witnessed in the fact that one of the novel's most important narrators, Nelly Dean, is also a domestic servant. The resistance perceptible in making the domestic such an important element of the novel suggests the author's purposeful revealing of a capitalist, colonialist gender hierarchy that has often erased the importance of domesticity and elevated more traditionally 'masculine' forms of work. Sara Ahmed (2006) uses the metaphor of the writer's table to illustrate the unbalanced hierarchical power relationship between work that is publicly valued, recognised and rewarded, and work that is invisible and taken for granted, erased and exploited "[t]o sustain an orientation towards the writing table might depend on such work, while it erases the signs of that work, as signs of dependence" (Ahmed, 2006: 31).

In *Wuthering Heights*, working class farm labour and household chores exist visibly side-by-side. It is the stereotypically masculine, white, middle and upper class business of colonisation and acquiring financial capital and wealth – for example, Heathcliff's foreign expedition and Lockwood's work in London – that are invisible, occurring outside of the central narrative.

In a similar way to the aforementioned overturning of the gender and class hierarchy of the novel, I will examine Cathy and the Earnshaw family as interpreted through the figures in the novel that would traditionally be the most marginal, particularly the story's primary narrator Nelly Dean.

Nelly Dean's key position of power in the book as central narrator, and also as a survivor, allows the reader to understand the Earnshaw family from the dual perspective of someone who is an incomer and also a trusted confidant to the family. This brings into question Nelly's reliability as a narrator. Both the reader and Lockwood have to trust that Nelly has not embellished this tale of the family she worked for over eighteen years. Nelly's story is one based on memory, albeit first-hand, from someone who lived with the characters whose family history she recounts. This position as storyteller empowers the elderly Nelly Dean, who then gives Mr. Lockwood the story that he demands. It quickly becomes clear that Lockwood is not interested in Nelly, or her own personal history outside of her connection to the Earnshaws. Lockwood is more concerned that "[s]he was not a gossip, I feared; unless about her own affairs, and those could hardly interest me" (Bronte, 1847: 33), as he states rather arrogantly when trying to prise the story out of her. This disinterest in Nelly as an individual in her own right highlights the class structure of the time – servants and women were usually expected to be seen and not heard – but in this novel we hear Nelly; she is central to our understanding of one of the book's main characters, and she helps give 'voice' to her mistress Cathy.

One of Nelly Dean's chief functions in the novel is that of gatekeeper to the reader's understanding of Cathy, and as the longstanding maid at the Heights and onlooker to Cathy's childhood development, and when recounting her many experiences with the child Nelly seems to put emphasis on Cathy's personality as difficult and troublesome. Nelly's position in the family as one of the domestic servants who is also both young and female means that she was barred from many of the social, financial and class privileges that Cathy took for granted, and Nelly's view of Cathy would possibly have been affected by these factors.

In *Wuthering Heights* language is often used to gender our understanding of Cathy's physical prowess. Throughout the novel, stories of her adventurous behaviour are retold, and there is usually an emphasis on how unusual her exploits are in comparison with the more reserved and moderate physicality that was socially expected of a young woman of her class, race and social status. We are informed by Nelly Dean that, at the early age of six, Cathy "could ride any horse in the stable" (Bronte, 1847: 36). Unlike her older teenage brother who cries to show his disappointment at not getting a present on their father's return from Liverpool, Catherine chooses to internalise her feelings and instead "showed her humour by grinning and spitting at the stupid little thing" (Brontë, 1847: 37). "Cathy taught him what she learnt, and worked or played with him in the fields" (Brontë, 1847: 46). Cathy's pleasure in outdoor activity finds a ready outlet with her male companion Heathcliff: "But it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day" (Brontë, 1847: 46). Even in the company of Heathcliff, Cathy is depicted as being unafraid of physical boundaries, and more than able to keep up with Heathcliff when both go exploring at Thrushcross Grange: "We crept through a broken hedge, groped our way up the path, and planted ourselves on a flower-plot under the drawing-room window" (Brontë, 1847: 48).

There is clearly a connection between the language used to describe Cathy's behaviour and the language that has traditionally been used to define the tomboy; such language has often described and exaggerated the tomboy's sporting prowess, the masculine girl connected to the outdoors, the natural world, the external, the body – she is imagined as an uninhibited child with an inherent connection to the natural world. This celebration of the able-bodied tomboy erases many other tomboy experiences that operate outside the

realm of the physical; such language works to elevate the white able-bodied tomboy and has, with its association with the 'uncivilised' and 'brutal', often been devastatingly applied to women who occupy the intersection of disability and race, where for centuries it has been continually used to exoticise and dehumanise them, whilst simultaneously controlling and limiting their agency. The exceptionalisation of the white tomboy body limits the way that the tomboy is defined, privileging the sporty and energetic tomboy figure within the Anglo-American tomboy narrative that will be spoken about in-depth in the second chapter's analysis of the tomboy and physical disability. The emphasis on forms of vigorous gendered physicality draws numerous parallels with historical and present-day Western conceptions of disability, race and gender.

1.5 A Twenty-first-century Cinematic Queering: the Decidedly Tomboyish Re-emergence of Catherine Earnshaw

It is interesting to look at a twenty-first-century re-imagining of Catherine Earnshaw to see how changes in attitudes and understandings of tomboys have impacted the way that the young Cathy is portrayed. The depiction of the young Catherine Earnshaw leaves an indelible and queerly tomboyish mark on director Andrea Arnold's 2011 remake of *Wuthering Heights*. This version of the child Cathy is depicted in the film as confident in herself and in nature. As in the novel, this Catherine Earnshaw strides out in front of Heathcliff, takes risks, takes the lead, swears and wears breeches, all of which recognisably place the character firmly in the onscreen tomboy tradition. However, it is the subtler elements within the film that make this re-imagining of Cathy decidedly more queer than we are used to seeing this well-known character depicted.

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This more acute observance and bringing out of the young Cathy's more anarchic and socially unconventional qualities are noted in film critic Paul Bradshaw's review. "They go riding together on one horse: Heathcliff leans in and inhales the perfume from Cathy's hair while stroking and kneading his horse's flank. When Heathcliff is beaten for insolence and idleness, Cathy literally licks his wounds: an ecstatic moment of transgression and defiance" (Bradshaw, 2011). This scene with the licking of Heathcliff is emblematic of the way that the film highlights how young Cathy's behaviour unapologetically violates the social norms of the day, in a way that is perhaps more loyal to Brontë's original imagining of the character.

Another compelling feature of Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011) is the portrayal of Heathcliff as a black mixed race foundling of African and European heritage. Unlike other versions of *Wuthering Heights* such William Wyler's 1939 film starring Lawrence Olivier (Wyler, 1939), Arnold gives an unusual cinematic imagining of Heathcliff as a child of colour. Though seemingly new, this depiction of Heathcliff is actually truer to Brontë's original text, and to the historical and social context in which the book was written. Christopher Heywood, in his examination of slavery in Yorkshire and its impact on the literary work of the Bronte family, notes, "This web of patronage at the heart of the rural economy provided the secret but self-evident theme of slavery and the probable model for the specific traces of African origin which characterize Heathcliff" (Heywood, 1987: 194). Tola Onanuga's review of the film in *The Guardian* expresses frustration that it took so many years for a director to depict Heathcliff in this more authentic way. "It suggests a certain amount of arrogance, and even cowardice on behalf of directors who

were not prepared, or too fearful of audience reception, to give the role to an actor whose ethnicity came anywhere close to matching that of the character" (Onanuga, 2011).

This less ambiguous re-imagining of Heathcliff as racial 'other' also stands to suggest a kinship between Cathy's tomboyism and Heathcliff's blackness. This intersection between race and gender comes together visually in the film in a symbolic moment when Cathy smears dirt across her face in rough play with Heathcliff, again reemphasising the connection between the tomboy and untamed nature, as well as the white tomboy's connection with blackness. This symbolic 'blackness' is of course only temporary and Cathy is able to reclaim her whiteness and the attendant social, cultural and economic privileges that this allows. Cathy's association with black masculinity allows her a temporary outsider status in the family, which she is always able to cast aside. The same is not true for Heathcliff.

Abate (2008) explains the relationship between the nineteenth-century white tomboy and blackface minstrel traditions by drawing attention to the way that the racial and gender aspects of blackface minstrelsy can be interpreted in the narrative of American tomboy character Capitola Black (Southworth, 1888):

> [B]lackface minstrelsy also formed an important component to the tomboy's interest in the maintenance of white racial supremacy. In the same way that white blackface performers smeared their faces with burnt cork to buttress rather than blur the distinctions between blackness and whiteness. (Abate, 2008: 20).

This depiction of protagonist Capitola also has relevance for thinking about the racialised depiction of the kinship between Cathy and Heathcliff, highlighting the ways that their

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kinship is, amongst other things, one based on white male supremacy, white patriarchy

and a long Western tradition of the white female appropriation of Blackness.

But there is something less certain in the racial relationship between Catherine and

Heathcliff than the surface symbolism suggested by the depiction of Cathy smearing of

dirt across her face, and Arnold's film negotiates the uncertainties in Bronte's text that

reject easy interpretation. As Sue Thornham suggests, "In Arnold's film, and in the

intertexts that lie between it and Brontë's own refusal of direct depiction, we can trace a

genealogy of spatial imaginings that is a rejection of such identifications" (Thornham,

220: 2016). Brontë confronts the reader with the gendered power dynamics of slavery but

does not offer up any easy answers to the questions that such issues pose. Maja-Lisa Von

Sneidern states, "Wuthering Heights is the site in which the problematics of an Anglo-

Saxon mythology saddled with the fact of slavery and the 'fact' of race are revealed, if

not resolved" (Von Sneidern, 1995: 174).

In many scenes during the childhood part of the film, the power balance between Cathy

and Heathcliff is strongly defined. With Cathy almost in the role of mentor to Heathcliff,

by portraying Heathcliff as a person of African heritage Arnold makes clear the racialised

power dynamics of this relationship:

> This mistress-bondsman relationship, which Heathcliff explicitly
> characterizes as slavery (WH, 138), is rooted in his complete submission
> to her will, rather than mutual affection or sympathy of feeling. His
> service is the material and social extension of her identity. (Von Sneidern
> 1995: 178)

There is a disorientating strangeness in the small details of this film, of the sparing use of

words that suggests an awareness of the limitation of language. This deliberate non-

engagement with conventional language structures allows the film to convey the many subtleties within Brontë's narrative through haptic visuality. Laura Marks (2000) describes this cinematic concept: "haptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure – a sensory-motor reaction – so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (Marks, 2000: 164). This 'bodily relationship', when applied to Arnold's version of *Wuthering Heights* and its concentration on the visceral and violent elements of the novel, makes for an unnervingly claustrophobic yet compelling experience that places the viewer in the position of disempowerment with its privileging of the tactile and the sensual – we watch helplessly as violence is casually meted out to the young Cathy and Heathcliff. This haptic visual approach allows for a more gritty and truthful depiction of the story. This film positions Catherine firmly within her element of the natural world. The spectator is able to actually watch Cathy physically interacting with nature in an honest and naturalistic way as the director paints a realistic picture of life on a nineteenth-century Yorkshire farm: we see her emptying out a chamber pot over a wall, and her childhood clothing is also shown as practical rather than ornamental, layered in style and often not dissimilar from Heathcliff's clothing.

In this cinematic version of *Wuthering Heights* there is a visual concentration on nature's tiny details: the fragment of a tree branch taps and scrapes at a windowpane; Cathy strokes a lapwing's feather. Another symbolic detail in the film is that of Cathy's long brown hair – the young Cathy's queerness is embodied by the symbol of her hair. It not only obscures her face, but also plays an important part in the visual and metaphorical obscuring of Cathy: she controls our gaze. Hair and hairstyles have always had strong cultural and social significance, rather than being merely bodily ornamentation. Various haircuts have often been used as a way to gender individuals, and traditional feminine

hairstyles have many connotations, and possess many racialised ideals of beauty. In nineteenth-century Britain the way a woman or girl wore her hair would have been directly connected with her gender, class, race, ethnicity and social standing. It was viewed as a signifier of moral character, racial purity and, in the case of the white tomboy or the masculine young woman, a short hairstyle suggested a particular gender orientation or sexuality. In this film the young Cathy's long hair is unkempt, often loose around her shoulders, long and yet defiantly unladylike by the conventions of the day.

It is notable that this version of *Wuthering Heights* only concentrates on the first half of the novel, and ends when the older Cathy dies. These narrative limitations seem to allow for a more fully formulated and complex depiction of the young Cathy in the first half of the film. Instead of going forwards in a traditional trajectory, which depicts the future generations of the Earnshaw, Linton and Heathcliff offspring, this film engages with a queer diverting of a possible heteronormative future for Catherine Earnshaw.

CHAPTER TWO

"My legs feel so queer"
The Physically Disabled White Tomboy in *What Katy Did*

While researching the history of the tomboy character in popular culture, I have noticed that there is a scarcity of representation of the physically disabled tomboy in children's literature. While the disabled child in literary and popular fiction continues to be woefully underrepresented, representations of the physically disabled tomboy figure have been practically non-existent. In this chapter I shall examine the popular nineteenth-century American tomboy novel *What Katy Did* (Coolidge, 1872) to explore Katy Carr's relationship, as a temporarily physically disabled tomboy, to disability, gender, language and race in this popular text.

I will also use this chapter to raise questions about some of the possible reasons why the disabled and physically disabled tomboy is noticeably absent from the tomboy canon, and why this particular figure also remains canonically unrecognised within a larger cultural European and Western framework, while narratives of homogenously able-bodied tomboys and tomboyhood have continued to be centred and celebrated. Exploring Katy's transitory encounter with physical disability allows for a critical rethinking of popular literary constructions of the tomboy and the character's strong association with particular kinds of physical activity.

What Katy Did (Coolidge, 1872) is a particularly interesting case to study when considering Anglo-American historical representations of physical disability and personal autonomy within a nineteenth-century Euro-Western tomboy narrative, because Susan Coolidge's character Katy Carr emerges as a classic example of a middle class, white, post bellum American tomboy protagonist. In this respect Katy is very much akin in time, place, and somewhat in temperament to Louisa M. Alcott's character Jo March, the tomboy and central character from Alcott's seminal tomboy narrative *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868). *What Katy Did* was published after *Little Women* and was greatly influenced by the success of Alcott's novel:

> [Coolidge's] publisher encouraged her to write a novel in a similar vein to the enormously successful *Little Women* (1868), presumably hoping to capitalize on the market for lively family chronicles with bright girl protagonists. (Hale, 2010: 345)

Although it is the case that Coolidge "took many themes from *Little Women* and made them her own. Like Jo March, Katy is the headstrong, active, and impetuous sibling in a large provincial family" (Craig, 2011), one of the central things that differentiate Coolidge's creation from Alcott's character is that, unlike Jo, Katy is a tomboy who experiences a temporality of physical disability.

A re-examination of the physically disabled tomboy from an intersectional, disability rights perspective can help to imagine an alternative idea of tomboy movement and autonomy that bypasses colonial Western, binary-gendered concepts of disability. It is a reimagining of the tomboy childhood where the tomboy departs from, circumnavigates, or completely resists the binaries of gender, sexuality and able-bodied narratives altogether.

2.1 Passing through: the nineteenth-century American tomboy and disability, race and

gender

In *What Katy Did* (1872) the reader is introduced to Katy Carr, a 12-year-old tomboy

who lives with her large family of five siblings, widowed father, and aunt in the small

town of Burnet in late nineteenth-century Midwestern America. Katy's mother died when

Katy was very young. Katy's father, who works as a doctor, is often out of the home,

leaving Katy and her younger siblings to be looked after predominately by their Aunt

Izzie, a formidable character who is generally well-meaning but strict. This family setup

places Katy's story in the familiar trope of the motherless tomboy. Before her accident

Katy is constructed as a rambunctious, fun loving, physically confident, intelligent,

ultimately well-meaning tomboy: "Still, I am sure that on this occasion Katy meant no

mischief. Like all excitable people she seldom did *mean* to do wrong, she just did it when

it came into her head" (Coolidge 1872: 47).

She gets involved in endless scrapes, and instigates many adventures. The reader learns

that, with her younger siblings, "Katy, who, as oldest and biggest, always took the lead in

their plays" (Coolidge, 1872: 75). This early description of Katy's height and physicality

sets the scene for understanding what Katy's personality was like before her accident:

> Katy was the longest girl that was ever seen. What she did to make herself
> grow so, nobody could tell; but there she was—up above Papa's ear, and
> half a head taller than poor Aunt Izzie. Whenever she stopped to think
> about her height she became very awkward, and felt as if she were all legs
> and elbows, and angles and joints. Happily, her head was so full of other
> things, of plans and schemes, and fancies of all sorts, that she didn't often
> take time to remember how tall she was. (Coolidge, 1872: 9–10)

In the early part of the novel, the reader's attention is often directed towards Coolidge's

overly exaggerated depictions of Katy's gangly height, that also work to highlight the

perceived excesses of Katy's tomboyish personality:

> There are moments when it is a fine thing to be tall. On this occasion Katy's long legs and arms served her an excellent turn. Nothing but a Daddy Long Legs ever climbed so fast or so wildly as she did now. (Coolidge, 1872: 9–10)

These comedic and slapstick descriptions of the child before her accident paint a vivid picture of Katy as an energetic young woman with access to many of the physical freedoms of her young male counterparts. Elizabeth Hale characterises the symbolism in this early part of Katy's narrative: "Katy Carr begins *What Katy Did* in full health, but her body and mind exemplify excess and misrule" (Hale, 2008: 350).

The pivotal moment in *What Katy Did* occurs when Katy decides to use the damaged swing that her aunt has forbidden any of the children to ride. The swing gives way, Katy badly injures her spine and, as a result, has to spend the next four years of her life mostly in bed or in a wheelchair. Initially Katy experiences the state of physical disability as a profound challenge to her sense of personal autonomy and white, middle class comfort. It is with the support and moral guidance of her cousin Helena, who is also a wheelchair user, that Katy eventually goes through an emotional, spiritual, and physical transformation.

In an American context the white tomboy identity has been strongly connected with both racial and cultural appropriation, and has historically benefitted from an association with blackness. Abate (2008) explains this theory when talking about the particular appropriation of blackness by the white tomboy named Capitola Black – the orphan tomboy protagonist from the *Hidden Hand* serial: "[H]er blackness is metaphoric and not

literal, she retains a firm link to whiteness and the socio-economic privilege it affords" (Abate, 2008: 17).

Both Katy and Capitola are popular nineteenth-century American literary tomboy characters; there are parallels in the ways in which Capitola and Katy, as tomboys, appropriate blackness, and a clear racial and anti-blackness thread runs throughout the novel, including in Coolidge's depictions of Katy's eventual physical transformation. This draws attention to the anti-black bias in the American white kyriarchy, where things white are coded as positive and pure, and all things black are deemed negative and reactive. This binary approach to the racialisation of disability is witnessed again when, after her accident and period of convalescence, Katy's physical appearance is said to literally transform from dark to light, and her eyes go from black to blue. Anti-black thinking makes an appearance again, when after her accident Katy remarks to her father,

> "My legs feel so queer," she said one morning, "they are just like the Prince's legs which were turned to black marble in the Arabian Nights. What do you suppose is the reason, Papa? Won't they feel natural soon?" (Coolidge, 1872: 129)

This comment from Katy about the Prince's black marble legs connects a change of both bodily sensation (from flesh and bone to marble) and a change of skin colour to feeling "unnatural" in some way, a state of physical and racial queerness that Katy needs assuring is only temporary before her usual state of whiteness and able-bodied normativity is resumed.

These racially suggestive imaginings of the tomboy echo Abate's discussion of the character Capitola, mentioned earlier, when she writes that Capitola's "blackness is metaphorical" and that she "retains a firm link to whiteness and the socio-economic

privilege it affords" (Abate, 2008:17), thus highlighting that the white tomboy's anarchic veneer was often temporary, superficial and merely skin deep. In this respect, Katy's narrative conforms to that of an American tomboy who is envisioned as simply "passing" through a kind of temporality of darkness, because for the white tomboy this is only a limited time of otherness before bodily signs of blackness fade to white: "accordingly, when this unruly young character conforms to the expected gender roles for white women – marriage and motherhood – her various forms of darkness fade" (Abate, 2008: 17).

These gender, race and class intersections have also implicitly associated the nineteenth-century, white, American tomboy with the outdoors life. In the novel Katy's four years of indoor convalescence, and the subsequent physical pallor that this brought about, are not attributed to sunlight deprivation or a lack of fresh air; instead her pale countenance is attributed to some sort of mysterious magical physiological alteration that Katy has undergone because of her accident, and this change is seen as a positive sign. As Mary Cathryn Cain states, "Antebellum white Americans interpreted visible whiteness as an outward projection of inner virtue" (Cain, 2008: 33).

Before her injury Katy has been allowed her temporary tomboyhood (a period in the tomboy narrative that has traditionally been characterised by much time spent outdoors running wild). This outdoors existence would also suggest that Katy was exposed to the elements, including sunshine, the exposure to which can be assumed to have included the tanning of Katy's skin. As has been mentioned the symbol of tanned skin has many strong racial connotations; a tan would also have been a radical and unwelcome signifier of gender transgression for a white, middle class young woman at this point in Antebellum America, where pale skin was still a status symbol for middle class women –

a sign of femininity, health, racial purity and wealth. Cain explains, "as they made up their faces and tended to their physical appearance, Northern middle-class white women learned to emphasize their markings of race and gender as powerful signifiers of a larger civic identity" (Cain, 2008: 28). For a tomboy from a middle class background, then, the acquiring of a tan would have been symbolic of luxury and sexual, gendered and able-bodied freedom, the freedom to play outdoors, to have free time.

The connection between tanned skin and the white body is a complex one, as Sara Ahmed (1998) suggests here when considering the exterior bodily significance of tanned skin from a feminist, postcolonial perspective: "Tanned colour has a complex and ambiguous relation to the marking of status and health. In the first instance, one can consider how tanning became a sign or outward display of healthy bodies" (Ahmed, 1998: 57). The privilege to show areas of skin, to not be covered up in extra layers of clothing to protect sexual modesty, was not a freedom that would have been available to all girls at this point in history. It was the dominant patriarchal culture that had rewarded the able-bodied white tomboy with the freedom of not covering up in the sunshine. This freedom was usually only afforded in childhood, and we see this dichotomy between the open and energetic exterior freedom and the reclusive, inward and domestic interior of her later physically disabled adolescence.

After the Civil War, American society became tangibly entwined with, and directly affected by, the everyday spectacle of disability as never before in the country's history. The Civil War also worked to unsettle many of the cultural certainties of gender, race and disability in a way that impacted how certain kinds of masculinities were viewed and understood. As Michelle Anne Abate explains, when discussing the relationship between

Louisa May Alcott's tomboy Jo March and her sister Beth, "rather than considering soldiers weak or unmanly because they had been wounded, in the aftermath of war they were deemed heroic and even angelic" (Abate, 2008: 46). It is important to note that it was the most visible signs of disability that were rewarded socially by this elevation to the angelic.

Such enhanced social visibility had implications and social consequences for those at the marginalised intersections of race, gender and class hierarchies, whose lived experience was already public, and who would become even more socially vulnerable. Those who wore this visible mark of their disability needed it to draw positive attention to their heroism and thus ensure that positions of social power – with the resulting gender, race and class privileges – were still open to them.

As a tomboy who benefits from her proximity to white patriarchy, Katy is celebrated for her ability to 'overcome' disability, and to literally 'stand on her own two feet'. Patricia Holland (1992) discusses this phenomenon when she writes, "As the strongest group they are least likely to conform to the expected image of the victim and the most likely to be involved in attempts at reconstruction or resistance, confusing the clarity of the story, complicating a reaction of pity alone" (Holland, 1992: 152). In the Western kyriarchy those who are closest to particular dominant cultural ideals of masculinity are less likely to be depicted as the victims of circumstance, be that a natural disaster or an accident. Katy's history as a previously energetic and sporty tomboy allows her to be depicted as having mastered her physical disability bravely, in a narrative that is reminiscent of the individualist ideology that underpins the myth of the American dream.

2.2 Sentiment, Language, Disability and Interior Space

The social, cultural and economic changes that occurred after the American Civil War brought forth a wave of newly sentimentalised and disempowering depictions of disability in the mass media. Stoddard Holmes (2012) suggests that such literature was far from helpful:

> These texts' recurrent ways of representing bodies and feelings helped produce not only a social identity for disabled people that was significantly defined in emotional terms, but also the distinctive identity of 'disabled', and its co-product, 'able', in a century in which disability were not the established (if ambiguous) rhetorical categories that they are in Anglo-American culture today. (Stoddard Holmes, 2012: 4)

As well as these highly sentimentalised depictions of disability, there has also been a tradition of using militaristic, masculinised terminology, and expressions such as 'wounded in action', to elevate some soldiers who are injured for state and country. This would suggest that, in America, those mostly white, masculine, individuals who received their disability in the service of the nation state, would have experienced a higher degree of respectability and social acceptability than those deemed to be 'other'.

Given the cultural and historical context in which *What Katy Did* was conceived, it seems hardly surprising that one of the few examples of the physically disabled tomboy to appear in popular fiction was a figure that benefited from both class and race advantages, and that the novel was authored by an able-bodied writer, who herself was in receipt of such social entitlement. Katy Carr's story is that of a particularly privileged experience of physical disability in nineteenth-century America.

In *What Katy Did* (1872) the character of the Katy's cousin Helen can be seen as an example of the sentimentalised physically disabled other. Cousin Helen was paralysed after an accident she experienced when younger; Katy is first introduced to Helen a day before, and directly after, she undergoes her own spinal injury. Katy and Helen experience an intense kinship, a relationship based on cousin Helen passing on to Katy the Victorian moral codes of ideal middle class, feminine behaviour for a disabled woman. There is a contrast in the symbolism and metaphorical narrative possibilities within this tale, as Helen remains an example of the sentimental myth of nineteenth-century non-sexual, and angelic, disabled femininity, seemingly at peace with the fact she will never regain her mobility. It is interesting that, before her injury, Katy is shown trying hard to integrate the qualities of the angelic into her own personality, seemingly to no avail: Katy's disorganised and wilful tomboyish nature is shown to subvert her good intentions at every turn, setting the well-intentioned Katy in binary opposition to cousin Helen and her unattainable "goodness" – a woman that Dr. Carr had stated was "half an angel already, and loves other people better than herself" (Coolidge, 1872: 104–105).

The words used to signify the disabled body, and bodies that are perceived as "able", are loaded with gendered and ableist language that have often crept into everyday usage. These words, seemingly innocuous, are actually often violent in nature, and exert great power. Tobin Sieber (2008) stated, when writing about disability and representation, "Bodies are linguistic effects driven, first by the order of representation itself and, second, by the entire array of social ideologies dependent on this order" (Sieber, 2008: 55). The language used to illustrate the myth of the Anglo-American tomboy is suggestive of a vigorous autonomous physical power and independence that is also reminiscent of neoliberal tropes of individualism. The tomboy never simply walks or

runs, but instead romps and frolics with a zestful exuberance and enthusiasm. The tomboy is never simply happy, but high-spirited and boisterous. The tomboy at play is lively, advancing with vigour. There is an innate, definite, and most importantly deliberate effervescence to such descriptive language that is curiously reminiscent of the kinds of grand and often masculine gendered words used to illustrate natural phenomena such as volcanic activity or chemical reactions.

Katy's tomboy gender performance is often described in excessively grandiose terms. Because language plays such an important role in shaping the ways in which we think about gender, disability, immobility and movement, it is useful to consider the differences in the ways Katy is described before and after her accident, and whether any changes in the language used also reflect changes in attitude towards Katy's tomboy identity. In a wider analysis of disability and literature for girls, Lois Keith (a writer who herself had personally experienced a spinal injury) suggests,

> [w]ords which relate to difficulties with walking and standing have taken on negative associations – bent, crooked, crippled, stooped, hunchbacked (a 'crook' is a criminal, a 'bent copper' is a corrupt police officer) – whereas those connected with walking are positive: straight, upright, firm, erect. In our common language, we have many expressions that equate walking with being strong and independent. (Keith, 2001: 22)

Such overtly ableist language has seeped into everyday usage seamlessly, to the extent that it is easy to forget the negative connotations inherent in these words. As Keith again notes, "[w]e describe someone without courage as 'spineless', someone incapable of talking action as 'paralyzed by fear'" (Keith, 2001: 22). Such words and expressions also show the particular social stigma that spinal injuries have had historically, and also show that being in a state of immobility is both something that has been feared for different reasons, as well as a condition that has been gendered – for example there is the

connotation that a 'spineless' man is somehow less masculine, the state of paralysis meaning that a person cannot be independent or, to use another negative expression, is 'unable to stand on their own two feet'.

From the beginning of the story it is suggested that the biggest obstacle that Katy has to overcome is her defining tomboyish characteristic of impatience, so the temporality of physical disability imagined here is one that she is envisioned negotiating through a mix of outer self-governance and control of her tomboy inner nature. These are the heady parallel moral lessons that Katy is encouraged to encounter as she also moves through a temporality of adolescence.

Early in the book Katy is portrayed as a confident and self-assured person; as a middle class woman she has been indoctrinated into a system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to strongly believe in her own sense of social and cultural entitlement and personal destiny. Katy's belief in the promise of a successful future to which she is entitled is illustrated in a scene in the book where Katy is sitting with her siblings and friend Cecy, talking of their imagined future lives when they are "grown up". Katy proudly declares, "I mean to do something grand. I don't know what, yet; but when I'm grown up I shall find out" (Coolidge, 1872: 20–21). And, even though we have been told beforehand that Katy's ambitions will be redirected, the words that are used to give an illustration of Katy prior to her accident are those that denote an archetypical tomboy, one who is strongly defined by her own selfhood, energy and sense of physical autonomy. The language used to describe this part of Katy's narrative often connects Katy to the outdoors, to the natural world, and is often forward looking, positive, optimistic and

dynamic; these words are also reflective of attitudes towards ideals of masculinity, physical health and, from a very different angle, disability.

The earlier tomboy Katy is constructed as brave and active, and able to utilise her unusually long coltish limbs to scramble in and out of trouble, such as when she is playing raucously in the schoolyard: "There are moments when it is a fine thing to be tall. On this occasion Katy's long legs and arms served her an excellent turn. Nothing but a Daddy Long Legs ever climbed so fast or so wildly as she did now" (Coolidge, 1872: 9–10). After her accident the language that is used to describe her often implicitly links her to the quotidian internal world of home, family and her bedroom in a negative way:

> Years afterwards, Katy told somebody that the longest six weeks of her life were those which followed this conversation with Papa. Now that she knew there was no chance of getting well at once, the days dragged dreadfully. Each seemed duller and dismaller than the day before. She lost heart about herself, and took no interest in anything. Aunt Izzie brought her books, but she didn't want to read, or to sew. Nothing amused her. (Coolidge, 1872: 129)

At the beginning of her convalescence Katy is shown to struggle greatly with her new-found state of immobility. Katy's energy has seemingly disappeared and, for a time, the scope of her dreams and imagination seem to be diminished; all these changes are reflected in the kind of language that is used by, and about, her: "But still the once active limbs hung heavy and lifeless, and she was not able to walk, or even stand alone" (Coolidge, 1872: 128). The language used to illustrate Katy's frame of mind and her bodily frame after her accident is decidedly negative: "She was so wretched, that she didn't care what became of anything, or how anything looked" (Coolidge, 1872: 129). Again, neglecting one's appearance, especially in the case of a white woman, is used as an example of a kind of inner discontent or inner disquiet. Before her accident Katy's neglect of her hair and unladylike lack of care about her looks was frowned upon and

attributed to her energetic tomboy lifestyle; now it is Katy's physical immobility that is blamed for her lack of interest in her outward image, even though it is understandable that Katy would find it hard to care about such things when she is in physical pain:

> It was a forlorn-looking child enough which she saw lying before her. Katy's face had grown thin, and her eyes had red circles about them from continual crying. Her hair had been brushed twice that morning by Aunt Izzie, but Katy had run her fingers impatiently through it, till it stood out above her head like a frowsy bush. She wore a calico dressing-gown, which, though clean, was particularly ugly in pattern. (Coolidge, 1872: 133)

Contemporary discourses about disability and the binary relationship between the carer and the cared for explore the power imbalances in the relationship between those who look after and those who need help. As a child Katy was already being cared for to some extent. As a disabled young woman in the nineteenth century, the amount of support, isolation and seclusion that Katy is thought to need seem excessive by modern standards, when not being able to walk does not naturally mean that one would be kept mostly in bed, in a single room, and never go outside. However, in the nineteenth century, as Lois Keith (2001) notes when discussing literary tomboys such as Katy Carr in the context of the history of disability and the woeful lack of treatment and pain management for spinal injuries, "There were very few developments in the treatment of people with spinal cord paralysis as a result of accident or concussion until well into the twentieth century" (Keith, 2001: 25). So those like Katy, whose class afforded them the luxury, were cared for at home.

At the early stage in Katy's period of disability, she is depicted as being difficult and noncompliant towards those who are caring for her: "So long as she was forced to stay in bed, Katy could not be grateful for anything that was done for her" (Coolidge, 1872: 136–137). Such open displays of dissatisfaction are still often viewed as unacceptable in

someone who is disabled. Katy seems to be resisting her position of dependence by showing dissatisfaction about her situation: "the room was so gloomy, and Katy so cross" (Coolidge, 1872: 129). At the same time she is also confounding the usual trope of the grateful and passive invalid, the disabled person who is pliable, docile and who yields to the will of those who care for them. But Katy is shown to disregard her resistance to her position and, ironically, soon most of Katy's surplus of tomboy energy is redirected from her own pleasure and adventures, and channeled instead towards the more socially acceptable (for a disabled woman) aim of learning to keep other people happy. The result of this internal change, and giving up of her inner power, suggests a defeated Katy. "She had grown accustomed to her invalid life at last, and was cheerful in it, and he thought it unwise to make her restless, by exciting hopes which might after all end in fresh disappointment" (Coolidge, 1872: 187).

The home and bedroom, and objects within, were all recognisable symbols to find within a nineteenth-century sentimental text, a type of literature in which Merish (2000) describes "the dynamic interplay between affectional and material forms – between, in other words, middle-class interiority and the middle-class interior – central to sentimental discourse […] fore grounded in a standard topos of sentimental fiction: the window scene" (Merish, 2000: 140). In *What Katy Did*, objects such as windows and chairs become potent metaphors and settings as Katy, still unable to move or venture outside her bedroom, is pictured "hour after hour, with folded hands, gazing wistfully out of the window" (Coolidge, 1872: 175). This depiction of Katy's time spent looking out of her window is used to suggest that her new-found state of immobility has altered Katy's frantic tomboy nature, and encouraged her to "conform" or "yield" to a nineteenth-century hegemonic American-European able-bodied idealisation of the good and deserving cripple. It is through physical disability, we are to believe, that Katy has found

sanctity, and attained the socially desired qualities of a nineteenth-century white, middle class young woman, that her pain "had taught her self-control, and, as a general thing, her discomforts were borne patiently" (Coolidge, 1872: 175). And even when Katy is finally able to get around her room in a wheelchair there is an emphasis on the chair not as an instrument of independence but as a tool to placate her able-bodied family and keep other people happy:

> Katy came to meet them as they entered. Not on her feet: that, alas! was still only a far-off possibility; but in a chair with large wheels, with which she was rolling herself across the room. This chair was a great comfort to her. Sitting in it, she could get to her closet and her bureau-drawers, and help herself to what she wanted without troubling anybody. It was only lately that she had been able to use it. Dr. Carr considered her doing so as a hopeful sign, but he had never told Katy this. She had grown accustomed to her invalid life at last, and was cheerful in it, and he thought it unwise to make her restless, by exciting hopes which might after all end in fresh disappointment. (Coolidge, 1872: 187)

2.3 Tomboy Movement, Sideways Growth and Bodily Resistance

A physically inactive tomboy might almost seem like a contradiction in terms. Historically, when thinking about the tomboy's relationship to ideas of gender and disability, it is important to understand that the figure of the tomboy in nineteenth-century American literature was also strategically positioned as the champion of white, middle class, feminine health, where tomboy traits of a love of the outdoors and physical activity were in some way celebrated to further the cause of white womanhood in the nineteenth century. In mid-nineteenth-century America there was a pragmatic ideology that put an emphasis on the active and robust tomboy as a new feminine ideal, ousting the previous stereotype of pale and fragile femininity, as Abate (2008) notes,

because the time may come when adolescent girls and young women would be called upon to support families, they could no longer afford to be weak, ill and languishing. Instead of deeming female health, strength and vigor unattractive, society now considered these qualities desirable in the nation's young women. (Abate, 2008: 5)

In this context it would seem that Katy's particular spinal paralysis, and eventual and inevitable recovery, is a moral plot device used by Coolidge to intentionally redirect Katy's tomboy activity, but not to rid her of energy altogether. For, instead of running wild, and getting into adventures outdoors, after her accident Katy's energy is used in domestic internal chores, and tasks that she is able to undertake even while confined to her bedroom.

When specifically writing about Katy Carr, disability and nineteenth-century morality, Keith (2001) emphasises the significance of the time scale of Katy's accident, and of her eventually recovery: "Katy remains upstairs for four years altogether, significantly between the ages 12 and 16. She is paralyzed as a girl and cured as a young woman" (Keith, 2001: 90). Puberty is a defining moment in the tomboy trope because in many nineteenth-century tomboy narratives puberty is depicted as a time when the tomboy is steered towards conforming to socially normative behavioural ideals. So as Keith mentions, it is of importance that Katy's accident, and subsequent confinement, spans the years that she would also have been experiencing the changes of adolescence.

The fact that Coolidge decided to give Katy a spinal injury is also not without precedence and significance, for there was particular fascination with, and recurrence of, spinal injury narratives in nineteenth-century literature. There were many social and cultural reasons for scientists, as well as authors, to be intrigued by this form of paralysis. For writers the metaphorical potential of the symbolism of immobility was huge. As Keith (2001)

explains, regarding Victorian literature and the romanticisation of spinal injuries, "[t]he real incurable and unromantic diseases of the time did not hold much appeal for the Victorian novelists. Spinal weaknesses, on the other hand, allowed great possibility for linking physical conditions with a troubled inner life" (Keith, 2001: 27).

There is an obvious poignancy and symbolism to the depiction of a young woman sustaining an injury to the spine at the onset of puberty, which offers a wealth of metaphorical possibilities when discussing the developing gender and sexual identity of the queer tomboy. Motion in this context could be viewed as emerging sexual energy and exuberance being stopped, or stilled, for one of the ever-present myths about disability is that disability confers a lack of sexual desire on the disabled individual. The symbolism of an injury to such an emblematic body part also presents the possibility of discovering different ways to think about the concepts of growth, development, and also the need to control or curb the queer child's sexuality. As Siebers (2008) writes, "[d]isabled people experience sexual repression, possess little or no sexual autonomy, and tolerate institutional and legal restrictions on their intimate conduct" (Siebers, 2008: 84), and this is even more the case with the queer child or adolescent. It is also notable that the recurrent motif of the bed begins to become symbolic of a place of rest, retreat, safety and a socially acceptable, closeted sexuality.

There is also a connection between the way that Katy's injury seems to curtail her adolescent sexual development and how cousin's Helen's injury seemingly had also put an end to her sexual and romantic yearnings:

> Alex felt dreadfully when he heard this. He wanted to marry Cousin Helen
> just the same, and be her nurse, and take care of her always; but she would
> not consent. She broke the engagement, and told him that some day she

hoped he would love somebody else well enough to marry her. So after a
good many years, he did, and now he and his wife live next door to
Cousin Helen, and are her dearest friends. Their little girl is named
'Helen.' All their plans are talked over with her, and there is nobody in the
world they think so much of. (Coolidge 1872: 104)

The kinship between Katy and Cousin Helen runs throughout the book. Both characters

had a natural affinity for one another even before Katy's was injured, as witnessed by

Katy's emotional reaction after their first meeting:

"Papa said he wished we were all like Cousin Helen," she thought, as she
wiped her eyes, "and I mean to try, though I don't suppose if I tried a
thousand years I should ever get to be half so good. I'll study, and keep
my things in order, and be ever so kind to the little ones. Dear me—if only
Aunt Izzie was Cousin Helen, how easy it would be! Never mind—I'll
think about her all the time, and I'll begin to-morrow." (Coolidge, 1872:
109)

It is possible to read a queer subtext into this relationship, which seems to be based on

what Stockton terms "arrested development" (Stockton, 2009: 22). Here Stockon has

reinterpreted a pathologised right wing term for use when discussing the grown

homosexual, describing arrested development in this context as,

The oddities of this kind of retrospection ("I was a gay child") make a
second queer child seen: the grown "homosexual" who is fastened, one
could say, to the figure of the child – both in the form of a ghostly self and
in the form of "arrested development." (Stockton, 2009: 22)

While cousin Helen's injury is permanent, Katy's will last only for the period of her

adolescence.

Katy's adolescent temporality of disability becomes a period of introspection for the once

physically active tomboy, a time that could be viewed negatively as "[t]he period of her

disability has begun, and the period of her taming and cure" (Hale, 2008: 350). This time

of enforced social withdrawal in Katy's adolescent development could also be read as a

time when, rather than 'missing out' on adolescence, Katy is instead redirected to a different experience of transition from childhood to adulthood, one where she is able to concentrate on the more internal changes that are happening to her mind and body.

Before her accident there had been a constant emphasis put on the noticeable outward signs of Katy's pubescent development through the reoccurring attention drawn to the child's uncontrolled height, which is continually commented upon as remarkable and even as unnatural: "Katy was the longest girl that was ever seen" (Coolidge, 1872: 9–10). After the accident it is the less tangible aspects of Katy's development that take precedence in the text:

> I'm glad! But what I could do was very little. You have been learning by yourself all this time. And Katy, darling, I want to tell you how pleased I am to see how bravely you have worked your way up. I can perceive it in everything—in Papa, in the children, in yourself. You have won the place, which, you recollect, I once told you an invalid should try to gain, of being to everybody 'The Heart of the House.' (Coolidge 1872: 211)

Katy's pre-accident life as a tomboy had given her access to many of the physical and intellectual freedoms of a boy; after the experience of falling off the swing, the narrative of the novel seems to almost punish her by forcing her into a more complicated relationship with time.

Understanding the subject of the queer child and disability allows for a greater exploration of Stockton's (2009) theory of the queer child's sideway growth: "one could explore the elegant, unruly contours of growing that don't bespeak continuance" (Stockton, 2009: 13). Exploring this theory of the tomboy and disability also bring forth the question, what is a tomboy without the defining features of physical action, forward motion, and boundless energy? Is the tomboy incompatible with the very notion of

physical disability and immobility? Throughout the first half of *What Katy Did,* Katy is depicted as an exceptionally independent and self-determining individual – indeed, after her accident her greatest fears are vulnerability, her dependence on others, and the confinement to one place that seems to come as a result of her new state of physical immobility. We see these fears illustrated in the novel after a doctor prescribes immediate bed rest for Katy; we notice immediately how quickly her sense of personal independence is taken away from her: "Aunt Izzie and Debby lifted Katy, and carried her slowly up stairs. It was not easy, for every motion hurt her, and the sense of being helpless hurt most of all" (Coolidge, 1872: 120–121). Katy has been characterised throughout the book as particularly impatient with both herself and others, and so it would seem that one of the moral lessons that Katy's time of confinement and disability is supposed to bestow upon her is the lesson of patience which, again, would have been a desirable quality for a middle class young woman.

The problematic idea of the metaphor of enforced immobility and dependence as a form of moral growth and redirection was a familiar trope in portrayals of the disabled child in the nineteenth century. As Keith (2001) suggests,

> [t]he disabled character is always a child, never a menacing adult, and where disability is primarily used as a metaphor for dependency and weakness, providing a time for reflection and learning. Whatever the trials, troubles and grief of the character – who is almost always a girl – things will be resolved, their reward is likely to be in their cure. (Keith, 2001: 14)

A nineteenth-century author would have found the story of a disabled tomboy child, a female character who experiences the extreme and contrasting temporalities of both physical activity and physical immobility, a tantalising narrative to exploit for rich, emotive and gendered literary metaphors. Again the association between disability and

the child reappears, with the supposed childlike qualities of vulnerability and dependence being projected on to an Anglo-American idea of disability in nineteenth-century society.

But is there a different way to approach the ideas of activity, immobility and the tomboy? A way, perhaps, that incorporates theories of different ways to be active, and different ways to think about the trajectory of physical growth and the physically disabled, queer, tomboy child? Here I suggest thinking about the ways that Katy Carr's story unintentionally subverts and redirects some of the conventional ideas about tomboyish energy and physicality, as well as some of the traditional ideas about the theory of childhood growth itself. To again return to the ideas of Stockton (2009),

> growing up may be a shortsighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved. By contrast, "growing sideways" suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing "adults" and "children" into lateral contact of surprising sorts. (Stockton, 2009: II)

It is possible to reconsider the moments leading up to Katy's accident and her period of immobility as a reordering rather than a literally immobile state, or as a disordering of the notion of upwards growth. Just before her accident Katy had resisted her Aunt Izzie's warnings not to use a new swing that had been installed in a barn for the use of all the Carr children. Katy is unaware that there are practical reasons for her aunt telling her not to use the swing (it was not properly secured), but Katy, who had been a bad mood all morning, interprets this command as her aunt trying to spoil her fun by limiting her autonomy, mobility and personal freedom. When she is comfortably ensconced on the swing the story's narrative seems almost to retract in scope, bringing its focus inward to Katy's internal feelings and emotions. Importantly, this literary strategy both prioritises and privileges the experience of Katy's ephemeral feelings of embodiment as she

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experiences the thrill of the physical process of swinging back and forth, hypnotically, allowing her to feel a different, languid motion. The reader is allowed to imagine, in some tangible sense, a little of what Katy must feel while she is swinging – we can almost feel her sense of freedom, quiet internal joy and illicit excitement, as well as the playful changes to Katy's sense of personal scale, and dimensions, as she experiences

> [s]winging to and fro like the pendulum of a great clock, she gradually rose higher and higher, driving herself along by the motion of her body, and striking the floor smartly with her foot, at every sweep. Now she was at the top of the high arched door. Then she could almost touch the cross-beam above it, and through the small square window could see pigeons sitting and pluming themselves on the eaves of the barn, and white clouds blowing over the blue sky. She had never swung so high before. It was like flying, she thought, and she bent and curved more strongly in the seat, trying to send herself yet higher, and graze the roof with her toes. (Coolidge, 1872: 119–120)

In the potent symbolism of the clock in the paragraph quoted above we see the pubescent tomboy Katy, propelling herself airwards and seeming to defy time, while her swinging movements mirror those of a great clock – she almost seems able to become an embodiment of time itself. The imagery of the cross-beam and the high arched door depicted in this scene also suggests to me an undermining of conventional upwards growth patterns, and could be read as reflective of a different, more subtly queer kind of childhood growth that Katy is engaging in, a subversion, or redirection of growth: "which is to say, growth is a matter of extension, vigor, and volume as well as verticality" (Stockton, 2009: II). There is also a space for Stockton's sideways growth when Katy, after her temporality of physical disability, regains use of her legs and emerges changed by her removal from conventional 'able-bodied' adolescence, but emotionally stronger, more confident, independent and more self-sufficient. As Cousin Helen states when Katy thanks her for her support, "I'm glad! But what I could do was very little. You have been learning by yourself all this time" (Coolidge 1872: 211). The novel shows that there is a

future for Katy after adolescence, which is important because many tomboy characters in film and literature remain stranded in childhood, their narratives forever suspended and incomplete with nowhere else to grow.

In her writing about Katy's injury and temporary physical spinal pain Coolidge makes her own interventions by being complicit in what Siebers terms a "disability masquerade" (Siebers, 2008: 96). As an able-bodied writer contributing her own able-bodied privileged subjectivity to the continuum of a disabled child's sense of temporality, Coolidge's intention seemed to be that the reader (the possibly imagined young and able-bodied reader) should need or want to circumnavigate this uncomfortable part of Katy's experience of disability, to look away, or to avoid the pain of recognising Katy's pain: "We will hurry over this time, for it is hard to think of our bright Katy in such a sad plight" (Coolidge, 1873: 126). The reader is excluded from this section of Katy's sideways, physically disabled growth, which resides beside her tomboy self, and we are only allowed to reconnect with her again when "by and by the pain grew less, and the sleep quieter" (Coolidge, 1872: 126).

This symbolic and hurried, turning away from pain, speaks much of both nineteenth-century and contemporary Anglo-American conflicted attitudes to the lived reality of disability. Such fear of witnessing disability is especially strong when confronting the spectacle of the disabled child in physical pain. This absence of addressing the reality of pain and disability is also noticeable in popular culture, which is ironic because, as has already been discussed, the mass media in the 1900s (much the same as in the present day) widely exploited the images of disability and of the disabled child for sentimental, emotional reasons. At the same time the painful, quotidian realities of this temporality of disability, and the disabled childhood, are often erased or hidden from view.

It is of obvious relevance to this exploration of the sporty, active tomboy and physical disability in Anglo-American literary history to consider the changing representations of disability and states of action and autonomy in these countries. Anglo-American discourses about disability, activity and gender include many involved in disability rights movements questioning and challenging the tendency to exceptionalise certain idealised images of disability. A contemporary, globally-recognised example of the exceptional disabled individual would be that of the high-achieving Paralympian athlete. This heroic sporting figure is culturally heralded as a positive example of a disabled individual, while concurrently mainstream Western society in general continues to ignore many of the less glamorous realities of the daily issues surrounding disability, such as the need for funding and support for health care needs and making sure that accessibility needs are met, as well as other basic daily human rights.

In conclusion, as an example of the disabled tomboy in literary fiction, *What Katy Did* is an equivocal study. To the twenty-first-century reader, the story of Katy can at first seem to be a conservative and staid morality tale in which a playful, confident tomboy has her life cruelly redirected by an author keen to see her heroine set safely back on the path to normative gender behaviour. But *What Katy Did* is a novel that reveals itself to be open to many interpretations. However problematic aspects of Katy's development might appear, she is still a rare example of a tomboy with a physical disability in a novel, and offers, particularly to young disabled readers, an opportunity to encounter the complex trajectory of a multifaceted, young female character who struggles with topics of physical difference in a world that prioritises the physically able. In the article 'A Girl Who Wasn't Born Neat: Disability, Gender Trouble and *What Katy Did*' (Walker-Gore, 2015),

Clare Walker-Gore provides a feminist reading of the novel, finding something empowering in a story that addresses the taboo of physical disability in the act of making it visible to young readers:

> Disability tends to be excised from fiction for children: *What Katy Did* offers a rare opportunity for young disabled readers to see their own experience mirrored – however distorted by moralism the reflection may be. The novel's representation of disability as 'the school of pain' does at least offer a way of conceiving disability as an empowering state – not a catastrophe or an unspeakable fate, but a useful experience. (Walker-Gore, 2015)

This idea of the novel as empowering, as Gore suggests, is also visible in the way that the story confronts the reader with the concept of gender as a performative behaviour, as something that has to be learnt:

> What Katy does, I would argue, is demonstrate the artificial nature of gender, as a code of behaviour rather than an essential state. The alignment of disability with femininity not only gives disabled women a positive self-identity – Cousin Helen may be a limiting role model, but at least she isn't condemned to an early death, or depicted as useless – but gives readers struggling with the burgeoning demands of femininity a means of understanding their struggle. (Walker-Gore, 2015)

That Katy Carr's story is also a tomboy bildungsroman that encompasses a temporality of physical disability during her years of adolescent development again serves to offer readers a more expansive way to think about the temporality of childhood, adolescence, the intersections of disability and gender and what it means to grow. These broader ways of understanding childhood growth offer the gender nonconforming child – the tomboy in this instance – a narrative that troubles and disturbs the assimilatory metaphorical forward trajectory inherent in words such as 'development' and 'progress' by hinting instead at alternative, more expansive, spacious and creative ways to envision ideas of

motion, and of inhabiting spatiality – ways that are able to exist and thrive outside of

dominant Western, able-bodied, binary ways of thinking.

CHAPTER THREE

The Tomboy Guise

Misrecognition, the Queer Childhood, Sensation and Sound within Two Twenty-first-century Tomboy Films

"Indeed to access queer visibility we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the vista of the here and now" (Muñoz, 2009: 22).

This chapter is an examination of the means by which the films *XXY* (2007) – an Argentine-Spanish-French film directed by Lucía Puenzo – and director Céline Sciamma's French film *Tomboy* (2011) have been able to utilise sensory methods to portray certain aspects of the rarely depicted queer child and adolescent experience on screen. Muñoz (2009) and Stockton (2009) have been important sources in helping to consider the different ways in which queer children subvert the traditional idea of growing up, what Stockton explains as the concept of "growing sideways" (Stockton, 2009: II).

The films that I engage with here use this idea of the disruption and rejection of the growth narrative to open up a dialogue with the queer identified viewer, to thus enable them retrospectively to discover the power of the sounds, imagery, and other sensations associated with the queer childhood experience.

The queer cinematic moments that I examine in this chapter particularly pertain to the young, misrecognised individual and this exploration also involves some different ideas about how to reengage with the filmic experience as spectator – the individual who is to be uncovered is as much 'you' or 'me' as the character portrayed. This methodology is intended to raise questions about how a consciousness of bodily sensation translates from the screen to the viewer to create a moment of recognition when pertaining to gender and sexuality, and how to discover different ways to describe the sensation of being personally affected by a film.

I shall also be engaging with the sensory experience of cinema, therefore drawing on some of the theoretical ideas put forth by Vivian Sobchack (2004). In her work on phenomenology within the cinematic experience, Sobchack discusses the idea of a sensory and materiality-based encounter as another way to engage with film: "we, ourselves, are subjective matter: our lived bodies sensually relate to 'things' that 'matter' on the screen and find them sensible in a primary, pre-personal, and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localised" (Sobchack, 2004: 65).

I think that Sobchack's theory is useful as a way for the queer subject to negotiate the position of spectator by personalising the filmic interaction; this kind of intervention also entails approaching the filmic encounter anew. Very early on, audiences in Anglo-American cultures are trained to concentrate on the more obvious visual and sonic elements of the film; the film viewer is often encouraged to engage on a surface level rather than embracing and concentrating on the holistic experience that our lived body goes through during an interaction with a film.

In the context of the narratives of *XXY* and *Tomboy*, the class, race, gender, sexuality, as well as the biological and global specificities of both films make using an intersectional approach to critique these films important. Using an intersectional critique allows me to take into account how the differing axes of identity impact upon the way the two stories and the central characters are understood. For example, although both characters are white, gender nonconforming young people who live in multicultural communities, their gender identity is informed by differing factors: Alex, the main protagonist of *XXY*, was medically diagnosed as intersex at birth and has had to deal with the medicalisation of their gender development ever since; while the central character of *Tomboy*, Mikäel, has never, as far as we know, been diagnosed as intersex, and their gender identity has not been medically pathologised. These examples suggest two very different formative gender experiences. There is also the fundamental difference of geographical location within both films: *XXY* is set in Uruguay and *Tomboy* in suburban Paris, and these different geographical locations also suggest differing historical, cultural and societal attitudes to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and childhood. The language I use to refer to the central characters in both *XXY* and *Tomboy* shall be gender neutral – although these are obviously fictional characters, this choice of gender-neutral pronouns is used out of respect for the ambiguous and non-binary nature of the identities portrayed within both films.

XXY and *Tomboy* centre the narratives of two ambiguously gendered, white young people; both films contain story lines that depict pivotal moments that take place during their adolescence. *XXY* is a story set in a small Uruguayan fishing port, and the story is centred on the narrative of Alex Kraken, an adolescent, middle class, intersex young

person. Like many intersex people Alex's gender was assigned at birth as the result of the medical pathologisation and problematisation of intersex bodies in many countries throughout the world. When Alex reaches puberty they decide to stop taking the hormones that have been holding off the physical effects of masculinisation. The emotional and physical changes that Alex experiences as a result of stopping the hormones cause much turmoil for Alex, their family and the wider community. Alex's mother invites her brother in-law, who is also a plastic surgeon, and his family, including a teenage son Álvaro, to stay with the family for a while, so that they can secretly discuss the possibility of coercing Alex into undergoing gender reassignment surgery. This puts Alex in the extremely traumatic position of having to choose from the constrictive, Westernised, binary options of male or female, straight or gay.

Tomboy is the story of Laure/Mikäel: a lower middle class preteen growing up in a multicultural, multiracial Parisian suburb. The film begins as Mikäel moves with their family to a new town where they decide to change their name from Laure to Mikäel, and to start presenting as a male to their new group of friends. Mikäel cuts their hair short and starts making alterations to their physical appearance, carefully constructing this persona over the course of a summer holiday. Eventually their mother discovers that they have been presenting in a masculine way, and in one particularly harrowing scene, forces Mikäel to return to presenting as stereotypically feminine, something that is clearly greatly distressing to them.

In this exploration of contemporary queer film and the representation of minority non-normative gender and sexual identities I shall also critique the directorial responsibility of constructing such films, as well as the powerful political intentionality inherent in the

chosen symbolism and messages within the films. It is important to consider who the films' intended audiences are, and also to question whose gaze the films are aimed at, whether a special interest audience or a mainstream one. It is also imperative to have a deeper awareness of the larger power structures behind the distribution and financing of these cinematic projects, and the impact that this has on the overall marketing, public access, and consumption of the final film in a global economy.

3.1 Cinematic Representations of the Sensory Experience of the Misrecognised Tomboy

The way in which these two particular contemporary tomboy narratives have been translated onto the screen presents the possibility of treating the viewing process as a multi-sensory experience, one that gives the viewer the freedom to explore a more subtle, nuanced, less clichéd, and non-binary depiction of the tomboy experience. This has been achieved by employing a different array of sensory means to convey their stories; means that allow an awareness of spatiality and surroundings, and enable the spectator to consider the subtle and personal ways in which they engage with both films. In thinking along these lines I include the personal space in which the film is encountered, whether in the public space of a cinema with others, alone on a television screen, on a laptop computer, a tablet computer, or online, as well as the proximity and the size of the screen.

Such an understanding of the encounter enables the possibility of experiencing a film as an extension of one's own body, and encourages us to become aware of one's own bodily experiences and sensations as we observe 'non-normative' bodies and narratives on the screen. This temporality gifts the viewer a particular type of awareness of the 'queer' aspects and possibilities of their own body. As Sobchack (2004) proposes, "[i]n a

paradoxical way, then, we are most 'at home' in our bodies when we are most absent from them—that is, when they ground us in the world as a transparent capacity for significant action and sensible meaning" (Sobchak, 2004: 189). This experience of 'queer' filmic space, I believe, also enables a disordering of the senses that allows the viewer inside a queer form of personal misrecognition that helps bind them to the images on the screen.

Certain sensations have the power to move the viewer in visceral and emotive ways; this power creates a particular sort of experience when engaging with a piece of art, in this case a film. In *XXY* and *Tomboy* we discover two distinctly different representations of a queer child/adolescent narrative on the screen, and both films tell stories that have only relatively recently been explored within a cinematic framework. When engaging with a non-heteronormative, non-cisgender narrative it would seem natural that we would need a non-normative, non-passive and potentially transformative way to interact with such films.

Both *XXY* and *Tomboy* can be understood to communicate the sensory experience of the queer child/adolescent and both films contain scenes that have a profoundly stimulating material quality, capable of having an evocative effect on the sensory system of the viewer. It is notable that, while describing the mechanics of creating *Tomboy*, director Sciamma strongly emphasises the importance of the depiction of the sensory experience of childhood/adolescence in the film: "I wanted to make a movie in a crazy energy, as free as possible. I thought that story would be perfect, because it's about childhood, the rush of emotions, the energy" (Silverstein, 2011). It is notable that Sciamma associates

childhood with a particularly rich kind of sensory experience, one which she describes attempting to replicate in the film.

The film begins with a close-up shot of the back of a head, a short haircut, and a child's head. There is a sensation of movement, trees, the head is moving forwards, and the figure's hair is blowing. As well as seeing and hearing these the sounds associated with movement, the air, and a car engine, the spectator is also able to experience the feeling of the physical and bodily effects of disorientation.

It is hard to tell whether or not the central figure is riding a bike, and to be sure of their proximity to the trees. The light is constantly changing, the head disappears out of shot, we are still moving, they are moving, light reflects though a texture of trees viewed in motion from below, the sunlight disappears then returns, the sensation is a displacement – are we, or they, being dragged? The images seem to blur. From the first scenes of the film *Tomboy*, the viewer is encouraged to become accustomed to a sense both of familiarity and displacement – this is a reimagining of the sensation of childhood energy as a temporality of confusion and ambiguity.

Familiarity emerges in the form of a raised hand, a small, single white hand standing out strongly amongst, and against, the scenic blur. The hand scoops the air, the fingers and wrist fold and twist slowly, a slight sway – they are still in motion – the hand stands out clearly amongst almost imperceptible jewelled light forms and powerful quick sensations of pervasive sunshine. Then comes a moment of welcome recognition for the spectator – the figure's head is viewed from the front and revealed to be a shorthaired child with their eyes closed, still moving forwards, head and shoulders in close-up, head swaying from

side to side, cleft in the chin, furrowed brow. The child seems to stir from their state of temporary meditation; reawakening and reorienting, they begin to look around themselves.

This feeling of restriction and confusion also manifests as physical feeling, a sensation of childhood games such as blind man's bluff, being blindfolded and lead through unfamiliar terrain. The punctuating tweets of birdsong, a road behind the child that explains their location – the child is standing in a car with their head and shoulders poking through the car sunroof. The camera pans down for the first time and we see an older figure, a man with one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding on to the legs of the standing child. The man enquires about the child's safety and comfort; the child answers in the affirmative while continuing to survey the passing scenery, hair carried by the breeze, freckles and a concentrated gaze on the child's face. This scene ends abruptly with total silence and a black screen confronting the viewer and the word 'Tomboy' written in the centre in blue. This scene also acts as a physical and emotional moment of awakening for the spectator, a scene that plunges the spectator from the comfort of visual imagery into blankness as the camera actions encourage the viewer to become more aware of their physical surroundings – depending on where the film is viewed, these scenes evoke a bodily feeling of discomfort, even claustrophobia. This short scene is rich with connotations of remembered sensation, evocative of small moments of personal pleasure. Again the formations and presentation of gender ambiguity in the scene are in keeping with the film's spirit of uncertainty, where fittingly, the introduction does nothing to reveal the child's gender.

In both *XXY* and *Tomboy* the lead protagonists are at first presented to the viewer as possessing a 'tomboy guise'. Whether or not they actually are 'tomboys' in the Anglo-American historical and cultural sense of the word remains elusive in the films and is never resolved.

Misrecognition in the context of the non-binary child would seem to be a powerful experience with many potential outcomes for the young person whose gender is not recognised or understood. Obvious possible outcomes could include possible embarrassment, confusion, even the child or their parents trying to change their self-presentation for a more socially acceptable one. I feel that the idea of misrecognition as a lived reality also has obvious strong intersectional implications. There are numerous forms of the misrecognised experience that operate across many areas of race, class, ethnicity, etc. I propose that the form of misrecognition that is engaged with in this chapter is a fluid space that many people inhabit to differing degrees throughout their lives. This is particularly true of those whose gender, race, age or class is not immediately obvious. There is also an argument to be made that misrecognition has as its opposite socially acceptable recognition.

Both characters in *XXY* and *Tomboy* have in common the experience of gender misrecognition, and at certain points during their individual narratives they both experience looking like and being socially categorised as, or at times misread by the viewer as, tomboys. The viewer is introduced to both Mikäel and Alex through their physicality and behaviour, an introduction through which their tomboy guise is quickly established. This guise includes a stereotypically 'boyish' manner of dress and physical demeanour. Regardless of their outward tomboy dis-guise the viewer is allowed to

interpret an inference in the subtext of both films that makes the suggestion that both characters internally 'know' themselves to be altogether more complexly and ambiguously gendered. The lack of resolution with regards the gender and sexuality of the characters enables the viewer to consider the tomboy's crossing with and/or distancing from either trans or intersex subject. On the surface both characters share certain stereotypical traits or affiliations with the tomboy – Sciamma even uses the word for her film's title – but neither can be pinned down to this one definition. Alex presents at times in a tomboyish manner, but the character's experience has been one of someone who is intersex, and the film does not shy away from these complexities, as Alex is depicted struggling with the changes that puberty and stopping female hormones are having on their emotions and body. Alex is positioned between many different gender experiences. Mikäel does not encounter any medical pathologisation but, despite being connected to a film titled *Tomboy*, the viewer is made aware that there is also a possible transgender narrative at play. Both characters are presented as occupying a space of what Halberstam names "in- betweenness" :

> It is in-betweenness (not androgyny but the active construction of new genders) here and elsewhere in the history of tomboys that inspires rage and terror in parents, coworkers, lovers, and bosses. As soon as the tomboy locates herself in another gender or in an affirmative relation to masculinity, trouble begins and science, psychology, family, and other social forces are all applied to reinforce binary gender laws. (Halberstam, 2004: 210)

A scene in *XXY* that is representative of this inferred subtlety of an internal self-awareness of gender and sexual complexity is Alex's introduction to Álvaro. Alex marches up to Álvaro, clad in a hooded top with the hood up, and shorts. There is a confidence in Alex's physical demeanour, and many of the stereotypes of boyishness and young, masculine gender performance are readable in the way that Alex stomps through

the sand, coltish-limbed and nonchalant, when approaching Álvaro. This scene, in contrast, situates Álvaro as the introspective, sensitive boy who sits quietly sketching on the beach, his ever present and protective headphones slung around his neck. Alex stands domineeringly over Álvaro before giving a confident greeting. Alex is immediately sexually forward in their questioning of Álvaro, speaking candidly about how they can tell he has recently been masturbating, and then casually proclaiming, to Álvaro's surprise and shock, that they also do the same thing themselves every day. Alex smiles openly when asking these sexually intimate questions, but Álvaro's facial expression is cautious – Alex seems to have confused and embarrassed him, he clearly does not know what he is dealing with, and he tries to change the subject. Looking more serious now, Alex explains that they have never had sex before, and propositions Álvaro by making the suggestion that they sleep together. Álvaro does not understand this kind of bluntness, especially from someone whom he perceives to be female. Alex seems to see nothing wrong with their question and sees Álvaro's hesitance and non-reciprocation as a rejection. The conversation between the two characters is sparse and concise, and the sound of the sea is constant and yet not invasive. Along with the setting and the clothing of the characters, the sounds help to convey a sense of coldness – Alex's body language is hunched and they hug their knees for warmth – this is not a summer beach scene. The sense of sparseness that the scene carries is mirrored in the textures, and the spectator is invited to have a haptic experience of the snow-like crunch of sand, ropes on the harboured fishing boats, fine twists of stray hair, and tufts of seagrass blown by the breeze, driftwood, wooden boats and trees in the distance. This scene between the two characters is filmed in close-up, highlighting their facial expressions and creating feelings of intimacy and vulnerability as Alex allows someone else into their less obvious internal gender and sexual interior life. But Alex is still wary of people, possibly due to the

experience of a childhood of medicalisation, having to be socially cautious about the disclosure of their intersex condition for fear of being judged as different, the real threat of physical violence from others when they find out, or a fear of being generally misunderstood. In this scene the central characters are foregrounded, while the viewer is kept at a distance. Alex and Álvaro do not trust each other, and the spectator experiences this mistrust in the feeling of shared isolation, which is also communicated through the use of props, like Álvaro's headphones and sketchbook, and Alex's self-protective body language.

In *Tomboy* a series of scenes illustrates the ambiguity and self-awareness inherent in Mikäel's tomboy guise, as well as depicting the different filmic sensory methods that the director employs to convey the way that Mikäel negotiates their temporality of misrecognition. The night before going on a swimming trip with a group of new friends, all of whom perceive Mikäel to be male, Mikäel makes a feminine-looking swimming costume into a pair of stereotypically masculine swimming trunks by cutting them in half.

In a poignant scene, Mikäel constructs a prosthetic phallus out of modelling clay and places it in the swimming trunks in order to give the illusion of a bulge. This situation clearly reveals to the viewer the many tireless way in which Mikäel is trying to endlessly navigate the temporality of gender nonconformity. Navigating other people's perceptions of their gender is depicted as a complicated and exhausting business for Mikäel. At home, especially with their parents, they are viewed as a tomboy, a 'boyish' girl, while in public with their new group of friends they 'pass' as male; but it is when they are alone within private spaces, such as their bedroom, that they finally have the space to express an ambivalence about their gender. The scene in which Mikäel is trying on the homemade

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prosthetic is silent apart from the sound of their breathing. Both scenes that are described here are noticeably silent; this silence is illustrative of the intimacy of Mikäel's personal interior space, while the perceptible sound of Mikäel's breath allows the viewer to make a human connection with the character. The bedroom in which the scene takes place is uniformly suburban and modern. Mikäel stands in front of a window that has the blind pulled down, and positions the new swimming trunks while looking in a mirror that is strategically out of the viewer's sight. When the prosthetic is positioned correctly the camera pans in closely on Mikäel's face as they give a proudly satisfied smile, before continuing to privately admire themselves. This smile acts to relieve much of the tension building in the scene and the physical impulse in a viewer could be to mirror the child's smile. The spectator is invited to recognise the haptic qualities of Mikäel's private moment of pleasure through the graze of clothing material and the way that the camera mirrors the physical child's movements – all these things convey a feeling of contentment without using words.

After triumphantly taking part in the swimming trip, and continuing to be read as male by their friends, Mikäel finds themselves again back in their bedroom alone, and noticeably still wearing the homemade swimming trunks. Mikäel takes a small trinket case in which they have kept small mementos that obviously hold personal significance, such as their baby teeth. They unscrew the lid of the case, make space amongst the teeth, place the plasticine penis inside and put the lid back on before returning the case to a shelf above their bed. The camera lingers for some time as Mikäel looks thoughtfully at the trinket case before sitting back on the bed, with their head resting against the wall, their arms hug their knees. The use of lighting to cast shadow in the bedroom and the way that the

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child's face is mostly shown in profile expresses a perceptible underlying pathos in this scene.

These are subtle hints at the many possibilities for Mikäel's developing gender identity. The scene sensitively depicts the way that their prosthetic has obviously become of real personal significance; however, this segment of film also hints at an ambiguity in their reasons for keeping the object, the intention behind their action is expansive and open to interpretation.

One of the all-pervasive semiotic elements of *XXY* is the director's use of the symbolic sounds and imagery of the sea. This is most obvious in the work that Alex's father undertakes in his position as a marine biologist, and in the surname of the family, Kraken, that echoes the mythic sea monster of the same name. One scene in the film shows Alex and Álvaro bonding when Alex presents Álvaro with a friendship pendant, which comprises of one of the tags that Alex's father uses in his work to tag sea turtles.

Aquatic life, rain and other forms of water, form an integral part of the film's narrative, as well as the more material representations of water symbolised by the working fishing port that sustains the local economy of the small Uruguayan village. The aquatic theme of the film reoccurs in countless ways throughout the story, also forming a fruitful multi-sensory cinematic element throughout the film, and the connection between gender, the sea, marine life, and the similarity between human and animal biology, is made in many subtle ways.

At the beginning of the film the viewer is immediately plunged in to this disorienting sensory interplay between the worlds above land and beneath the ocean, as in a forest we hear the low menacing hum of crickets, a looming shadowy figure, and shadows cast on a nest of interweaving undergrowth, slow crunching feet on branches, a hand holding a blade. In the following scene the pace and sounds change to quieter, underwater noises. Back on land we experience the considered prowling energy of a figure treading carefully through a forest; we are led by the sense of sound, the crackle of twigs and branches underfoot, and the swish of a knife hitting the air. Quickly and acutely the sounds subtly alter, pulsing (reminiscent perhaps of a womb-like interior) as momentarily we are submerged in an unfathomable ocean. On land, bare feet, darkness and light, the gauzy wooded patchwork textures, a hint of blade, then a blue release into the cloudy sea below, ambiguous marine organisms – possibly sea anemones – twist and unfurl, expelling their substances swaying in the depths. This contrast between the outside and inside, between earth and water elements, is thus established. In the next scene we find ourselves above sea level again, the pace of the figure running through the trees becomes frantic on land, exhaustive breaths, arm hooked purposefully, knife protruding, the genderless being, maybe a young boy, moves forward, a long-haired girl runs behind, maybe chasing, maybe following, perhaps both figures are being chased or doing the chasing, deep breathlessness – are they playing a game? Forest floor becomes ocean floor. There is a feeling of unease. The following oceanic scene offers sonic respite and a strange sort of momentary calm. The muscled arms of the vest-clad figure, their forward running movements punctuated by trees, knife held out in front, sounds of woodland snakes. Beneath the ocean again, a tentacled creature, beautiful and strange fluid movements, bubbling sounds, many shades of blue, green, we are comforted by imperceptibly small bubbles. The figure in the forest seems to reach their end goal, arms and legs surge

forward, and in one final, aggressively exhausted effort they force the knife down heavily into the earth, giving out a frustrated, primal signal of vocal intent, stabbing the knife into the ground. This is our introduction to the film: the aquatic themes, the connection between the differing layering of fundamental natural elements, and the literal blurring of genders are established from the beginning. These elements immediately locate the viewer in a multi-sensory and sensually ambiguous environment, one that the viewer is encouraged to navigate in a fully physical way. From the beginning, textures, patterns, repetition and sensual disorientation are all flagged up as semiotic references. This first segment ends with the film's title *XXY* imposed against the underwater backdrop. The letter Y looks like a severed X: are we to understand this as the mysterious runner's final Freudian destination? This is, in many respects, an obvious and literal reading. What is clear is the importance of the privileging of the oceanic throughout the film, and the important part that it plays in giving a literal reflection of the theme of ambiguity.

> I hold on to the fire in the ocean, whose bones are cold not frozen, don't get me wrong I'd gladly be the one, to pick my teeth with the very last whale bone, take my garbage throw it in the ocean, suck a man off throw up in the ocean, no the moon is no fire in the sea no object like that could speak to me, who will love me oh like the ocean does?
>
> – 'Fire in the Ocean' from the EP *Thieves* (Cohen, Sketch, Smyth & Stocks, 2008: track 4).

These lyrics by queer Vancouver rock group *The Organ* form a seamless musical and textual parallel with this discussion about the queering of oceanic symbolism. There are many elemental, raw and more visceral representations of water in these lyrics, and in *XXY* similar imagery works to artfully bastardise and subvert the gently poetic visualisations and romantic suggestions of fluidity. In these subversive and, I would argue, uniquely queer filmic actions, Puenzo manages to create a new, more carnally poetic discourse for the multi-sensory representation of water, an element which after all

is a binary compound and, in finding different way to navigate the traditional heteronomative symbolism of this natural element, *XXY* again works to displace and obscure the concept of the binary system in all of its many of its forms.

There is a later scene, occurring after some of the most harrowing moments in the film, in which we see Alex being subjected to an attack by a group of local boys who have heard rumours about Alex's intersexuality. When discovering Alex walking alone on the beach the boys decide to descend and make their attack by pinning Alex to the ground, and forcibly removing Alex's shorts and underclothing to reveal their genitalia. Notably this attack on Alex occurs on the beach and is framed by images of the sea; also, the group of teenage boys make their entrance into the scene on a fishing boat. In these segments of the film we see a different representation – the sea is no longer a cleansing or meditative space, but rather it is threatening and violent, its expansiveness and starkness offering a potential pathway for imperialistic tendencies, a sailboat becoming a shadowy other on the horizon.

The constant sound of the windswept ocean permeates the scene, as well the noise of intermittent spluttering from a small fire around which the friends are sat. After a moment of consideration Alex arises from a place near the fire, followed by Alex's old friend Vando, who, before getting up to follow, issues a warning to Álvaro. Vando uses two female pronouns when talking about Alex – he says "leave her alone", "she's too much for you". Álvaro is left alone by the light of the fire; as Vando joins Alex at the edge of the shoreline they both unzip their trousers and urinate into the sea. Alex stands unashamed, no longer hiding the secret of their penis. The secretion and excretion of human bodily fluids also forms a metaphor of the sea as a dumping ground for toxic

waste, and also a site of fluid bonding; in *XXY* all these symbols are queered in a multitude of unexpected ways

3.2 Recognising the Queer Child Past and Present

In many instances there is a dislocation of space associated with the viewing process that helps to queer a possible relationship to a film and allows us to map where a filmic attachment can begin to take shape. This kind of queer intervention can also be understood as a strategic practice – indeed it has been a powerful and creative way for sometimes disenfranchised queer children to take ownership of, and make investment in, a wider Western popular culture that has often overlooked or excluded them. In *Tendencies* (1993), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has defined this kind of queer childhood practice as:

> The ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, [which] became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest these sites with fascination and love. (Sedgwick, 1993: 3)

I believe that the childhood interventional techniques that Sedgwick describes can also extend to the queer adult viewer, allowing the adult to experience film in a multitude of different ways and within different situations. If one has the privilege to be able to access new technology, the cinematic narratives that are first engaged with on the big screen are now allowed greater, more detailed attention on the small screen within a personal spatial setting. It is possible to engage with the film at closer quarters, choosing segments of film to access online via websites such as YouTube, for instance, or chapters watched on a DVD through a laptop, allowing for pausing, forwarding, rewinding, choosing the order

of chapters purposely, switching off the subtitle option, focusing on particular segments of narrative – in all circumstances making one's own interventions to the filmic experience.

My own personal introduction to the film *Tomboy* was through an encounter that brings to mind a vivid consciousness of a very particular spatial location and temporality. I first saw the film commenced in a half-full cinema in the middle of the day. Having been aware of the subject matter of the film beforehand, a concerted effort was made to go and see it, with a certain amount of anticipation about the way such a contemporary narrative about a tomboy-like figure would be depicted. This first introduction and opportunity to recognise aspects of a queer childhood in a public venue like a cinema also felt like a process of removal, both physically and emotionally, a lack of familiarity, a wish for a glimpse of the recognisable, a recognisably queer childhood on film to which I could relate. Watching a film with an audience is a very physical experience – while concentrating on the film there is also an awareness of those who also share the space. Other external elements of the public viewing process can also affect the way the film is encountered – the temperature, evocative smells (such as popcorn), and the comfort and size of the cinema all impact upon how a film is personally experienced.

Subsequent viewings of *Tomboy* have differed from the initial disorientation of this first encounter, as I have engaged with the film in much less public settings. Also, becoming more familiar with the film's narrative has helped to enhance the personal nature of the viewing process. Watching the film on DVD on a small laptop placed me in a closer, more intimate space with the screen – this closer proximity to the viewing object has placed me in a more proactive, almost editorial position where, far from removed, the

physical connection to the film became a more tactile one as described by Laura Mulvey's account of the pensive spectator: "To delay a fiction in full flow allows the changed mechanism of spectatorship to come into play and, with it, shifts of consciousness between temporalities" (Mulvey, 2012: 184).

In pausing the film I was able to create our own mini still-life portraiture through freezing the film's temporality, displacing time in numerous ways, and scrutinising the film's most minute details. In doing this I was, in a small yet profound way, curating my own filmic encounter. As a queer person I rarely saw examples of my gender nonconforming childhood reflected on screen, so the physical encounter in which I experienced the film at such close quarters felt empowering. I engaged in this interactive form of spectatorship when watching *XXY*. At the beginning of *XXY* the camera pans in on the scene of a figure lying on a bed. The figure is turned away from us so that the spectator can only see the back of their head. The composition of the scene depicts the structuring of depth and lines and a subtle mixture of early-dawn-coloured blues, aquamarine and blue/grey hues. In the process of pausing the image on screen it is clear that many of these scenes would work as Vermeer-style, individual, self-contained portraits, as Mulvey again notes, "By halting the image or repeating sequences, the spectator can dissolve the fiction so that the time of registration can come to the fore" (Mulvey, 2012: 184). This feeling of empowerment was also enhanced while fast-forwarding quickly through *XXY* on a laptop – there is a layer of detachment in being able to watch the film's highly traumatic and dramatic intricate scenes at a heightened speed.

However, the process of close scrutiny and editing through making personal interventions into the filmic experience is not without danger. In *The Skin of the Film*, Laura U. Marks

makes the observation "[t]he act of attentive recognition, although it sounds dry in Bergson, is often a traumatic process" (Marks, 2000: 48). The possible trauma evoked in the particularly queer filmic scrutiny that is being addressed within this chapter is manifold. The most obvious trauma that is engaged with here is that which is created in the process of filmic recognition – this is the trauma of searching for a trace of recognition of one's own queer childhood within the narrative and all-encompassing world of a film, a wish to see elements of one's own formative queer narrative reflected back, as Stockton explains when defining some of the complex feelings that could be released during such moments of queer childhood recognition:

> For these adults, talk of a gay child may trip a tenderness. It may release, however unsought, a barely allowable, barely admitted sentimentality. One may be pricked by, pained by, feelings—about one's childhood—that, even now, are maudlin, earnest, melodramatic, but understandable pangs of despair or sharp unease. One can remember desperately feeling there was simply no where to grow. (Stockton, 2009: 3)

To revisit a queer childhood, perhaps in some cases for the first time, and to catch glimpses of such a childhood/adolescence within a film can stir up a multitude of conflicting feelings, feelings that connect very strongly with, and evoke the imagery of, Barthes' punctum (Barthes, 1981): a feeling of poignant pain; but these aspects of suggested trauma are no reason for the queer viewer to look away. I suggest that the viewer's engagement with both these twentieth-century filmic depictions of queer childhoods offers the opportunity to encounter some representation, however "problematic" (it is evident that the child who is represented is still often white, and or able-bodied and privileged by social class and societal location), of a queer childhood narrative on the big screen. Even now such depictions of a queer childhood are still a relatively rare thing, and the opportunity to see a particular version of the queer child placed firmly centre stage allows for an engagement with many issues that are all too

often ignored, issues around childhood gender identity, race, class, culture, sexuality and the taboo of childhood queerness.

3.3 The Onscreen Emergence of Childhood Sexuality

Both *XXY* and *Tomboy* were released towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. This was the beginning of a time when questions and issues surrounding the sexual identities and the emerging gender of children and adolescents were continually given a prominent place in Western culture within academia, politics, medical and social sciences, and particularly in the mass media. It is now not unusual to discover mainstream chat shows and popular television documentaries discussing the perceived ethics, as well as the personal narratives, that surround childhood transgender and transsexual identity. However, a notable absence in the public mainstream discussion of childhood transgender identity is the notion that a transgender child might have queer sexual inclinations. Stockton detects a discomfort, or even a determined resistance, to the question of the sexual identity of these transgender children when the issue is raised on mainstream American television programmes: "Strikingly, decisively, no mention is made of object choice, attraction, or sexuality in reference to these children, not even for the teens" (Stockton, 2009: 8).

This erasure of the possible queer sexual identity of transgender young people is clearly in contrast to the widespread hetero-sexualisation of childhood in Western culture generally witnessed elsewhere in the media. Stockton's question about the complex and nuanced ways in which children can be transgender also opens up a dialogue about the transgender spectrum, and the public emergence of non-binary gender identities,

including non-binary sexualities, asexuality and of all the numerous indigenous gender

and sexual identities that predate settler colonisation and imperialism, many of which

continue to thrive to the present day despite the many continued efforts to erase them. In

an article titled "Third, Fourth, and Fifth Genders In Cultures Around The World", Jacob

Sloan explains a little of this often hidden global history:

> recognized, revered, and integrated more than two genders. Terms such as transgender and gay are strictly new constructs that assume three things: that there are only two sexes (male/female), as many as two sexualities (gay/straight), and only two genders (man/woman).
>
> Long before Cook's arrival in Hawaii, a multiple gender tradition existed among the Kanaka Maoli indigenous society. The *mahu* could be biological males or females inhabiting a gender role somewhere between or encompassing both the masculine and feminine. Their social role is sacred as educators and promulgators of ancient traditions and rituals.
>
> In pre-colonial Andean culture, the Incas worshipped the *chuqui chinchay*, a dual-gendered god. Third-gender ritual attendants or shamans performed sacred rituals to honor this god.
>
> Among the *Sakalavas* of Madagaskar, little boys thought to have a feminine appearance were raised as girls. The Antandroy and Hova called their gender crossers sekrata who, like women, wore their hair long and in decorative knots, inserted silver coins in pierced ears, and wore many bracelets on their arms, wrists and ankles. (Sloan, 2013)

I am interested in thinking about the concept of the queer childhood outside of the

assimilationist and individualistic narrative that a neoliberal Western media endeavours

to project on the narrative of the queer child. Instead I want to trouble this assumed

"normative" trajectory, and to imagine an alternative idea of the child, and the

temporality of the queer childhood, as a concept with the potential to stand defiantly

against an agenda of assimilation that focuses on the present in which the Anglo-

American LGBT agenda, whose influence is global, has been dominated by pragmatic

issues like same-sex marriage and gays in the military. Such an imagining of the

childhood temporality has much in common with the concept of queerness that Muñoz proposes (2009). He describes a pragmatic future bound phenomenon, a "not yet here":

> Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. (Muñoz, 2009: 1)

In this quote Muñoz's particular vision of queerness also forms a fruitful connection with Stockton's concept of the trajectory of sideways growth (as opposed to the tradition of 'growing up'), of the queer child as a proleptic temporality.

When it comes to the depiction of queer childhood and queer adolescent sexuality, *XXY* and *Tomboy* are, paradoxically, both ambiguous and candid about the sexuality and gender identity of the central protagonists. *Tomboy* establishes an enigmatic bond between Mikäel and their close friend Lisa. Both children form a friendship from the moment Mikäel moves into the neighbourhood, and they continue to become close throughout the film. During one key scene their friendship begins to develop into more of a romantic attachment. Both children have been swimming with a group of friends when the pair decide to remove themselves from the other children. Lisa takes Mikäel by the hands and leads them into the nearby woods. We view both youngsters from behind, their shoes making crunching noises through the undergrowth as Lisa walks out in front and they both walk down a woodland path. The camera shows us a front view of the pair: Mikäel's eyes are shut and they are still holding Lisa's hand. Lisa pushes away stray branches as they walk through the trees and undergrowth together. Their final destination is through the trees to the banks of a river. They come to a stop in front of the river and Lisa turns to look at Mikäel, who asks if they can open their eyes. Lisa answers 'no'. We

hear the water rippling on the river as Lisa reaches over and puts a hand over her friend's closed eyes, staring for a while before moving inwards and kissing them on the lips. Lisa removes her hands from Mikäel's eyes and she looks at her friend who now has their eyes averted from Lisa; they begin to look slightly blinkingly at her as she looks at them before taking their hand again. Mikäel looks self-conscious and thoughtful in a full close-up shot on their face, before smiling at Lisa. This scene raises questions about the way in which Mikäel's male presentation might precede any questions about their sexuality, and if their relationship with Lisa is simply an example of a heteronormative romantic narrative. The scene is layered with more complexity than these questions would suggest, and there is a fluidity of gender performance exchanged in the interactions between the two main characters in the scene. Even though Mikäel looks superficially more masculine, and is indeed presenting as 'male', it is Lisa who is taking on the stereotypically characteristically masculine roles in the scene. It is Lisa who leads them both through the woods, and Lisa who walks out in front; it is Lisa who always controls the direction that the two are taking, and Lisa who ultimately instigates the kiss, with Mikäel cast in the role of passivity. These of course are binary ideas of male and female, and the fluid nature of this scene allows for a more subtle approach to gender performance and childhood sexuality.

In *XXY*, Alex's sexuality is approached in a confrontational, traumatic and ambiguous way that does not shy away from depicting the complexities of Alex's sexuality or their sexual curiosity. There is a scene where Alex has been staying with a younger female friend overnight. Alex takes a shower the next morning, and after a short time their young friend joins them in the shower cubicle. This moment is filmed through the glass door of the shower and framed in a way that mostly reveals both characters from the shoulders

up. Alex begins to wash their friend's hair. The camera concentrates on Alex's reaction to the friend, only showing back of the friend's head. The intimate framing of this scene enables the spectator to construe Alex's pubescent sexual arousal, while the abrupt ending of the scene also conveys the character's sexual confusion, vulnerability and sense of shame at their own feelings for their younger friend.

3.4 Race, Gender and Images of Tomboy Androgyny

In a global culture that has been impacted by the power dominance of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1994: 197), it is impossible to separate many of the fundamental elements in the way that the films construct Alex and Mikäel's particular tomboy guises from the depiction of both of the characters as white, thin, and of stereotypically masculine presentation. All of these things have an important effect on the way that their gender performance in the film is perceived. For example, in *Tomboy*, Mikäel has moved with their family to a multicultural, multiracial neighbourhood where their new group of friends are mostly boys with some girls who are brown and clearly of mixed heritage. It is the brown boys that Mikäel is trying to fit in with when playing football. By making Mikäel's narrative the dominant one, I wonder if the other children simply become a backdrop to symbolise a low-income community, instead of complex and autonomous characters in their own right. What are the political implications during the football game when Mikäel's performance of white masculinity is shown to triumph over the multiracial boys that they are playing with? Rather tellingly during these scenes, Mikäel is clearly depicted as separate and "apart" from the other boys, who are shown in a way that ensures that they simply become a homogenous jeering blur of aggressive, young, brown masculinity. Mikäel's white, masculine performance fits into a larger

global white supremacist colonial framework in which white masculinity is represented as civilised, individual and complex, while brown and black masculinity are envisioned as brutal, threatening and 'other'.

Remaining mindful of the white, Western, popular cultural, historical framework that has seen the tomboy body itself as a site of misunderstanding, vilification or celebration, the question of a normalised body and what constitutes such a body raises many questions about attitudes to, as well as portrayals of, the queer child. We frequently see images of the child's body as queered by weight and body mass, or equally, images of the underweight child, the child who is malnourished, suffering and vulnerable, often in a racialised, lower class, medicalised, Western context, or that of a developing country. Differing extremes in body weight change how the child is represented on film and within the media. There seems to be a growing concern with the question of childhood obesity in many Western countries, while at the same time there is a parallel consciousness about the threat of eating disorders such as anorexia, a mental issue that has been heavily gendered and characterised in the mass media as mostly being the preserve of white, middle class, Western teenage girls, while in reality the problem is found within many groups spread out over a wide range of class, gender, race and different locations. While these are the images of the child in danger, the child at risk, the vulnerable child, typically the child in developing countries is often envisioned and represented as suffering, starving and, as such, spectrally thin. These differing uses of the image of the thin child raise question about widespread media usage of the undernourished child who suffers and the connotations of the queering of such imagery.

There seems to be a link between these images of the vulnerably thin, white child, the prepubescent queer body, and the wider Western social need to envision the child itself as inherently innocent. Stockton also makes such a link between the societal need to envision as suffering, and thus make vulnerable, children who lack the conventional privileges of heterosexuality, wealth, and whiteness:

> Experience is still hard to square with innocence, making depictions of streetwise children, who are often neither white nor middle class, hard to square with "children." One solution to this problem (of children lacking the privilege of both weakness and innocence) is to endow these children with abuse. As odd as it may seem, suffering certain kinds of abuse from which they need protection and to which they don't consent, working-class children or children of color may come to seem more innocent. (Stockton, 2009: 32–33)

Stockton's statement raises the possibility that cinematic representations of the queer child, or at least the body of the queer child, also need to be imbued, coded or marked with a certain aesthetic manifestation of vulnerability that enables the viewer to see the queer child as a less threatening and socially challenging prospect. Does the director's emphasis on the thinness and whiteness of the central characters in *XXY* and *Tomboy* make the viewer more sympathetic to their plight? I think this might well be the case, and it is an unsettling element of both films.

Both films draw upon the metaphorical and aesthetic potentiality of a version of the young queer physical form in which androgyny is synonymous with being thin, able-bodied, white, masculine and youthful. Androgyny is often imagined as a blank canvas, and this is particularly true of the mainstream fashion world. This aesthetic, that equates the androgynous with neutrality, is employed in many of the mostly silent scenes in *XXY* – in these moments during the film the viewer is placed in the position of voyeur, quietly observing the aesthetic qualities of Alex within both the natural and quotidian landscape.

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These scenes draw on the non-binary aspects of both the mundane and the sublime, while drawing attention to the queer possibilities encoded in the textures and sensations of the material culture that surrounds us, written on the body, within the natural world both internally as well as externally. There is also a disquieting suggestion of compositional visual harmony within such scenes, as though the signifying whiteness of Alex's body is inherently symbolic of neutrality.

The fear of physical and sexual difference is central to the denial of the existence of a non-heteronormative child; such a fear also extends to the fear of a physically non-normative child. Ohi further expands upon his argument that this fear of the existence of the queer child has led to a widespread practice of the social normalisation of temporality that we call childhood, a presumption that every child is heterosexual (though presumed non-sexual) by default:

> To argue that all children are queer, then is not to argue that all children feel same-sex desire (which, for all I know, they do). Rather, it is to suggest that childhood marks a similar locus of impossibility, of murderous disidentification; the disidentification with childhood queerness presumes, in other words, to recognise it, and to recognise it by emptying it of reference to anything but an incipient normativity. (Ohi, 2004: 82)

This incipient normativity, as well as denouncing the idea that a child could be queer in orientation, is also, by its very nature, prescribed heteronormativity, and leaves no space for the child's body to be anything other than normative. The denial of the non-normative child's body is particularly relevant when exploring films such as *XXY* and *Tomboy* which place the ambiguously gendered body of a possibly transgender child, and intersex adolescent, at the centre of the film's narrative. Intersex and transgender bodies and identities have, particularly within Western culture, long been the site for various

aggressive forms of normalization, both societal and through forms of medical and psychiatric pathologisation that privilege the male/female gender binary.

The issue of racialised thinness also intersects with issues of gender and is a problematic aspect particularly evident in both films. In the films, androgyny, or forms of young female masculinity, are coded as being synonymous with a slight physical build. In this respect there is a lack of diverse representation of what the tomboy body can look like, a representation that does not always ring true to life and the physical reality of the child or adolescent body which comes in many differing shapes and sizes. The relationship between images and ideas of prepubescence, childhood, adolescence and embodied thinness, runs deep. In *Tomboy* the image of the loose-fitting vest that Mikäel wears hanging loosely over their flat boyish chest throughout the film is in many ways depicted as emblematic of the state of androgynous prepubescence.

In *XXY* the use of clothing also plays a part in the representation of Alex's pubescent gender ambiguous intersex body and, like Mikäel in *Tomboy*, Alex is also often shown wearing a loose-fitting vest that emphasises their intersexuality, which has caused a lack of breast development, a point that Alex further draws attention to by explaining to her friend Álvaro that there is "nothing there" when Álvaro tries to grab Alex's breast in the middle of a sexual liaison between the two. In other scenes in *XXY* we note a pendant that hangs over Alex's chest, again accentuating the flat chest.

It would seem that both the actors in *XXY* and *Tomboy* were intentionally chosen for the their roles because of their slight physicality, and the way in which this body shape allowed them to convey a very particular vision of the masculinsed body, one that is

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linked to whiteness. *XXY*'s director Puenzo talks about lead actor Inés Efron's ability to appear physically much younger than she really was as an important aspect of portraying the teenage Alex. "With Inés we have a very close friendship today. When she made the casting for *XXY* I was amazed to meet a girl that could look 15 being 23, which allowed me to work with a woman, with the head and understanding of a woman, in the body of a girl. That was a big help for such a complex character as Alex, from *XXY*" (Scott, 2011). This quote also draws a connection between the intersection of age, weight and gender, and the way that certain Western cultural ideals of androgyny are often coded as synonymous with agelessness, or youth.

3.5 Sound Before Vision: the Queering of the Film Soundtrack

The segments under discussion here use soundtracks that comprise mostly naturalistic sounds and the sudden introduction of music. This music is shown to have a direct effect on the central character by allowing the viewer not only to see but to feel the sensation of a young non-binary body, at times awkward and at times free, occupying a multi-layered space between the artificiality of the soundtrack and the supposed reality of environment, challenging the viewer's assumptions of the authentic and non-authentic in the way that this pertains to gender. These segments of film and the action within them offer different sensations for different viewers, as we bring our own personal experience and momentary awareness to the filmic space that we temporally occupy. In the reading of these clips I have chosen a personal interpretation of the sound and physical energy conveyed in the scenes.

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The camera moves slowly through a layer of open doors towards Mikäel's sister, Jeanne, sitting alone at a table; a soundtrack of energetic electronic pop music plays and contrasts with this somewhat solemn and noticeably silent scene. The music gets louder and builds in a fizzy and exuberant manner as the camera cuts to Mikäel's friend Lisa dancing and shaking her long hair in tune to the soundtrack as Mikäel sits watching her and smiling; she says something to encourage Mikäel and then reaches to pull them up to also join in the dancing. At first Mikäel seems a little hesitant but after some encouragement soon begins to twirl with their friend, we hear the lyrics to the song which repeat the words "I love the way". Both children jump and wave their arms about as the music becomes ever more lively and disorientating with many electronic high notes before fading. As both children stop dancing and look at each other, we no longer hear any music but only the sound of their exhausted breathing now as they smile at each other and hold hands. This segment of film seems to act as a release of anxious tension for both Mikäel – who has had the pressure of living a double life – and for the viewer, who has been 'in' on Mikäel's secret from the start. The spectator is temporarily able to leave the position of complicity that has been signified by the silent and static space in which Mikäel's sister sits alone at the beginning of the scene, and momentarily enter a space of escapism, a space of transformation, of transformative energy.

There are many layers to another segment of the film *Tomboy* in which Mikäel is playing in a children's football game. The soundtrack is comprised of the noises of the game. We are outdoors, we notice the physical behaviour of the children; some of the boys are topless. At a certain point Mikäel takes their top off and joins in the gender performance by spitting on the ground before kicking the ball and celebrating by slapping hands with some of the boys. The sounds of a children's football game, the scuffing and dragging of

sport shoes on concrete, running, shuffling, the sound the ball makes, can be read as naturalistic noises, sounds evocative of the outdoors, youthful energy, playful teasing, voices raised in excitement, shouting, hand slapping, whooping, spitting. This soundtrack seems to bring the viewer into the centre of the action. Are these the sounds of young masculinity? The football pitch is a heavily-gendered, stereotypically masculine space. Mikäel's female friend watches the match from the sidelines but does not join in with the game.

As well as making use of gender sounds, both films privilege silence as a fundamental part of the storytelling: on a seafront in Uruguay we hear people's voices, the bustle of a street market and the tinny sounds coming from the music playing on Álvaro's headphones. Alex, who is walking in front, turns around, smiles and removes Álvaro's headphones, remarking that when you listen to music in the street everyone seems to be listening to the same song. Alex puts the headphones on and the music grows loud enough for the viewer to hear this private soundtrack. Still wearing the headset, Alex begins to move to the music, then takes them off and passes them back to Álvaro, who puts them back on and smiles as Alex continues to dance and move to the music; we still hear the soundtrack – a lively rhythmic song titled 'Dance For Me' from the Album *XXY* (Kabusacki, 2007: track 9) – and it is possible to faintly make out a whispery, presumably masculine vocal. Alex turns around while dancing and smiling; Álvaro, wearing his headset, looks on admiringly and smiling. Alex walks on, Álvaro catches up and they both walk off out of the frame as the music continues.

This exchange between Alex and Álvaro sees music used as a symbol for both the private and the public. And, as with Mikäel, we also see that music has a freeing effect on Alex –

in these clips, music, or at least the music chosen for these segments of film, is seen to animate the central characters, and we could further could view the poignancy of these musical set-pieces as spaces where gender is momentarily broken down, disordered and disorientated, if only temporarily. The use of headphones (a potent motif that appears throughout *XXY*) to listen to films is also a way in which the spectator is able to engage with the films when watching them on a laptop, giving another way to modulate the viewing experience through use of volume control, etc., while also adding another level of intimacy to the haptic experience of sound particularly as it relates to the protagonists in *XXY*.

3.6 Reengaging with the Temporality of a Queer Childhood or Youth from the Vantage Point of the Present

To conclude, the exploration of these two contemporary cinematic films, the kind of excavation, a mining of the memory and reengaging with past sensations that I have examined in this chapter, highlight the power of spectatorship and the fluidity of memory. This proactive strategy of engagement is especially powerful when it comes to reinterpreting certain sensual symbols, imagery and certain spatiality that pertain to queer temporalities. I imagine such a strategy as not limited to the individualised and insulated position of bystander, but at best a collective process of moving between present and past temporalities to recapture and re-experience queer childhood sensation akin to this vivid description of disdentification by Muñoz:

> The aesthetic practice that I have previously described as disidentification
> focuses on the way in which dominant signs and symbols, often ones that
> are toxic to minoritarian subjects, can be reimagined through an engaged
> and animated mode of performance or spectatorship. Disdentification can

> be a world-making project in which the limits of the here and now are transversed and transgressed. (Muñoz, 2009: 169).

This strategy of reengaging with the temporality of a queer childhood or youth, from the vantage point of the present, offers the spectator the possibility of reclaiming the intensity of such sensations as adults. This is an adventure of the sensually queer, where framing, gesture, bodies, and emotions are all equally evocative, and as such this is potentially an adventure to be embarked on by both director and audience.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Currency of Cuteness

Innocence, Interval of Animal and Landscape: Depictions of the Adorable Tomboy in Transnational Cinema

In this chapter I shall explore the depiction of the tomboy in relation to ideas of cuteness, innocence, and the interval of animal and spatiality, through a process of critiquing two transnational films: *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* (2005) and *Stray Dogs* (2004).

The context of twenty-first-century transnational film clearly suggests many cultural, social, geographical, historical and political variations and differences in attitudes to childhood, tomboyhood, and gender, so it is important to explore the inherent non-binary subjectivity inscribed within forms of transnational cinema, and the way in which the two tomboy films that are examined here envision a new kind of imagining of the tomboy narrative – one that centres the child of colour, and a particular transnational subjectivity that I shall further expand upon in this chapter.

The term 'transnational cinema' is still relatively recent. It was predated by the category 'Third Cinema', a term that has "become increasingly problematic in a world no longer marked by the sharp divisions between Communism, Capitalism, and the rest" (Ezra & Rowden, 2006: 2), and its precise definition is still the subject of much ongoing critical debate. In the introduction to the book *Transnational Cinema The Film Reader* (2006) Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden summarise transnational cinema as a disruptive and

expansive cinematic category: "without succumbing to the exoticizing representational practice of mainstream Hollywood films, transnational cinema – which by definition has its own globalizing imperatives – transcends the national as autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force" (Ezra & Rowden, 2006: 2).

I shall also use this chapter to briefly critique the myth of the child in cinema, particularly the tomboy child of colour in transnational film, a figure that is often praised for displaying a style of acting that is often underestimated, and patronisingly seen as natural, effortless and unaffected. Through the rejection of a universalised and essentialised understanding of the child or of 'a childhood' I endeavour to raise important and timely questions about how transnational film places the non-Westernized cute tomboy in a non-Eurocentric filmic context. I also critique the possibly problematic directorial intentionality of such a positioning because, although these productions are categorised as transnational, such a cinematic categorisation is not in and of itself necessarily perfect or without limitations – there is often a great deal of pragmatism exercised by those involved in transnational cinema when it comes to catering to the tastes and expectations of international Western film festival audiences. In the words of Ezra and Rowden, "[t]he space of the transnational is not an anarchic free-for-all in which blissfully deracinated postnational subjects revel in ludically mystified states of ahistoricity" (Ezra & Rowden, 2006: 4).

The central argument that underpins this chapter is that in critically observing and deconstructing the concept of the tomboy child in a transnational cinematic context, the viewer is able to begin to catch glimpse of an emerging child figure that confounds some

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of the gender and cultural constructs embedded in Anglo-American ideals of the cute and innocent child.

Some of the critical texts that inform this chapter are Karen Lury's expansive and sensitive study of the child in film, *The Child in Film – Tears, Fears and Fairytales* (Lury, 2010); Lori Merish's (1996) chapter on the aesthetics of cuteness, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple", from the anthology *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, (Garland-Thomson, 1996); and James R. Kincaid's *Erotic Innocence – the culture of child molesting* (Kincaid, 1998), which was the text that inspired my initial interest in the complexities of the depiction of the cute and adorable child. Other works that have helped inform the arguments in this chapter are Sianne Ngai's essay *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde* (Ngai, 2005) as well as the later book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Ngai, 2012); Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Ahmed, 2000); and Kathryn Stockton's exploration of queer childhood identities in *The Queer Child – or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Stockton, 2009). Stockton's explanation of the theory of the interval of animal has been particularly useful for thinking about the tomboy and pet dog kinship.

The anthology *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, And Transnational Media* (Shohat & Stam, 2003) has also informed some of my thinking on phobic spaces in independent transnational film. As Hamid Naficy, a leading authority of Iranian cinema, notes, "Western critics have associated the domestic, enclosed spaces with women and heralded the disappearance of nature" (Naficy, 2003: 211). In this chapter I shall further examine Naficy's quote to discover the ways in which transnational film deviates from the

expectations of Western critics when it comes to the tomboy and depictions of gender, especially when positioning space and landscape as destabilising and vital elements in film.

The Cave of The Yellow Dog (2005) is a German and Mongolian production with Mongolian dialogue directed by Byambasuren Davaa. Davaa came originally from Mongolia and studied in Germany where she now resides. *Stray Dogs* (2004) is set in Afghanistan and filmed on location in Kabul. It was written and directed by Iranian filmmaker Marzieh Meshkini and is an Iranian and French film with dialogue in Farsi. *The Cave of The Yellow Dog* is a film that follows the story of a nomadic Mongolian family, concentrating particularly on the adventurous tomboy and independent eldest child, Nansal, who has recently returned from boarding school. Nansal discovers a cave in which she finds a lone dog and is immediately captivated by the animal whom she names Zochor (which is Mongolian for 'spot'), but when her father learns of his daughter's intention to keep the dog for a pet he explains to her that this is not practical. Nansal's wilful tomboy traits surface when she keeps the dog against her father's wishes, but when her family is ready to move on she must face the dilemma of whether or not the dog can stay with the family. It is also a result of her companionship with the dog that Nansal encounters an old Nomadic woman who tells the child about the fable of the Yellow Dog.

The cute child protagonist in the film *Stray Dogs*, Gol-Ghotai, is a stoical yet quietly determined ragged tomboy who, along with her older brother Zahed, is a street child living in the ruins of post-Taliban Kabul. Gol-Ghotai's parents are imprisoned – her father is a mullah and her mother has been accused of infidelity. In the day, along with

her brother, she gathers items of debris to sell, and in the night she goes back to the prison to stay with her mother. One day, when looking for items to sell, Gol-Ghotai encounters a dog that is being tormented by a group of angry children who are determined to burn the animal; in a moment of tomboyish heroism she rescues the dog that then accompanies her throughout the rest of the story.

4.1 The Currency of Cuteness – The Transnational Tomboy Performing Cuteness

In certain cultural understandings of the word there are connotations that 'to be cute' is to be small and sweet, conventionally attractive, twee, to lack substance, to have one's powers reduced in some way, and to be dependent. There is also a fundamentally racialised and gendered quality to this history of innocence and cuteness, and the idea of childhood innocence. Indeed, cuteness is also an idea of whiteness in which white femininity itself has often been symbolised on screen in images of the white female child, as Lury suggests when discussing Merish's critique of a Shirley Temple performance from the film *The Littlest Rebel* (1935): "Here, cuteness is tied to whiteness not just because it signifies purity or innocence, but because cuteness 'makes respectable' the desire to own and control a little girl's unruly behavior and, implicitly, her sexuality" (Lury, 2010: 70). There is also an understanding of the word 'cute' as meaning sexually attractive, which is the opposite of the Anglo-American historical tradition in which the white tomboy has been often been represented as sexually non-threatening (Rottnek, 1999). Lee Zevy acknowledges this tradition: "[t]omboys have always been treated as an asexual entity, a time of cuteness" (Zevy, 1999: 186).

This depiction of the tomboy as nonsexual and non-threatening is true of the depictions of the tomboys in the two transnational films analysed in this chapter and was likely to have been one of the considerations for the casting of a tomboy lead character in *Stray Dogs*. In the Iranian film industry a child is often recognised as a less socially threatening choice for certain roles; to quote Reza Sadr in *The New Iranian Cinema – Politics, Representation and Identity* (Tapper, 2002): "[w]hile sex is taboo in Iranian cinema, children are sexless, completely innocent of sexual knowledge, and appear free" (Sadr, 2002: 235). Sadr here is referring to specific Iranian films but this statement, when applied to the subject of this chapter, would explain the reason why a female child tomboy as a lead character in a film would be able to act out roles, and be seen as less of a potential threat to Iranian social norms, than an adult Iranian woman.

But this perception of the female tomboy as unthreatening was only one reason for casting a girl in this role. When the film was originally conceived Gol-Ghotai was not envisioned as the central character of *Stray Dogs*, as director Marzieh Meshkini states: "In the original script, the boy was the principal character. But when I saw the girl and realized she had great talent for the expression of her inner feelings, the story underwent changes, and finally the girl became the principal character and the boy was relegated to a secondary position" (Makhmalbaf Film House, 2004). Meshkini stated that it was Gol-Ghotai's ability to convey inner depth of feeling and emotion that the director had seen – there was something more in the child than just surface adorability and, despite being younger than Zahed, there was a noticeable depth and maturity to Gol-Ghotai as a character. It is useful here to think about the ways in which age and performances of maturity, as well as physical attractiveness, are also all noted as influences on adult perceptions of cuteness in children.

To give a broader context to why they chose to place a tomboy character at the centre of their films, serving to give a powerful and multidimensional agency to the gender transgressing depiction of their central tomboy gender nonconforming protagonists Nansal and Gol-Ghotai, it is possible to look towards the directors' – Davaa's and Meshkini's – personal positioning as exiles, returnees, and women of colour who are now in the empowered role of film director. In recent years there has been an cinematic emergence of a small number of gender nonconforming tomboyish characters in both Iranian and Mongolian film, as witnessed in the 1999 Iranian cinematic production *The Girl in Sneakers – Dokhtari Ba Kafhshaye Katani*, directed by Rasoul Sadrameli. Viewing the plot of the film as a bildungsroman, Najmeh Khalili Mahani surmises the cultural importance of the film in an Iranian context:

> It is not only the characters of mothers and wives in the new wave of Iranian feminist cinema that raise the volume of their voices of dissent against patriarchic order, but also the young girls who question the traditional restrictions on expression of their identity. In *Dokhtari Ba Kafhshaye Katani* (*A Girl in Sneakers*, 2000, Rasoul Sadr-Ameli), the character of a tomboy girl is borne to the cinema of Iran. Tadayee (played by Pegaah Ahangarani) is arrested with her boyfriend in a park —as dating is considered illegal and against the Islamic rules— and her family humiliates her as they have her medically examined to ensure her virginity. She runs away from home and starts her odyssey in the brutal and disturbed subculture of the inner city and returns home with a new perspective of her place in society and her relation to the opposite sex. (Mahani, 2006)

A Girl in Sneakers pre-dated a recently documented Iranian social media movement in which women have been dressing and presenting as men for reasons of safety and social freedom. In an interview with *The Independent*, an Iranian woman explains why she cut her hair short to bypass her countries strict morality laws:

> Wearing a hijab is a legal requirement for women in all public places in

> Iran and strictly enforced by 'morality police'. But in recent
> weeks, women have started sharing photos of themselves with their hair
> short in some images and dressed in clothes more typically associated
> with men in others. (Saul, 2016)

A woman who wished to remain anonymous said, "As a child I acted like a boy to fill the void of the son my parents never had". Another said, "Outside I had to act like a tomboy to be heard in my society. When I was only 13, I would cut my hair short and dress up like a boy and go on mountaineering trips for years. From the ages of 13 to 15 I made it to the top of Alam-kouh and Damavand many times, side by side with other men" (Saul, 2016).

Meanwhile the 2016 Mongolian film *The Eagle Huntress* – a film in where the lead character, the "[c]heerful, seemingly fearless" Aisholpan Nurgaiv is described as a "tomboy who excels at athletics as well as academics" (Harvey, 2016) – highlights Mongolian attitudes to gender in a culture in which there has historically been a fluid, practical and ambiguous relationship to gender presentation that often begins in childhood:

> When you see Mongolian toddlers and children, it is difficult to tell the
> gender of the child because of their long hair. Then after the haircutting
> ceremony, it becomes equally difficult to tell the gender because of their
> shaved heads. (Farmer, 2014)

The Eagle Huntress brings to international cinematic attention an insight into a Mongolian culture in which women shared many practical physical duties that might be understood as stereotypical 'male,' as Per Inge Oestmoen again explains:

> Practically speaking, among nomads the contribution of each member of
> society was very important for the whole, hence Mongol women had
> many other duties than those directly connected to reproduction. Therefore
> there was at the outset a material basis for comparative equality between

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man and woman among the Mongols. In addition, Mongolian woman were often proficient and merciless warriors. Even if this fact has been downplayed in subsequent historical works written by (male) Western scholars, Mongolian women were routinely given extensive military training, and the strongest and most skilled of these fought in wars together with the men. (Oestmoen, 2001)

This tradition of gender equality plays an important part in the plot of *The Eagle Huntress*:

Nomadic herders like Aisholpan's father, Nurgaiv, himself the seventh generation of male-only hunters, use the birds to go after foxes and other small animals, both for food and for fur to keep warm in the savage winters. Despite scoffing from traditionalists, when Aisholpan expressed an interest in becoming a hunter, her father readily agreed. (Turan, 2016)

In both films, tomboys Nansal and Gol-Ghotai are depicted not as simply cute, but rather they are envisioned as hyper cute. This excessive cuteness can be witnessed in the images of Nansal's endearingly ruddy cheeks, broad smile and winsome expressions, while alternatively, Gol-Ghotai's matted hair and dirty face, as well as her seeming fortitude and imperturbability in the face of such adult-sized horror, adds undoubtedly appealing vulnerability to her character. The idealised vision of the cute demeanor of these two children of colour is clearly calculated to appeal to the sympathies and gaze of a global film audience – especially to the relatively small, and often culturally and economically privileged demographic that makes up the international film festival audience. I interpret an intentional and pragmatic positioning behind the way that the directors have chosen to envision their lead characters in this appealing way. It is possible to detect an undercurrent of unspoken and cynical presumption that a child of colour or, for that matter, a child at the intersection of race and class, should have to act in an overly exaggeratedly "cute" manner for the viewer to care about and empathise with their plight – such performative cuteness becomes what Merish, in her study of Shirley Temple, calls

one of "precocity and powerlessness" (Merish, 1996: 194). The emphasis on powerlessness is one of the key elements of the cute aesthetic – there is a need to encourage the viewer feel protective of the vulnerable child. Thus, as with Temple in her precocious film performances, that the tomboy in these cases is able to be tough to a point, but elicit sympathy in the viewer, means that even this independent child character has to appear to be vulnerable:

> As public, mass cultural event, cuteness activates an erotic of maternal longing: "exposure" in the public sphere generates an appropriative desire to "rescue" the cute object by resituating it within a properly loving and appreciative (i.e., affectionally normative) familial context. (Merish, 1996: 188)

Reframing the above quote by Merish, I suggest that it is possible that the independent and stoical tomboy character performing cuteness can actually subvert and confuse the instinctive impulse to "rescue" the cute and vulnerable child. When discussing some of the differences between beauty and cuteness in the study of the aesthetic category of the zany and the cute in the world of late capitalism, Ngai makes this observation: "[i]ndeed, in vivid contrast to beauty's continuing associations with fairness, symmetry, or proportion, the experience of cute depends entirely on the subject's affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the object" (Ngai, 2012: 54). Again, cuteness reveals itself as an ambivalent and also a disruptive force.

The tomboy in these transnational films also works as a subversive element in the context of the normative family unit. It is in following the culturally specific Mongolian nomadic traditions of her own parents, who share differently gendered workloads on their smallholding, that Nansal is able to negotiate both the traditional stereotypical gendered roles of feminine domestic work, and masculine labouring work; the ambiguous nature of

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both children's tomboy performances draws attention to the gender fluidity ascribed to the tomboy role, and how the definition of what constitutes tomboy traits is itself reliant on contexts such as differing geographical, historical, global, local, and personal cultural definitions of gender, femininity and masculinity. As a result of the ambiguity in both Nansal and Gol-Ghotai's performance of tomboyism, which combines both the traditional markers of the tomboy – such as energetic physicality, and the placement of the tomboy figure in the outdoors landscape – with rarely depicted tomboy attributes such as vulnerability, both children are shown to be incredibly vulnerable.

At times, in the case of Nansal, this is seen in the way that she looks to elder family members for support and protection. In *Stray Dogs* Gol-Ghotai's cuteness is performed differently; her cuteness often externalised in the form of her physical demeanor through the subtlety of her facial expressions, while her tomboy traits are perceptible in the depiction of the tenacity and forbearance of her character and the ways in which she stoically keeps pace with her older and taller brother without complaint, walking the busy streets of Kabul, weaving in and out of crowds and traffic, as both children carry with them a dog and blankets for bedding. Gol-Ghotai is a young child whose uniformly androgynous clothing at times renders her gender unreadable, and invisible; her particular cuteness is imbued with a deep Chaplinesque pathos. When discussing the child in an American cinematic tradition, Kincaid encourages the consideration that there might be an inherent power in the concept of the cute child:

> This adorable child is both the center of and the best excuse for our wish-fulfillment fantasies about our own being, our memories, our longings, our losses, and our arousals. According to this tradition, the child is not simply radiant but disarmingly cunning, unexpected – in a word, cute. (Kincaid, 1998: 113)

While questioning exactly whom Kincaid is speaking for when using the word 'our', I would agree that understanding the complexities and paradoxes inherent in the concept of cuteness as a strategic performance helps to reinstate the innately subversive elements in the concept of the child itself, which makes the figure distinct from the concept of the adult.

It is fascinating to consider the idea that there is an element of the vulpine, a trickster-like quality to the tomboy child performing cuteness, for it should be remembered that the word cute arrives from the word 'acute', which is a word that among other things is suggestive of perception and shrewdness. In many cultures the dominant representation of the trickster has traditionally been that of a man, as Kristine Holmes explains in her study of the feminist trickster: "Whether we know him as Coyote, Hare, Bottom, Nanabozho, Anansi, or Tom Sawyer, the trickster is usually gendered male" (Holmes, 1995: 45).

So discovering the trickster in the form of a gender nonconforming tomboy further subvert the cultural and historical tradition of the trickster as male character. The inherent indefinable nature of the trickster seems to allow for the character's all-pervasive ubiquity, as Helen Lock states when discussing the transformative nature of the trickster:

> However, so that while it is easy to recognize them, it is a lot more difficult to find any critical consensus about their essential nature: who or what they are, or can be. Contentious issues include the status of the archaic archetypal tricksters (were they mortal or divine? can a god be a trickster?), the relation of tricksters to gender and to ethnicity, and the vexed question of whether modern tricksters exist at all. In one sense it does seem entirely appropriate that these embodiments of ambiguity (no dispute there, at least) should remain so elusive. (Lock, 2003: I)

Taking this into consideration allows for a reassessment of the tomboy's onscreen

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performative cuteness, and the tomboy's position of ambiguity. The need of the adult to possess, control, dominate and live through mass-produced images of the adorable child sees cuteness emerge as a surprisingly dark and multifaceted commodity, a grotesque parody of childhood perhaps, a childlike naturalness that also encompasses a huge degree of self-awareness that simultaneously allows little room for the "natural".

In a wider popular culture, cuteness has been such a dominant force that popular adult performers and actors of all racial backgrounds have been required to possess the facial qualities of "baby schema" (Lorenz, 1943). Konrad Lorenz explains that certain infant characteristics evoke a positive affective response in the human. Lorenz envisioned the baby schema ('Kindchenschema') as a set of infantile physical features such as the large head, high and protruding forehead, large eyes, chubby cheeks, small nose and mouth, short and thick extremities and plump body shape, that is perceived as cute or cuddly and elicits caretaking behaviour from other individuals (Lorenz, 1943).

In the text entitled *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde* (2005), Ngai prods at the idea of something eerily supernatural inherent in the aesthetics of cuteness:

> For while cuteness is an aesthetic of the round and soft that becomes amplified when its objects are depicted as groggy or sleepy, the word *acute* means coming to a sharp edge or point, while *acuteness* similarly suggests mental alertness, keenness, and quickness. So *cute* exemplifies a situation in which making a word smaller, more compact, or more cute results in an uncanny reversal, changing its meaning into its exact opposite. (Ngai, 2005)

The already heavily gendered creation of innocence would, in a post-Romantic world, take on a newly fetishised life of its own where it would be linked implicitly to the sexualised and the sexual. As Merish explains, "[t]he cute child, unlike the Victorian

sacred child, is pure spectacle, pure display" (Merish, 1996: 188). As the result of this constant "display" and constant repetition of these images, perpetration and representation in the arts and mass media, particularly through the new medium of cinema (of which the innocent and importantly the cute child was naturally guaranteed a starring role) the Anglo-American concept of childhood innocence became a powerfully positioned, all-consuming cultural and economic force, one that is "queerly" situated, continually malleable, secularised and highly marketable as a commodity. One very marketable aspect of childhood innocence is cuteness. The artificially constructed version of the child that puts emphasis on the cute, I would suggest, reveals and enables the lawless and uncontrolled elements of the tomboy character that might otherwise be suppressed, to surface in a more boldly, strongly defined and subtly rebellious way within a cinematic setting. Such moments of anarchic comedy are allowed to seep through *The Cave of The Yellow Dog*, causing slight moments of disruption and disorder to a film that has ostensibly been aimed at a mainstream global audience.

Cute children and, indeed, cute tomboys have had a hold over popular culture, and film audiences, for many decades. The tough yet adorable tomboy character has been well-established and often held a privileged position as a result of what could be their perceived masculine performativity. Just a few examples of this tomboy figure can be seen in the characterisations of inquisitive orphan Gillie Evans portrayed by Hayley Mills in *Tiger Bay* (1959), Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), wisecracking Addie Loggins in *Paper Moon* (1973); and, in the twenty-first century, showing that the public appetite for the tough yet cute tomboy has not abated, 9-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis received a best supporting actress nomination for her depiction of cuteness under extreme

endurance as tomboy Hushpuppy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) in a rare example of the tomboy of colour in American cinema.

The gender, race and age paradoxes and intersections, and historical and cultural precedents of the powerful hold of this tomboy character speak volumes about the deep need that any given culture has had for such big screen reflections of the cute and innocent child, and the reward of visibility as a result of the figure's position as an ambiguously gendered character that, in a patriarchal Anglo-American popular culture, has sometimes allowed the tomboy to quietly subvert particular binary images of cuteness and innocence. It is in a set piece of *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* that Nansal's anarchic cuteness begins to be really showcased: Nansal's mother suggests that, instead of playing with her younger sister and brother, the child helps out by collecting dry cattle dung. This is a practical task as the dung will be used as fuel for stoves and heating. When her mother explains what the task will entail, Nansal exclaims smilingly that she has never collected dung before, thus the scene is cunningly set up for a short segment of comic adorability, as the child empties her tiny brother out of the basket in which he has been playing, before marching across the fields on her mission. In the scene that ensues there are moments of perfectly timed adorability and, importantly, this scene also highlights Nansal's performative combination of tomboyishness and cuteness, shown by her physically assertive actions and straightforwardly humorous style: with little pitch folk in hand she tries to flip the dung that she finds into the basket, more often than not missing her desired target, and then mumbling to herself in playful mock irritation.

While cuteness is a taste concept that cannot be fully enfolded into kitsch (cute objects can of course be kitschy but not all kitschy objects are cute), it is one firmly rooted in

visual commodity culture rather than the language arts. And while the avant-garde is conventionally imagined as sharp and pointy, as hard- or cutting-edge, cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round, and deeply associated with the infantile and the feminine (Ngai, 2005: 813).

Nansal's actions that defy and resist the conventions of language are, in a way, akin to what is meant by Ngai's quote – because this scene is based on action and physical comedy rather than dialogue it cuts across the cultural boundary of language to become a transnationally understood performance of both childhood and tomboy cuteness. In the same way, without any need of dialogue, both these films highlight the ways in which a particularly tomboyish form of cuteness is conveyed in a child's cheeky stance and rough and ready physicality.

4.2 The Roots of the Myth of Childhood Innocence as a Western Construct

Setting these two examples of the tomboy figure in twenty-first-century transnational cinema in a broader context of the race and ethnicity discourses that have often privileged particular histories of cuteness and innocence, I shall give a condensed summary of the history of Anglo-American forms of "cuteness," to examine how the idea of cuteness begins to take a on a queer and less obvious form when embodied by tomboy children in a transnational non-Western cinematic context.

> In contrast to Enlightenment thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau recognized the child as its own entity. Rousseau's unique characterization of the child led to discussion surrounding the way children were raised and the manner in which they developed into adults. The material conditions of children's lives changed, specifically in terms of education and early employment, as definitions of children and childhood shifted. (Metz, n.d.)

In the construction of childhood innocence as a cultural commodity, the somewhat oblique trajectory of innocence remakes itself in differing forms of the non-offensive, naive and passive surface identities realised in the image of the child. To understand more about how the cute tomboy became to be so centrally positioned in Western popular culture, and also how, in different ways, the figure is so centrally placed in the two contemporary transnational films discussed in this chapter, it is useful to consider the interconnection between the concepts of 'cuteness' and 'innocence' in Anglo-American popular culture, and how these constructs have interweaved to affect the concept of the cute tomboy figure in twenty-first-century transnational film.

The concept of innocence as it pertains to the construction of whiteness in a Western context, was a European Romantic idealisation that took shape in the mid to late eighteenth century. The Romantics prized the stereotypically feminine traits of the pastoral, the intuitive, and the organic over the conventionally perceived masculine traits of the industrial and the urban. The Romantic poets saw the child as an embodiment of these feminine qualities. Cuteness as an aesthetic has also had a long association with the feminine, as Merish notes:

> Associated with the figure of the child and coded as a "feminine" cultural style, the cute seems to have emerged in conjunction with the rise of the woman consumer in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the emergence of cuteness as a commercial style in the second half of the nineteenth century activated a structure of feminine spectatorship and identification and helped constitute a feminine consumer public. (Merish, 1996: 188)

Gender has impacted the way that the qualities of cuteness are seen as particularly desirable in children. As well as the hierarchies of race and class, childhood innocence and cuteness also have gendered taxonomies, and this idea of the gendering of cuteness

has many connotations for the positionality of such an often strongly masculine gendered figure as the tomboy. Neither innocence nor cuteness are qualities that are always assigned to children arbitrarily – there are often stringent criteria for the particular characteristics that adults find cute in children. As the survey 'Assessing the Cuteness of Children: significant factors and gender differences' (Takahashi & Mori, 2006) shows, not every child is created equal as far as cuteness is concerned. Differing perceptions and treatment of children based on their perceived gender was a defining outcome of this particular survey, with the attribute of cuteness being seen as a more desirable trait in girls. This sort of binary separation of the genders into male and female has a particular impact for the tomboy who is a character already understood to be blurring gender boundaries.

Gender also impacted the way that certain versions of contemporary childhood innocence were often used as a political tool, and as a symbol of a denial of what were seen as the traditional and "adult" virtues of the Enlightenment. The elevation of innocence was at some cost to childhood as a conceptual temporality as the social desire to define and control the image of the child led to suppression and denial, the suppression of any alternative way for a child to be other than as a one-dimensional embodiment of innocence. When understood within a binary it is the qualities opposite to innocence such as worldliness, knowledge and experience that often give a richer and more expansive understanding to the temporality and constructs of innocence. But to allow space for the embellishment of meaning, and to appreciate the unfathomable integrity of the child from an objective distance, was not the intention of the Romantic creation of childhood innocence. Instead the already heavily gendered creation of innocence would, in a post-

Romantic world, take on a newly fetishised life of its own, where it would be linked implicitly to the sexualised and the sexual.

4.3 Cuteness and the Child of Colour in Transnational Film

It is of great relevance to this history that transnational cinematic productions *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* and *Strays Dogs* offer two tomboy narratives whose very transnationality allows them to operate both inside and outside of this Euro-Western understanding of the cute and innocent child. Here I shall discuss further the way that the image of the child of colour has been associated with the concept of experience, as opposed to the concept of innocence.

Childhood cuteness as an aesthetic form has frequently been fixated upon ideas of the racial, ethnic and gendered 'other', and the tomboy of colour under discussion here is situated within this discourse that Merish calls the "Cuteness's preoccupation with Otherness" (Merish, 1996: 188). While discussing her own study of how the tomboy identity intersects with the class and race dynamics of white womanhood in a North American context, and understanding differing cultural and global definitions of masculinity and femininity, Abate notes in the introduction to their book that "non-white and especially non-Western gender-bending figures exemplify the way in which tomboyism is culturally situated, culturally specific and – perhaps most importantly – culturally relative" (Abate, 2008: xxiii).

Images of children of colour suffering have long been aimed at the Western gaze. This is particularly true of the mass-produced images of the suffering child of colour from

developing nations where, as a result of the constant repetition of such traumatic images, many have become detached and numbed from the abstracted and fragmented depictions of brown children in distress. Such images echo what Stockton refers to in a section of their book that discusses the child queered by innocence or the child queered by colour, the alien quality bestowed upon images of childhood innocence as a result of adults misremembering and re-imagining the temporality of innocence (Stockton, 2009: 30). These oft reproduced, slick and sometimes sentimental images of the suffering child have frequently and rather unsubtly been employed at a sub-textual level in the Western mainstream mass media, and have become symbolic of the way in which developing nations are still depicted in the West as victimised and lacking in the personal agency, self-sufficiency and ability to self-determine their individual destinies. Patricia Holland suggests that the image of the suffering child is often employed in a sinisterly benevolent way to reaffirm an ideology of First World capitalist superiority: "Third world suffering acts to secure our sense of First World comfort by assuring us that we have the power to help. That power is confirmed by the gaze of an appealing child, carefully selected so that it in no way undermines our complacent certainty of our own position" (Holland, 1992: 150).

The use of the image of the suffering child to reinstate an idea of First World superiority is similar to ideas about the possible motivation underlying those that attend international film festivals, put forth by Bill Nicholls:

> To want to know of foreign cinemas, for example, of their indebtedness to state control often betrays our own ideology of the free market and artistic license. We ask more to gain reassurance that this is a cinema like the one we imagine our own to be than to explore the intricacies of the relationship between culture, ideology, and the state. (Nicholls, 1994: 19).

Such images, ironically (as we are discussing children) whether they are of adult or children suffering, are also often overtly infantilised. The colonial gaze has dehumanised the child of colour through the reproduction of traumatic images echoed in certain contemporary charity advertisements and viral Internet non-governmental campaigns today. The conflicted feelings that can be encouraged by such campaigns are similar to those reflected upon by Ngai:

> We can thus start to see how cuteness might provoke ugly or aggressive feelings, as well as the expected tender or maternal ones. For in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle. (Ngai, 2005: 816)

Regardless of global setting there is a homogenisation to be found within depictions of the child of colour and/or underclass child in an economically underdeveloped context and, given the tomboy's already racialised status as wild other, there might also be tendency try to "civilise" these brown transnational tomboys through a universally understood aesthetics of cuteness:

> For the transmission of culture and the ("uncivilized") Other in that culture's midst – cuteness represents lines of interpersonal, intergenerational identification, promoting affective bonds of social affiliation and cohesion. Specifically, cuteness engenders an affectional dynamic through which the Other is domesticated and (re)contextualized within the human "family". (Garland-Thompson, 1996: 189)

How does the confident and swaggering present-day transnational tomboy character fit in with such images of the vulnerable and suffering child of colour? I would suggest that Nansal's, and especially Gol-Ghotai's, resourceful tomboy characteristics surface through the images of their survival skills and independence, and the characters' abilities to survive in either the harsh terrain of the Mongolian wilderness, in the case of Nansal, or a precarious daily existence in Gol-Ghotai's case. Both tomboys are pragmatically depicted

as a possessing vulnerability as well as the toughness to survive. This is a kind of racialised imagining of the tomboy that is implicitly linked to tropes of race as a maker of experience. Both children are in living in very different circumstances, and it is the character of Gol-Ghotai who fits into the trope of the suffering child, the child in immediate peril – she is the character that most requires the viewer's empathy with her plight and the precarious existence she experiences as she tries to survive within the war-scarred ruins of Kabul. She and her brother are both dispossessed, only occasionally in contact with one parent, who is also incarcerated. The sister and brother survive through negotiating strategic and mutually protective kinships with other street children, appealing to the sympathy of adults and hustling to get by. Again, as Stockton points out, "[i]t is a privilege to need to be protected – and to be sheltered – and thus to have a childhood. Not in spite of privilege, then, but because of it, that all-important feature weakness sticks to these markers (white and middle-class) and helps to signal innocence" (Stockton, 2009: 31). And so in these two transnational films the act of cuteness is also strategic, a performance that becomes manifest as a transnational tomboy strategy of survival, embodied and performed powerfully by Gol-Ghotai. It is often the case that to be "seen" as innocent is itself a privilege not afforded to all children, but in these two films the tomboy characters' resistance to the conventions of being viewed as purely passive acts as a disruption, and adds a layer of fortitude and strength to a character that might be otherwise one dimensional.

4.4 The Natural Performance, and an Interval of Animal

In this intersectional study it is clear that the class, gender, race, global, social and political positioning of the viewer are major influences on the demand and wish to gaze

upon the supposedly natural and the authentic instead of the ideal or abstract performance. I believe that cinematic cuteness in a transnational context empowers those transnational filmmakers who author it, in quite a different way from the child actors who embody and perform it on screen. Here I will look at the particular agency of the naturalistic acting performances in *The Cave of The Yellow Dog* and *Stray Dogs* to explore why the specific values of such reproductions of the "natural" are privileged in these two transnational films, and think about some of the gendered ways that the natural is embodied by the untrained transnational tomboy child actor. In both films all the actors were untrained, and in interviews both directors put emphasis on this point – the need for the actors to be untouched by any stylised acting tradition has uncomfortable echos of the Anglo-American, Orientalising, anthropological gaze that is found in Salvage ethnographical social documentation, and recorded in the first half of the twentieth century in films such as the silent documentary feature *Nanook of the North* (1922). In the case of transnational cinema, for whose spectatorship are these acts of the naturalised childhood being performed? And how do these particular films navigate the usual trope of ethnographic encounter, and the privileged position of the filmmaker with all the inherent power structures within such an encounter?

Nicholls (1994) explains that there is often a knowing exchange between the Western film festival audience and those that satisfy the expectations of such audiences:

> Back-region or behind-the-scenes information such as this gives us as festival-goers an edge over those who see the films in regular distribution. Such information, presented casually, is nonetheless far from haphazard. The order of presentation and the rhetorical emphases are not invented on the spot. Iranian film representatives learn, with experience, what predispositions and doubts loom foremost in the festival-goer's mind. Their answers aim to satisfy our curiosity, assuage our suspicion, arouse our sympathies, and heighten our appreciation. As with most contemporary forms of crosscultural encounter, an inevitable degree of

knowing calculation enters into the experience on both sides self, conception of state, culture, or aesthetic value. (Nicholls, 1994: 19)

Such cultural pragmatism is detectable in an interview with Meshkini, in which the director explains the ideology of cinematic "authenticity" that underpinned *Stray Dogs*. In the interview she emphasises that a realistic film needed to include "real locations," and "real-life people", with the intention that "this will help the filmmaker to focus on the lives of real people which we often ignore" (Makhmalbaf Film House, 2004). Both *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* and *Stray Dogs* utilise a realistic documentary style to tell their stories, but this "realist" documentary film style is itself limited and already has, historically embedded within it, a suggestion of illusion, the illusion of reality, the everyday, the supremely natural.

Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad discusses the frequent use of children in Iranian cinema, and the popularity of such films with international art film festival audiences:

Once a few films about children had won awards in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, a trend began with numerous films with child protagonists emerging from Iran. Understandably, film makers tried to emulate the earlier films, knowing that such films would be easy to promote internationally. (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010: 145–146)

In a British review of the film from 2006, Peter Bradshaw, while praising the political bravery of such a film, suggests that utilising the child actors in *Stray Dogs* in such a sentimental way is actually a cynical ploy purely used to appeal to international film festival audiences:

There are many American pundits who believe that the popularity of this gentle, humane Iranian cinema among the US intelligentsia may help persuade America that military action against Iran is unthinkable. If this is true, then the House of Makhmalbaf already has its own remarkable justification. As for this whimsical and elusive film, I am not certain that

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its mannerisms delve into the real lives of children or women or men in twenty-first-century Afghanistan. (Bradshaw, 2006)

An earlier 2004 American review by Deborah Young in *Variety* magazine agrees with Bradshaw's assessment: "The sentiment turns saccharine and the images, while as strong as ever, are disturbingly obvious in trying to provoke a reaction from the audience. Still, this direct approach will appeal to some arthouse auds, just not the fans of more sophisticated Iranian product" (Young, 2004).

The depiction of the child being childlike has been a standard canonical image in film since the inception of Euro-Western cinema. Vicky Lebeau (2008) has raised the timely question: "what does cinema, its arts of movement, of life, want of the child? To capture the child as child is perhaps the first response, the child in all its 'child-likeness', its 'Child Life'" (Lebeau, 2008: 39). If, as Lebeau explains, cinema wants to "capture" an innate child-like natural quality in the child, I suggest that in both *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog*, and *Stray Dogs* – while clearly pragmatically catering to the tastes of an international film festival audience – the films subtly privilege narratives of gender, race, ethnicity and nationality in a multidimensional way, to bring to the screen often unseen visions of the tomboy in a somewhat less familiar cinematic context. The tomboys in these films are not simply performing a self-consciously Westernised version of the tomboy, but a new kind of vision of the archetypical tomboy character that is culturally and nationally differentiated from histories of white Euro-Western or North American femininity and the nineteenth century. Both films discussed in this chapter offer a unique vision of the tomboy story because both bring together the female transnational director, and the non-professional female child actor of colour, a combination that is still rare in a male dominated international film world. Of course none of these identities alone can

presume that either director will work in a different way simply because of their gender, ethnicity, race or nationality.

As I have explored elsewhere in this thesis, the way that American historical tomboy narratives have constructed tomboyism became employed as a "eugenic strategy or, at the very least, one that would help maintain white racial supremacy" (Abate, 2008: 6). Abate discusses this when looking at the nineteenth-century roots of the tomboy's association with white femininity, in a chapter of her book that examines E.D.E.N. Southworth's tomboy character Capitola Black (Southworth, 1888). Unlike Abate's example, in the transnational context of the films in this chapter the tomboy is divorced from "a few" elements of the racist and misogynistic American imperial white supremacist patriarchal agenda of elevating white womanhood. This freedom from such past histories allows the directors different ways to imagine the tomboy story and the tomboy character, with alternative culturally specific locations, landscapes, adventures for the tomboy, and even bold hints at ways for the tomboy to express and perform gender that are freed from a constricting, Westernised gender binary.

When examining the particular emotional pull of cuteness in relation to sentimentality in an American context, Merish notes that "[t]he cute contains within its address an invitation to ownership: hence, the particular relevance of cuteness in certain arenas where ownership is negotiated and established (such as adoption, pet ownership, and so on)" (Merish, 1996: 188). In a power dynamic where the cuteness of both child and pet is calculated to appeal to our gaze by emphasising the dependencies of small tomboy and small animal, an invitation to ownership elicits in the viewer complex and ambivalent feelings, including a desire to rescue and protect the vulnerable subject.

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It is interesting to note that one of the main criticisms of both films in two British and American reviews was the way that it was felt that the dogs were used essentially as an unnecessary, contrived and often distracting plot device. "The children's faces express enormous courage and determination, qualities that might have been better served if they weren't forced to trail a barking dog from scene to scene" (Young, 2004).

I believe that no matter how contrived and sentimental this familiar narrative is, the dyad of the child and dog companion is a reoccurring global cultural trope that is worth exploring in greater depth through the symbolism inherent in it. Here I shall give a short reflection on the narrative and trope of the child and beloved and loyal pet, which has been a popular trope throughout the history of Anglo-American cinema and fiction in films such as *National Velvet* (1944), *Lassie Come Home* (1943), *Kes* (1969), *Annie* (1982), *The Yearling* (1946) and *Pippi Longstocking* (1969), to name just a few (interestingly, these are all white examples).

The animal companion, as Donna Haraway (2013) has proposed, can take many forms, not always a dog. "Companion animals can be horses, dogs, cats, or a range of other beings willing to make the leap to the biosociality of service dogs, family members, or team members in cross-species sports" (Haraway, 2003: 14). Historically in cinema as we have seen that the beloved pet can take many forms – in this instance I shall examine the dog as tomboy companion animal in relation to an emerging tomboy identity, childhood development, metaphor, delay, sexuality, nationhood, companionship and the stranger.

The tomboy and the dog are an interesting dyad, a dyad that often seems to attract each other at a pivotal stage in the tomboy's childhood development. It is through two different and yet equally unconventional diversions that both Nansal and Gol-Ghotai first encounter their canine companions. Both children first meet their dogs when, in the tradition of the heroic tomboy, both rescue the animals. Both are shown to have an immediate affinity for and form powerful kinships with the dogs. In *Stray Dogs* Gol-Ghotai watches as a group of youngsters holding burning torches are chasing a small dog into a cave. It is in these scenes that Gol-Ghotai's tomboy bond with the dog is formed, as without hesitation she climbs in to a small hole at the back of the cave to rescue the animal, escapes, and brings the dog to safety.

It is in much more tranquil circumstances that Nansal first encounters her soon to be canine companion. The setting for the first meeting between child and dog is during a time when Nansal is working outdoors; the child takes a break and she discovers a cave. Again in a somewhat characteristic display of tomboyish curiosity she ventures closer to the cave to examine what is inside. She climbs some rocks that stand at the entrance. The camera pans to reveal a dog within. Nansal rescues the small dog from the cave, before making sure that both she and the dog climb down the hill to safety.

Here I shall think about the way that the dog in each film becomes a foil to the tomboy and to theorise on how the animal and child interrelate (not become simply acquainted).

In these two films the dog and tomboy interrelate as companions, confidants and sometimes as sidekicks; their connection is based on comradeship, mutual respect and a certain amount of equality. Gol-Ghotai is depicted as cherishing and protecting her dog,

often carrying it. Within these films the dog becomes a useful foil for the tomboy, a way to highlight the powerlessness of both the child and the dog, and a way to show the precocity of the tomboy – as well as companionship there is also a hierarchical element to the relationship that, for example, places Gol-Ghotai in a role of empowerment as she at times becomes instructor to the dog, explaining why her mother is in prison and why they must both pray for her wellbeing. Nansal often takes on a sort of parental responsibility for the dog, nurturing and disciplining the animal, for example by encouraging it to eat; in this way Nansal is able to lavish the attention and care on this creature that she herself is not receiving. The dog becomes both surrogate child and parent. The connection between the child and dog is clearly important, but also it does not seem like a kinship based on sentiment. The relationship between Gol-Ghotai and her stray dog is far from a carefree childhood friendship – they are often bound by responsibility. In many of the film's scenes Gol-Ghotai deflects the viewer's gaze; in the central motif of child and dog that appears throughout the film Gol-Ghotai often leads the (nameless) dog on a length of rope, there is an ambiguity to whom is leading whom (child or dog?). This is not "straightforward" direct motion. Meanwhile, even on the DVD cover of the British version of *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog*, Nansal is posed in a controlled action with her dog waiting obediently at her side; she is taking a masterful stance while the dog waits under her command. Again the dog in this film is more than simply a sidekick and the relationship between tomboy and dog is more than just sentimental. *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* begins with a scene depicting Nansal and her father on a mountainside burying Nansal's dog Zocher. That the film starts with this realistic encounter between the child and death is reflective of the naturalistic nature of the film's overall style. Is important to note that Nansal and her family are Buddhists, and there is a strong Buddhist aesthetic and philosophy at the forefront of the film reflected in the way that space,

materiality and time are conveyed. These scenes are just an example of others in the film, in which the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation and karma is woven into the film's philosophical visualisation as well as into the story of Nansal's coming of age narrative and her personal journey of connectedness to her family, community and the natural world, exemplified in a small part by the cyclical way that this film begins with an ending. Nansal's relationship with her dog is loving, practical and didactic; the dog works as a way for Nansal to learn larger philosophical truths about life and death.

In both these narratives it is not purely accidental that the animal chosen to bond with the tomboy in this kinship is a dog, a domestic animal. In the theory of the interval of animal, Stockton (2009) thinks about the symbolism of the dog in cinema and builds upon that concept to envision the family or domestic pet as a hypothetical device, whose kinship at the cusp of adolescence acts as a temporality of delay, especially in the case of the queer female child. "One must grasp the ample, surprising role of animals in the child's delay, the child's supposedly slow approach to the realms of adulthood, coupledom, and parenthood" (Stockton, 2009: 90).

The tradition of the tomboy trope has often cast the tomboy as brave and unafraid of strangers; indeed, the tomboy is often depicted as not just fearlessly approaching the other, but also aligning itself with the racial, sexual, ethnic other. So here we see in this tradition Gol-Ghotai's stray dog is both the insider and the other, both familiar and strange; at the beginning of the film, hounded by hordes of children for being a "American" dog, the dog becomes an animal embodiment of American global war policy and U.S. imperialism. In fearless tomboy style, Gol-Ghotai seems to view the creature differently and forms an immediate and non-discriminating kinship with this canine

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stranger. The dog in *Stray Dogs* becomes a metaphor for many sites of difference, including cultural difference. Ahmed (2000) employs feminist and postcolonial theory to examine the relationship between strangers, embodiment and community, while proposing that the stranger, instead of a being that is unfamiliar to us, is actually socially constructed as somebody that we already know:

> The encountering of cultural difference within the fantastic nation space allows the work of nation formation to be sustained: strangers, those who are not recognized as typical of a nation, might allow the question of what it means to be a nation posed (again and again). (Ahmed, 2000: 100)

In the film the metaphors of the stray dog, stray children, and the stray tomboy work to facilitate questions of how we understand both what it means to be the Other, as well as a need for a fixed clarification of what nationhood and personal agency mean within a post-war temporality. For example, in *Stray Dogs* the siblings encounter many street dogs but they are local and familiar; the dog in this film is marked out by its difference – it is not local but foreign. The concept of foreignness itself raises the question of how national identity is assembled, especially at times of war or national catastrophe: "the figure of the stranger is also constructed at the level of governmentality as the 'origin' of the very question of national identity" (Ahmed, 2000: 101). This stranger/foreigner is a powerful construction, one that can be employed to rally feelings of patriotism and belonging. Thinking of the concept of the child itself as that of a stranger, we can think the of the lived embodied strangeness of the developing tomboy child, the queer child becoming stranger to itself and others, the tomboy facing adolescence inhabiting a temporality of 'stranger,' and 'other' as, during childhood, the tomboy body is constantly changing and altering in subtle, and less subtle, internal and external ways.

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It is fundamental to the narratives of both films that the dogs in *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* and *Stray Dogs* seem to appear mysteriously, or almost to materialize, to Nansal and Gol-Ghotai when the children are of school age. There is a precedence for such an interval of animal at such an important time of childhood development when we consider that one of the social anxieties surrounding the tomboy who is coming of age are fears centred around the child's untamed and problematic sexuality and gender identity – the anxiety that the tomboy may grow up to be lesbian, transgender or queer in some respect. It is at the point of puberty or pre-adolescence in the traditional tomboy narrative that the child faces increasing pressure to conform; manifestations of such societal pressures have often been embedded with the Euro-Western tomboy narrative as witnessed in numerous traditional tomboy tropes.

Gol-Ghotai and Nansal are both, in different ways, at traumatic turning points in their young lives and, in the case of Gol-Ghotai, are already having to leave the innocence of childhood behind. Taking into account the extreme reality of living in the aftermath of a war, and without any parent to look after her, there would seem to be very little time or space in Gol-Ghotai's life for the acknowledgment of her childhood until a dog comes along, thus offering protection and friendship as well as space – a delayed moment outside of social gender, sexual pressures, and expectations. As mentioned previously, the dog becomes a new metaphor for tomboy growth, and for imagining a different kind of spatiality. "The dog is a living, growing metaphor for the child itself, as we are going to see, and for the child's own propensity to stray by making the most of its sideways growth" (Stockton, 2009: 90). Stockton's evocative imaging of a straying, or stray, child is rather apt given that one of the films being explored here is titled *Stray Dogs*. The image of the stray dog and stray child (Gol-Ghotai) combine metaphorically: the tomboy,

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a character who in many cultures is historically already often viewed as wild, uncouth, untamed, and anti-social, going against the norms of femininity, finally becomes meteorically animal. The animal becomes child. There is also a heavily gendered element to this image that speaks of the gendered connotations of the tomboy and dog relationship – a dog is often gendered as male by default. Language is full of gendered metaphors for sexuality that use the word 'dog' to suggest traits of stereotypical masculinity, as well as often negative slurs for femininity.

When thinking of the symbolism used to explain how a tomboy is able to negotiate such physical changes, it is interesting to think about how, in both films, the tomboy characters first encounter the dogs in a cave. Symbolically, the cave is typically a place of adventure for the tomboy, and there are obvious Freudian symbolic references here (the cave as womb is just one) as well as a surface connection to Plato's allegory of the cave (Plato, 380 BCE). I read the significance of the cave in this instance as a place of renewal and strength, a space of exploration – both tomboys are able to assert their own courage against nature. There is also a rather pertinent coming-out metaphor lurking here formed by the dog hidden within the cave and the child going in to the cave, and coming out, only to have their life altered by what they have discovered there. Venturing into the symbolic cave at such a pivotal age is perhaps suggestive of a non-normative sexuality, gender identity or both. That both children go to great lengths to enter the caves, and reveal the dogs hidden within, neither showing any caution, and each venturing inside at a cost to their own personal safety (particularly in the case of Gol-Ghotai) suggests a queer reading of the both children's sexuality and gender as emerging forces that can no longer be contained. Here the freed dog becomes a symbolic vehicle of silence and delay,

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offering both tomboys a different kind of spatial growth within a personal world of prepubescent queer discovery and development.

4.5 The Tomboy within a Landscape

The landscape is often featured as an important and integral character within some European and North American traditions of tomboy literature and cinema. These strong associations between tomboy and landscape can be traced through internationally popular works of tomboy fiction in books such as *Five on a Treasure Island* (Blyton, 1942), *Caddie Woodlawn* (Ryrie Brink, 1936), *Gypsy Breynton* (Stuart Phelps, 1866) and *National Velvet* (Bagnold, 1949). This tradition is also echoed in more recent examples of the tomboy genre in films such as *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Girlfight* (2000) – both of which are centred on tomboys of colour and use overtly culturally gendered, ethnicised, and economically marked tomboy landscapes little seen before, such as setting *Whale Rider* on a small Maori Island in New Zealand, and *Girlfight's* employment of areas of Brooklyn and the urban housing projects as a visibly gendered, powerful and energised working class, radicalised and ethnicised cityscape.

It is illuminating to consider the unique and particular role that landscape, and especially gendered space in particular, has had to play in the tomboy narrative as well as in the form of landscape in which the tomboy is situated. The landscape and cultural environment of twenty-first-century rural Mongolia and post-war Afghanistan add rarely seen dimensions and cultural settings to the tomboy narrative that allow us to rethink the tomboy and what the character is able to mean in a broader global context independent of

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Anglo-American or indeed Euro-Western patriarchal notions of whiteness, femininity, masculinity and gender.

In both *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* and *Stray Dogs* it becomes apparent that external, internal and natural space is positioned as a central defining sensual element of both films. These different spatial environments act as overtly subtle and not so subtle gendered settings in which to centre these two tomboy films. And in the uniquely gendered elements of these two transnational films we find the altered tomboys' internal and external landscapes: paces that are both immediately familiar tomboy settings such as natural expanses of terrain with caves and trees, but also settings less familiar to the Westernised idea of the tomboy landscape like the closed militaristic world of the prison industrial complex.

In *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* and *Stray Dogs*, both films have separate and differing cultural, social religious, political and ethnic contexts, but both films, similarly, manage to make powerful use of the contrast between vast external landscapes and enclosed quotidian domestic space (in the case of *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog*), or heavily gendered internal spaces of confinement and constraint, that could be understood as being emblematic of certain kinds of patriarchal authority (as witnessed in the prison locations of *Stray Dogs)*. For a character so closely associated with the outdoors and the natural world, whether it is an urban backdrop, a rugged mountain range, or a forest, the landscape often strongly reflects the tomboy's nonconforming gender expression and sporty, energetic, and mythically exceptionalised physicality of constant motion and the symbolism of the able body.

In fiction and film the tomboy character is often pitted against the landscape (often landscapes that are heavily gendered) as a test of the character's mental and physical strength. These films also offer a different form of cinematic spatial affect in the form of landscape and cinematic spatiality that disrupt, disorder and destabilise expected forms of gendered, sexualised, nationalised and ethnicised space in the context of the temporality of a tomboy childhood.

Our introduction to Nansal's tomboy embodiment within the landscape happens when she is lifted from a vehicle that has transported her from her boarding school in the city to her nomadic family settlement in the vast landscape of rural Mongolia. When Nansal runs excitedly from the car to greet her parents, we already begin to see a multi-gendered shift from the industrial perspective of the city to the car to the rural, domestic and familiarly cosy home and work space as Nansal seems to cast off the control and discipline of school life to enter the realm of wilderness and freedom. It is interesting to note here that Nansal's trajectory from school to nature echoes the traditional trope of the tomboy as an independently rebellious figure with an unconventional intellect who rejects formal structures of education. In the films, the textuality of the scenes of the tomboy in both nature and home are richly sensual, as the viewer is visually and audibly transported from outdoors scenes and panoramic aerial shots, to the interior of the family yurt.

Importantly for this tomboy setting, outside space is a constant in the film, both as a backdrop and as prominent character. The way that the director envisions this nomadic space is not unprecedented and, although visually powerful, is also suggestive of the somewhat uneasy Euro-American presence, tradition, and racialised and ethnicised gaze. Caren Kaplan states, "[t]hroughout Euro-American modernity, nomads, bedouins, and

other mobile tribes have been geographically located outside metropolitan locations (in the desert or forest) or on the peripheries of metropolitan locales" (Kaplan, 2005: 90).

The Cave of the Yellow Dog avoids some of these stereotypical imaginings of the nomad culture by centring a Mongolian tomboy figure with agency and offering the viewer a different view of the tomboy in nature – Nansal is shown as confident and independent in this landscape although she is a young child. In the Mongolian nomadic tradition Nansal is able to expertly ride a horse at a young age, and is allowed a certain amount of free rein to explore the open spaces around her, while practically she is also expected to partake in tasks around the home and contribute to the work on the small holding. In all of this the child passes through inside and outside spaces often strongly identified as either male or female. In one particularly visually striking scene, Nansal is searching for her dog. She perches high upon a mountain top and calls out for the animal. The child is alone, the river and valleys spread out far around her, putting emphasis on how high up she is sitting. In another scene the child is filmed from above, her voice echoing though the immensity of space and air as she calls the dog's name. This mountain top scene is filmed in a sweepingly panoramic way that also focuses important emphasis on Nansal's essentially independent nature, and her tomboyish assertion of personal agency: she is in control on this mountain top; she has placed herself there; she has learnt to understand and now knows this terrain. Nansal is shown constantly interacting with the landscape – we often see the child alone, working, playing and moving through boundless areas of scenery – she is sometimes dwarfed by the landscape, but the landscape is depicted as her playground.

When considering the history of the Western tomboy and racialised other, these images of desert landscapes and nomadic symbolism in *The Cave Of The Yellow Dog* and *Stray Dogs* are not without problem. As Kaplan (2005) suggests, there has often been a troubling formula to Western influenced filmic representations of the desert, and even in a transnational context, and authored by directors of colour, there is always the possibility of romanticising the tomboy in transnational film. This is because, to quote Kaplan, "mystified versions of the 'romance of the desert' remain with us in postmodernity, often in the supposed service of a 'postcolonial' critical practice" (Kaplan, 2005: 66). This discourse brings into focus the agency of the racialised tomboy body in the transnational landscape. In a transnational filmic context, and gazing upon the tomboy in this context, it is important to remain aware of the perpetuation of seductive visualisations of such "foreign" landscapes for a global audience working to make strange or infantilise the lived experience of the nomadic tomboy – this othering harks back to the fetishising seen in global charity advertising, as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The environment that is depicted in *Stray Dogs* is immediately recognisable as an active setting reflective of the traditional outdoors tomboy realm of exploit, action and overcoming adversity. This kind of challenging cinematic location is reminiscent of that portrayed in the Australian outback setting of the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) where the central character, indigenous Aboriginal tomboy Molly Craig, is pitted against a hostile natural and social environment over which she heroically triumphs. The landscape in *Stray Dogs* is suggestive of action and adventure, and, as with *Rabbit Proof Fence*, the viewer is made aware from early on that Molly's tomboy adventure is fraught with danger and far from child's play.

Stray Dogs is notable for being the story of the tomboy alone without adults, and when the adults are visible they are either in the starkly contrasting positions of unassailable masculine authority, or totally lacking in personal agency (as in the case of Gol-Ghotai's incarcerated mother). The child alone is a very familiar tomboy trope often witnessed in stories of the orphaned tomboy, the motherless tomboy, and the abandoned tomboy. Indeed, within a patriarchal culture the tomboy is often envisioned as uniquely equipped to be able to survive alone. What makes Gol-Ghotai's situation unique are the specific cultural, social and economic reasons for that solitude – this is post-Taliban Afghanistan and this tomboy is positioned in the aftermath of a war zone.

Placing the figure in such a setting, this kind of post-war space, the director brings to the fore the need for the tomboy to be seen calling upon their physicality, and what are seen as their superior abilities at climbing, scrambling, and jumping, in order to negotiate it. Such spaces bring to mind games of rough and tumble, hide and seek, mysteries to be solved and other games in the tomboy trope. It is in this new kind of adult or grownup tomboy setting that Gol-Ghotai negotiates not frivolous childhood situations of hijinks and adventures, but spaces of destruction and interment. In *Stray Dogs* the landscapes consist of piles of smoking debris, ruined buildings, streets swarming with all human and animal life, rubbish tips: suspended spaces where neither the inside or outside environments are particularly welcoming. The film depicts heavily controlled, militarised, masculinised, authoritarian spaces, narrow streets, places of family separation, and continual trauma – these are spaces that offer little comfort or solace. Such spaces hint at Gol-Ghotai's pragmatically positioned tomboy gender performance, as she is at times shown as cute and vulnerable but at the same time as combative and assertive in these various spaces, shifting momentarily between different roles as the

situation demands. The extreme circumstances that she has found herself in, and the constant need for self-preservation, have led Gol-Ghotai to have little choice but to assert a sometimes-defensive, protective side that can be interpreted as a form of tomboyism, and thereby help to blur the gender lines. At night, in the open space of the desert, she looks to her older brother for reassurance, while a little later on the gender roles are reversed in a scene that highlights the multifaceted complexities and aforementioned pragmatism of the transnational tomboy performance in these films, and how such a performance draws on the visual and sensual agency of the landscape. In this scene, the children discover some trailers to sleep in. One of the trailer's occupants (a young boy) shouts at her brother, saying that it was his trailer; Gol-Ghotai, who has been ignored by the angry boy, possibly due to reasons of her femininity, immediately steps in and calmly reasons that they both simply want to get out of the cold, before decisively and in a controlled and considered manner demanding that the other boy leave her brother alone. He complies and both children climb into the trailer. Gol-Ghotai's calm yet assured, angry manner is reflected in the way she is filmed up close, framed by the dark night sky. This scene portrays a moment of tension between unbounded threatening desert landscape, and the blurring between reversals of masculinity and femininity, and restricted and yet safe temporary shelter. In this scene it is the tomboy figure whose ambiguous gender performance both connects and enables the viewer to reimagine such hostile landscapes as tomboy narrative settings.

To conclude, the image of the tomboy in transnational cinema can be understood as a potent symbol of unrecognised agency and wilfulness that translates to a global audience while conversely is able to be read as emblematic of discourses on gender, agency, childhood, ethnicity and race that are embedded in Euro-North-American histories of the

tomboy that have often been strongly associated with histories of white femininity and white masculinity. This dual symbolism embodied by the tomboy of colour in a transnational filmic context hints at future further explorations of young, non-gender-conforming, gender transgressing children authored by a wider variety of directors and storytellers globally, allowing for greater exploration and understanding of the temporality of childhood in general. The central positioning of the tomboy in transnational film highlights a multifaceted child character that unflinchingly challenges the viewer to reconsider the ways they think about the iconography and concept of the cute child, and how such depictions intersect with ideas about cuteness, innocence, race, ethnicity and gender in a transnational context. These two films depict tomboy child protagonists who conform to the conventional idea of cuteness, but also achieve something that I perceive to be much more multifaceted and destabilising – these films offer a way to imagine the tomboy figure both within and outside of sentimentalised ideals of cuteness and the insufficient, problematic, Anglo-American binary options of either innocence or experience, masculine or feminine.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think oh bondage up yours!''

From Invisibility to Heroism: the Multiracial Tomboy in Young Adult British Literary Fiction

In this chapter my focus is on the tomboy who is queered by a multiracial identity. In an Anglo-American context the multiracial narrative has often been ignored, marginalised and erased from mainstream history, or alternatively co-opted and mired in the clichéd and faux "inspirational" imagery of post-racial multiracial exceptionalism. As discussed in an article by Marcia Dawkins in the *Huffington Post*, "[s]ince the *Time* magazine 'New Eve' cover in the 1990s, multiracial individuals are more and more said to be the face of twenty-first-century America and its evolved standard of beauty" (Dawkins, 2013).

Hero (Johnson, 2001), a British novel written by novelist Catherine R. Johnson in the young adult fiction genre, is the story of a mixed race tomboy set in early nineteenth-century east London. Johnson identifies herself as mixed race; she was born in London to a black Jamaican father and white Welsh mother. Johnson has established a name for writing about mixed-race teenagers. I will show that there is a powerful and political statement in the act of a self-described mixed race, female author placing a multiracial multi-heritage tomboy at the centre of a novel, especially as young adult literature in general has tended towards very narrow representations of femininity. as Eliane Rubinstein-Avila explains:

> The model young adult female protagonist highlighted or recommended
> across the professional literature is definitely still white, middle-class and
> heterosexual and is still expected to toe the line of acceptable behaviour
> for a young woman within a conservative patriarchy. With few exceptions,
> my analysis reveals that this body of work privileges a traditional version
> of female subjectivities. (Rubinstein-Avila, 2007: 371)

Taking into account the often orthodox nature of some young adult fiction, particularly when it comes to young female characters, in this chapter I am going to demonstrate that the centring of the mixed race tomboy in a narrative gives greater nuance and substance to tomboy characters' particularly queer cultural and gender complexities. By employing Muñoz's theory of futurity (Muñoz, 2009), this chapter will explore the tomboy's relationship to queer temporality in a more sustained way to think about rewriting the possibilities for the tomboy in the past as well as into the future.

The figure of the mixed race tomboy in young adult literature and British popular culture is a figure that destabilises certain dominant Anglo-American, neoliberal, homonormative narratives. Concentrating on this figure of the mixed race child – in this instance the figure of the tomboy in the context of twenty-first-century British historical fiction – will encourage the rethinking of many subsequent ideas about what it actually means to belong – particularly what it means to belong in a postcolonial, multicultural society – as well as how to think about the concept of British national identity in an expansive and ever-changing culture.

In this chapter I shall also interpose an exploration of the 1970s and 1980s British music scene, particularly focusing on the punk rock singer songwriter Poly Styrene, a performer who herself was of a mixed race background, to rediscover and unpack some possible

popular cultural sources that could be viewed as forerunners to the mixed race tomboy character in the novel *Hero* (Johnson, 2001).

Punk rock is a particularly interesting musical genre and cultural phenomenon to examine in relation to the concept of the tomboy because of its liberating impact on many people internationally, including gender transgressing girls and young women, as Halberstam explains:

> Punk allowed tomboys to extend tomboyism into adolescence; punk gave
> us permission to be ambiguous about gender in our unisexual punk outfits,
> and of course, in relation to the music, it allowed us to scream and shout
> and make noise and finally be heard. (Halberstam: 2004: 192)

I intend to explore the kind of freedoms the tomboy heroine is given if one anachronistically puts an arguably punk, Poly Styrene-ish heroine back into a historical fiction, and to examine how this act opens up new possibilities for the mixed race tomboy.

Hero tells the story of Hero da Costa, "the biggest, the bravest girl in London" (Johnson, 2001: 11). Hero is a street smart, spirited, working class tomboy growing up in a pub called The Feathers with her father in London's East End in the early nineteenth century. The reader's first encounter with Hero is at a very traumatic time in her life: her beloved grandfather Reuben has recently died, and her father John da Costa, who had been a successful boxer as well as an escaped slave, has disappeared. Her father's disappearance leads Hero to believe that he has been sold back into slavery by her white mother's Jewish relatives, many of Hero's Jewish relatives having never approved of this interracial marriage. With her mother long since dead, we find Hero all alone in the world. With no grandfather, or father, and only her cousin and a few trusted friends as

allies, Hero endeavours to find and rescue her father before he is put on a slave ship back to the Caribbean. *Hero* is a historical adventure novel written from a twenty-first-century mixed race perspective, and is primarily for a young adult audience. Some of the themes of the novel are of tomboy heroism, racism, anti-Blackness, and multiracial/queer families in an historical setting, maternal absence, and the father-daughter relationship.

The novel takes place in the United Kingdom during the years of the British Empire when an illicit slave trade still existed. In the *Black Jacobins* (James, 1963) C.L.R James explained the importance of understanding imperialism in connection with race:

> The race question is subsidiary to the class question, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental, is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental. (James, 1963: 334)

In answer to James I think that the centring of the mixed race child in a literary context against the historical backdrop of the British Empire, and exploring the complexities of the central character's mixed racial heritage, is particularly important in a society in which historically binary ways of thinking have been used as a tool of patriarchal, anti-Black, Western colonial oppression. This endeavour would be one that could potentially allow for a broader and more nuanced perspective on the intersections of childhood, race, gender, radicalised gender identities, sexuality and the meaning (and contestability) of queerness in twenty-first-century British young adult literature.

Much recent research on mixed race identity is heavily indebted to Bhabha's ideas of cultural hybridity expressed in *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1991):

> It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that

we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or "purity" of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (Bhabha, 1991: 55)

Dawkins (2013) goes on to point towards the dangers inherent in the American media glorifying of multiracial people in this way:

Hybrid vigor makes mixed race people somehow biologically different and prettier than non-mixed (non-white) people by nature. Equally dangerous is the added effect that focusing on mixed-race offspring continues to make interracial relationships about sex and heterosexuality and to marginalize those who do not identify as heterosexuals and/or come from same-sex interracial families. (Dawkins, 2013)

This is also a theory that often defines a hybrid person by their supposed racial features. In this chapter I shall employ elements of the creative, spatial and the poetic, a phenomenological approach to consider mixed race individuals' self-defined notions that encompass some ideas of the "embodiedness" of mixedness (Ahmed, 2007) outside of the confines of the purely visual and physical definitions of supposed racial difference.

In answer to Jonathan Brennan's assertion "that an exploration of the world of mixed race identity both reinforce[s] these essential categories of race and also provide[s] one of the best opportunities to see the limitations and absurdity of racial categories" (Brennan, 2002: 7), I shall negotiate this sometimes problematic and complex terrain in an endeavour to disturb such essentialist ideologies of race by centring the very concept of race itself as a fiction. I shall explore certain tropes and literary spaces ascribed to the gender nonconforming child of multi-heritage, as well as briefly considering some of the multiracial mythologies in literature, such as the concept of the tragic mulatto (Mixedracestudies.org, 2009) and racial passing to enable an alternative observation of

some of the social, cultural, and racial instability inscribed within multiracial literary spaces, and literary identities.

Examining the tomboy and multiraciality means exploring the possible shared queer positioning of the multiracial author and multiracial child character. This examination of multiracial writer and tomboy character will entail exploring some of the creative strategies employed by a self-defined multiracial author when writing about a multiracial tomboy. My intention is to question how it might be possible to find a sympathy and interconnectedness between the non-binary positioning of mixed race identities in a literary context and real life non-binary queerness, while at the same time questioning the ability to queer the experience of multiraciality itself.

When writing about the subject of multiracialism I am conscious of the inherent historical global and cultural changeability, instability and insubstantiality of language when it comes to describing mixed race people and what it means to be mixed race. In fact the term 'mixed race' can describe a wide range and intersection of racial, ethnic and cultural identities, multifold identities that are not dependent on whiteness for validity: "The term mixed race itself may not reflect the complexity of its own formation through historical entanglements and contemporary redefinitions. This may account for the gradual displacement of 'mixed race' by a notion of 'multi-raciality' that point[s] to multiplicity being the form of contemporary identity itself" (Johnson, 2001: 8). Addressing the fact that the blanket term 'mixed race' itself is still relatively new and, in a global sense, still a much contested, ever-changing, ever-evolving term, the focus of this chapter is a tomboy of Black, White, Sephardic Jewish and Afro-Caribbean heritage, and as such I will be particularly considering cultural and historical debates and discussions about Caribbean

and Sephardic Jewish Diasporas, multiracial, multicultural identities in a British, Afro-Caribbean, Anglo-American context. There is a very complex and nuanced global cultural history of people defined as mixed race, and I am aware that even the term 'mixed race' itself is capable of being interpreted as upholding a hierarchical, white supremacist system rooted in an ideology of anti-Blackness that gives credibility to the notion of a singular and pure mono white race.

I believe that that there is a very important and specific political, cultural and racialised positioning inherent in being identified as first-generation mixed race in certain national, transnational and global social and economic contexts. I suggest that the global cultural influence of the American hierarchical racial ideology and classification system – the 'one drop rule', or the belief that having any amount of African ancestry – automatically meant that someone was black. The one drop rule is a hypodescent system which is embedded in a history of white supremacy, the politics of anti-Blackness, and the economics of slavery and racial segregation, and one which has had a particular global and cultural impact on the way one thinks about what it means to have a mixture of black African and white European ancestry (Mixedracestudies.org, 2009).

My own understanding is that it is indeed possible to queer the mixed race experience, for to quote Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), postcolonial countries have an unspoken legacy of cultural hybrity: "Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (Said, 1994: xxix). The queerness which I speak of in this chapter is perceivable in the noticeable existence of people that self-identify as mixed race, and draws attention to the inherent instability and continual shift of all supposed

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singular identities, be they sexual, gender, racial, cultural, or physical. Here it is important to note that the term 'queer' itself is also a contestable, ever-changing one and, at times, depending on context, a problematic one. My use of the term is indebted to theory of queer futurity (Muñoz, 2009).

Coming himself from a background of art and performance created by, and heavily indebted to, the work of queer artists of colour, Muñoz critiques what he sees as the inherent whiteness, able-body privilege and class privilege in queer theory tropes of the anti-social and negativity, as witnessed in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) that posits queerness as a "child-aversive future, negating force" (Muñoz, 2004: 13) The vision of "queerness" addressed in this chapter is primarily one grounded in the struggles and creative endeavours of those that experience multiple marginalised identities, and will also constantly question my own positionality, proximity to power and accountability in relation to my subject matter.

5.1 A Queer of Colour Tomboy: Punk Imagining and Becoming

It certainly is not too difficult to imagine the conventional characteristics of the tomboy as portrayed throughout Anglo-American literature, but how would the tomboy character differ if they were overtly portrayed as being of mixed racial heritage? It is interesting to consider how such a characterisation might alter the tomboy narrative, and if overtly depicting the tomboy as being of mixed race identity would change the way that the reader views, empathises and identifies with the character. I invite the reader to rethink their assumptions about the traditional tomboy figure, and also re-imagine what indeed

constitutes 'conventional' when thinking about literary depictions of the mixed race tomboy.

Before discovering the novel *Hero* I had never found a book or seen a film with a narrative that specifically centred on a tomboy of multiracial origin. Eurocentric Westernised fiction and cinema have traditionally favoured white children as central characters, so this lack of children of colour is sadly hardly unusual. Historically, this absence of children of colour in mainstream popular culture is especially common when the child in question is a female child of colour, and as Lury has noted when considering the lack of the little black girl in twentieth-century Anglo-American cinema, "[t]he peculiar history of American film-making in the twentieth century demonstrates a lack, an almost complete absence of the little black girl as major character or star" (Lury, 53: 2010). So to expect to see any depiction, positive or otherwise of the nuanced tale of a spirited and multifaceted multiracial tomboy character would have been a tall order indeed.

Outside the realms of literary and cinematic fiction the mixed race tomboy has of course existed, and occasionally it has even been possible to catch a glimpse of this figure in a popular cultural entertainment context – one such figure was the punk rock singer Poly Styrene from the group X-Ray Spex.

While stating the importance of the very particular historical and cultural context that existed when Styrene came to national prominence in her incarnation as a punk rock vocalist and songwriter, I believe that Styrene's image can be understood as emblematic of a certain kind of multiracial tomboy spirit.

I would suggest that Poly Styrene purposefully and artfully used her image, and elements of her mixed race heritage and identity, to create a powerfully and positively 'fragmented' and ultimately very 'British' visual and musical aesthetic that would challenge, displace and archly parody binary ideas of hyper femininity and masculinity.

Styrene's image also disrupted notions about how Britishness is defined. Certain forms of punk rock music and culture are often defined both nationally and internationally as being essentially or even quintessentially British and English, which could be read as code for white, so how does the mixed race tomboy fit into these ideas of a constructed national identity? Maybe the answer to this is found in the form and concept of self-creation, a mixed DIY aesthetic and assemblage.

Styrene's onstage persona was both lively and energetic; her image was playfully and artfully androgynous, as Stinson notes in the essay *Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance* (Stinson, 2012). Unlike many of her punk contemporaries she was neither "hyper-sexualized" nor was she desexualized" (Stinson, 2012: 288), her voice was loud and high-pitched and her lyrics were often radical and challenging on many levels. Styrene also inhabited the typically male-centred world of punk rock music, and she also fronted an otherwise all male group. As part of this chapter exploring the mixed race tomboy figure in a British context it is Styrene's multiracial heritage, and black, cisgender femininity, that gives a very visible and appealingly "queer" person of colour potentiality manifest.

In a biography on the X-Ray Spex official website, an article written by Styrene's daughter, Celeste Bell, described the politically tumultuous historical and cultural context in which her mother grew up as a mixed race, multicultural young person in the 1960s and 1970s in a postcolonial Britain that was still in many respects clinging to the last vestiges of Empire.

In the 1970s Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' warning against a multi-cultural England still permeated the thought of much of white Britain and it was assumed that mixed-race meant 'mixed up'. Poly herself maintained that despite the inevitable issues encountered as mixed-race she was resolutely at one with and also enriched by the range of her genetic heritage and ancestry, commenting that "I've always been happy, and well, rather intrigued, by a family tree that includes Spanish Princes, Celts, Imams, Ancient Bretons and Somaliland tribal chiefs that descend from Abraham and Sarah" (Bell, 2005).

What stands out here is the incredibly strong sense of personal agency in the way in which Styrene talks about her multiracial, multicultural heritage, and it is in these words that we can see Styrene pointedly overthrowing the Western cultural myth of the tragic mulatto. The tragic multatto character is a simplistic stereotype often perpetrated throughout Western literature and popular culture, most commonly in American cultural traditions of the mixed race person who as a result of their mixed race heritage finds themselves unable to fit in to the racially designated categories of Black or White (Mixedracestudies.org, 2009).

As a result of this identity trauma the tragic mulatto is often depicted as experiencing much psychological anguish and alienation. In her daughter's reminiscences, Styrene overthrows the stereotype of the confused tragic mulatto by insisting that, instead of confusion and tragedy, she found positivity, pride and considered creative fascination in the interweaving factions and fictions of her heritage. **'Fiction'** is an important word here, because this argument is concerned with the fictions of race, and the ways in which the symbolism of mixed race, like all racial classification, is itself fictional and shrouded in myth, invention and interruption.

When thinking about Styrene's employment of words as a strategy of self-creation, self-determination, self-agency and the power to name and create, it is noticeable that there is also a strongly inventive and mischievously playful tomboy quality traceable in the quotation used as the heading for this chapter: "[s]ome people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think oh bondage up yours!" (Styrene, 1977). These lyrics, which were written and sung by Poly Styrene on the X-Ray Spex debut single "Oh Bondage Up Yours!" are apt when considering the riotous determination of the tomboy character itself to be both seen and heard throughout many areas of popular culture, from cinema, literature, music, graphic novels and television. The tomboy figure has often fought against a given society's tendency to try to silence, control and reorientate them into a heteronormative, gender-normative social system. Zevy explains how Yamaguchi and Barber (1995)

> contend that because tomboyism is often patronized and devalued, it has often been overlooked as a valuable place for learning for girls. Girls not only learn the nurturing and social skills that will gain them acceptance into a female world. Girls, also by imitating boys, learn about adventure, activity, irreverence, fighting, competition, and bonding. These tools acquired from this period of their life will translate into power, mobility and visibility, and adult forms of achievement and satisfaction. (Zevy,

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Styrene's words, an unapologetic statement of intent and joy in a multiform cultural heritage, are even more poignant and radical when considering the particular and long-term silencing and cultural erasure of women of colour in the context of punk rock music.

In the tomboyish image of Styrene, the ideas both of the tomboy and the punk acquired a transnational and particularly early postcolonial, British, working class dimension, which at the same time do not shy away from the politics of the overtly queer by subverting gender through artfully mixing militaristic clothing with exaggeratedly feminine bows, ribbons and Day-Glo makeup. Performing in the mostly white world of British punk rock, Styrene's mixed race presence functioned to decentre the dominance of whiteness, and white patriarchy in particular, within the male-dominated realm of punk.

Another facet of her multifarious self-presentation was the way in which the teenaged Styrene did not hide the fact that she wore braces on her teeth, and many of her song lyrics "chart the modern world's obsession with cleanliness and hygiene, concepts with particular importance throughout her repertoire" (Brown, 2011: 462), unflinchingly challenging the dominant beauty standards of the era.

Again and again Styrene returned to this subject matter and the powerful and at times harmful effect that culturally prescribed personal hygiene standards had particularly on young people, especially young women. Brown writes of the subtlety within these lyrics that playfully and powerfully critiqued the throwaway debris of everyday 1970s British consumer culture:

> Her songs chart the modern world's obsession with cleanliness and hygiene, concepts with particular importance throughout her repertoire. Hygiene functions as a metaphor for the materialist artificiality of consumer capitalism, reminiscent of a white plastic surface that must be vigilantly scoured to resist the encroachment of dirt, germs, and other organic life, or of a plastic bag used to remove all traces of the waste produced by such consumerism. (Brown, 2011: 462)

Styrene's physical stage performance and controlled yet fervent singing style (that belied a formal operatic training) also suggested a certain kind of disruptive and unapologetic tomboy aesthetic, one born out of a multicultural, British identity.

It is also interesting to note that Poly Styrene also could be seen as heralding the future emergence of other British multiracial performers with an idiosyncratic, outspoken tomboyish and androgynous image in popular music, such as Pauline Black from the ska group The Selecter who is of Nigerian and Anglo Jewish descent, and who has often spoken about the formative importance of her mixed race identity as well as her experience as a trans-racial adoptee on her creative output and world view; Annabella Lwin Anglo Burmese singer from New Wave group Bow Wow Wow Wow; and singer-songwriter and rapper Neneh Cherry, whose musician father came Sierra Leone and mother from Sweden, while Cherry herself was brought up in both West Yorkshire and London.

It is fascinating to explore further the strand of multiracial diasporic queer futurity in these androgynous and popular tomboy singers who were able to establish and influence British music and culture at particular points in the 1970s and 1980s. It is no accident that, as well as merging together a transnational mixture of sounds such as two tone, ska, West African high life, dancehall, Brazilian pop, hip hop, pop, reggae and punk, all the aforementioned performers often employed a stylised and at times futuristic overtly

mixed aesthetic. Be it through the use of visuals, self-presentation, sound, or lyrics, this embodied hybrid futurity is most obvious in the sense of unease and powerful sonic tension that is always present in Styrene's overall style and message. As Stinson states, "[t]his reproduction wants to maintain binaries of control and yet Styrene attempts to forfeit and forge a new future"; and again: "[t]he unstable position that Styrene leaves us with speaks to the present with a critical race and sonic intervention project in locating race and gender in punk" (Stinson, 2012: 288). Such an intentional reach for the present can also be understood as a call to a queer futurity, a reaching out from within, that eclipses conventional ideas of both time and space. Perhaps we might read this kind of reaching out as heralding a state of 'becoming' that removes the traditional Anglo-American binary notions of arrival, surety and completion.

When considering the gender, sexual and multiracial connotations of the performances of women of colour in a music scene that privileges particular forms of masculinity, heteronormitivity and whiteness, I would like to return to some the origins of the word 'punk', because this word itself is a queerly hybrid one, with much to connect it to the word 'tomboy'. In an Anglo-American context both the words 'tomboy' and 'punk' have from early on been used to describe sex workers; also both words have also traversed gender boundaries from male to female – in the case of the word 'punk' it became gender neutral at times. In the hybrid slang of Polari, a London-based homosexual subcultural language, the word 'punk' also denoted a young male sex worker. The word 'punk' has also historically been a hierarchical term used for a young male sex partner in the heavily classed and racialised world of the prison industrial complex (Dictionary.com, "Punk"). When thinking about the association of the word 'punk' with these particular, marginalised sexual, racial, gendered and working class communities, Stinson (2012)

poses some pertinent questions about the image of a contemporary commodified North American version of punk rock music as a

> [m]acho togetherness with a shunned queerness in being punk'd whitifies "punk," distorts what "punk" can be, controls its reproduction, and lays claim to it through aggression and appropriation. What laws and desires have twisted racial and sexual negotiations of prison life into a punk spirit of repressed homoeroticism and oblivious hipster charm?" (Stinson, 2012: 289)

The gentrified version of punk rock that Stinson envisions here is one that has almost erased all traces of race, class, sexual and gender complexities; perhaps in doing so also becomes more blatantly honest about its intentions as a version of a musical genre that has, throughout its history, been uncomfortable with sexual, gender and racial difference, and responded to this discomfort by appropriating otherness as the uniform of rebellion while, at the same time, often ignoring and marginalising the contributions of women of colour, the queer, and those that intersect multiple marginalised identities.

My choice of Styrene's lyrics for the heading of this chapter are also intended to reflect the narrative of the book *Hero* on many different levels. The symbolism of overthrowing bondage both echo the rebellious stance of punk rock tomboy Styrene who, as well as the mixed race tomboy Hero from Johnson's novel, meditates more literally on the freedom from the bondage of slavery, while Styrene's songs "linked pithy critiques of slavery, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and plastic" (Brown, 2011: 456).

Hero's understanding of slavery derives from a particularly mixed race perspective as she journeys to understand the slavery that her father experienced, while seeking her own freedom from the racial binary and white supremacy. Throughout the novel Hero's self-awareness gradually changes in scope and understanding as she questions the political

patriarchal intuition of systematic slavery, and also her own personal placement as a mixed race British female child in relation to it. "She couldn't bear to think of Pa lashed, of Pa bought and sold, of Pa as a thing like a pair of cotton gloves going cheap in Berwick Street market" (Johnson, 2001: 14). This gradual emerging self-awareness of race as something that she might be thought to embody, or to be implicated in in ways beyond her control, allows Hero become more questioning of the notion of racial boundaries and how these challenge her world view, a view that up until her father's disappearance was one of obliviousness to the harsher realities of systematic racism and white supremacy. Hero's vision of herself and self-identity, that had been nurtured by her white, Sephardic Jewish Grandpa Reuben, was of someone unique, someone who stood out, but not necessarily for reasons of race. "She was always just special, different, darker skinned obviously, but with hair that curled into fashionable Greek-style ringlets by itself, and occasionally people shouted at her in the street, she knew it was their ignorance, and it never touched her" (Johnson, 2001: 101). These words suggest that Hero has had to negotiate and integrate the temporality of innocence and racial naivety that she has grown up with, together with the space of self-knowledge and worldliness that allows her to be aware of her own racial ambiguity. Her racial ambiguity and place in history has enabled the youngster to evade many of the direct and visceral experiences of racism that her own Father endured. This mixed race status has in some small ways shielded her; perhaps this is because of her privileged familial connection that has allowed her access to a certain amount of whiteness, and white privilege by proxy: a white, temporal familial shield, insubstantial, and yet at times 'protective', but ultimately a shield that Hero's developing knowledge and awareness of structural racism has told her she has to discard eventually unless she is also to continue to perpetuate patterns of a white supremacist ideology. The

concept of racial passing is important in this chapter and I am going to consider it here in relation to gender passing (or not passing), described here by Katrina Roen:

> Postmodern articulations of the question, to pass or not to pass, are central to current transgender/transsexual dialogues. According to some transgenderists, passing as the "other sex" is the ultimate sell-out. Here, passing is portrayed as complicit with normative gendering and therefore as contrary to the gender-transgressive ethic of transgender politics. (Roen, 2002: 501)

I have noted throughout this thesis the way that, historically, the tomboy story itself has also traditionally contained within it elements of a bildungsroman, and her particularly mixed race 'coming of age' experience shows the reader Hero's self development in relation to issues of race, paternity, gender norms and sexuality. This concept of a brown female child setting out to recover her missing black father is rich with the imagery of developing self-discovery, and of adventure and action. Streeter suggests,

> The dualism inherent in the notion of the biracial hybrid both troubles the ways in which distinctions are made between groups and has the potential to undermine the stable sense of identity within a group. (Streeter, 2012: 62).

This rebellious multifold stance, this 'troubling' of assumptions of identity that Streeter talks of in this paragraph would also seem to work as a creative literary strategy for the mixed race writer and lyricist, and such a strategy might allow for a more original approach when it comes to imagining a narrative, an approach where any certainty about race, ethnicity, sexuality or gender cannot be taken for granted. For example, when Hero goes to an organisation called "The Sons of Africa" for help and support to look for her father, she meets a man called William Julius, a black nationalist who makes anti-Semitic comments regarding her father's connection to the da Costa family, Hero reacts to this with immediate and unexpectedly forceful anger:

> Hero felt the blood rising in her face; she knew she was as much Jewish as she was Black. They were her people too, and men like Julius made her feel sick. Everyone was born and died. Everyone hurt, everyone bled, whoever your God was and whatever the colour of your skin. (Johnson, 2001: 80)

Hero's perspective on this encounter highlights the complexities, perversities and power behind the mechanics of structural hate and, importantly, draws attention to the fact that the reader is not able to take for granted where Hero stands when it comes to race and ethnicity. Because of the way in which she has been brought up, Hero feels strongly connected with her Jewish ancestry (even if she does not look "stereotypically" Jewish) thanks to the positive example set to her by her grandfather, who always encouraged Hero to see herself in terms of processing myriad identities. There is also a powerful visceral element to Hero's experience here, as the rising of blood in her face becomes a metaphor for the emergence of a family identification that runs constantly below the surface, not merely skin deep. This image of rising blood below the surface challenges the idea of race as a signifier of difference that is displayed on the skin.

In the article in which Styrene's daughter talks about her mother's attitude to her multiracial heritage, one of the things that stands out is the description of Styrene's ability to weave the various strands of her heritage together in a creative and imaginative narrative way to tell her own story, a story that defies the assumption that as a mixed race, multi-heritage person she must be quite literally 'mixed up', disenfranchised or disconnected from herself in some way. Styrene's attitude also offers a challenge to the racist assumption of disharmony between different strands of cultural heritage. Indeed, to be both inside and outside of a particular position at the same time, I would argue, gives Styrene as a mixed race individual a very particular and rather 'queer' vantage point, the

metaphorical and symbolic ambiguity of being 'something' and yet not quite 'something'. I would suggest that the mixed race tomboy in such a literary context is able to utilise such multifarious vantage points and occupy such a shifting position for embodying, questioning and challenging social race, gender, and sexual norms, by allowing for an understanding of the potentially multifaceted and intersectional dimensions in the scope and narratives of youthful rebellion.

5.2 Strategical Ambivalence: a Mixed Race Tomboy Narrative Challenging Racial and Sexual Norms

In this section I will explore what I call strategies of ambivalence: racial, gender and sexual ambivalence employed by Hero as a mixed race tomboy character, as she negotiates narratives of drama, trauma and self-discovery while circumnavigating, adding to, and extending the tomboy cannon in a less Eurocentric way. Hero da Costa is depicted as a physically and emotionally tough character. The first scenes in the book show Hero embroiled in a fistfight with her cousin Daniel, a fight that Hero subsequently wins. Hero is gradually revealed to be a resourceful and thoughtful girl who has been hugely influenced by the two central paternal figures in her life, her Barbadian Father, who was a famous boxer, and her Sephardic Jewish Grandfather, who was the father of Hero's mother, and the man who trained her father and who also acted as supporter and benefactor to him, even aiding his eventual freedom from enslavement. There is a very obvious multiracial theme in this intermingling of patriarchal influence in Hero's life, a theme that often suggests cooperation and unity as a thread of continuity across structural barriers. The two most powerful figures in Hero's narrative could also be viewed through a multiracial lens, as traversing such social barriers as race and class to form useful and

familial kinships. Such kinships might be viewed as fanciful and incongruous considering such a fraught social and historical context – one of Hero's father figures is a black Barbadian man and the other is an elderly white Jewish man: as with femininity, notions of masculinity have often been highly racialised and ethnicised depending on the cultural and historical context. Throughout the novel Hero is depicted as being led by the literal presence, as well as the absence, of both of her father figures; thus in this literary context we might imagine Hero the mixed race tomboy as a subversive representation of a multifold harmonious embodiment of these two usually opposing versions of masculinity. In a Western white supremacist culture, black masculinity has traditionally been stereotyped and mythologised as hyperphysical and aggressive, while conversely, white Jewish masculinity has often been exceptionalised as intellectual and non-physically-imposing. Interestingly there has long been a tradition of Jewish involvement in boxing in the United Kingdom:

> Jewish involvement in prize-fighting during the Georgian period, for instance, seemingly had both a direct effect on the Jewish community and reflected wider socio-cultural trends within Anglo-Jewry at that time. The Golden Age of British pugilism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was effectively dominated by Jewish boxers and historians have claimed that this had significant consequences for the wider Jewish community. (Dee, 2011: 13)

Running contrary to the stereotype of Jewish masculinity, one of the most renowned boxers of the British bar knuckle boxing period was prizefighter Daniel Mendoza, an English boxer of Sephardi Jewish descent (Ross, 2015).

In the text there is also a strong narrative theme of 'interracial' paternity and paternal and racialised power dynamics inherent in the relationship between Hero's father and grandfather; this relationship having been formed in a climate of colonial division of

labour that is both racial and gendered and, in numerous ways, ambiguous and ambivalent in nature.

Hero's father has taken, or has had bestowed upon him, Reuben's Sephardic Jewish surname 'da Costa', and in this gesture we find echoes of the combination of the gendered Western European concept of paternal lineage, as well as much more sinister traces of the white supremacist power ideology of the slave being given, or made to take, the name of the slave owner, only to lose their own 'original' name and history; there is a absence of agency, and a deep sense of violence encoded in such a process of being named beyond one's choosing. All these themes become symbolically intermingled in this patriarchal relationship based on power and beneficence. John da Costa is a son-in-law to Reuben da Costa, but we never learn what John's original surname was, and at certain points in the book Hero herself laments the fact that she knows so little about her father's past history, which in turn is also a loss of a part of her own family history from the paternal line. The novel itself actually ends on a positive note, with Hero asking her father to tell her the story of his life before he came to London. The narrative ends with delicious ambiguity at this point, suggesting a symbol of queer futurity in this private exchange of familial renewal and regeneration between father and daughter, instigated by the daughter.

The tomboy has often been understood as a character strongly connected with, and influenced by, the father, or a father figure. In the case of Hero her two father figures form a multicultural, multiracial, and transnational patriarchy and, like her father, Hero shares the same maternal surname as her Grandpa Reuben. At times Hero seems able to draw on the mutual strengths from both, such as wisdom, knowledge, and survival skills

that she has gained from of the father figures, and in the novel we see that she has often incorporated what she has learned from them into her own survival strategies.

The depiction of Hero's physical prowess is complex and reflects the imagined intricacy of her multifaceted identity. Hero is not simply a tough bully, or even aggressive by nature; rather, as a working class girl of mixed race identity living in the East End of London without a mother in the early part of the nineteenth century, the reader is made aware that Hero has had to be tough to survive.

In the brawl with her male cousin we learn that "Hero had never hit anyone that hard before" (Johnson, 2001: 1). This first sentence of the novel encapsulates much of the ambivalent terrain that Hero will traverse throughout the rest of the book. Hero's joy at her fighting triumph is tempered by her worries about hitting her cousin, a doubtfulness suggesting that family ties run deep for Hero. As a multiracial, female child on the cusp of adolescence, from a working class background, in the text Hero occupies multiple identity temporalities and spaces and, as a result, multiple literary strategies are employed to give full attention to the many dimensions of Hero's character and life. It is important to note that a synonym of the word 'ambivalent' is the word 'mixed'; in a Western European context there is often an implicitly negative undertone to the concept of ambivalence, a word that carries with it a connotation of uncertainty, submissiveness, or of 'being on the fence'. In some societies such criticisms of uncertainty are also often directed towards people who identify their race, sexual or gender identity outside certain permitted social binary options, "Whereas the hybrid may move with relative ease across boundaries and up hierarchies, he/she is also marginalized for being fragmented and multiple" (Streeter, 2012: 62).

It is worth thinking about this position of ambivalence as a strategy of personal empowerment, for both the mixed race tomboy Hero who resides at the intersection of many non-binary identities within this novel, and also for the multiracial author whose task is to give voice and agency to a fully rounded, multilayered, yet still rarely seen child of colour in a historical literary setting.

The aforementioned sentence that describes how Hero had never hit anyone that hard before also comes with the suggestion that the incident is far from Hero's first fistfight, and we quickly learn that she has mixed feelings about her victory against her cousin Daniel in the fight; many of her ambivalent feelings about this fight seem to be connected with her feelings about her family and are, in turn, "haunted" by both the presence and absence of her blood family. Such gaps in the narrative are, I would suggest, akin to Hero's mixed diasporic experience that is, of itself and however fragmentary and unacceptable, what connects Hero's family. Lily Cho talks of "a state of diasporic consciousness" (Cho, 2007: 19) that has the power to haunt throughout generations who have experienced the transient shift of diaspora. "To live in diaspora is to be haunted by histories that sit uncomfortably out of joint, ambivalently ahead of their time and yet behind it too" (Cho, 2007: 19). There is a strong element of this spectral diasporic consciousness present in the many ways in which traces of race, gender, class and culture seem able to intersect with the taxonomy of heteronormative family kinship in this text in general. It is interesting to play with the idea of this symbolic temporality, this spatial and metaphorical discomfort of being ahead of time and yet behind it, when thinking of an existence outside of the natural world, and the power and value within such a force.

In the novel Hero's present narrative is continually haunted and guided in many fundamental ways by her familial past. Two of Hero's strongest allies in the book are her dead mother Lily Juliet and maternal grandfather Reuben. Hero constantly evokes their support and guidance from beyond the grave, keeping close photographs and other mementos to remind her of her mother: "'I'm back now, Ma,' Hero said. She stroked Lily Juliet's cheek and jammed the picture into the side of the window frame" (Johnson, 2001: 75). She also makes an important pilgrimage to her mother's grave, and is depicted continually remembering the inspirational words that her grandfather had said to her, and, importantly, the drama of the novel begins with Hero returning from her Grandpa Reuben's funeral.

These two maternal family ghosts – we might term them 'familiars' – in the form of Hero's grandfather and mother in particular are woven as wraithlike presences throughout the novel. Even her absent father becomes a haunting emblem, a 'not quite there' presence throughout most of the book; yet all these characters are alive and present so vividly and importantly in Hero's mind, that they seem able to guide her and affect and direct the narrative in fundamental and important ways. When considering these notions of hauntology and mixedness as well as 'notable absences' we should also consider the complex symbolism of the figure of the mixed race woman as a ghost that haunts two key texts from British literature of the colonial period: the character of the West Indian Creole Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 1847), and the "mulatto" Caribbean Heiress Rachel Schwartz from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (Thackeray, 1848). These colonised multiracial women have often been often literally whitewashed to the extent of sometimes even being literally presented as white – in the case of Bertha Mason – and shrouded in ambiguity, to the point where they have become ghostlike, but still

importantly present. I would suggest that there is a parallel between the way that these women's mixed race identities have been made invisible in British literary history and the way in which, many decades on, the mixed race Poly Styrene is played by a white actress in the 1986 film about the punk rock scene that dramatises the doomed romance between Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, *Sid and Nancy* (Cox, 1986). This deliberate removal of a culturally and historically significant mixed race woman from an important part of British history is reminiscent of the proposed banishment of Scottish, Afro-Jamaican Creole, mixed race nurse and entrepreneur Mary Seacole from the present-day school curriculum to make more time for white, male historical figures.

Hero has been both embraced and rejected by her mother's side of her family, her cousin Daniel and Grandpa Reuben being her strongest maternal family allies in the book. Most of the rejection that Hero has encountered from her maternal relations has been due to some of them, in particular her Aunt Silver, viewing her as a racial, cultural, and even gender outsider. Hero's father is a black Barbadian, a freed slave and a boxer, while her mother (who notably Hero always refers to as Lily Juliet rather than mother) was a Jew from the East End of London; Hero's Jewish maternal grandfather Reuben, himself a boxing enthusiast, has unconditionally accepted both herself and her father, to the extent of helping to free her father from slavery, encouraging his talent as a boxer, bringing him back to England to fight, treating him like a son and going into business with him. Grandpa Reuben is also shown as having a profound effect on Hero's own racial self-image, after her white cousin Rachel taunts Hero by telling her that she cannot be Jewish because she is not fair-skinned and freckled. It is at this point that Hero recalls her grandfather explaining to her the ethnic multiplicity of her Jewish ancestry, and how there is a space and precedent for her to be both black and Jewish:

> Grandpa Reuben told her about African Jews, from Ethiopia in the east, from Morocco and Algeria in the north. "We've probably family there still," he rubbed his beard, "in Fez, I think. We're Sephardi, and there probably aren't many corners of Africa a Jew hasn't seen!" He said something else too: "Hero, whatever you want to be, you are." (Johnson, 2001:82)

This idea of being able to be whatever you want is a powerfully seductive one indeed, and an idea that has some resonance with the concept of queer self-creation that is often found in marginalised queer LGBTQ communities, particularly in communities of queer of colour, as discussed by Muñoz (2009).

This ideology of freedom from categorisation is also a poignant one from the standpoint of a Sephardic Jewish grandfather to a mixed race tomboy fighting not to give into expected social norms – this could be viewed as a bequeathing of ideologies, a potential unity of empowerment shared across racial, generational and gender boundaries, or it could alternatively be viewed as Hero's grandfather willingly showing a kind of white racial ignorance to the perilous complexities of Hero's position as a child of colour in a dominantly white family. Again, there is much spatiality of ambivalence in the text allowing for the possibility of both ways of thinking.

Early on in the story the reader is made conscious of Hero's multiracial heritage and the ways in which her particular mixed race vantage point and gaze are central and fundamental to shaping and directing this story: "The frequent shifts in names and racial identity are sometimes accompanied by gender transformations. These transformations occur in traditional trickster tales as well as in mixed race narratives" (Brennan, 2002: 26). As Brennan suggests, there are some very particular literary strategies than can enable a mixed race character to negotiate a storyline, and the parallel with the

iconography of the trickster is an apt one, as is the idea of a strategical shift in names, and gender transformations. The act of naming suggests a particular power relationship between those that get to name and those that are named, so it is interesting to think about the connotations of a mixed race, female author choosing to name their central protagonist 'Hero'. The name is itself loaded with numerous gendered and, at times, racial connotations. Traditionally, in a European Western context, the idea of the hero has been understood and presumed to be a male figure, even though it has transformed gender from Greek myth, where it referred to a priestess of Aphrodite beloved by Leander, and is now gaining a more gender neutral understanding in recent years.

In the novel Hero's tomboyish toughness and strong physical demeanor are often explicitly racialised in a negative way by her white Jewish family. Throughout the book Hero's height in particular is either racialised or gendered, and she is depicted as being unusually, even freakishly, tall for a young girl. Hero is often depicted taking pride in her tough reputation and often using her strength to her own advantage.

Hero's aunt and cousin Rachel in particular speak about Hero in a racially dehumanising way: "Look at this girl, this giant of yours. No wonder my Lily died giving birth to that!" (Johnson, 2001: 4). The kind of attitudes shown by some of Hero's maternal family were indicative of a point in European history during the Enlightenment when scientists, anthropologists and zoologists were beginning to separate the human species in to five different races, attributing to each race certain physical and behavioural characteristics. Such racist thinking suggested that those of black African heritage were particularly inferior to the white race in all respects. There was an extreme bias in his kind of racial anthropology, because much of this pseudoscience was based on ideologies of white

racial superiority: ideologies, it should be noted, that were perpetrated by mostly privileged white, wealthy, European, male scientists. These ideologies were also used to categorise people by class: "You've just got to learn to control that terrible temper! Mrs. Sliver says you can't be helping it, what with it being in your blood an' all" (Johnson, 2001: 36). Here Hero's aunt's comments mirror an awareness of such historical pseudoscientific debates about race and supposed biological differences.

There are many metaphors that privilege the often supposed connection between race and family, culture and family, and ethnicity and family; such metaphors speak to a certain need to find shared likenesses through familial connections, as Ahmed discusses: "The primary trace of a familial connection is, after all, resemblance: we assume that resemblance is a sign of a connection – in whatever way that connection is described or explained" (Ahmed, 2006: 122). We can imagine that one of the reasons that Hero's maternal family attack her racially is a feeling borne out of fear, because Hero's very existence poses a threat to their idea of a racial family lineage, and also threatens their own claim on white Englishness.

Because Hero's skin tone is different from that of her aunt and cousin, this also raises questions about the significance and importance of supposed shared family physical traits. Hero's mixed race heritage obscures and muddies the waters of these assumptions of shared racial and ethnic kinship being visible on the surface of the skin. Hero's multiracial heritage is a constant reminder to her Sephardic Jewish family that their own temporality of whiteness is itself an artificial construction prone to the changeability and contestability of what the larger dominant white supremacist culture sees as constituting whiteness at any given point in time. Hero is also a reminder of how ephemeral her

family's own claim on whiteness is, for – as a Jewish family who for reasons of survival have assimilated into the accepted cultural and racial standards of white Englishness – their own claims on white Englishness could also be understood as being tenuous. An important part of the novel is the decentring of whiteness, particularly the decentring of adult white male patriarchy. Grandpa Reuben and Hero's mother Lily Juliet are both dead and, as a result, are physically absent from the narrative. One of the few white male characters to play an important role in the novel is Daniel, Hero's cousin, a child of the same age. There is an interesting dynamic between Hero and Daniel: at the beginning of the book it is Daniel whom Hero begrudgingly fought and knocked out, and throughout the story the pair develop a close kinship, but as a character Daniel's importance never eclipses that of Hero – it is her personal growth, and her mission to recover her father, that are the central themes of the narrative.

Through the title 'Hero' being bestowed upon a young, female, working class child of colour, a figure that is rarely portrayed as heroic or given such literary significance, we can see the Eurocentric literary concept of the hero transformed on quite a few gendered, racial and other intersectional levels. The name 'Hero' also echoes the stereotypical characteristics of the tomboy figure, as heroism is often one of the defining traits of the tomboy; again Hero's ambivalent vulnerability works to displace any possible preconceived ideas that the reader might have about Hero the tomboy simply being a one-dimensional tough character – we are also often made aware of her lack of confidence, and the fact that she is not always sure of herself: "Hero da Costa, the bravest, biggest girl in London, had crumpled up into a ball by the side of the road and wept" (Johnson: 2001: 11). This quote echoes Hero's fragility, and contrasts her supposed toughness and strength with her ability to be physically vulnerable. As well as the racial associations, in

the novel there are strongly gendered connotations given to Hero's physical strength; again, as with the rest of the narrative, nothing can be taken for granted, and we discover that Hero has ambivalent feelings about violence and boxing. We read in one part of the novel that neither Hero nor her father have ever really liked or enjoyed the sport of boxing, and yet on another page she laments that she was not born male: "Hero wished she hadn't been born a girl. If she'd been born a boy, Grandpa would have taught her everything, trained her up properly and she'd be earning good money in the ring" (Johnson, 2001: 38). This wish to have been male is reflective of the historical context of the novel, in which the story is set at the turn of the nineteenth century, a time when, although it was not uncommon for working class women to compete in bare knuckle boxing matches for small sums (female bare knuckle boxing matching had been popular for centuries and peaked in popularity in Britain in the 1700s): "There is little doubt that women were involved in the prize ring during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, their fights are rarely recorded or taken seriously by the commentators writing at the time or by later historians" (Female Single Combat Club, 2014). In the mainstream sporting world men dominated boxing, male bare knuckle boxing drew larger crowds, had a professional infrastructure and male boxers made larger salaries. Interestingly, though there was a great interest in female bare knuckle boxing in Britain in the 1700s and 1800s, it actually would have been possible for Hero to earn money in the boxing ring, but probably at risk of greater exploitation, and for less money than a male boxer. In *Hero* the central character's ambivalence towards the sport of boxing, seeing it more as a "means to an end" rather than something she inherently gets pleasure from, helps to confront and alter such essentialist characterisations of the tomboy.

The idea of the female boxer has also often been a feature of many Western European and North American popular cultural tomboy tropes seen in films such as *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) directed by Clint Eastwood, *Knockout* (2003), *In da Red Corner* (2006), *and Honeybee* (2001).

The film *Girlfight* (2000) followed this female boxing narrative. In *Girlfight* a young, working class, Latina woman with a troubled home life who lives in present-day inner city New York, turns to boxing as a way to channel her frustrations. One of the obvious appeals of the tomboy boxing narrative is the opportunity to see the tomboy challenge gender stereotypes, yet at the same time such tropes often reemphasise such binary stereotypes of masculinity and femininity by depicting the tomboy as a more 'naturally' aggressive or physically strong figure than non-tomboy girls. There is an obvious subtext that would seem to link a sport such as boxing to a queer sexuality; this is a subject that is problematically sidestepped in *Girlfight* (2000) as the film uses an overtly heterosexual romantic narrative to erase any ambiguities or question marks about the lead protagonist Diana's sexual orientation. This heteronormative storyline, in which Diana falls in love with fellow boxer Adrian, would also seem to have been used as a plot device to soften, normalise and reorientate the wild, aggressive and formerly untameable young boxer Diana. The reorientation of Diana's sexuality to a reassuringly heterosexual persuasion in *Girlfight* is in contrast to the queer resistance and ambivalence with which Hero's emerging sexuality is depicted in the novel. Unlike her friend Sara, who regularly has crushes on many of the local young men, Hero is depicted as being indifferent and even 'resistant' to the expectation of romantic relationships with boys. "Hero hadn't yet met any boy – especially a usually spotty-faced apprentice – that she would describe as darling. 'I could knock him out with my little finger, Sar!'" (Johnson, 2001: 5). In typical

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tomboy tradition Hero employs an almost comically exaggerated, feisty attitude to the very thought of romantic intrigue, and this lack of interest in boys adds another facet of ambivalence to the idea of the tomboy's developing sexuality and sense of gender identity. This might also hint at a negative and even a misogynistic attitude towards other young females in the novel and be seen as yet another way to separate the tomboy character from a supposedly more heteronormative and gender normative female character.

5.3 Positioning of Mixed Race Author and Mixed Race Protagonist in Young Adult Literature

Previous sections of this chapter, that looked at the question of the identity of the fictional mixed race tomboy character, lead us to a discussion about the possible shared "queer positioning" of the multiracial author and multiracial tomboy character. This idea of a character and author that share a similar ancestral experience also allows us to consider questions of authorship, and the possible literary strategies employed by a mixed race writer when writing from the perspective of a mixed race character.

As I have mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there is a fairly recent Western cultural and media trend that emphasises mixed race exceptionalism and hybrid vigour – this narrative has presented mixed race individuals as more attractive, more desirable, or as having the best of both worlds. These Western cultural clichés position mixed race people as a novel feature of a utopian post-racial future (Dawkins, 2013), a future without any racial boundaries. However, mixed race people are hardly a new phenomenon in the United Kingdom, as Malaika Rose Stanley (herself of mixed race), has noted in

her article "Black, White and just right":

> Mixed-race people have existed ever since our ancestors first set out to explore and wage war – and today, the UK has one of the largest and fastest-growing mixed race populations in the western world. (Stanley, 2011)

In spite of the sizable number of mixed race individuals in Britain, there has been very little complex, nuanced or truthful representation of the mixed race experience in children's books or young adult literature, as Stanley again notes:

> Although mixed-race people are highly visible in some spheres of life – we can model haute couture, win F1 Championships and BAFTAs, and even become the President of the United States – in some fields like educational policy, we are often ignored. Is the same true in children's and YA publishing. (Stanley, 2011)

In the United States, particularly at the beginning of the Obama presidency, we have witnessed a certain kind of mixed race metaphor being utilised on the larger cultural and global stage as a political strategy to further the myth of mixed race exceptionalism and ideas of post-racialism. This neoliberal employment of the mixed race narrative within global and national political and advertising campaigns in order to further a global myth of post-racialism still leaves young people of colour (and ironically, this includes mixed race children themselves) blatantly ignored and underrepresented in the culturally and educationally influential realm of young adult publishing. There is a lack of variety in young adult fiction in the UK in general, and the market tends to be dominated by young adult books from American authors reflecting a normatively white American culture. Moreover, there is often a lack of a transnational perspective in young adult, with English speaking authors and Eurocentric cultures gaining the predominant representation.

The lack of diversity (to use that slightly awkward and problematic term) in young adult

literature is reflective of an issue found in the wider cultural entertainment industries such as the arts, music and cinema. Within these industries, the powerful and all-pervasive international conglomerates and publishers continually fail to acknowledge a global market for culturally diverse narratives and, as a result, tend to privilege the same universally familiar, homogeneous, Eurocentric and North American stories.

A recent positive change in young adult literature in the United Kingdom, one that has begun to make inroads into representing a larger variety of characters and narratives, is the 2013 appointment of young adult author Malorie Blackman to the role of Children's Laureate. Blackman is a black British writer who works within such literary genres as science fiction and fantasy, and the central protagonists in her books are black young people, as well as young people from a wide variety of different ethnic and class backgrounds. Undertaking the official role of the Children's Laureate, Blackman uses the power and visibility of her position to raise the issue of the woeful lack of representation of children from many differing ethnic, cultural and working class backgrounds in contemporary British literature, and tries to redress the balance. It is also relevant to this discussion that Blackman has been particularly keen to put an emphasis on the multicultural nature of British history, believing that the teaching of British history in schools should allow children to relate to aspects of the history that they are taught in the classroom. There is a personal investment in Blackman's need to represent narratives that centre children of colour – as her own husband is white and Scottish, she had found it frustrating that she was unable to find books that she could read to her mixed race children, books that contained characters that they could connect with. It could be argued that the influence of Blackman's mixed race children allowed Blackman to take a more nuanced attitude to depictions of race and cultural heritage and what it means to be

British when considering the characters that she has included in her own novels.

It must be added that Blackman and Johnson's views that children should be taught a wide-ranging multicultural British history in schools have been at odds with the current British government. More specifically, in the national curriculum under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove chose to concentrate on familiar British male figures such as Winston Churchill and Nelson, while considering removing references to women and people of colour from history, described here in *The Independent*:

> Leaked documents which surfaced recently appeared to detail Mr Gove's plan to replace Seacole with more traditional, white, male historical figures; such as Admiral Lord Nelson, Winston Churchill and Oliver Cromwell. (Rawlinson, 2013)

This policy has had a particular effect on historical figures of multiple marginalised identities such as Mary Seacole, a Scottish, Creole-identified, mixed race nurse and entrepreneur of Caribbean and Scottish descent, who tended to soldiers during the Crimean War.

Countering the educational erasure of mixed race people in the British educational curriculum, British writers of colour such as Malorie Blackman and Catherine Johnson are making a difference by consciously choosing to have children of multiracial and multicultural origin at the centre of their novels for young adults. In literature, cinema, popular culture and historical costume dramas, we have become accustomed to seeing a whitewashed version of historical Britain, a British past without brown faces. This version of British history has long been entrenched in a biased political determination to only show a one-sided view of a British history – that is, the one that has centred

whiteness and Eurocentrism, and has been perpetuated through the school curriculum for decades. In Johnson's fiction, the choice to centre mixed race child narratives comes from her own awareness of the lack of such characters.

Reflecting on her own childhood growing up as a mixed race child in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, Johnson states "[w]hen I was a kid I used to love the Sunday morning costume dramas on television, then you'd go to school and you'd act them out. But there was never any character like me" (Johnson, 2008). This quote suggests that the creation of Hero was born out of a determination to show a side of British cultural history that is still rarely depicted in mainstream popular culture, and a desire to highlight and utilise narratives from the little-seen perspective of the immigrant. Somewhat uniquely, the novel subtly draws attention to the multicultural makeup of nineteenth-century London and depicts the mix and range of nationalities and ethnicities that occupied various communities, jobs, and social positions in the city. These insights allow for a younger reader to make use of these novels both for entertainment, but also as a first foray into gaining a more rounded and multidimensional knowledge of the cultural history of London in the 1800s.

Johnson has discussed the extensive research she did on the many multicultural communities that historically inhabited London, explaining that there was a rich mixture of different ethnic and cultural peoples living in the city: "It was the first world city. You could get anything. Even at that time there were people who were going regularly between Europe and London, America and Africa – not just slavery. I'm interested in the immigrant communities of London. There are so many stories" (Johnson, 2008).

Here Johnson seems to employ her own mixed race perspective as a way of traversing time, space and historical boundaries to enable the reader to experience a multiracial dimension of 1800s London. This perspective allows Johnson to give nuance to a complex young mixed race character, and to depict a version of the black British narrative that is not solely reliant on the familiar conventions of slave narratives. Johnson is also able to use the elements of her own multiracial positioning to portray characters of many differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as many characters of diverse and ambiguous ethnic heritage.

In conclusion I would suggest that a rethinking of manifold non-binary identities in relation to queerness will allow us to look more closely at the intersection between mixed race identities, race, gender, childhood and sexuality.

The act of imagining something, to conjure to mind a particular mental image or picture of that which one desires to see reflected back at oneself, can be a very simple and constructive act of creative actualisation. This kind of strategy is often a very effective queer methodology much akin to Muñoz's concept of queer futurity (Muñoz, 2009) "Utopian performativity is often fueled by the past. The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that function as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness" (Muñoz, 2009: 106).

Even the word 'conjure' itself in Muñoz's quote is suggestive of an uncanny methodology of willing an image to appear before oneself as if by magic. Using this concept throughout the chapter has allowed me to show that by anachronistically putting the Poly Styrene-ish heroine Hero back into a historical fiction it is possible for

contemporary British young adult literature to present a complex tomboy character that is able to make strengths of their hybrid identity.

Fusing together seemingly conflicting and disparate fragments of cultural identity, the tomboy heroine as written by a present-day author is given the freedom to challenge entrenched ideas about gender, race and sexuality. This presence of this new kind of British heroine, a mixed race tomboy, is able to subtly disorder the perceived certainty of whiteness in the Anglo-American tomboy literary cannon, whilst also disturbing some of the socially preconceived, global, Eurocentric certainties about the fixity and often supposed reality of the racial and gender binary. Hero as a tomboy figure contributes to the desire to excavate a more diverse, truly representative history of the UK's past; Hero's multiracial, multicultural narrative and tomboy adventures through London, too, allow the reader to gain an unusually broad view of the city in the early 1800s. In keeping with the literary tomboy narrative of the independent fearless bildungsroman, as Hero goes out seeking her father throughout the various districts of London, the reader is given an insight into predominantly underexplored facets of a racially and culturally diverse city.

The closer study of this subject, I would suggest, has a particularly powerful relevance and resonance to the historical struggles and identities of queers of colour, and for marginalised Diasporic and unrepresented queers in general, be they migrants, immigrants, working class, intersex, underclass, disabled, or undocumented LGBTQ and intersex communities in the United Kingdom whose queer histories have also often been "hidden histories". The use of anachronism to navigate the past and present, looking at examples of the tomboy at differing time periods, outside a normative concept of time,

has been purposeful: "We must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion. We must step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present" (Muñoz, 2009: 185).

The tomboy's specific intervention into these queer histories is as a figure whose gender expression is often already, to quote Halberstam, "tied precariously to masculinity and queerness" (Halberstam, 2004: 192). According to Stuart Hall,

> We should not for one moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery that this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails. 'Hidden histories' have played a critical role in the emergence of many of the most important movements of our time – feminist, anti colonial and anti racist. (Hall, 2003: 235)

To reiterate Hall's message, it is of great importance to collect, document and preserve these subterranean queer of colour histories because, within such rediscovery, there lies profound and potentially transformative power, so it is imperative that such material is preserved, saved and archived for future generations, and these documents must also be readily accessible to all not just a privileged few.

CHAPTER SIX

"My steady gaze"

Tomboy Acts of Decolonisation and Personal Resistance in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*

One of the central arguments of this chapter is how tomboys of colour operate in a text in relation to a heteronormative narrative. This chapter explores the radical potential that is discoverable within the representation of the tomboy character in a postcolonial literary context. Reflecting on the queer potential in the act of a postcolonial writer authoring the tomboy narrative will add to our knowledge and understanding of the range and nuance of this gender transgressing child figure, and the circumstances in which, as I have shown throughout this thesis, queer traces of this archetypically rebellious character have continued to reappear in many different guises throughout a spectrum of international literature and film and across differences of time, place and culture.

6.1 Queering Maternal Bonds and Girlhood Kinships

When reading the novel *Annie John* (Kincaid, 1985), one is immediately drawn into the ten-year-old Annie's daily experiences of island life in a heternormative postcolonial environment that on the surface seems to replicate many of gender and sexuality norms of 1950s England. A particularly intimate mood is set at once as a result of the candid and at times conspiratorial tone of the guiding voice used by the main protagonist. Annie John's Antiguan life includes a cyclical quotidian routine of domesticity, and her witnessing of

causal acts of subtle cruelty meted out by the local colonially-influenced centres of power which, in the novel, are usually embodied by the British education system or her parents. Annie observes and relays her awareness of the monotony and casual social micro-aggressions of authority figures that occur in the daily island life of colonial Antigua. The novel, told in the first person, records Annie's rituals of daily meals with her parents, attending a new school, building new friendships with other children, and helping her mother with the daily domestic chores. The strongly-drawn literary parameters of the novel are also mirrored in the images of displacement and fracture of the outer postcolonial landscape in the small Antiguan town in which Annie is living – this fracture being particularly perceptible in the breakdown of Annie's relationship with her mother and father.

Throughout the novel there are many suggestions of departure, most noticeable in Annie's preoccupation with death and her general disillusionment with the limitations of life in a small town that is still heavily impacted by British colonial rule. In the novel, colonial Antigua is depicted as an island heavily divided by the intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender.

Hall (1995) has noted some of the social challenges that have shaped Caribbean culture, drawing attention to the impact of the particular power structures of colonialism:

> Now the question of what a Caribbean cultural identity might be has been of extraordinary importance, before but especially in the twentieth century. Partly because of the dislocations of conquest, of colonization and slavery, partly because of the colonial relationship itself and the distortions of living in a world culturally dependent and dominated from some center outside the place where the majority of people lived. (Hall, 1995: 4)

In the novel there are obvious parallels between the kind of uneasy and unequal colonial relationship that Hall describes and those of the often fraught and troubled kinships that exist between Annie John and her family, friends and community; this is particularly noticeable in many of the metaphors that are employed in the novel to symbolise the shifting dynamics of Annie's bond with her mother, her closest girlfriends, and those in dominant positions of educational power. As Moira Ferguson (1994) suggests, "Kincaid inflects the gradually seesawing and ultimately agonized mother-daughter relationship with commentary about growing up as a female dominated by colonizers and their allies who administer patriarchal dictates, the law of the father" (Ferguson, 1994: 44). It is notable that many of these symbols of "colonial" power are also often depicted as female, for example, when starting her new school Annie notes the prevalence of female teachers: "on either side of Miss Moore stood our teachers, women and men – mostly women" (Kincaid, 1985: 36).

A simple interpretation of the novel allows for a reading of Annie's relationship with her mother as an obvious symbol for the kind of traumatic alienation that a colonial subject might experience on being rejected by a country one has been encouraged to view as a 'motherland'. As Annie grows older, the more deeply disenfranchised she becomes from a mother she had once idolised. This incredibly traumatic turning point in Annie's life also seems to mobilise her and direct her towards an ambivalent kind of independence, which again can be viewed as reflective of Antigua's own trajectory towards self-rule.

As well as this expansive understanding of the mother and daughter relationship in the context of Caribbean colonial history, it is also important for this discussion of the tomboy to explore the personal interplay between structures of gender, power and

sexuality, and the way that intersectional combinations of these elements impact the story of Annie John as an individual tomboy.

Another commonality between representations of the tomboy that is explored in this chapter and throughout this thesis is the tradition of the tomboy experiencing the absence of a mother for various reasons. There have been numerous examples of the dynamics of this absence of a relationship between tomboy and mother in other chapters of this thesis – for example Catherine Earnshaw, Hero, and Katy Carr's mothers are all dead, whilst in *Stray Dogs* Gol-Ghotai's mother is imprisoned and, in *Tomboy*, Mikäel's already somewhat distant mother is preoccupied with the arrival of a new baby. In all these cases the tomboy either forms a closer bond with the father – as with Mikäel and Katy, whose fathers are particularly sympathetic to their ambiguous tomboy children – or else the tomboy becomes ever more independent and self-reliant, as is the case for *Hero* where the departed mother acts as an important matriarchal spirit guide who protects the tomboy from beyond the grave.

I believe that centring a black postcolonial tomboy in this chapter will add a little explored dimension to the study of how the tomboy operates in a heternormative context. In her study of the tomboy and Euro-American constructions of whiteness in a white supremacist culture, Abate has noted some examples of contemporary literature written by female authors of colour that focus on and centre the tomboy figure:

> Numerous novels released in recent years by African American, Latino/a and Asian American authors contain gender-rebellious female figures that can be placed on the spectrum of tomboyish behavior. Of these, the central characters in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1982) [*sic*] and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) are perhaps the most well known. (Abate, 2008: xxii)

Tomboys of colour have indeed historically existed in literature, but reengaging with such tomboys often entails digging a little deeper into the literary archives. Abate mentions some early American examples of tomboys of colour:

> In fact, the first full-length novel published by an African American woman, Harriet Wilson's 1859 *Our Nig,* show cases a tomboyish heroine who plays school pranks, daringly walks across rooftops and even cuts her hair short. In addition, Sui Sin Far's collection of Chinese American folktales, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912), contains several narratives that showcase gender defiant female characters. (Abate, 2008: xxii)

In this chapter such engagement entails looking in depth at the idea of the personal story and biography in connection with issues of a postcolonial rendering of tomboy subjectivity within the novel *Annie John*, and in so doing positioning the Caribbean tomboy of black African heritage at the centre of this debate.

Annie John, by the Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid, is the story of a tomboy called Annie John and her experiences as she comes of age in 1950s colonial Antigua. Annie is a bright, precocious young person with a rich and often morbidly curious imagination. The book is narrated in the first person through the direct perspective of Annie John herself as she reminisces and candidly reflects on her experiences of childhood and adolescence. Annie's island world is at turns both insular and domestic, while her internal view of this world, both youthful and perceptive, is shown to be simultaneously expansive and gothic. The novel is both politically and ideologically strongly anti-colonial, as well as also being profoundly autobiographical in structure. This autobiographical structure can also be understood as a performance of decolonisation, the defiant telling of a personal history that has traditionally been erased. Much of Jamaica Kincaid's literary work has centred on her own life story, and has seen her draw heavily

on her own familial relationships with her parents and brothers. It is between public and private environments that Annie negotiates the complications and reformations of personal identity that are brought about by the beginning of puberty and a changing school and family life. Within her small family Annie is an only child who is emotionally connected to her mother in a particularly powerful and complex way. It is the changes that occur to this close mother daughter relationship that provoke much internal drama and trauma, the ramifications of which are ultimately life-altering.

In the story of *Annie John*, Annie's mother is very much alive and tangibly present in Annie's daily life, and the attachment and identification that Annie feels for her mother is both incredibly powerful and all consuming. Annie describes in warm and sentimental detail the extent of the closeness she has felt towards her mother throughout her childhood, she is dressed identically to her mother when very young, and Annie's mother carefully keeps a trunk preserving of all the milestones of Annie's earliest years from baby clothes to locks of Annie's baby hair.

Throughout her childhood, Annie had both enjoyed and become used to often being dressed in an identical way to her mother, but this pleasure is brought to an end rather abruptly one day during the onset of Annie's adolescence when her mother suddenly informs her, "Oh, no. You are getting to old for that. It's time you had your own clothes. You can't go around looking like a little me for the rest of your life" (Kincaid, 1985: 26). This is just one of many moments in the novel that show how Annie's pathway to adolescence seems to entail a painful and tumultuous cutting of the bonds between mother and daughter. Another pivotal moment in the book that illustrates the growing gulf between mother and daughter occurs when Annie returns home late, only to discover

that her mother had seen her talking to four boys that day. Annie's mother said that she had been upset by what she interpreted as Annie's forward behaviour with the boys, and as a result she calls her daughter a slut. Annie is deeply wounded by this slur. "The word 'slut' (in patois) was repeated over and over, until suddenly I felt that I was drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with water it was filled with the word 'slut'" (Kincaid, 1985: 102). Annie defends herself against her mother's words in a way that hurts her mother. "I turned to her and said, 'Well, like father like son, like mother like daughter'" (Kincaid, 1985: 102).

After such an emotionally painful argument Annie notes, with much sorrow, another fracture in bonds between mother and daughter: "[b]ut I couldn't move, and when I looked down it was as if the ground had opened up between us, making a deep wide split" (Kincaid, 1985: 103).

Annie's mother begins to prepare Annie for the process of impending womanhood in a way that Annie seems to find sudden and humiliating: such moments ultimately destroy the bond between Annie and her mother in an irrecoverable way that eventually changes the course of Annie's life.

When Annie begins to break away from her mother's influence during her teenage years, the sudden division between mother and daughter feels less like Annie's choice and more like a concerted effort on the part of Annie's mother to distance herself from her daughter as Annie enters young womanhood. This forced separation between herself and her mother seems to further enable Annie's already strongly developing rebellious streak, and launches Annie into a complex power struggle with her mother.

Although this continual conflict is often a source of great trauma for Annie it also, importantly, seems to unleash elements of her imagination and creativity in new and inventive ways, as she plays many unspoken games of one-upmanship with her mother. For example Annie, already a voracious reader, when in conflict with her mother seems to consume books in an even more passionate way. "Whenever I felt I was falling out of my mother's good graces I would let her see me absorbed in these books" (Kincaid, 1985: 55). The defiance in these words is an example of Annie's need to claim back power from her mother by reading whatever kinds of literature she wants to regardless of her mother's wishes, or whether her mother finds her literary choice socially acceptable or not. This is a powerful act of self-determination.

Annie and her mother also go to war with each other over Annie's love of playing marbles, and the game of marbles functions in a multifaceted way within this text to open up discussions about gender, hierarchal family dynamics, and the way that the power in such relationships often begin to shift and alter when the tomboy reaches adolescence. Annie's mother had initially instigated this interest herself by presenting Annie with a set of colourful glass marbles chiefly to provide a visual amusement for the child. It is at the beginning of puberty that Annie begins to take a real and independent interest in the game: "Quite by accident, in a moment when I was just fooling about, I discovered that I had a talent for playing marbles" (Kincaid, 1985: 60). Annie is clearly proud of this newfound skill at marbles, and she uses this skill to separate her identity from that of her mother. Even though her mother had given Annie her first set of marbles in the hope that the unusual colours would amuse the young child, we learn that her mother begins to

disapprove of Annie's passion for marbles when her daughter grows older and her interest in marbles becomes a more serious desire.

Her mother's disapproval prompts Annie to hide the marbles in containers and odd places in a storage area underneath the house. Aided by her burgeoning skill at the game, and the illicit thrill of having a hidden dimension to her life that her mother does not know about, Annie becomes obsessed with the ritualistic act of playing marbles, at which she unexpectedly discovers she excels: "Everyone attributed my talent to my long arms and my steady gaze. What a surprise it was to me – something about myself that I had not known" (Kincaid, 1985: 60–61). Playing marbles becomes a gender-neutral way for Annie to define herself outside her purely intellectual capabilities, the latter being something she has already been recognised for at home and at school. Her parents and teachers take a pride in Annie academic achievements, but Annie's skill at marbles becomes a fresh arena in which she can shine outside the conventional context of a colonial academic setting.

Importantly, the world of marble games is private and not defined by adults and grown-up authority figures. It is her childhood peers that are recognising Annie's talents in this private world, where to be quick of eye and hand is rewarded by the praise and admiration of other young people, both boys and girls.

This continuous battle with her mother seems to be part of the ongoing narrative of Annie's teenage re-molding and self-fashioning of her identity, as she begins to find herself "deliberately shunning and depriving herself of a female model, fixating on her mother as treacherous, she molds herself into an exciting, desirable subject who obeys

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and disobeys at will" (Ferguson, 1994: 5). Her mother's disproval makes playing marbles even more appealing to Annie.

This hiding of the marbles again brings Annie into direct conflict with her mother, as Annie begins to lie and steal. "Disobeying and withdrawing emotionally from her mother in a qualified revenge, a victory over maternal surveillance, she becomes an artist in her prowess at marbles and in her appreciation of their striking qualities" (Ferguson, 1994: 54). As Ferguson suggests, Annie seems to derive a strong element of pleasure from this subterfuge and deceit, and the process of hiding the marbles and refusing to tell where she had hidden them becomes another battle of wills between mother and daughter, a battle which Annie wins through sheer tenacity despite her mother's own persistence, strength of character, and emotional manipulation. Annie's interest in marbles comes to an abrupt end when her periods begin: "[s]oon after, I started to menstruate, and I stopped playing marbles" (Kincaid, 1983: 70). The finality of this moment is one of many irreversible moments in a narrative that positions growing up as a fearful, sad and restrictive trajectory.

The ambiguity, transitory fleeting passion, and retrospectively formative impact to be found in the union of childhood friendships – specifically, in this case, the queer bond of young female kinships – are important threads that weave throughout the novel. Annie John constantly describes in sensuous detail the ways in which she internally forms many passionate affections for other girls of her age. Such friendships often involve Annie and one other girl, but Annie also indulges in rebellious and often secret meetings with larger groups of girls. The partnerships that Annie establishes are very intense, and are often based on a power dynamic of domination and sadistic behaviour both on the part of

Annie, and the girl with whom she forms her relationship. Early on in the novel she describes the way that she equates love with pain, and how this was the basis for one of her early friendships. "I loved very much – so used to torment until she cried – a girl named Sonia" (Kincaid, 1985: 7).

As noted in the fraught dynamics of the relationship with her mother, secrecy and deception also form part of Annie's elaborate bonding rituals with her young female friends. Annie seems to use such friendships as a way to test her ability to exert control over others: "I would buy her a sweet – something called a frozen joy – with money I had stolen from my mother's purse, and then we would go and sit under a tree in our school yard. I would then stare and stare at her narrowing and opening wide my eyes until she began to fidget under my gaze" (Kincaid, 1985: 7). Annie gleans a powerful kind of creative strength from her closet friends; she seems to be often drawn to girls at first because of their immediate aesthetic appeal to her creative senses and imagination. This is evidenced in a passage about her attraction to a charismatic friend whom Annie names 'the red girl': "the Red Girl and I stood under the guava tree looking each other up and down. What a beautiful thing I saw standing before me" (Kincaid, 1985: 57).

There is a questionable and negative connotation about the heavily controlling nature of Annie's attachments, and the ways in which her behaviour toward some of her friends is suggestive of an objectifying, white, colonial, patriarchal attitude towards women. The relationship between Annie and her friends in one often built on an inherent power imbalance, because "[b]y replicating in her interpersonal relationships the systems of mastery and patterns of dominance and submission that characterize the system of

colonialism, and thereby foreclosing the establishment of any type of meaningful communal bonds" (Karafilis, 1998: 72).

In a text about the bildungsroman in postcolonial literature written by women of colour, Karafilis (1998) draws attention to the similarities of Annie's personal interaction with her friends and the way that, through her behaviour, Annie is implicated in repeating the very colonial systems that are also confining her.

As well as simply reinforcing and single-mindedly re-enacting the colonial system into which she has herself been indoctrinated, there is a strong and self-aware racial and gender ambiguity detectable in Annie's behaviour. This act of observing other females in such a detached way suggests that Annie John seems to also be ambivalently exercising an anthropologist's gaze over her friends. Annie is seemingly acutely aware of the mechanisms of the hierarchies of structure, gender, race and class power that she witnesses in the culture around her, and it is in her friendships with other girls that Annie seems to replicate these colonial hierarchies. Such fascinating gender, class and racial ambiguities, and crossovers between the colonised and the coloniser, return again and again through the novel. "For Annie John, all assumptions of power, even her own as she reaches adulthood, seem to be destructive. When Annie John matures, she becomes complicit with the colonizers by wielding her newfound power as a young woman arbitrarily and abusively" (Karafilis, 1998: 72).

Whilst I agree with Karafilis's quote that it is clear that there are incredibly destructive consequences to the power dynamic of Annie's kinships with other girls and women that are ultimately harmful to all concerned, there is also a creative dimension that Annie

gains from her female kinships. It is this that seems to fuel her imagination, and enables a space to create controlled scenarios in which partnerships with her girl friends become forceful alliances, dyads capable of perpetrating great acts of destruction. In her daydreams Annie envisions many fantasies in which she and her favoured friend are living together alone without boys or adults.

There is a decipherable pattern of behaviour in the way that Annie John's close girl friends are usually either those that her mother deems socially acceptable because they come from seemingly conventionally respectable, middle class homes like her own, or those friends whom Annie's socially conscious mother considers to be uncouth, wild, untamed and unkempt. Annie is mostly drawn to the former category of friend, and her mother's disapprovals of the latter only seem to entice Annie towards these forbidden friends all the more. It is also possible to detect a strongly queer element to these non-conventional relationships, a queerness in which a fluidity of gender roles seems to exist, both girls having the freedom to perform differing gender traits within the safety of their relationship. This fluidity is traceable in the way that Annie admires the Red Girl's climbing ability: "[b]ut look at the way she climbed that tree better than any boy" (Kincaid, 1983: 57). But it is fruitless to simply read Annie's kinships as a Westernised example of a lesbian relationship. Instead, as Zoran Pecic explains, the reader might consider "[a] critical queer diaspora bends and unties the generalized notions of queer subjects, producing and reproducing new geographies of desire, based not on a stable one-way transfer of ideas and identifications but on multiple, fertile, de- and reterritorialised sites of exchange" (Pecic, 2013: 14). In opposition to such generalised notions of queerness, Annie's kinships are cast as deliciously elusive, ambiguous, and unyielding to Westernised understandings of sexuality and gender. Even though these

friendships seem to be infused with an apparent eroticism, this eroticism is presented to the reader in a matter-of-fact way, without judgment, and without imposing twentieth- and twenty-first-century Westernised understandings of queer sexuality.

In the novel the reader is shown that it is also through a strongly developing philosophical engagement with the concept of death that Annie is able to bond with her friends. The first encounter that the reader has with Annie John is at a point when she is reflecting back on a time during her tenth year, when she was beginning to ponder and reflect on the reality of death. When reflecting on death, Annie develops a particular fascination with the death of other children, children that also happen to be her own contemporaries. Annie's developing knowledge and awareness of death becomes a source of social cachet and power for her, a way to connect with others on her own terms. For instance, at school she seems to take great pleasure in being in receipt of rarified knowledge, especially when she is able to tell her friends about her firsthand experience of the death of a small girl who had died in her mother's arms.

In becoming more acutely aware of the daily realities of death, Annie's personal reaction is both capricious and unpredictable, as noted in the description of the death of another girl of exactly her own age. The girl whose death made such an impact on Annie was a hump-backed child, and it is in remembering her feelings about the girl that Annie's curiosity seems focused on a particular memory of the affective presence of the dead girl's hump. Annie remembers her instinctive and incongruous wish to do something socially taboo, to reach out and touch the girl's physically "different" body, a body that was different from her own. This symbolic act of being able to touch another person's

difference is suggestive of a process of othering the hump-backed girl, as through Annie's able-bodied gaze the memory of this girl becomes the memory of simply one part of her body, she becomes in some way reduced to a body part.

> I remembered once standing behind her in a line to take out books at the library; then I saw a fly land on the collar of her uniform and walk up and down as the collar lay flat on her hump. On hearing that she was dead, I wished I had tapped the hump to see if it was hollow. (Kincaid, 1983: 10)

Annie's thoughts on these formative encounters with death are written by Kincaid in a detached and matter-of-fact way, a cool, quizzical and controlled style. There is also a powerful and affective sensuality about Annie's reminiscences: the scents and textures associated with her memories of this time of childhood exploration and curiosity stand out strongly, as Annie recalls the lingering smell of bay rum on her mother when she returns home from the house of the dead girl. In Annie's childhood recollections there is strong sense of the transformative queerness of death and its seeming ability to remake the mundane and the familiar as strange and uncanny.

6.2 Small, Important Acts of Decolonisation and a Reengaging with the Bildungsroman

In this section I shall look at how the tomboy queers or decolonises the bildungsroman or how they support it (if it is a phase for a girl to grow out of). In the novel, Kincaid employs her vantage point as a postcolonial author to both reclaim and redefine the tomboy figure from its anglicised, British colonial and imperial legacy and history, a history in which the tomboy is almost always depicted as white, and also very often as middle class. Like many other children who grew up under British colonial rule, Kincaid herself was brought up reading the works of English writer Enid Blyton, and in *Annie John* Annie herself describes to a friend her own strong identification with the British

children's author. "I told her that I wished that I had been Enid, after Enid Blyton, the author of the first books I had discovered on my own and liked" (Kincaid, 1983: 50). With Annie John being such an admirer of Enid Blyton we might imagine that she would possibly have also strongly identified with Blyton's own famous tomboy creation George (Georgina) Kirrin from the *Famous Five* series of children's adventure books (Blyton, 1942–63). Ferguson notes the powerful significance of Kincaid evoking a British children's author such as Blyton in the context of a Caribbean colonial childhood. "In the chain of colonial signifiers, the name Enid Blyton, a popular writer of children's stories, insinuates something about Annie John's experiences as a black pupil in a society undergoing fundamental transition" (Ferguson, 1994: 53). The cultural gulf between the world that Blyton depicts in the *Famous Five* novels and the lived reality of Annie John's life is vast – Blyton's novels were mostly set in a fairly exclusive sector of English society divided by class, gender and racial hierarchies that might suggest a degree of cultural disorientation for a child growing up under colonial rule who had absorbed English literature in their formative years. As well as being an early fan of Blyton, Kincaid has been appreciative of the English writer but also openly critical of the destructive qualities of the widespread popularity and iniquitousness of Blyton's novels on the developing self-identities of young children growing up in the Caribbean. "Kincaid has said "the constant inference that England was the center of the universe, robbed colonial children of a sense of their own worth" (Simmonds, 1998: 65). In the novel Kincaid does not simply rectify this issue by trying to create a Caribbean equivalent of Blyton's middle class, British, hierarchical environment, but she engages with the important underlying issues of visibility and representation by producing a novel in which the most marginalised of colonial voices, the black, female child, is brought confidently, complexly and fully to the centre of the text in a unapologetic way. Whether

we can completely trust Annie's telling of her story makes little difference – this novel works as an arena for both lead character and author to converse with each other directly – such a direct dialogue is not endeavouring to the exclude the reader, but neither is the primary aim of the text to appease the reader's desires.

Annie John presents us with a new way to encounter and engage with the colonial child of colour, often a first encounter with the colonial tomboy child of colour. It is of great importance that Kincaid chooses to make the lead character of her novel a tomboy. By using a literary archetype characterised by an independent nature, and many of the privileges of a boy, Kincaid has a useful device in her task of reshaping and redirecting the tomboy story and employing a semi-autobiographical narrative to explore the both the personal and political cost of the colonial structure on the life of one child's experience of the temporality of girlhood. She utilises all the aforementioned cultural and geographical differences to rethink and centre the tomboy as a black, female, working class child from a Caribbean colonial background. She thus allows for a re-engagement with the tomboy figure in context of larger social and cultural discourses of postcolonial identity and nationhood, as well as the opportunity to critique the power structures of colonialism itself.

This renewal of the tomboy story enables Kincaid to place Annie John in domestic, educational, and adventurous situations that are both familiar to the reader of traditional Western tomboy narratives, while at the same time also make such cosy familiarity disconcerting and uncanny, such as when Annie describes mimicking her Anglophile mother's pronunciation of the word 'amber', and then using the newfound word to impress her school friends: "when I showed the marbles to my friends at school I said,

'such a nice colour, amber', causing the desired effect among them, for on hearing me say the word 'amber' they widened their eyes and shaped their mouths into tiny 'o's'' (Kincaid, 1983: 55–56). There is a grotesque sensuality about this image of the girls' mouths mimicking Annie (and also Annie's mother) in this triple form, to give the impression of a supposedly correct way of perceived British pronunciation. This seems to have an almost physical powerful and transformative effect on those who speak it. Also of importance is the fact that it is Annie John who consciously orchestrates this performance of an uncovering and redirecting of colonial performativity.

There is a kind of radical uncovering and redirecting of the subtle and insidious aspects of the ideologies of colonialism that Bhabha describes when discussing acts of decolonisation: "[t]hey formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the 'rationalizations' of modernity" (Bhabha, 1994: 171).

In the novel Annie John has daily encounters with those who hold the positions of social authority to which Bhabha refers, whether it is in the home, in the community or in her school, and as the colonised Other Annie is placed in the position of sceptical observer of these powerful colonial intuitions. As befits a child who had been doted on by both her parents, one of the most noticeable of Annie's qualities is her very high self-esteem; throughout the novel she is careful to reveal to the reader that she is fully aware of her own self worth and the value of her intellect and insight. Throughout the novel Annie's independent, intelligent personality are constantly emphasised, and it is perceivable that Annie John is a uniquely and unapologetically gifted child. Self-reflection is an integral

part of the narrative of the story and, when recounting her own memories of infancy, Annie seems particularly proud as she reflects on the way that her mother remembered her as possessing an exceptionally wilful personality even as a toddler. Annie's intellect is demonstrated in the novel by the way she is able to perceive how it is that her British colonial education is structured to exterminate and erase the indigenous West Indian culture, as well as the African religious and cultural traditions of many of the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands who were descendants of the African slaves. Very often in the novel Annie is depicted as employing her intellect to cleverly negotiate the colonial education system, to try to manipulate it to work in her favour whilst at the same time also trying to retain an acute self-awareness of the ways in which the mechanics of such a colonial system are structured to the disadvantage of marginalised groups within the Caribbean. Antigua did not become self-governing until 1967, not becoming an independent Commonwealth nation until 1981, and so Kincaid, like many of her generation, received a colonial education, and Kincaid's own feelings of anger towards the destructive dominance and all-pervasive power of such an education system is reflected in Annie's attitude towards her indoctrination into a system that she seemed to inherently understand as being inauthentic and hypocritical as well as one that was symbolic of the hierarchical constrictions that she found even within her own family. As Ferguson says, "British royalty symbolizes a relationship and a status she rejects and is trapped in, another hideous parental immersion" (Ferguson, 1994: 51).

There is a deep underlying scepticism detectable in the tone of Annie John's internal dialogue that is emblematic of her deep mistrust of the dominant white colonial hierarchy, most notably in the way that she views the unspoken tensions between differing racial groups within her class: "I could see how Ruth felt from looking at her

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face. Her ancestors had been the masters, while ours had been the slaves" (Kincaid, 1983: 76), and we can also see this simmering sense of mistrust permeating the outright consternation and deep sense of cynicism at the dominant position given to the teaching of upper class British cultural history in the Antiguan school. "For it was all history, it was all in the past, and everybody behaved differently now; all of us celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday even though she had been dead a long time" (Kincaid, 1985: 76).

In Annie John's attitude to the history of British colonialism there is also a very detectable uncertainty about the changes that were surfacing in 1950s Antigua. It should be remembered that Antigua was an island that, at this point in history, was still under British colonial rule, and a large part of the colonial teaching of history was the veneration and celebration of those that had been so instrumental in helping to colonise so many territories. In the novel there is a vignette that highlights Annie's resentment towards a traditional celebratory colonial narrative in which explorer Christopher Columbus has been presented as an admirable, powerful and heroic figure. Kincaid depicts moments when Annie confidently challenges the conventionally heroic representation of the famous coloniser by having the child impose her own unconventional and anarchic interpretation on a painting of Christopher Columbus in which he is depicted in chains. In this personal intervention Annie John quietly undermines the ways in which Columbus has been represented to her, and instead finds her own independent reading of the work of art in her schoolbook:

> When I next saw the picture of Columbus sitting there all locked up in his chains, I wrote under it the words "The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go." I had written this out with my fountain pen, and in Old English Lettering – a script I had recently mastered. (Kincaid, 1983: 78)

It is rather telling that Annie uses the traditional and seemingly innocuous educational tools of empire, such as a fountain pen and classical Old English script, against the very colonial education system that is trying to control and alter her own sense of Antiguan identity. This act is suggestive of what Bhabha calls mimicry, "a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence" (Bhabha, 1994: 86).

Annie's act of colonial mimicry is a seemingly small, juvenile act of rebellion, but conversely this is also a political act – a young black colonised schoolgirl claiming back a sense of agency by rejecting colonialism through disrupting and breaking the colonisers gaze, and also symbolically taking away the capacity for agency from a powerful man who is so culturally representative of personal and global self-determination.

When thinking about the concept of tomboy acts of rebellion as a way to solidly define the parameters of one's own creative identity, it is constructive to compare Annie's use of books and of the written word as a wilful act of self-determination and defiance in the face of those who held power over her with the way in which Catherine Earnshaw, another tomboy explored at length in this thesis, made use of her personal journal as a space in which she could satirise figures of authority. Contextually set in different times and places, both Annie and Catherine are also historically bonded by a colonial inheritance, although from considerably different positions in the racial and social hierarchy. As a white, upper middle class young woman, Catherine was the beneficiary of British imperialism and colonial slavery. Having private spaces of their own in which to read and create seems to have been of uttermost importance to both Catherine and Annie;

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it is through Mr. Lockwood's retrospective discovery of Catherine's select library that we learn that it contains within it a "state of dilapidation [that] proved to have been well used, though not altogether for a legitimate purpose; scarcely one chapter had escaped a pen and ink commentary – at least, the appearance of one – covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left" (Brontë, 1847: 20).

In different ways both young women have a need to claim personal agency and, like Annie, Catherine seems to have disrespect for and mistrust of the conventional educational tools of a British, patriarchal, colonial education – as shown by her defacement of her own personal library of books. For Annie John this disrespect of authority and the need to construct her own reality through creative and imaginative endeavours also leads to a process of self-building, something Karafilis (1998) defines as an erasure: "Annie John practices erasure-first attempting to erase her British influences and then attempting to erase her West Indian influences" (Karafilis, 1998: 73).

Ultimately, later on in the novel, it is shown that this attempt at erasure leaves Annie isolated and fragmented on her particular pathway of bildungsroman. The conclusion of her story leads not to Annie being completely defeated on her voyage to self-identity, but both disenfranchised from her island home and also her future new home in Britain, and instead of becoming a writer she goes to work as a nurse, joining many other young women from the British colonies who found employment in the healthcare system.

<u>6.3 Autobiography as a Refusal of Abjection</u>

The narrative of Kincaid's novel confounds binary definitions by being both structurally fragmentary and yet simultaneously also structurally complete; such a format is suggestive of its earlier incarnation as separate, self-contained stories that originally appeared in the New Yorker magazine; while the intensity of the subject matter enfolds the reader in the visually expansive yet at times claustrophobic and all-consuming story of a young girl's physical and psychological transition from child to teenager. Throughout the book the main protagonist, Annie John, is immediately recognisable as characteristic of a wilful tomboy archetype, but more than this Annie also stands out not merely as simply a character within the novel, but also powerfully as her own biographer, the all-pervasive centre, and manipulator, of her own narrative. There is a narrative continuity in the theme of the quest for personal autonomy that is suggestive of a postcolonial novel – this theme is also that of an individual's quest for personal liberation from home, family, school and community; a young adolescent colonial woman's endeavour for self-determination; as well as the confident assertion of self throughout the novel. This is evident in the way that the book itself is named after Annie, taking both her first name and surname, and from the first chapter it is Annie's internal reflective monologue that sets the tone and guides us into, and through, the world as she sees it.

As I have stated in previous chapters of this thesis, historically the child – particularly in a Western European context – has often been a figure fêted for its supposed qualities of vulnerability, powerlessness and innocence. The construction of the child as powerless has had particular consequences for the ways in which children of colour have been viewed. Often to be understood as worthy of protection, children of colour, especially in developing nations, have often been visualised in the West as a homogenous mass of

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suffering, vulnerable brown bodies, the ultimate victims, completely lacking in personal agency or individuality.

It can often be important, and even imperative, to tell a personal story – the sharing of our personal narratives can help us to empathise with one another across many social conventions and cultural boundaries. But there can sometimes be a personal cost to telling one's own story. In recent Western European history there have been many discrepancies between those who have traditionally had the power to narrate a story, and those who have been objectified, appropriated and tokenised. This tokenisation of diverse subjects can be viewed in contemporary neoliberal ideologies of change and trajectories of progress, where people of colour, women, LGBTQ people and the disabled are often fêted as visible symbols of "diversity" within advertising and employment narratives, while the heterogeneous make-up of these capitalist structures of oppression and global power remain largely unchanged. How to convey a personal or autobiographical narrative without demanding sympathy of your audience is a timely question, particularly when the character is identified as being marginalised in some respect, but such questions of authenticity are important as they entail holding oneself accountable for the privilege of the power to tell a story. Holding the powerful position of narrator can mean having the ability to frame the story being told, be this in a negative, a positive, or a neutral way. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie noted, in a lecture given in 2009 titled "The Danger of a Single Story", that "[a]ll of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience, and to overlook the many other stories that formed me" (Adichie, 2009). I believe that this call for nuance of character when relaying the personal stories and narratives of marginalised voices is especially important because, historically, there has been a widespread Western tradition of trying to elicit sympathy

and empathy by endeavouring to make such subjects palatable. Making the narrative subject agreeable to the tastes and supposed moral sensibilities of the majority is a practice that has historically been used in many global and national contexts when talking about social and political issues such as homelessness, poverty, sexuality, gender, class, immigration, and issues of equal and civil rights. A need to portray those in marginal positions as worthy of our understanding and support can be seen as an extension of the binary ideals of the Victorian concept of a hierarchy of poverty, where we see those in positions of welfare authority in mid-Victorian Britain designating two categories of need, the deserving and the undeserving poor. Thinking about the postcolonial tomboy in a literary context is also to consider the tomboy character as a manifestation of a refusal of such traditional Westernised literary narratives of abjection; instead, thinking of tomboy Annie John's narrative as an example of a personal story, it can be seen as a tale that is autobiographical in origin but one in which there is no pretence at presenting the reader with a likeable protagonist. Given a tradition where women of colour, and black women in particular, have globally found their bodies to be sites of constant policing, a scrutiny often manifested in the social control of respectability politics, I suggest that there is something profoundly subversive and radical about Jamaica Kincaid's statement in the drawing together of strands of her own autobiography, and fictional fragments, to present the reader with the such a complex child character. The character of Annie John is presented unflinchingly as a precocious, self-centred, complex, imperfect tomboy and with an ambiguous and fluid sexuality and ambivalent attitude towards the expectations of her life. This confronts the reader with the rarely encountered black rebellious female tomboy, as well as confounds and confuses Western ideologies of the abject, suffering, Other.

It is important to note that the reader is not required, nor expected, to like Annie John, even if we might be expected to relate to, or empathise with, her and her story. Kincaid clearly understands the value and power of autobiography, and she herself takes an unconventional approach to the genre, as Braziel explains: "[t]hese biographical, metonymic displacements push autobiography to its generic limits but also allow Kincaid to create lives – her own and others – from memory and imagination, refusing the destruction of those lives through anonymity and historical erasure" (Braziel, 2009: 3). This ambiguous approach also allows for a literal decolonising of dominant Western literary traditions and conventions. Hall recognises such an inverted ghostly world in this description:

> Nevertheless, in everyday life, in so far as it was possible, maintaining some kind of subterranean link with what was often called 'the other Caribbean', the Caribbean that was not recognized, that could not speak, that had no official records, no official account of its own transportation, no official historians, but nevertheless that oral life which maintained an umbilical connection with the African homeland and culture. (Hall, 1995: 7)

Many irrepressible vestiges of this "other Caribbean" keep remerging throughout the novel under many different guises, the most prominent of which is the powerful figure of the Obeah woman. In this particular Caribbean context an Obeah describes a person who practices a form of healing and magic outside of Westernised forms of medicine, and this practice has its roots in Africa. "This imaging of Obeah, indigenous people's culture versus an imposed Western bureaucracy and its dominative value system, stresses her egalitarian acceptance of material and supernatural remedies; for Annie John, they are indistinguishable" (Ferguson, 1994: 42).

This powerful connection to Obeah forms an important and necessary decolonising space that works to destabilise the colonial symbolism throughout text, also suggesting an irrepressible emergence of aspects of the heritage shadowing Annie's personal trajectory – regardless of Annie's colonial education and upbringing, there are important fragments of her African heritage that have remained with her.

In conclusion, in this chapter I have explored how tomboys of colour operate in a text in a way that disrupts the heteronormative narrative. Annie John operates as a postcolonial tomboy in a heteronormative text in a way that shows that queer resistance can indeed be the same as tomboy resistance because the tomboy itself is a figure that destabilises many of the certainties about gender and sexuality norms. As Quimby suggests in their study of the tomboy and sexual textual politics narrative desire,

> If we understand queer to mean what undermines or exceeds the fantasy of stable identity categories of gender and sexuality, then the tomboy may well be seen in this regard as paradigmatic. For by eschewing the feminine and expressing masculine identifications and desires, the tomboy, by definition, points up that such categories as male and female, or masculine and feminine, are indeterminate and unstable. (Quimby, 2016: 1)

I have demonstrated a deeply symbolic and tangible power inscribed within the radical act of a Caribbean female author giving narrative agency and voice to a black female child, not simply by telling the story of that child's coming of age, but by making the character an ambiguous figure of power – of Caribbean diasporic queer resistance and a symbol of Caribbean diasporic queer decolonisation – rather than simply a tokenistic image employed to symbolise abjection. The ending of the novel sees the teenage Annie John set off for England on a path that seems to be not of her own choosing, but in the book's final words there are clues that this is not where Annie's travels reach their conclusion: "I could hear the small waves lap-lapping around the ship. They made an

unexpected sound, as if a vessel filled with liquid had been placed on its side and now was slowly emptying out" (Kincaid, 1983: 148). Sharp and perceptive as ever, Annie draws the reader's attention to this last image, an image that seems to be suggestive of a figurative releasing of a great tension – there is an openness to Annie's description that allows for a many interpretations and thus suggests a breath of possibilities for Annie's biographical future.

Spivak (1998) aptly names this as "the deliberate and powerful play of the individual and representatively is the impossible signature of the ghostly witness in all autobiography" (Spivak, 1998: 3). And it is those two words, "deliberate" and "powerful", that materialise through the remnants of Kincaid's own story in the telling of the adolescent years of Annie John. The impossibility of a colonial child such as Annie John, the tomboy whose very real existence only haunted the peripheries of the English imperial narrative of Kincaid's early literary heroine Blyton's *Famous Five*, is, in a 1980s postcolonial climate and through the genre of autobiographical fiction, able to become fully realised in the kind of a literary completeness that was as yet inaccessible to Blyton's George.

CONCLUSION

<u>Intention behind Thesis</u>

One of the aims of this thesis has been to begin to help reveal the complex ways that the tomboy functions as a gender nonconforming character in a variety of film and literary narratives.

Although the tomboy is a character which had previously felt very familiar to me, having read many books and watched numerous films in which tomboy characters appeared as central characters, the more that I researched the historical and cultural roots of the tomboy and the tomboy narrative, I surmised that something was missing. There was an absence of considered and nuanced engagement with the most marginalised tomboy characters, such as the child of colour, the disabled child, the gender nonconforming child, the intersex child, and the working class child, and the specificities of how these tomboys in particular functioned within the narrative form.

This project has intended to go some way towards addressing this lack, while also raising questions about the power imbalance in the narratives that are heard and those that go untold and unrecognised. This inequality is not unique to the tomboy story, but instead is emblematic of larger and continued structural inequality within the global mass media.

This re-examination of the tomboy narrative in popular culture has also endeavoured to think about this single, well-known and well-loved, gender nonconforming child

archetype in the broader context of historical, political and cultural/social change. This engagement with the tomboy was less about individual tomboy characters, and more about how attitudes to gender, race, sexuality, age, class and the concept of the child and childhood operate in different social, historical and cultural contexts – although it is true to say that every tomboy narrative that I have engaged with in this project has invoked a personal affinity with me.

Through engaging with the way in which the most marginalised tomboy subjects have fared within a textual context and a cultural system that has tried to erase their existence, I have highlighted the way that the marginalised tomboy's continued existence, far from being an abject identity, has itself a complicated, often ambiguous, position, and a complex story to tell, one that often disrupts the narrative situation in which the character is placed.

Tomboy Futures: New Examples of Tomboy and Gender Nonconforming Child Characters Emerging

When it came to my choice of source material I tried to choose a broad selection of tomboy narratives to examine. The very nature of focusing my research on a few select film and literary case studies when exploring the hidden aspects of the tomboy narrative has meant that there have been limitations to the scope of the research presented.

There were of course questions of personal taste when it came to my choice of books and films. I have not, for instance, looked at how the tomboy operates as a character in genres such as science fiction, fantasy, or horror. Such fantasy narratives are areas that I believe

would provide a rich source of alternative examples of tomboyish and gender nonconforming child characters to explore, particularly in the case of the many queer writers of colour who are using social media as a platform to tell such stories, or to get their stories funded. For example, Marjorie Liu's fantasy feminist comic *Monstress* (2015–) tackles issues of race, disability and gender: "As a woman of color, diversity in comics, both structurally and optically, feels like a natural given. The comics we read should reflect the real world, and the real world is incredibly diverse" (Liu, 2015). Liu goes on to pinpoint the way in which mainstream comic books are missing an opportunity to reach a wider range of readers. "I think the readers are hungry to see themselves reflected in these stories that everyone is so passionate about. We saw this with Spider-Man and we see this with Thor: These are powers and archetypes that are not dependent on race. They're not even dependent on gender. These are fluid archetypes. All archetypes are fluid" (Liu, 2015).

The emergence of gender diverse children's literature that harnesses social media to raise funds and to reach a greater audience can be witnessed in Myles E. Johnson's use of *Kickstarter*, a global funding platform to raise money for his project *Large Fears* (Johnson, 2015) – a picture book and ongoing online multimedia project about a queer black boy named Jeremiah Nebula who loves pink. In an interview Johnson states, "I read this book to children and they knew, in a way that stunned me actually, that Jeremiah Nebula is the product of dealing with two different identities intersecting" (Nichols, 2015).

Johnson suggests that we should not underestimate the sophistication of young audiences when it comes to such topics:

There are little girls who love blue, black boys who love pink, Latino trans girls and boys that feel left out during recess that know Jeremiah Nebula's politics well and their ages don't even have double digits yet. So, in short, I am just honest and appropriate in my writing throughout the book and the children understand intersectional identities even if they don't necessarily know the big academic words that are attached to the definition. (Nichols, 2015)

I also think that there are many new exciting developments in the area of children's and young adult literature and film in which the question of diversity in representation is beginning to be addressed more widely, and I have touched upon some of these developments in the thesis, particularly in Chapter Five. *The Guardian* newspaper recently held a week dedicated to diversity in children's books that investigated the need for wider depictions in children's literature:

What makes a diverse book? This means books by and about all kinds of people, as the UK and the world are full of all kinds of people. So that means boys, girls, all different colours, all different races and religions, all different sexualities and all different disabilities and anything else you can think of – so our books don't leave anyone out. Now here are some shocking stats: of the 3,200 children's books published in 2013, only 93 were about black people, 34 about Native Americans, 69 about Asians and 57 about Latinos (people from South America). Not too good! (Drabble, 2014)

A particularly interesting article that emerged out of the newspaper's engagement with this subject was written by blogger Megan Quibell (AKA TheBookAddictedGirl) who questioned the lack of disabled children in books aimed at children:

My name's Megan. I'm a teenager, a book blogger, a book addict, an aspiring author and a now-too-old member of this site (sad face). Oh, and I also happen to be in a wheelchair. Sorry for that little introduction, but I just wanted to point out how being in a wheelchair doesn't define me. And I want people like that in books too: I want normal characters in normal situations, who are either wheelchair-users or cane-users or whatever – I'm really not fussy. I just want those with physical disabilities to be more visible in children's and teen fiction. (Quibel, 2014)

Questioning the Future of the Tomboy

This project is not intended to be a straightforward conventional historical trajectory of the tomboy that takes the reader to the present day, because I believe that such histories have been covered by other authors, for example Abate (2008), whose study of the tomboy in an North American historical context I reference widely throughout this thesis. I am also not offering any conclusive predictions about the future (if indeed the tomboy as we have known it has a future at all). I am observing that in a fast-changing, global culture with varying different cultural attitudes to gender, and particularly in this instance, childhood gender expression, it is of utmost importance to question the continued association of young 'female' empowerment with the supposed gender neutrality of certain kinds of traditionally Western masculine signifiers.

For example, in the last year American comedian and chat show host Ellen DeGeneres has made a high profile collaboration with GapKids: GapKids X ED. The aim of this children's fashion line is to make fun, "gender neutral" clothing for girls. In a recent article for the *National Post*, writer Audra Williams made these pertinent observations when calling into question the ideology behind this seemingly positive fashion venture:

> If gender neutral clothes are only made for and marketed to the parents of little girls, it is less a sign of gender equality and more an indication of the misogyny that is so ambient in our culture. There is such a devaluing of anything traditionally feminine that we'd rather chuck it out triumphantly than ever demean our boys with it. (Williams, 2015)

Rather than suggesting an end for the tomboy, I think that questioning and challenging the misogynistic undercurrents that still impact the way that the tomboy is often

represented could lead to possibilities for broadening the scope of the tomboy narrative altogether. For example, a small facet of the tomboy narrative that I think still needs to be explored is the figure of the trans feminine tomboy. I have not discovered any films or books that tell the story of the trans woman or assigned-at-birth trans feminine tomboy individual. In a media where binary male- and female-identified trans people are often the most visible, there are very few representations of trans women that express themselves as tomboys.

In an article titled *Confessions of a TomBoy TransWoman* (Vancleefe, 2015), a trans woman, Phoebe Vancleefe, who is also a tomboy, explains the frustrations inherent in the lack of visibility for those trans women who are also tomboys. "As a young trans woman, speaking to my elders has played key parts in my transition. I, myself, lean more towards a 'tomboy', pseudo-masc personality, and because of that, women feel the need to give me 'tips' on how to 'be a lady'" (Vancleefe, 2015).

Another example of how the tomboy aesthetic continues to thrive while also disrupting heternormative cisgender expectations and narratives can be found online. Fashion blogger and creative Ari Fitz's popular Instagram account showcases contemporary tomboy styles. In an interview, Fitz explains an ethos to challenge the tomboy stereotype, while remaining sure to dismiss many of the misogynistic tropes that the tomboy has sometime fallen prey to, and which has pitted the tomboy against the girlie girl, for example in the relationship between George and Anne in Blyton's *Famous Five* series:

> To answer the question, I think it's important for young girls to dress however they want – whether that's traditionally girlie or more on the masculine side – but whatever they chose to wear should remind them how fucking awesome they are. It took me a while to learn menswear/streetwear and playing into my androgyny makes me feel

powerful, strong and sexy. If I didn't have that as an option, I don't think I would be able to remind myself of my worth so easily. (Asos.com, 2016)

In the same interview Fitz explains some of the problems with the way that the tomboy has been traditionally depicted and how she is trying to imagine and depict the tomboy in a different way: "a big part of TOMBOYISH has be inclusivity; a thin white woman with a short haircut has always been synonymous with androgyny in fashion" (Asos.com, 2016). Fitz goes on to say how they try to subvert these dominant norms:

> There are a lot of tomboy fashion pages online; what makes TOMBOYISH different is that I strive to make it as inclusive as possible. You'll see different body types, different skin tones, different countries, different hair types and most importantly, different takes on the tomboy-ish aesthetic on my page. (Asos.com, 2016)

All of these different approaches to the depiction suggest that there is still a need for some people to identity with the tomboy, and that it is indeed possible for the character to be reimagined and reinvented, to still remain rebellious, and "occupy an imagined space created by diverse cultural and familial definitions of gender" (Zevy, 2004: 144).

This thesis was never intended to simply 'cover every base' in a tokenistic way, because I feel that that would be unproductive, superficial and that, in doing so, I would be re-enacting some of the failings of the neoliberal project of individualism where concepts such as 'diversity' and 'inclusion' become mere buzzwords to paper over the larger political structural issues of systemic racism, poverty, and global economic inequality. As Yasmin Nair warns:

> We need to refuse the narratives of abjection that are routinely forced upon us. They only render us immobile creatures, begging for help. We are all neoliberals now. We're all selling our bodies, our lives, our stories to the media and to provide comfort to ourselves. Those stories have to be

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challenged and reworked or we lose sight of the larger story of economic exploitation, at our peril. (Nair, 2010)

From a writer's perceptive, by critiquing films and books that centre the marginalised tomboy in childhood and early adolescence, I have learned that when it comes to claiming the powerful position of author it is important to recognise the hierarchies that already exist – in this case in the literary and cinematic world – and the disparity between those narratives that get to be told and those that remain hidden, discarded, undervalued or completely erased by dominant cultural histories. For instance, while evoking the many utopic future possibilities of sensory cinema and cinematic depictions of misrecognition, as I have done in Chapter Three, it is important to question the temporality of misrecognition as a lived reality. This also has strong and obvious intersectional implications because there are numerous forms of the misrecognised experience that operate across many areas of race, class, ethnicity and culture. Outside the safety of the cinema screen, for many, the outcome of being misrecognised results in extreme violence or death. This inherent danger is horrifyingly and particularly true in the case of trans women of colour globally, whose bodies are constantly hyper visible; the trans sex worker who is scrutinised and put under daily surveillance; those who never have the luxury of being able to hide; the legions of brave trans women of colour who are the pioneers of the present-day trans struggle – the trans women of colour who are both hyper visible on trans day of remembrance, but often erased and neglected by a transgender movement that they started in the beginning.

When critiquing a film it is essential to be aware of the appropriation of the narratives that belong to marginalised groups which, due to various social inequalities, have not

always been afforded the opportunity to attain a position of power that would allow them to publicly tell and record their own histories and narratives on film.

To not simply keep repeating or mimicking the oppressive hierarchies that exist within the educational system, the predominantly white, Western curriculum, and the academic industrial complex, I think it is imperative to find radical ways to engage with, uncover, and recognise such narratives. I have tried to structure this thesis throughout in way that supports my own belief in the importance of enacting an ideology of accountability within my work as an academic researcher in a self-critical way. The idea of a respectful collaborative process of excavation, rather than one of claiming and appropriating marginal narratives, is an important idea in this thesis and underlies the way in which I have approached writing about the tomboy. For instance, this awareness has made me conscious of the way that I think and write about the temporality of childhood (particularly when writing about marginalised children and childhoods) because I write from the privileged perspective of an adult in a Western country. It has been imperative that the process of writing this thesis has been one of collaborating with the tomboys in these texts instead of simply consuming their stories. I have tried to listen to the tales of tomboys, whose experiences are often lived on the margins, in the hope of becoming something of an accomplice to them, following where their narratives lead me instead of the other way around.

How the Marginalised Tomboy Functions in a Narrative: Lessons Learnt From Texts Examined

I have discovered that the marginalised tomboy has a variety of functions within a

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narrative. This tomboy character is an archetype that works to continually subvert the seemingly normative social narratives in which it appears; regardless of historical or cultural context this tomboy disrupts assumptions about class, race, gender, sexuality and age. Quimby sums up the continued function of this powerful anarchic, and ambiguous character perfectly: "Because the tomboy is unhinged from and in turn unhinges the fiction that gender identity is natural, she in many ways only reveals in the extreme what is true of all children: that the possibilities of identification and desire are vast, perverse, and ultimately unmanageable" (Quimby, 2016: 2).

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