Research Article

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A Tale of Two Trans Men: Transmasculine Identity and Trauma in Two Fairy-Tale Retellings

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Abstract: Transgender identities in fairy tale retellings are rare, but can reveal much about gender fluidity. Helen Oyeyemi's novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* conflates transgender identities with mirrored falsehoods and fairy-tale spells, pathologizing a trauma victim who turns out to also become an abuser, while Gabriel Vidrine's novella "A Pair of Raven Wings" depicts a queer transgender man with dignity, making it clear that the trauma he suffers is at the hands of bigots rather than being an invention of a sick mind or the cause of his transition. Pairing these fairy-tale retellings illuminates the topic of gender fluidity in fairy tales by demonstrating that gender is indeed fluid, but that representations of gender fluidity due to trauma are misguided at best and harmful at worst, while those representations that assert the dignity of transgender people, even as they face trauma at the hands of bigoted people, are another stellar example of the genre's potential to represent people who are culturally marginalized, connecting identity to power in a classic magical fairy-tale move.

Keywords: fairy tales, trauma, transgender

Transgender characters are under-represented in fairy tales and in many facets of expressive culture, even as transgender people in the real world are disproportionately likely to be stereotyped in unrealistic and harmful ways and also to be discriminated against, verbally attacked, and physically harmed, up to and including death. The study of transgender representations and experiences in both lived and literary/ artistic worlds lingers behind the prominence of studies devoted to, and general social acceptance of, cisgender identities that are not heterosexual (those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and generally queer-identified). It is unclear why the validation and exploration of transgender identities has been slower than that of non-heterosexual cisgender identities. The point remains, however, that in various locations both within and outside the academy, the LGB and sometimes Q have received more attention than the T of the acronym representing diversity in gender and sexuality. This is also the case in fairy-tale studies and fairy-tale retellings; there are far more adaptations exploring "What if such a character experiences same-sex attraction?" than "What is such a character is transgender?"

There are of course some exceptions, even in oral tradition, like the existence of ATU 514, "The Shift of Sex" (explored in Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire, and in Ready in this volume) and other tales that have utilized motifs of cross-dressing and gender play. The contributors to the 2012 volume *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* make use of not just feminist theory and queer theory, but also specifically transgender theory and studies (Turner and Greenhill). On the whole, however, adaptations have been quicker to assert the existence of same-gender desire in fairy tales than the existence of transgender identities. Novels

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by Malinda Lo and Kalynn Bayron pair Cinderella-like characters with female lovers, and in "The Tale of the Shoe," Emma Donoghue does the same, while in other stories (e.g., "The Tale of the Rose"), she explores female same-gender pairings mapped onto both traditional and original fairy-tale plots.

In this article, I analyze two retellings that feature transgender characters, "Snow White" (ATU 709) by Helen Oyeyemi in her novel Boy, Snow, Bird, and Gabriel D. Vidrine's "A Pair of Raven Wings" (ATU 451). The main characters in both stories are transgender men. In order to understand how transmasculine identities are portrayed in fairy-tale retellings, I argue that Oyeyemi and Vidrine utilize trauma to articulate their characters' gender-queerness in ways that alternately reinforce and shatter negative stereotypes about transgender people. Trauma is, in the words of renowned trauma researcher Bessel Van der Kolk, "by definition, unbearable and intolerable" (1); it "produces actual physiological changes" that can compromise "the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive" (2-3). In other words, trauma is potentially any experience of an existential threat, whether to oneself or that one witnesses, that can have a lasting impact on the person's brain and body. While Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a well-known trauma diagnosis, trauma responses vary beyond those recognizable when it comes to sets of traits, even as they remain generally patterned. Human brains evolved to recognize and deflect threats, and thus we all have the potential to experience trauma and encode it into our future behaviors. As far as expressive genres that reflect human experience go, fairy tales do not show one's suffering with much depth or as much of detail; Max Lüthi famously claims: "mutilations call forth no expressions of physical or psychological suffering. Tears are only shed if this is important for the development of the plot" (13). Thus, it is notable that even if canonical or traditional fairy tales do not typically dwell on the experience or symptoms of trauma (and this point too may be disputed), fairy-tale retellings like the ones I analyze here make trauma the centerpiece of not just their plots, but of their transgender characters' experiences and identities.

Oyeyemi's "Snow White" retelling and Vidrine's "A Pair of Raven Wings" focus on different tale types but both feature a trans man among their main characters. However, these are diametrically opposed in the sense that one is the antagonist as the other is the hero. The adaptation of "Snow White" (ATU 709) in Helen Oyeyemi's novel Boy, Snow, Bird features a villainous father figure, Boy's father Frank, who turns out to be a trans man who transitioned after giving birth to Boy, and who was a victim of such intense sexual trauma that transitioning seemed to be the only option. In contrast, the eponymous maiden in Vidrine's retelling of ATU 451, "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers," is indeed the sister of the brothers who have been turned into ravens, but she is not the story's only protagonist; she is accompanied on her quest by the viewpoint character (and as I argue, the main character), a trans man who is the lover of one of the missing brothers. Each story utilizes trauma differently in relation to the transgender identities as well: Oyeyemi posits that it was trauma that made Frank trans, which is a grossly inaccurate way of representing both the aftereffects of trauma and the underpinnings of most people's reasons for transitioning. In contrast, Vidrine presents a trans character who suffers trauma both to be reunited with his lost lover and as an extension of the transphobia of those around him. While there has been little critique of Oyeyemi's transphobic representation (see Lau for a brief note and Jorgensen forthcoming for a more extensive analysis), I demonstrate that, especially in contrast with a more positive depiction of a trans masculine identity in fairy-tale retellings, misunderstandings of transgender identities remain rampant in popular culture.

And this matters for a number of reasons, not least among them the fact that famed children's literature author J. K. Rowling has posted numerous transphobic arguments which are now being quoted in political decisions to restrict LGBTQ + rights ("GOP Senator Quotes J. K. Rowling While Blocking Vote on LGBTQ Bill"). This confluence illustrates that the realms of fairy tale and fantasy are not so far apart from reality as some may think, and thus it is crucial to better understand the meanings and implications of transgender identities in fairy-tale retellings, not simply whether or not they are "accurate" but whether they represent what is known from both scholarship and lived experience of transgender identities, which remain frequently misunderstood if not outright distorted.

Situating Trans Identities Within and Surrounding Fairy Tales

The scholarship on transgender identities in fairy tales remains sparse, even as transgender people in real life face disproportionate scrutiny and violence. We know this in part thanks to work in other disciplines (such as gender, women's and sexuality studies) and realms of activism wherein transgender experiences are not only studied but also validated (in contrast to scholarly approaches such as psychological ones that pathologize transgender identities, and this is not entirely a thing of the past). Thus, it is common in the scarce writings on transgender identities and experiences in fairy-tale studies to see references to previous scholarship done from a disciplinary home base of feminist or queer studies, or the more recent trans studies, for example.

Scholarship does not operate in a vacuum, and thus it is important to take into account data about the lives of transgender people. Depictions of transgender people more broadly, such as in the US/North American media, are often distorted, with a focus on trans women over trans men as well as heightened attention to pathology. Queer scholar Em McAvan notes: "Transsexual and transgendered people have long been a figure of fascination and disgust in our culture, typically being analyzed as pathological in medical and psychological discourse, or in sensationalist fashion in the media" (40). Further, McAvan draws on the pioneering work of Julia Serano to distinguish between two main tropes in media representation, "the deceptive transsexual" and "the pathetic transsexual" while also echoing Serano's assertion that cisgender people (people who identify with the sex and/or gender assigned to them at birth) often fixate on the supposed inferiority of the gender identity of transgender people, as though it were fake or inauthentic (40). Transgender people do comprise a small part of the population, but they tend to be either made invisible in policies and research, or hyper-visible in policies that misconstrue their will and ability to harm others. Simultaneously, they suffer from a multitude of oppressive acts, and skewing largely towards violence and visibility towards trans women, and the invisibility of trans men. As Julia Serano notes: "the media tends to not notice – or outright ignore – trans men because they are unable to sensationalize them the way they do trans women without bringing masculinity itself into question" (46). Many of the above tropes play out most visibly and most violently when it comes to trans women; trans men are often ignored in popular culture. This may be due in part to the clinical pathways available to trans people; as Zowie Davy's review of psychiatric approaches to transgender populations shows, classic sexological work from the 1960s "described an affirmative treatment pathway, and identified a typology that distinguished the 'true' male-to-female transsexual from the transvestite and the homosexual, establishing a type of person who required physical changes to their bodies in order to fully express their gender identity" (Davy 1167), a model that had to be adapted for use by "the rare transmen" who also wished "to access gender realignment technologies" (1167). Globally, there are activists working for trans people to be "legally recognized and... given access to healthcare despite psychiatry being removed as the gatekeeper" (Davy 1174). The persistent association of transgender identities with pathologization and medical gatekeeping has thus been harmful, both for those seeking access to social and medical transition and in terms of the representation of transgender people as sick or disturbed in the media and popular culture.

Data collection on the real-life experiences of transgender people faces some challenges due to the shifting nature of their identities, the hurdles they face in obtaining proper legal documentation, and the very nature of discrimination against them that often causes them to be impoverished, making it difficult to track them for the purposes of taking surveys. The 2015 US Transgender Survey nevertheless obtained data from over 27,000 respondents, with findings that include stark figures of discrimination and violence: nearly half of all respondents were sexually assaulted in their lifetimes, also facing higher rates of intimate partner violence than the mainstream US population; nearly one-third experienced homelessness at some point in their lives; one-sixth reported losing a job because of their gender identity or expression, with unemployment rates being three times higher than the US population rates; and 40% have attempted suicide in their lifetime, which is nine times the rate of the US population (James et al.). It is essential to apply an intersectional lens to this analysis as well; as the Human Rights Campaign notes, in 2019 and 2020 multiple transgender people were murdered (27 deaths in 2019 and at least 44 deaths in 2020). And while "the details of these cases differ; it is clear that fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women

of color – particularly Black transgender women" ("Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2020"). Thus, while the transgender population in North America is being discriminated against – up through and including murder – at a higher rate than the general population, it is crucial to keep in mind that the experience is often far more dire for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color and those already facing prejudice and hardship through poverty.

The landmark work on queer and trans identities, sexualities, and genders in fairy tales remains Turner and Greenhill's edited book Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms. In their introduction, Turner and Greenhill lament: "It's sometimes hard to fathom how extensive has been the absenting and denial of queer and trans culture readings in folklore studies" (12). They specifically bemoan the under-researching of trans topics in folklore studies (16), though they note that cross-dressing in fairy tales has always received a fair bit of attention. However, of the 13 essays in the volume, only a handful explicitly deal with transgender characters and topics: most of the essays apply queer theory to traditional fairy-tale characters and plots as well as recent and innovative retellings, or focus on same-gendered desires that also fall under the queer umbrella. Similarly, a search of the fairy-tale studies journal Marvels & Tales over the past 20 years (in digitized form on Project Muse, which includes issues from 2001 to the present), only yields around a dozen hits for the term "transgender." In these nine articles, and one special issue introduction, a book review, and a film review, transgender experiences are not centered, instead being mentioned under the heading of other queer theories and texts. There is, for instance, a provocative hypothesis that some of Hans Christian Andersen's works evince not only potential homosexual inclinations (same-gendered sexual or romantic desires) but also transgender imagination, wherein Andersen or one of his characters might wish to inhabit another gender, and in the case of "The Little Mermaid," another species (Carlson 91–95; Greenhill 116–123). However, none of these analyses centered on the discussion of transgender imagination or potential; none of the dozen works were specifically about transgender characters in fairy tales. In a parallel vein, the book chapter "Trans Magic: The Radical Performance of the Young Wizard in YA Literature" does not actually analyze any transgender wizard characters in YA fiction (much of which draws on fairy-tale motifs and themes, hence the relevance here). There are many cisgender characters who "queer" gender in a variety of ways, but not many transgender characters in these genres to discuss (Battis 325-326). Obviously, one cannot fault scholars for not working on texts that do not exist, or which are sparse, but it is worth noting that in contemporary fairy-tale scholarship, discussions of gender fluidity tend to be based more on the flux of gendered experiences from a cisgender perspective rather than transgender perspectives.

There are multiple ironies of the scholarly situation regarding trans-ness in fairy tales. First, fairy tales are notorious for featuring cross-dressing, from the wolf dressed as Grandmother in "Little Red Riding Hood" (ATU 333) to the female warriors ranging from Straparola's "Costanza/Costanzo" and Madame d'Aulnoy's "Belle Belle" to Disney's *Mulan*. Obviously, one should not conflate temporary cross-dressing with being transgender, but these instances of gender fluidity receive plenty of attention in the scholarship (see for example articles on these female cross-dressing warriors by Trinquet du Lys; Li) and are seen as valid choices. The cross-dressed lead characters in fairy-tale pantomime theater in England constitute another example of gender fluidity in fairy tales, one that is generally accepted by audiences as transgressive enough to be funny but not actually threatening (see Schacker).

In terms of fairy-tale retellings, adaptations, and adjacent literary genres that portray transgender characters, there are a handful of source texts beyond the ones I consider here as my main case studies. Seanan McGuire's work is notable in that she has written multiple transgender characters spread across her series; her fairy-tale mystery adventure series *Indexing* (based on the premise that the tale type index is real, and that people who have had close encounters with it use it to track down other narrative incursions into our world) features a transgender character, Gerry. He had started as a Rose Red to the protagonist's Snow White, and upon transitioning, the narrative had left him (mostly) alone. In two of McGuire's other series, which are a bit farther afield from fairy-tale retellings but still incorporate many motifs and themes from folktales, fairy tales, and folklore more broadly, there are also transmasculine characters: Kade in *The Wayward Children* YA portal fantasy series and Walter in the *October Daye* urban fantasy series. Both these characters and Gerry from the *Indexing* books are treated in very matter-of-fact ways, their gender being explained as something they knew from the start and took steps to socially and medically remedy when

they were able to (or to magically remedy, it is hinted with other characters). As Henry, the *Indexing* protagonist, explains to an interlocutor about her brother: "Gerry had always been male: that it was his body, not his brain, which was in error" (*Indexing: Reflections* 13). While this causes other characters (including Henry and Gerry's adoptive father) to treat Gerry with some prejudice, the author seems to treat these transgender characters as simply being human and worthy of dignity. Their problems arise from other plot factors, as when the Narrative in *Indexing* tries to grab Gerry and use him as a Hansel in a "Hansel and Gretel" (ATU 327A) set-up. This affirms his masculine identity without question (and luckily the plot is thwarted). Beyond McGuire's many transgender characters, examples are few and far between. The two tales studied here are particularly representative of trauma in transgender identities, something that is not especially the focus in McGuire's texts, and these examples are thus instructive.

Transgender Identity in Boy, Snow, Bird

Oyeyemi's novel, set in New York City and New England in the 1950s, follows a few different protagonists, starting with Boy, a woman who escapes an abusive father and strikes out on her own, eventually marrying and having to deal with a stepchild (Snow) and a child (Bird). Boy's loquacious best friend, Mia, eventually traces the whereabouts of Boy's mother, and learns that Boy's mother Frances actually transitioned and became known as Boy's father Frank due to the trauma of the rape that led to Boy's conception. While Frank's subplot is peripheral to the story as a whole, which is more involved with the family Boy marries into, the novel seems to be (mis)using a trans passing narrative to make a larger comment about a racial passing narrative, drawing a parallel between how Frank is (secretly) a woman and the family Boy marries into is (secretly) Black. However, as we will see, this does an injustice to the reality of transgender identities and misunderstands the role trauma may play in the lives of transgender people.

Trauma bookends the abuse that Frank, the rat catcher, experienced in his former life as Frances, and the abuse that Frank inflicts on his daughter Boy (whose name, indeed, could be read as wishful thinking on Frank's part: a performative utterance shifting the daughter's identity into more masculine territory). Thanks to Mia's investigation, Boy is able to learn about how after the rape, Frances "looked in the mirror one morning when he was still Frances, and this man she'd never seen before was just standing there, looking back" (303). Frances became Frank, traumatized into a social transition, though notably Frank sought but never followed through with medical transition, due to being "afraid of dying on the physician's table" (304). As a trans man, Frank's demeanor was cruel and vicious. Before Boy decides to move out, she recalls the constant unprovoked assaults: "He'd hit me when I didn't flinch at the raising of his arm, and he'd hit me when I cowered" (7). The physical abuse characterized Boy's childhood and influenced her decision to move out. Frank was especially punitive when Boy went out with a boy, or asserted herself; in retrospect, the reader might wonder if Frank was trying to protect Boy from the fate of Frances, who was raped. Thus, Frank is presented as steeped in trauma: his identity originates from it, and he perpetuates it.

Mia is more accepting of Frank's gender identity than Boy is; when Mia continues to use masculine pronouns to return to him, Boy protests: "Stop calling her 'him.' You're telling me my mother has been desperately ill for decades and I'm fighting like hell to take it in, but you've got to stop calling her 'him'" (304). Boy continues to fixate on the idea that Frances is still inside Frank, buried beneath years of masculine living. As evidence, Boy refers to an encounter when, late in the novel, Frank comes to the town where she lives and finds her daughter, Bird, and holds a lengthy conversation with her. Whether Frank intends to harm Boy or Bird is unclear; Bird thinks she spotted a syringe in his hand, but does not see it again, and "half believe[s]" that she made it up in the end (260). Bird takes notes on their conversation, and when Frank recounts how Boy was born prematurely (without disclosing his trans status), he says: "A wet nurse came every day – it was the one time in my life I've wished I was a woman" (262). From Bird's perspective as well as the book's audience, since Frank's trans identity has not yet been revealed, this is the wish of a man unable to nurture an infant due to biology; from a perspective sympathetic to the plight of a transgender person, this could be read as wishing to avoid dysphoria, or the uncomfortable sensation of being wrongly

gendered or inhabiting the incorrect gender role. Transgender people report varying degrees of and experiences with dysphoria, but it is generally taken to be unpleasant and an experience to be avoided whenever possible.

But to Boy, reading Bird's notes about the encounter later, one sentence from Frank about wishing he could have nursed her, is evidence that "Frances had wanted to come back" (307). Adding to the novel's use of fairy-tale intertexts, Boy arrives at the conclusion that her parent is under a magic spell, a curse. She asks first her husband and then a friend about how to break a spell, and fixates on the friend's response: "Pester your subject, Boy.... Make the enchantment inconvenient for them, find myriad ways to expose their contentment as false, show them that the contentment is part of the spell, engineered to make it last longer" (308-309). Boy's friend, Alecto Fletcher, is a feisty old woman who owns a bookstore, and it is unlikely she knows the details of the situation Boy is asking about, especially since she called under the pretense of "asking for a friend" (308). It is worth reflecting, though, on whether even a more liberalleaning character like Alecto living in the mid-twentieth century would view being transgender as a spell to be broken, or a valid identity. During this time in the US, trans identities were not yet as visible as they are today, with the notable exception of Christine Jorgensen, the American who went to Denmark in 1950 and returned, in 1953, as a "media sensation" (Meyerowitz 1) as well as a lasting figure in debates about gender, sex, and sexuality. Thus, transgender identities may not have been on Alecto's radar, leaving open the question of whether she would have helped Boy break the "spell" on Frank if she had known what the issue actually was. The notion of a transgender identity being a magic spell subsuming the original identity is, granted, a novel approach to the topic and one that befits a fairy-tale retelling, though it inherently robs the transgender person of the dignity of determining their own identity.

The novel ends with Boy grabbing her children and her friend and going on an adventure to New York City to try to disenchant Frank. As Boy explains: "We're going to New York for a few days...we're going down there to go see somebody. She needs us, I think...And we need her" (315). Clinging to the idea that Frances still lives inside Frank, Boy leads those closest to her on a quest based on the premises that transgender identity is instigated by trauma and that her parent's abusive behavior is worth forgiving. In contrast to many fairy tales, the parent here is worthy of forgiveness rather than punishment; no red hot iron shoes or spiked barrels or pits of vipers await Frank, as far as we know.

Transgender Identity in "A Pair of Raven Wings"

In Vidrine's short story (as of this writing, accepted for publication, which later fell through), the main character, Berin, is a transgender young man in love with Sam, one of the seven cursed brothers turned into ravens. This retelling of ATU 451, "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers," takes place in an expansive fantasy setting, which runs approximately 17,000 words in length, thereby allowing the author to develop the brief references to the Grimms' version of the tale type "The Seven Ravens" into major portions of the plot. This is notable because the transphobia that Berin faces as a trans person and the homophobia he experiences as a queer man become plot points in their own right, and the trauma Berin endures on the quest is transformative both for him personally (in a way that nonetheless validates his trans identity) and also transforms the outcome of his quest into a success. He leans into his trauma, heroically sacrificing himself to save his lover, and in the process magically achieving a full transition to manhood.

Because this is such a lengthy and imaginative retelling, and because at the time of this writing it is not publicly available, I will summarize it in a bit more detail than I normally would in an academic article. After Berin loses Sam to the transformation into a raven, he is put into a magical sleep for 15 years by a mysterious donor figure, who tells him that now, years later, he is in a position to actually break the curse. Berin wanders and finds the household where Sam and his brothers were raised. He stays the night with Sam's parents, and meets Sam's younger sister, Sosanna, whose birth led to the curse. Sosanna accompanies Berin on his quest to find the seven brothers. They go to the Land of the Sun, which is patriarchal and hostile. Next, they journey to the Land of the Moon, which initially seems welcoming because it is more

matriarchal. However, the women there strip Berin of his masculine clothing and continually mis-gender him, causing Berin and Sosanna to run away, and Berin to have a breakdown. After Sosanna affirms Berin's true gender as masculine, they are able to continue their quest. When they reach the Land of the Stars, they find a caring society that is accepting of gender fluidity and same-gendered attraction. The rulers there caution Berin and Sosanna that accessing the glass mountain where the seven ravens live will require a sacrifice of flesh. Sosanna offers to cut off her smallest finger, but Berin convinces her to cut off his breasts. This gains them access to the mountain, but Berin nearly bleeds to death before the ravens reappear. His lover, Sam, uses his last moments as an enchanted raven to envelop Berin in his wings, and as a result, Berin's chest wound heals, leaving scars in the shape of raven wings. Reunited, the lovers decide to stay in the Land of the Stars and create a new home together.

Berin's experiences as a trans man in a fairy-tale land are filled with much of the same transphobia that transgender people experience in our world; the mere existence of magical transformations does not mean that gender transformations are positively regarded. For example, when Berin and Sosanna go to the Land of the Moon, the women there traumatize Berin by mis-gendering him, going so far as to remove his binder and dress him in women's clothing. When Berin explains that he is a boy, the woman tending to him gives him a look that is "a mix of pity and revulsion" (28). She states: "We can see that there is something wrong with you...We want to help you...You are not a boy. You need to understand that, child. What you are doing is harming yourself" (31). This is a common expression of transphobia: a pathologizing move that sees it as a sickness. As noted above, being transgender is listed in the DSM (the Diagnostic Statistical Manual, used by psychologists and psychiatrists to diagnose patients with a variety of mental illnesses), though the diagnosis was downgraded in the fifth (and most recent edition) from Gender Identity Disorder (GID) to Gender Dysphoria (GD). This is in one sense a less pathologizing adjustment, as it implies that the disorder lies not in having a different gender identity than the one assigned at birth but rather in the dysphoria or discomfort caused by being transgender in a hostile world; however, as some scholars and advocates argue, "the semantic change from GID to GD in the DSM-5 will not lessen the perceived harms done by what they term psychiatric pathologization and its related stigmatization" (Davy 1166). This detour to a real-world psychiatric manual serves to demonstrate that transphobia will likely exist wherever strict binary gender roles are upheld as normal and ideal, even in a fantastic setting like Vidrine's fairy-tale retelling.

Additionally, homophobia intensifies the transphobia Berin faces, and is implicated in the disappearance of the seven brothers. When Berin, who had fallen into a magical sleep for 15 years after the brothers' transformation, finds their parents' house, where their little sister Sosanna also lives, he asks what happened, and the mother answers: "We feared for our little girl, our baby Sosanna. We had sent our sons out to find herbs and water for her, but they did not return. They were wicked and lazy, so we cursed them, and they never returned" (Vidrine 7). This is drawn directly from ATU 451, especially the Grimms' version "The Seven Ravens," which has a single father sending his sons for baptismal water. When they lose the pitcher in the well:

[T]heir father grew impatient and said, "Those wicked boys must have forgotten what I sent them to do! They're probably playing games again." He was afraid that his daughter might die without being baptized, and in his anger he exclaimed, "I wish those boys would all be turned into ravens!" (Grimm and Grimm 91)

Notably, the father in the Grimms' version gives the curse but both parents are implicated: "It was too late for the parents to revoke the curse" (91). In the same way, Vidrine's retelling places the blame on both parents, but it is not until a future conversation with Sosanna that Berin learns that there is an additional dimension to the brothers' "wickedness." Sosanna suspects that Berin and her brother Sam were more than friends, and when prodded, confesses that: "I heard...some things about some of my brothers. From the other villagers" which included "That they were wicked, just like my parents said" (13). Merely being called wicked does not connote being gay, but this connotation is confirmed in later conversations, where Berin confesses his feelings about Sam to Sosanna and she reflects: "My parents would say it was wicked" (8). When Sosanna and Berin face mounting challenges in their quest, they argue, and Sosanna snaps at Berin: "It was because of you and Samurel that my parents cursed my brothers. They said they were wicked, and

maybe you were" (45). Thus, the word "wicked" definitely connotes same-gendered attraction in this tale, and even though Sosanna later apologizes for her words, it is clear that in Vidrine's worldbuilding, homophobia abounds. As a trans man who is attracted to men, Berin is targeted on both fronts, and thus is intersectionally impacted by the bigoted beliefs of those around him.

Berin's traumatic experiences compound on the journey: the mis-gendering he experiences in the Land of the Moon leaves him shaken, barely functional. He follows Sosanna around "like a lost dog" and broods "in silence" (41). It is only when he and Sosanna argue, and he emotionally breaks down, nearly disavowing his trans identity and dead-naming himself just because it would be easier than the constant struggle to live his true gender, that he has a breakthrough. He voices the fear that "my parents...everyone else...none of them will accept me" (45). Sosanna proclaims that she does, and Samurel does, which provides the catharsis and validation that reaches Berin through his trauma: "His knees hit the forest floor, and he screamed out his pain for all the world to hear. He tore at his hair, but Sosanna grabbed him and held him until all he could do was rock back and forth, the pain spilling out of him like water from a tipped-over cup" (45). Bolstered by this cathartic moment made possible by Sosanna's uncritical validation of his identity, Berin finds the strength to continue their journey, and then to self-inflict physical trauma in order to heroically disenchant Samurel and the rest of the brothers. Thus, in this retelling, trauma is a sad side effect of being transgender in a world that mostly rejects gender fluidity, though enduring trauma also strengthens Berin to help him find the resolve to finalize the disenchantment of the brothers.

Traumatic Transformations, Transgender Identities

Comparing the role that trauma plays in these two retellings helps illuminate links between transgender identities and trauma, links which are sometimes a part of popular messaging yet ultimately incorrect. Further, these links are worth investigating from a fairy-tale studies perspective, due to the increasing body of work and interest in both trauma in fairy tales (see D'Amore) and in gender fluidity in fairy tales (after all, no one is proposing that the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" cross-dresses as the grandmother because he has a trauma history). In this section, I use scholarship from transgender studies and transgender advocates alongside trauma studies to illuminate one another and describe their relevance to fairy tales; further, I utilize monster theory, which has mixed implications for how to approach these fairy-tale retellings.

What, then, is the connection, if any, between trauma and being transgender? While that large question is outside the scope of this article, as serious scholars are still learning why some people are transgender while others remain cisgender, and what role trauma plays in all this, it is worth noting that many transgender people experience trauma simply by virtue of being transgender, due to the fact that we live in a highly transphobic society. According to the Trauma Institute & Child Trauma Institute, transgender children show symptoms of PTSD and related syndromes at alarmingly high rates; 41% of transgender children have attempted suicide. However, pathological experiences are not occurring inherently due to being transgender, but rather as a result of "the shaming, bullying, and discrimination that has been visited upon the child" ("Is Being a Transgender Child Traumatic?"). This is similar to Berin's experience in the Land of the Moon, where the inhabitants of that land traumatize him because they refuse to accept his gender identity. This is unfortunately a common response; as Jody Norton writes, the possibility of transgender children's existence is firmly rejected due to the power structures in place: "According to the hysterical logic of transphobia, insofar as transgendered persons do not accommodate themselves to a heterocentric ideology of gender that interprets reproductive functions as the naturalized basis of differential power relations, they must be made to do so" (294). Berin did not accommodate the women in the Land of the Moon's gendered expectations, so they punished him and tried to force him to conform.

One popular misunderstanding is that trauma causes someone to become transgender; this belief may have originated from the nineteenth-century sexological writings that pathologized "deviant" sexualities and sought explanations for their occurrence in origin stories that account for the deviance with trauma. While those writers were more concerned with homosexuality and transvestism than with transgender

identities, that model remains intact. For instance, a psychologist blogging at a Catholic website claims: "When we investigate the childhood of the man who believes he is a woman, we often see what attachment theorists call an 'intense but insecure maternal attachment'" and "The term that psychoanalysts use to describe this profound insecurity is 'abandonment-annihilation trauma'" (Nicolosi). Thus, early life trauma is posited to be at the root of a transgender identity (though, oddly, only for assigned-male-at-birth trans women; trans men are neglected in this analysis). To take another example, Ryan Anderson, author of a book that criticizes the transgender acceptance movement, includes interviews with people who have chosen to detransition upon realizing that trauma was at the root of their original transition: "Crash rejects the idea that she was a boy trapped in a girl's body. Instead, she says she wanted to identify as a boy because of personal trauma and a misogynistic culture" (38). The people that Anderson interviewed largely "detransitioned because they didn't find the peace and wholeness they desired by changing their bodies, but did find it when they were able to address past trauma in their lives and come to a better understanding of gender" (35).

However, although the scientific literature on detransition experiences is quite small (discussed in Hildebrand-Chupp), according to one study, only around 1% of transgender people choose to detransition, often for reasons surrounding the transphobia they experience once they are "out" as trans (Davies et al.). Thus, when transphobes point to early-life trauma as *the* cause of transphobia while making it seem as though detransition is more common than it is, they are perpetuating misinformation. One noted transaffirming clinician, Diane Ehrenseft, remarks that "There are also children who suddenly show up with a gender issue after a trauma and with no previous history of gender bending" (222); however, these cases seem rare. The link between trauma and gender dysphoria still remains unclear, and in any event, there are enough transgender people with reasons for transitioning *not* tied to trauma that the link must not be accepted as established fact.

The potential for transgender bodies to be viewed as monstrous is sometimes used as an explanation for why those inhabiting trans bodies experience such increased violence and assault. Drawing on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory, McAvan suggests: "The construction of transgendered bodies as culturally monstrous is in dialogue with other monstrosities with which they have no necessary or even logical connection - homosexuality, 'cross' dressing, child abuse - since as we know, most child abusers are straight men, as are those who cross dress for sexual pleasure, and while there are of course gay trans people this is hardly a certainty" (44). Oyeyemi portrays Frank as monstrous in this way: certainly, Frank's mistreatment of Boy constitutes child abuse, which reinforces his (potential) status as a straight man given the statistics mentioned above. Frank just happens to be a straight man who is also trans; Boy remembers him having a "lady friend" who leaves when he becomes too abusive (Oyeyemi 6). Frank is monstrous in other ways as well; he tracks down his granddaughter, Bird, and threatens her, holding a syringe (which Bird later wonders if she imagined) against her body, as though to drug and kidnap her (Oyeyemi 255; 260). Further aligning himself with monsters, Frank talks extensively to Bird about rats: how he was bitten on the face by one when younger and how the bites of rats are particularly incisive. He said this last bit while reading "from a little suede-covered book...the book was falling apart onto the tabletop, and the pages he was reading from didn't have any print on them" (260), hinting that Frank is senile or mentally unstable or otherwise trying to intimidate Bird by making up frightening facts about rat bites.

In fairy-tale logic, however, reading Frank as a monstrous mother instead of a monstrous father is almost persuasive, in terms of Oyeyemi convincing the reader to align with her portrayal of Frank as a very sick person who is under a spell rather than actually transgender. This serves to demonstrate just how insidious transphobia is in constructing narratives that discount the lived experience of transgender people. *Boy, Snow, Bird* is at least partially a "Snow White" retelling, albeit with shifting roles as Boy is herself snow-white with a "bloodless" complexion (4) yet also acquires a stepdaughter of her own, Snow, with whom to have a complicated relationship. As Lau states: "the reader is never quite certain who fills which role," listing ways in which all three titular characters sometimes occupy the role of Snow White (374). Given these intertextual references, one might expect that Boy has her own evil stepmother who torments her. But she only has an abusive father...until late in the narrative when she learns of her father's trans status, at least. This casts a new light back on an earlier interaction, one that occurred before Boy

decided to leave New York in the book's beginning, but which is recounted midway through the novel. After Boy goes on a date with Charlie Vacic, who's been courting her, Frank taunts her with Charlie's words: "So you're a beauty, hey" (126)? When Boy demurs, he slaps her and tells her to say she's ugly, which she does. Then he drugs her and ties her up in the basement. He dangles a rat in front of her face and says: "There is no exquisite beauty without strangeness in the proportion, is that not so? Let's fix it so that Charlie is truly mesmerized by you. Let's fix it so that he stares" (127). Ultimately, Frank does not have rats scar up Boy's face, but the threat remains.

I would argue that the threat is not simply that of a father trying to protect a daughter from sexual attention, but also that of a (wicked) mother competing against a rival in beauty. Fathers in fairy tales are often hostile towards their daughters – think of the incestuous fathers in ATU 510B, "Donkeyskin" or "The Dress of Gold, Silver, and Stars," or the overly passionate fathers who exile daughters in folkloric versions of ATU 923, "King Lear," also known as "Love Like Salt" – but these fathers rarely actually harm their daughters. Oddly, more common is for a daughter to self-harm or at least strip herself of femininity in order to escape a father's clutches (as happens in many versions of ATU 510B where the protagonist dons disgusting and sometimes masculinizing clothing, and in the Danish variant of ATU 514 that Psyche Ready discusses, in which she cuts off her breasts to escape her father's incestuous desires before experiencing a sex change and becoming a man; see Ready, "Transitioning"). But Oyeyemi has set us up to see Frank as a fairy-tale mother, not a father: once seen through the lens of "Snow White," once we know that Frank is a trans man, it is difficult to shake this intertextual resonance of a fairy-tale mother deliberately trying to scar her rival in beauty, even though it goes against Frank's own gender identity.

Oyeyemi establishes Frank's (questionable, in her portrayal) trans identity in one more way, using one more fairy-tale motif: the magic mirror. In the book's opening paragraph Boy says: "Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy" (3). Lau identifies the mirror as affiliated with the figure of the trickster (387), contending that both blur the boundaries between reality and reflection. Indeed, Boy may be an unreliable narrator, and she is at times unlikeable, demonstrating how she elides the roles of Snow-White figure and Wicked Stepmother figure. Much later, when Mia learns of Frank's transition, she tells Boy:

You know how Frank says he became Frank? He says he looked in the mirror one morning when he was still Frances, and this man she'd never seen before was just standing there, looking back. Frances washed her face and fixed her hair and looked again, and the man was still there, wearing an exact copy of her skirt and sweater. He said one word to her to announce his arrival. What he did was, he flicked the surface of his side of the mirror with his finger and thumb and he said: "Hi." After that he acted just like a normal reflection, otherwise she would've felt like she had to go to a psychiatrist and complain about him (303).

Having already established that mirrors are untrustworthy, this lays the groundwork to be dubious about Frank's transition occurring through a mirror. Further, the impetus for the transition is established as external – first, the rape, and then the man in the mirror – in contrast to the impetus for Berin's transition being internal. Berin knew his gender identity early on (not as a result of trauma), and though it caused friction in his family of origin, he clung to his identity, going so far as to leave his home when they refused to accept him: "The last person who had dared call him a girl was his father, who had thrown him out when he demanded his family treat him as they treated his brother, and not his sisters" (Vidrine 28). While there is magic in "A Pair of Raven Wings," the magic validates Berin's identity rather than, as the mirror does with Frank, calling it into question as external and possibly fickle.

While Lau identifies Bird as the main trickster figure in the novel (384), I would thus assert that author Oyeyemi is playing the biggest trick of all: inserting a transgender character into a fairy-tale role that overwhelms the reader with the weight of intertextuality and thus conditions the reader to reject gender fluidity in favor of gender normativity. Put another way, Oyeyemi's careful construction of narrative subsumes any gender fluidity that her trans character might have experienced (a transformation from woman to man) in favor of a normative displacement of gender onto biology: Frank, in Oyeyemi's crafted world, is and always has been Frances, as evidenced in part by the fairy-tale logic that crafts Frances as a damsel in distress under a spell and that requires a wicked (step)mother to Boy's "Snow White" figure. Frank's

fixation on Boy's beauty – and destroying it – is one more narrative piece of evidence that Frank's experience of gender fluidity has apparently only been temporary and superficial; there is, according to Boy, still a Frances under the spell, a mother who "had wanted to come back" (307). Boy's insistence that she and her daughters go rescue the enchanted Frances inverts the "Snow White" tale's emphasis on competition between women into what Lau terms a multivocal vision of "female allegiance and play" (388), though the solidarity between women does carry seeds of transphobia, as with Berin's experience with the Women in the Land of the Moon. In Oyeyemi's work, however, I find the use of fairy-tale framing to ensnare the reader into being an accomplice in doubting the gender identity of anyone – let alone a transgender person who has suffered in this narrative while trans people disproportionately suffer in real life – to be distasteful at best, and potentially harmful at worst.

One further point that Oveyemi misrepresents is that being transgender has no direct bearing on one's sexuality. Being trans is a matter of gender identity, or one's own internally held sense of gender. Sexual orientation or attraction is in one sense grounded in one's gender identity, since it is often relational and directs one's erotic energy toward another, presuming that there is a (gendered) self from which to direct the erotic. However, knowing someone's gender identity does not automatically give a clue as to their sexual orientation; statistically, yes, there are more cisgender than transgender people in the world, and there are more heterosexual people than their queer counterparts. But transgender people might be straight, bisexual, gay, asexual, or anything in between. In Boy, Snow, Bird, Boy puzzles over this, trying to recall if she's ever seen anything maternal or feminine in Frank. She recalls: "Through the keyhole of the rat catcher's bedroom door I once saw him place his hand on his girlfriend's calf and slide upward to the top of her thigh. Could I file that under feminine? Yes and no. It was the touch of a lover" (309). Thanks to Mia, Boy learns that Frances (before the rape) had been pursuing a graduate degree, "interested in proving that homosexuality isn't a mental illness" (300), and apparently had numerous female lovers. This, too, seems a move on Oyeyemi's part to assert that there is still an essential feminine self inside Frank, a holdover of that young woman determined to demonstrate that her lesbianism was not something sick. On the flip side, Berin is a transgender man who is attracted to men (it is unclear in the text whether he is bisexual or homosexual), and his sexuality is rather unremarked-upon except for some of the homophobic comments about "wickedness" described above. Allowing transgender people to have sexual expressions that are not cast as deviant or seen as inextricably tied to their trans status seems to be a basic tenet of humanely representing marginalized people in folklore and literature.

Conclusions

As has been said in so many ways, the stories we tell matter, and the representation of characters in them matters too. This is especially the case when said characters are drawn from marginalized, misunderstood, and vulnerable communities and are portrayed in ways that may contribute to further victimization. Fairy tales have long engaged with gender fluidity, but the traditional tale types have had little to say about gender transition, apart from ATU 514. And even then, the gender transition is accidental; the protagonist is happy with the change but did not seek it out. Retellings have picked up this narrative thread – as with others, like queer and non-white identities – but with mixed results. It is understandable that every story needs a villain, but as with Frank in Oyeyemi's novel, perhaps people who are demonized in real life need not be cast as fictional villains, forced to gender transition by their trauma. This is especially disappointing in the current cultural context, when transgender characters are portrayed as so few and far between, and when they do show up in a mainstream retelling, they are portrayed as the villain. For context, it is important to look to the trauma that transgender people undergo daily and understand that it is a real phenomenon with real consequences; in this vein, the retellings such as Vidrine's that make the central plot less about casting doubt on legitimate reasons to be transgender and more about stories of human bravery and sacrifice even in the face of very serious trauma deserve serious attention. Oyeyemi's novel conflates transgender identities with mirrored falsehoods and fairy-tale spells, pathologizing a trauma victim who

turns out to also become an abuser, while Vidrine's novella depicts a queer transgender man with dignity, making it clear that the trauma he suffers is at the hands of intolerant people rather than being an invention of a sick mind or the cause of his transition. Pairing these fairy-tale retellings illuminates the topic of gender fluidity in fairy tales by demonstrating that gender is indeed fluid, but that representations of gender fluidity due to trauma are misguided at best and harmful at worst, while those representations that assert the dignity of transgender people, even as they face trauma at the hands of bigoted people, are another stellar example of the genre's potential to represent people who are culturally marginalized. As many scholars have noted, fairy tales can serve as voices for the disempowered and dispossessed, and genderfluid retellings follow in this tradition of humanizing the Other.

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