Helene Nyheim

Feminist Thought in the Short Form

A Study in the Works of Women Writers in North America from 1971 to 2017

Master's thesis in English Literature
Supervisor: Hanna Musiol
June 2020

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the short form can function as a vehicle for feminist thought. Through the analysis of shorter works written by women in North America from 1971 to 2017, I argue that the form, style, and plot of shorter narratives offer distinct ways of understanding feminist matters, framed by theories of feminism and short fiction. The thesis is structured into two chapters. Chapter 1, "Personal and Autobiographical Features, the Short Form, and Feminist Thought", concentrates on how autobiographical and personal elements affects the texts to prompt feminist discussion, analysing the works of Roxane Gay, Toni Morrison, Joanna Russ, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Chapter 2, "Body Representation in the Short Story", provides different representations of the body, examining topics of motherhood, disability, gendered bodies, and the cyborg body, in the short stories of Anne Finger, Samantha Hunt, Margaret Atwood, and Jennifer Egan.

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Introduction

Emma Young writes in her introduction to her 2018 book *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories,* "[t]he contemporary moment appears to be *the moment* for women short story writers" (*Contemporary Feminism* 1). Indeed, the current time seems to be a great moment to investigate women's short stories to reveal feminist thought and discussions. Through investigation of the field Young discovers how contemporary women's short stories work as a terrific means for revealing "shifting feminist sensibilities" and "gendered subjectivities" (Young *Contemporary Feminism* 1). In today's hectic society, with fast developments and decreasing attention-spans, the short form might be more necessary than ever. At the same time, people are also reading, producing, and engaging with words more than ever before.[1] The short form can make an impact in a matter of a few pages and with stylistic traits such as an epiphany or open endings, incite the reader to reflect on feminist topics. Michael Toolan even contends that the theoretical and critical tradition of the short story has been more inclusive and attentive to women writers and readers, more so than the history of the novel (Winther et al. 159). Accordingly, the short form has been an important vehicle for women to publish their writing when restrictive institutional systems have prevented them from publishing larger works; being able to publish a shorter narrative in a magazine, journal or anthology has been crucial for women to push through patriarchal and exclusive forces in literature. To continue Emma Young's observations, I want to explore a collection of shorter works of writing, expanding it beyond the scope of short stories, written by influential women writers in North America picked from current time and going back to the 70s, to see what these narrative moments can offer the feminist discourse and reflections about women's experiences in the world.[2] I will focus on two larger topics, namely autobiographical or personal elements, and the representation of women's bodies, to explore how these themes, through the medium of the short form, become relevant for feminist discussion.

As these works are examples of the shorter form, the thesis will naturally also analyse the texts through theories on the short form and what it can do for a feminist discourse. To do so,

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[1] Michael Rudin explores some newer experimental short forms that have been created through social media, and points to how our generation are "…reading, writing, editing, distilling, and interpreting the written word more than any generation in history" (Rudin).

[2] This thesis focuses on Anglophone literature and context, but it is written by someone from Norway. In Norway several laws, norms, and a general common idea of equality help women to get the same rights as men in most areas. Although there is still much room for improvement, Norway ranks high on most equality markers worldwide, whilst the United States ranks considerably lower (Guardian's Inequality Project; Hutt). This protects me from several oppressions that are more prone to happen in North America, while also being a woman not living with any categories of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality or other, that are potential factors for discrimination. With this background I will be exploring experiences very different from mine, without saying I have the same experiences or understandings, but hoping to meet them with an open and curious mind.

I employ a variety of theorists and perspectives and engage both with short story theory, but also drawing on narrative theories. Firstly, I have found much inspiration in Emma Young's works on women's short stories. As she writes in the introduction of her 2018 book, "… contemporary women writers have utilised the short story's capacity for narrative and character ambiguity to challenge representations of gendered identity and the boundaries of sexuality; this feature can also perpetuate a more subtle and less militant engagement with feminist politics" (*Contemporary Feminism* 13). I am going to continue Young's argument and examine it in the context of women writers from North America, to explore how they use the short story, as well as essays and personal narratives, with its formal characteristics to discuss and engage in feminist thoughts.[3] Secondly, I draw upon many of Charles E. May's discussions on the short form, for instance, the way content does not dictate the form to strict rules in a short story, but rather creates a structure for bits and pieces of a narrative to fall into, and depending less on realism and long descriptions ("Way of Meaning" 174). Indeed, by inviting the reader to reflect upon the aspects that are not explicitly stated but rather has several possible interpretations, the short form could be a very useful way of discussing feminism in an inclusive and dialogic manner. May also refers to this in how the tradition of the short story focuses on a character's navigations through a critical event instead of following a steady progression of linear time, countering conventional realism ("Way of Meaning" 176). I am going to explore how this is important for shorter writings in general, in that they usually delve into one crucial moment, either in a moment in the life of a character or representing some general reflection of life more implicitly. This concentration allows for a focus on the specific emotions of an event and avoids possible diversions when describing surrounding factors. Finally, Sarah Copland's article aiming to connect short story theory and more general narrative theory (Copland 134-136),[4] has lead me to the insightful and diverse perspectives in *Narrative's* special issue on short fiction, where several theorists well acquainted in the field debate short story theory in dialogue with narrative theory, including Charles E. May, Susan Lohafer and Per Winther[5]. With this in mind, I do not focus on one

[3] Emma Young's work are based mostly around British writers.
[4] Sarah Copland investigates the *Narrative* special issue, but further develops the discussion of the relationship between short story theory, and narrative theory, debating among other why the short story is not deemed a distinctive genre in narrative theory, or why it is only viewed through specific short story theories and not with perspectives from narrative theory also (132-133). In other words, what short story narratives can tell us about human experience and in what ways such narratives shape and expands human comprehension, as narrative theory supports, but also to see the short story with its specific traits and not just a shorter or easier version of a novel.
[5] *Narrative's* issue of May 2012 reflects on the theories of short fiction, with analysis based around Alice Munro's short fiction "Passion". The issue contains articles from Per Winther, Susan Lohafer, Michael Trussler, Michael Toolan and Charles E. May.

specific theory of the short form or short fiction in my study, but rather draw on both traditional and non-essentialist ways of reading the stories throughout, connecting multiple perspectives to better understand the different particularities of these texts and to see their potential for feminist discussion.

The collection of primary sources I am going to explore are five short stories, and three stories that are more nonfictional to different degrees. The texts I will explore in Chapter 1 are "Bad Feminist" by Roxane Gay, Toni Morrison's "What the Black Woman Thinks of the Women's Lib", Joanna Russ's "The Little Dirty Girl" and "Borderlands/La Frontera" by Gloria Anzaldúa. Chapter 2 comprises Anne Finger's "Helen and Frida", Samantha Hunt's "A Love Story", Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg", and finally, "Black Box" by Jennifer Egan. This is naturally not an exhaustive list of women writers in shorter narratives, but they have all contributed to the feminist discourse with their writing, published works in anthologies, magazines and papers, and have all left a memorable mark on the literary field in different ways. The texts are mainly picked from two important periods in feminism, the second,[6] and third (to fourth) wave of feminism.[7] However, I will not discuss the texts chronologically, but argue not only that these texts provide insight and relevance as pieces for historical discussion, but also as useful tools for discussing more general concepts and themes of feminist interest. Consequently, my chapters are structured into the two topics I am going to focus on.

The thesis will be structured into two chapters, namely autobiographical or personal elements, and the representation of women's bodies. I have chosen these two topics because they both undeniably represent very important aspects of feminism and women's experiences and the two topics are both widely represented and have interesting ways of expression

[6] The second wave of feminism, considered to account the feminist movements of the 1960s or early 1970s to the 1990s, was largely revolved around consciousness-raising, and search for equality for women in more arenas than the most basic rights that developed with the first wave of feminism. Differing directions developed in feminism, the more radical views that argued that women's oppression was inevitable in most institutionalized systems in society like marriage or child-rearing, whereas other leanings searched more for a general participation for women in society and equality to men (Thornham 30-31). During this period black women had many issues with the mainstream movements, that were mostly lead by white, middle-class women, but eventually created their own movements, and were likely some of the most important actors of second wave feminism despite their feelings toward the mainstream movements (32). See also Evans, Sara M., and Evans, Judith.

[7] The third wave is thought to develop in the early 1990s, and was in many ways a rebellion to second-wave ideologies, though Claire Snyder argues the third wave could be considered more an approach rather than a time period (175-76, 178-79). However, the third wave is generally characterised by a feminism focusing on multiple perspectives, intersectionality, and inclusiveness, resisting to limit the boundaries of feminism, thus moving away from the discourse of unity from the second wave (175-76). However, some theorists debate that we have moved into a fourth wave of feminism, particularly related to technology and internet's current prominence in society and feminism as such. See for instance Munro, Ealasaid.

through the short form, as well as the many connections between the self and the body. Additionally, the long philosophical and linguistic history demonstrating associations to the subject and the mind as masculine and the body connected to the feminine (Butler *Gender Trouble* 15-17), further intrigues me to explore representations of women's minds and experience, but also the specific experiences that can occur with a female or feminine body.

Chapter 1 will explore four narratives that in different manners have some autobiographical or personal elements incorporated. Here I will analyse the texts of Gay, Morrison, Russ, and Anzaldúa, and through exploring both their plot, form, and autobiographical details, I argue how they in distinct ways serve as good vehicles for feminist discussion. For this topic, Leigh Gilmore's book *Autobiographics* and how she rethinks and connects women, autobiographical and self-representational writings, becomes especially useful. In fact, the chosen texts can be considered aligning more along the lines of Gilmore's "autobiographics", as none of them are conventional autobiographical texts and they are all written by women.[8] Chapter 2 will consider short stories and the theme of body representation and embodiment. Here I will explore the texts of Finger, Hunt, Atwood, and Egan. The four stories deal with the woman body in very different manners and all can be said to comment on aspects relevant to feminism such as disability, motherhood, body expectations or body modifications, as well as looking at the more conceptual aspects of the gendered body and feminism. The chapter will include perspectives such as Judith Butler's highly influential theories on gender and performativity and Donna Haraway's theories, particularly her perspectives connected to a cyborg body. Although Butler's theories on gender and performativity questions binary gender norms and analyses gender more as a social construct not automatically connected to biological sex, I wish to employ her ideas on how identity can be formed and influenced by cultural acts and social expectations of gender and how the literature engages with this through a woman's perspective and experiences, without restricting the lines of who can identify as a woman. Within these two overarching themes, I will also approach other important aspects of feminist discussions, such as gender identity or

[8] Gilmore offers "authobiographics" as a term "to describe those elements of self-representation which are … not content with the literary history of autobiography, those elements that instead mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography—namely, those legalistic, literary, social, and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced" (42), whereas also offering a map for looking at women's self-representational writing, with the history of conventional autobiography usually being connected to male ideals and associations (1-2). As she describes it, autobiographics focuses on interruptions, resistance, and disruption, questioning and finding multiple ways of doing representation, identity and the autobiographical *I,* occurring instead "in the margins of hegemonic discourses" (42).

intersectionality, using different theorists and writers within the field.[9] Women's experiences with personal identity and their bodies has been broadly explored in literature for ages. In what ways does literature and the short form unravel new ways of thinking of identity and how external factors in society affects it? I will hence explore the unique experiences and themes that these shorter narratives provide and through a feminist framework and context focus on their personal elements as well as representations of the body.

[9] Intersectionality is a term that was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw), and it "…emerged from the struggles of second wave feminism as a crucial black feminist intervention challenging the hegemonic rubrics of race, class, and gender within predominantly white feminist frames" (Puar 1002), and it has become a vital perspective in feminism today to understand the complexities of a woman's oppressions and marginalisations.

Chapter 1: Personal and Autobiographical Features, the Short Form, and Feminist Thought

> I am failing as a woman. I am failing as a feminist. To freely accept the feminist label would not be fair to good feminists. If I am, indeed, a feminist, I am a rather bad one. I am a mess of contradictions. There are many ways in which I am doing feminism wrong, at least according to the way my perceptions of feminism have been warped by being a woman. (Gay "Bad Feminist" 314)

These confessional remarks from Roxane Gay encapsulates many of the sentiments of navigating between being a woman and a feminist in society today, but these sentiments are not exclusive to our time. Her essay both addresses the issue of essentialist feminism, but also shares her personal life and experiences with her identity as a feminist and how she still feels like one despite doing some things that might contradict it. Women's literature has depicted narratives of women's and feminists' experiences for a long time, shedding light on the struggles that are unique to women based on cultural ideals, and the short form is a useful arena for it.

Autobiography as a form of writing has undoubtedly been an important medium for feminism in history, although the conventional genre has often had male associations (Gilmore 1-3, 13). Women suffragists who wrote about their own experiences often felt the need to apologize for their egocentrism, as the female personal experience was regarded as less important than that of a man (Joannou 295). Autobiographical narratives are also a way of reading history beyond the personal story of the author, it "leaves a trace in the dense, coagulate field of history rather than exclusively in the life of the writer" (Burton 186). Indeed, autobiography has been a way for women to appear in a history they have otherwise been written out of. Autobiographical or personal narratives is also a way for women to be in dialogue through interpretation; as Carla Kaplan illustrates it, one needs to recognize the mechanisms that silence or invalidate women's voice (11-12), "[t]o identify with other women was then understood as a form—or ethic—of accountability: creating a dialogue between women who, for historical and social reasons, could not be present in the room to share their experiences and stories" (12). Writings by women, and perhaps even more when the author gives some personal elements to their narratives, creates a space for a woman reader, a space that does not exclude her. Burton further describes women's autobiographical work as an archive for political and social histories, as they can detail specific moments in history as well as confronting the tendencies of objectivist and gendered approaches to writing and understanding history (186-187). Writings about personal experience have great historical value despite it being subjective, and one could argue that all written history is subjective in one way or another. In spite of this, autobiography in the most traditional sense has been a

genre associated with male writers and male representation, as females were not associated with individualism, making it hard to interpret women's self-representational writing (Gilmore 1-3). Therefore, Gilmore's term "autobiographics", might better help to categorize and understand the self-representational writings of women, and narratives with similarities to the autobiography that still do not fully fall into the genre.

Likewise, the tradition and the style of the short fiction is suitable in dealing with realities of the mind and the self. May explains the short story's tradition to evolve around matters of the self and the mind, focusing on the "immaterial reality of the inner world of the self in its relation to eternal rather than temporal reality" ("Way of Meaning" 177). Hence, the way in which short stories and other shorter writings use time, creates a natural connection to the autobiographical and personal elements in these narratives. The texts in this chapter also display a variety of emotions, which again makes a story more personal and can potentially create a connection to spark more emotions in the reader. Anger in particular, is a recurring theme, which is an important emotion for feminism and activism in general, both in calling out the injustice women have been through, but also generating activation, determination, and perhaps a feeling a common cause. As an emotion which encourages action instead of passiveness, it is a powerful tool for feminist thought.

Three of the chosen texts in the first chapter are not short stories, but are in varying degree nonfictional, however, they are still written with great artistry and use different styles personal or autobiographical perspective with the stylistic traits that stipulates. Thus, I argue that they are relevant to analyse through the theories revolved mainly around short fiction. For instance, the way brief stories conclude in a particular manner can shape the entire atmosphere of the text; Morrison's incandescent narrating through most of her essay, for example, is concluded with a poetic sentence of hope, whereas Anzaldúa blends fiction and nonfiction in her narrative, telling both stories from her life together with imaginative depictions and language.

I will in this chapter explore four shorter works that all have incorporated some form of autobiographical or personal detail within their narrative. I explore how these authors infuse their narratives with different modes of personal features and first-person perspectives, and how this can in combination with the short form and style communicate something significant to feminist thinking. Beginning with Roxane Gay's personal essay about being a feminist in our time and how she critiques an essentialist feminist mindset in describing her own inadequacies, I then continue to look back in time to an important moment in feminism with Toni Morrison's "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" and how her personal

experience lets her take a strict stance in the feminist debate, for good and bad.[10] From Morrison's important historical essay, I move to the first short story of this thesis with Joanna Russ's "The Little Dirty Girl". Here, only a few details are correlated with the author, but these still play a significant part when analysing her piece, and whilst this is the only short story among mostly nonfictional writings, I want to demonstrate the value of personal representation in a "fully" fictional story. Finally, I will explore Gloria Anzaldúa's "Borderlands/La Frontera". Anzaldúa infiltrates the story with different parts of herself, both in the storyline but also through the language and its form. All these authors represent different backgrounds of geography, ethnicity, sexuality and more, which hopefully gives a broad perspective of women's voices in North America, while by no means representing all.

"Through writing and feminism, I also found that if I was a little bit brave, another woman might hear me and see me and recognize that none of us are the nothing the world tries to tell us we are… I am trying to become better in how I think, and what I say, and what I do, without abandoning everything that makes me human" (Gay "Ted Talk" 10:35-11:08). This TED talk from 2015 captures Gay's wonderful ability to mix humour and self-irony with an important message. I believe what she found through reading other feminists and women's writing is the essence of what literature gives to feminist thought in an inclusive and empowering manner. Through powerful writing from women about women, diminishing and oppressive trends in society are shed light on and fought against, encouraging for progression and improvement. To try to do better as a person and a feminist without losing sense of yourself is the kind of feminism that allows for flaws without excluding those who cannot do everything perfectly, in other words, anyone.

With several bestselling books and collections, Roxane Gay has gained broad recognition in the US and beyond. Her essay collection published in 2014 where "Bad Feminist" is the title essay became a *New York Times* bestseller, with her other works *Hunger* and *Difficult Women* also reaching bestselling numbers (roxanegay.com).[11] For both her fictional and nonfictional works, her writing has been described as "subtle and discursive", and with an ability acknowledge several standpoints while also expanding on her own views (Gay "Interview Guardian"). Her essay "Bad Feminist" is no different. What started as an inside joke with herself in the initial essay publication soon became a phenomenon, a book, and

[10] Toni Morrison did not want to associate with the term feminism, but for the sake of this paper will employ the term when discussing her work as the term could be said to reach wider than it did back when Morrison wrote her essay, but still understanding her standpoint that she did not want to be limited by a term.
[11] The essay first appeared in 2012 in the Virginia Quarterly Review.

people started calling her *the* Bad Feminist (Gay "Ted Talk" 00:32-00:48). Her personal confession of the feminist experience ended up resonating with women all over the world and lead to her becoming a renowned name. “Bad Feminist” describes Gay’s own situation with a relatable frankness, bouncing between humour and severity and reveals uncertainties which evolve into statements of defying the pressures that provoke them.

Beyond being a personal confession of a lived experience, this, like so many other texts written by women is also a political one. In an interview with the Guardian, Gay describes her experiences as a woman writer: “As a writer who is also a woman, I increasingly feel that writing is a political act whether I intend it to be or not”, and how the way women and violence is dealt with in the media, it is difficult not to make her writing non-political in some sense (Gay "Interview Guardian"). This, I believe to be true to most women writers, both the ones chosen in this thesis, but also for women’s writing in general. In her essay “Bad Feminist” Gay both shares her personal experiences and revelations of how she acts as a feminist, but at the same time criticizes the idealism that has developed for women to be ideal and perfect feminists. Her personal life becomes a political statement against essentialist feminism, but for an open-minded feminism that accepts different people leading different lives. With this idea in mind, I will explore Gay’s narrative challenging the norms of essentialist feminism of our time, and I believe her text and mode of writing is great for talking about feminism today in a down to earth and available manner, also for people not invested or educated as much within the feminist discourse. The brevity of her confession acts similarly to how an emotion flickers in time in real life, appearing as a moment of uncertainty and insecurity, before it moves to a feeling of hope, acceptance and power.

In the first part of Roxane Gay’s twofold essay, she explains, “I fall short as a feminist. I feel like I am not as committed as I need to be, that I am not living up to feminist ideals because of who and how I choose to be” ("Bad Feminist" 303).[12] What happens when our identity and choices of who we want to be are conflicted with the ideals of some category that we essentially want to be a part of? This confessional remark in the beginning of her essay captures the issue at heart in her entire narrative, the struggle of accepting oneself in spite of not following all the norms and activities of a given category that you also identify with. When history has shown how diverse feminism can be, how come essentialists still define

[12] In her 2014 collection the essay is split into two parts: “Bad Feminist: Take One” and “Bad Feminist: Take Two”. I am however treating the text mostly as one for the purposes this thesis, considering that it initially did not have this distinction.

what a feminist is and how they should act?[13] Why do these pressures and ideals hinder us in everyday life?

Gay begins her discussion commenting on Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" and how there is a right way to be a woman, with punishments if one fails to follow this ideal ("Bad Feminist" 303). Following Butler's discussions about gender, Gay argues that, in the same manner as there is a right and a wrong way of being or performing a gender norm, there are also assumptions and expectations in how to be a feminist (Gay "Bad Feminist" 304). In the title, Gay reveals that she believes that she is a bad feminist, but is there such a thing? Why do her actions that might conflict with the norms of how to be a feminist make her a bad one? Should it not be possible to have diversity within the category of feminism, room for "mistakes" without lessening one's value as a feminist?

Difficulties occur when norms and rules in society for how to be a woman and a feminist differ from who you ask, and the when rules constantly shifts with time and trends. "The standard for the right way to be a woman and/or feminist appears to be ever changing and unachievable" (Gay "Bad Feminist" 310). With this everchanging and unachievable goal, if someone identifies as a feminist woman and wish to accomplish a sense of being a successful woman and feminist, the goal is out of reach and might lead to a constant feeling of inadequacy. Whilst it is fruitful to have a certain goal of acting 'right' in terms of a feminist development, to have a strict regime will likely lead to more division and setbacks than progression. "Public women, and feminists in particular, have to be everything to everyone; when they aren't, they are excoriated for their failure … We need so very much, and we hope women with a significant platform might be everything we need—a desperately untenable position" (Gay "Bad Feminist" 313). This has similarities to the final narrative I will discuss in this chapter, namely Gloria Anzaldúa's text; the expectation to be ideal for other people is apparent both in the Chicano culture in which Anzaldúa lives, as well as the essentialist feminism. Butler considers how completely blurring the lines of gender and womanhood might hurt feminism in that it no longer can represent the lives of women, "… this effort to combat the invisibility of women as a category feminists run the risk of rendering visible a category which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women" (Butler

[13] Throughout the development of feminism, different genres and branches of feminism have developed and it has gone through several changes. For instance, from the late 1960s through the 70s and 80s in the US, different "feminisms" developed with disagreements in for instance reformation of older feminist ideals or a more revolutionised movement. See for instance Thornham, Sue.

"Performative Acts" 523). This is also an interesting thought if the ideal feminist lifestyle becomes so strict that it no longer can be associated with but a very few.

The second part of Gay's essay leans more towards a personal narrative than an essay and describes the actions and preferences that might explain why she considers herself as a bad feminist. She describes her taste in music and is mortified by it at the same time, that she likes the colour pink and reads *Vogue* unironically, and that she follows some beauty standards although she knows feminism criticizes unrealistic beauty standards for women ("Bad Feminist" 314-315). All the things she mentions in this part of her essay fall into the idea of what a 'true feminist' should not be doing. Some of them are innocent choices in colour or songs, whereas other are a bit more serious as for instance accepting a slow career progression in order to have a baby, or faking an orgasm in bed ("Bad Feminist" 316). This part also describes a common conflict in the ideals for being a woman and being a feminist, for instance in the way a 'perfect' woman should look beautiful whilst a good feminist should not lean into the beauty standards set out for women, leaving even more difficulties in finding comfort and stability for their identity.

In her concluding reflections, Gay reveals that these insecurities and feelings of shortcomings are really provoked by myths of what it means to be a feminist, she devalues the ideals of feminism to be myths, not real.

> At some point, I got it into my head that a feminist was a certain kind of woman. I bought into grossly inaccurate myths about who feminists are—militant, perfect in their politics and person, man-hating, humorless. I bought into these myths even though, intellectually, I *know* better. I'm not proud of this. I don't want to buy into these myths anymore. I don't want to cavalierly disavow feminism like far too many other women have. (Gay "Bad Feminist" 317-318)

This discussion draws me back to her TED talk, where she aims to do better, without losing herself in the process. She finds that the stereotypical feminist, which often correlates with essentialist feminism, is not the only truth or possibility. Being a feminist does not describe or ascribe who you are as a person but illuminates some fundamental values about equality. Through stating the essentialist feminism as false, Gay opens for a more inclusive feminism and way of thinking about what a feminist could be. It is also an interesting relation to the essentialism of feminism and the essentialist way of identifying the short story. The essentialist way to look at specific traits and styles to define a short story such as describing one event or epiphany has been useful in the past (Winther et al. 137), and with a more non-essentialist way of looking at short fiction has developed, so has much of feminist thought.

Even though there are issues in giving feminism strict rules of definitions, not having clear borders of who is included in the feminist movement also causes difficulties as Butler contemplates when dissolving the meaning of gender ("Performative Acts" 523). Both the short story and feminism might have conceptual issues when following a non-essentialist way of defining them, because how do you define a short story without specific traits, is it its shortness? What about feminism if the definitions of gender and womanhood is constructed?

Feminism is to many in Western society today considered 'common sense', something everyone should agree upon to some extent, but could this idealisation cause harm and essentialism when drawn out beyond its most basic definition? "Certain contemporary thinkers consider, as it is well known, that modernity is characterized as the first epoch in human history in which human beings attempt to live without religion. In this present form, is not feminism in the process of becoming one?" (Kristeva 33). This reflection is still relevant today, forty years after Kristeva considered it. There are certainly several lines that could be drawn between how people engage with religion and feminism; as in many religions it has several branches of beliefs, one could think of the 'woman' as the divine being or god-figure, and the moral judgements can have similarities to Christian morality when considering essentialist feminism, or even just not associating with feminism, which is less and less accepted in current times. In an interview on the Norwegian talk-show "Lindmo" in 2017, young actress, influencer, and outspoken feminist Ulrikke Falch, met Sylvi Listhaug, at the time immigration and integration minister and representative for FRP (The Progression Party). In the interview, Sylvi Listhaug did not want to be associated with the term feminism, in spite of wanting equal rights for men and women, and talking about how she would not have been able to get as far in her career without a husband that was able to take care of the children most of the time (Grønlund 22:45-26:11). Listhaug is very careful not to get the label of feminist for neither her nor her husband, changing it instead to words like advocate (my translation) instead of feminist and arguing that feminism is a term associated with the left-wing politics. This opposition to and resistance for the feminist term Gay also points out with her example of the CEO of Yahoo! ("Bad Feminist" 306-307), and discusses the negativity many people have associated with the term. Whereas Roxane Gay is challenging essentialist feminism and the notion that there is a right and a wrong way to be a feminist, she nonetheless identifies as one. She represents a non-militant, relaxed and "common" image of a feminist, and narratives and humans like her may be needed to slowly erase the bad reputation feminism has gotten to make some women (and men) not want to associate with the term.

As will be explored more in this chapter, feminism has not always been inclusive to different races and backgrounds, which Gay's essay attests to as still happening today. "Such willful ignorance, such willful disinterest in incorporating the issues and concerns of black women into the mainstream feminist project, makes me disinclined to own the feminist label until it embraces people like me" (Gay "Bad Feminist" 308). This is actually similar to Toni Morrison's sentiment, 40 years earlier. The women's liberation movement of the seventies and eighties failed to respect and account for the very specific experiences and issues of black women, being led mostly by white middle-class women. Despite Morrison's essay being published such a long time ago, the issues Morrison described are still prevalent today with different manifestations. Although the contemporary feminist movement and discourse has come a long way from Morrison's time, it still fails to include a broad spectrum of women and yet again represents certain kind of women more than others. Being a black woman sharing her personal experience and perspective of not being included in the mainstream feminism in her writing, Gay's text becomes a "thermometer" for which to check the current movement of feminism and see how well it embraces different backgrounds. It connects to the past in portraying some of the same struggles black women found many decades earlier. But Gay continues her reflections, with questioning whether this is her own way of essentialising feminism to be more inclusive ("Bad Feminist" 308). This is a fascinating thought, as many might argue an inclusive feminism to be the best. However, it still becomes essentialist to say that this is the 'right way' to do feminism, nonetheless. To follow that sentiment might for instance fail to account for nuances in feminisms that focus on specific categories or backgrounds in the woman experience. The fact that her essay ends on this reflective thought about her own conclusions could both be beneficial but also problematic with a shorter narrative. With a longer work, she could be able to reflect more back and forth on the subject and try to delve into the dilemma more, but the fact that she ends it here, but does not end on a

With Gay's narrative, I wished to set the scene for a larger image of what being a feminist can be like in our day and age; her autobiographical confessions about being a "bad feminist" shows an honest presentation of not being enough as a feminist, while at the same time point to the issues about idealising feminism, limiting it to describe very few women. But to understand today's situation, it is also important to remember the past and the women that have paved the way of feminism before. To do this, I will continue my analysis with Toni Morrison's striking essay "What the Black Woman Thinks of the Women's Lib" from 1971, in the early days of the second wave of feminism. Her essay became important as a counterbalance to the leading narrative of women's liberation at the time, shedding light on

the black women and men's stance on why the movement did not suit or acknowledge them. Gay's narrative in many ways draws on points and perspectives that came through in Morrison's context and narrative, the issues manifesting themselves in different manners. Looking back to narratives like Morrisons is necessary to understand where the feminist debates of today comes from and how the current issues and debates has been brought to attention through voices of the past, their actions making the progressions and consciousness of our time possible.

Being one of the most influential voices of feminist literature of our time, Toni Morrison's fictional and nonfictional work has inspired and been a precursor for many women and women writers to this day. With her passing in the summer of last year, she leaves behind her a legacy of empowering and moving literature, fictional and nonfictional. Morrison received multiple prices for her literature, and she was the first black woman to ever receive a Nobel prize in 1993 (NobelPrize.org n.p.). Throughout her career, she was deeply invested in promoting black people's literature to the forefront, and immensely helped in doing so with her work and advocating. Representing African American women, some of her most famous novels and texts depict struggles of racism and slavery, but also the woman experience within it. Some of her most known and acclaimed works include *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon*, but in relation to feminism and women's liberation, her essay on black women's experience with the women's liberation movement in the sixties and seventies is particularly relevant. In the early days of her writing career and during the early days of the second wave of feminism, Morrison published this essay, confronting the ruling women of the Women's Liberation Movement, namely white, middle-class women. She represents the black women's voice in a time when they were expected to join in with a movement that did not consider or respect their specific experience or history. With a powerful and exquisitely crafted essay she tells a story from the other side of the Women's Liberation Movement of the early seventies.

Morrison's essay was published in 1971 by the title "What the Black Woman Thinks of the Women's Lib". Here Morrison sheds light on one of the main issues with the women's liberation movement of the late 60s, early 70s in the United States. With sharp tone and ironic passages, she displays her resentment towards the white women who have declared themselves as the spokespeople of the movement. Morrison gives the main reasons for why black women cannot stand behind the Women's Liberation movement, namely; distrust of white women (72-73), a belief that the movement cannot convey the unique experience of black women (73-74), and that the shared experience between black men and women is so complicated that they cannot depart from them when the main oppression is not solved (74-

76). With rich imagery, analogies and expressive language Morrison tells a story of the complexities of how black women did not want to join the women's liberation movement. Morrison's text illuminates many of the emotions reported by black women throughout the movement, even though this was written in the beginning of the movement. What is also striking in this text, is the use of anger. Anger is a powerful emotion for pointing out wrongdoings as well as generating empathy and activation in the reader. Although it can be counterproductive if exaggerated, the amount of anger found in Morrison's text mostly demonstrates the despair and urgency felt in the situation.

Morrison's essay serves as a correcting text in a movement that gave the impression of being pulled forward by white women of a certain status and class. Morrison reveals that the fight was not only fought by the white woman, perhaps quite the opposite, as the non-white women fought two fights at the same time, dealing with racism and segregation as well as women's equality. The women's liberation movement soon became a label appropriated onto people who did not associate with it, and it eventually developed to be a term with much prejudice and aversion both from its adversaries and the people considered being in it (Evans 139-40). Race is and has been one of the bigger issues when it comes to integration of all women in a feminist movement, but also matters of sexuality, nationality, age, disability, and other categorisations as intersectionality later came to focus on. The women's liberation movement of the late sixties and seventies was primarily associated with white, heterosexual middle-class women and who were thought to 'rule' the movement although women with other backgrounds were in fact vital and active in achieving equal opportunities for women (Sara M. Evans 141-143). The movement tended to revolve outwardly around white middle-class women in the United States who ignored issues of race and class when talking about feminism (Judith Evans 6; Johnston 264-269). The women outside of this category felt like the white, middle-class women were not speaking for them when they were speaking for all women and did thus not wanting to be associated with the term 'feminism' (Ngwainmbi 96-97). When the movement did not include everyone, it put a break on itself by separating the women that needed to fight together. Although many African American women were some of the most important participants in fighting for equality, they did not want to be associated with the collective women's liberation movement. With narratives and voices like Morrison's, black women were able to share their side of the story and explain why they needed to be heard and understood.

Whereas this essay is not an autobiographical piece in the conventional sense, it still comes from a personal perspective and offers a similar function to many women's

autobiographical writings in history—not letting one's experience be ignored or diminished by hegemonic powers, in this case, the leading groups of the women's liberation movement. Burton points to the importance of autobiographical writing for historical archiving: "…there is no logic to a distinction between the autobiography and the archive or between the history of the self and the history of polities and communities with which it is in dialectical relationship" (186), and debates this distinction of valuing 'objective' historical accounts more valuable than subjective ones to be unreasonable. In this sense however, Morrison's essay delivers on both the more conventional sides of history writing, but also offers her personal experiences to it. This essay does not share details about Morrison's life or particular experiences beyond the grander schemes of her and other black women's experience with the movement. But in the personal and emphatic way of conveying her opinions on the subject, it becomes a way for the black women to get a voice in a movement that seemed to be representing a very limited group of women. Her small comments using "I" in between a mostly neutral voice also gives the text another layer of Morrison's persona, and connects the reader and author more than not using it would. The text also illustrates, as Gilmore describes it, one of autobiographical writing's most basic political acts—namely asserting a right to speak instead of being spoken for (40). Morrison speaks for the black women's experience instead of letting the white, middle-class women of the movement speak for them and assume their role in the movement. Morrison also stands against the institutional issues of the feminist movement in writing this, letting minorities to the front and directing the issue of white women controlling progress, that not only white women's voices should be shaping the course of feminism.

Beginning her essay, Morrison turns the mood from remembering the horrible signs put up for segregation of races to focus on the signs of "White Ladies" and "Colored Women" (Morrison 71-72). Instead of being angry at the racism represented in these signs, she instead appreciates it for its accurate semantic difference between lady and woman. This slightly sarcastic but punching tone sets the scene for the rest of her essay, as she fights the cause for the black woman versus what she states is the not quite adult and timid white women claiming to fight for all women in the women's liberation movement. What appears to be a strong sense of self and identity as a woman of colour leads to a critique of the white woman, which to her seems weak, frail and dependent, and placing women of colour as superior, in spite of what the signs of segregation were likely intended to convey. As this is a personal perspective to the movement, these harsh critiques can be said without rendering the text irrelevant or offensive. However, despite the critique in its time and age was an important stance against

the mainstream, some of the observations and stereotypes she makes about white women can at times come off as counterproductive to her message. In critiquing the white upper-class women in the less productive manners as calling them childish or incompetent, she appears to want to be better instead of equal to these women: “Black women have no abiding admiration of white women as competent, complete people … [T]hey regarded them as willful children, pretty children, mean children, ugly children, but never as real adults capable of handling the real problems in the world” (Morrison 75). This is of course understandable given the complex history and the way this movement developed, and though it does give an interesting look into the more personal emotions of the author and other black women beyond a merely objective text would, it is more likely to receive criticism due to its harsh tone against white women.

Especially the paragraphs on the experiences of black women is vital in the discussion about inclusion in feminism, where she doubts the movement can hold the unique experience of black women:

> But there is not only the question of color, there is the question of the color of experience. Black women are not convinced that Women’s Lib serves their best interest or that it can cope with the uniqueness of their experience, which in itself is an alienating factor. The early image of Women’s Lib was of an elitist [sic] organization made up of upper-middle-class women with the concerns of that class … and not paying much attention to the problems of most black women, (Morrison 73)

In this part of her essay, the anger is less evident, and the sentiment is one of serious concern and a belief that the Women’s Lib simply cannot hold all the history and experience of the black woman sufficiently or in a respectful manner. She sheds light also on class and not just race, as most women of colour would not have a career, but a necessary job to be able to survive. Where the ‘elitist’ women see an opportunity to rule the house, the black women need the freedom to be able to leave it. This sentiment was likely one of the greatest reasons many African American women did not associate with the movement—because how can they all stand and fight for women’s rights, if half the movement seem to have forgotten that they were held as slaves not long ago, that the traces of it still visible in society forces women of colour to lead a very different life than the upper-middle-class white woman?

In an article discussing one of Morrison’s fictional works (*Sula* (1973)), Cassandra Fetters explores female relationship and the feminist connections found in the story (28). She links a problematic relationship between two girls in the novel with the second wave of feminism. In the two girls’ attempts to be similar, they are disappointed when they find

differences between them and try to over-identify with each other to bridge the gap. Fetters connects their relationship to the way many white feminists tried to include other women by objectifying them or not acknowledging the obvious differences between them (40). When the white upper-class women tried to include women of colour, they failed to account for the natural differences between their experiences and even objectified and simplified them, leading to a further split between them. If intersectionality had been a part of the feminist debate back then, the understanding of difference and inclusion might have been greater, acknowledging and appreciating their differences instead of trying to erase them.

Morrison also comments on the relationship between black women and men, and how their shared oppression creates a certain idea that they cannot leave behind the men and unite as women (76). This special relationship is something Audre Lorde also comments on in an interview with Adrienne Rich from 1979, describing their common oppression and how it has given them certain weapons which they have created together, but that these weapons could also be used against each other ("An Interview" 99-100). The relationship to black men, Morrison points to as being one of the reasons why black women could not simply join the women's liberation. Because following the feminist movement might potentially mean to leave behind the men they had fought with against oppression, as Lorde points out, it is also what could hold black women back in themselves. Because why would black women want to fight a fight separate from the men whom they fought oppression together with, not to mention the specific vulnerabilities black men also experience to this day?[14] This essay demonstrates the very complex dynamics happening in the early days of feminism's second wave, and uses her personal perspective to report black women's side of the story in a powerful manner. The brevity of it would also enable a fast publishing and distribution, which is so important in the heat of such a debate and movement.

Following Morrison's important narrative on black women and their relationship with the women's liberation movement, I wish to move my argument to the first short story in this thesis. Whereas Morrison is strongly critiquing certain white women and not trusting them to understand or treat black women properly, the next short story deals with a woman critiquing herself, directing hatred inwards. Joanna Russ's "Little Dirty Girl" gives an interesting twist

[14] In the finishing weeks of writing this thesis, yet another instance of a black man being killed by a white police officer has occurred in America. Numerous protests are currently happening after George Floyd was brutally strangled by a police officer, demonstrating the toxic and horrendous attitudes still existing against black people today. However, the incident has led to demonstrations and consciousness against racism worldwide, reaching massive attention in media and social media, and it is seeming to become a very important step towards the end of systemic racism.

to representations of mistreatment and self-hatred, isolation, mother-daughter relationships and acceptance. Both "What the Black Women Thinks of Women's Lib" and "The Little Dirty Girl" work with anger, albeit in very different manners, but they demonstrate how the strength of anger can be a powerful tool in discussion about feminism and women's rights. The way Russ infiltrates an otherwise fictional story with fragments of her own personal life to the character gives life to the story in an unconventional manner. Although the story is not an autobiographical piece, or a representation of an underrepresented group in a historical moment in time as Morrison's text is, it instead focuses on the real representation of a woman healing herself through her past. There are also several short story techniques and unanswered details in the narrative which provides for many possible angles of interpretation, particularly between the relationship between the narrator, The Little Dirty Girl, and the unnamed recipient of the letter, as this short story opens in the epistolary style.

Joanna Russ was an author and a feminist challenging norms and conventionality with her writing. Specialising in the science fiction genre, she was one of the very few women in a field dominated by men, and she changed the field with her unique writing and feminist perspectives. Russ got wide acknowledgement for her work, *The Female Man* (1975) likely being her most recognized work which follows a woman and three alter egos living in different points in history and the future, a novel Christopher Priest contends to be a necessity when talking about the women's movement in the US (Priest). Russ's stories often deal with women in different situations and in various worlds and universes, for instance utopian worlds without men, and she has a style weaving humour, absurdity, and anger into her narratives. As Morrison expressed anger and resentment in her essay, so does Russ demonstrate powerful narratives in exploring the emotion of anger. Pat Wheeler describes her writing and how she uses anger in her writing: "She uses anger to communicate powerfully women's sense of alienation, as well as the dissatisfaction that arises out of estrangement and social fragmentation … Her writing exemplifies the ways in which anger can be amplified and used to investigate women's vocalizations against oppression and silence" (100). In the short story I am going to investigate, "The Little Dirty Girl", first published in 1982, both alienation, estrangement and anger is interwoven to the main characters life, and the fact that some parts of the narrative correlates with the author's life makes for interesting reflections although it is by no means a retelling of Joanna Russ's life. As a fictional short story, it offers creative imagination without having to oblige to factual limits, whilst the personal details connecting the character in the story to the author, reveals an extra significance and honesty in the

narrative. It represents a woman shunned off from society, intentionally or not, and gives another perspective to the stereotype of women of a certain age living alone.

In this odd but sentimental story we find the narrator meeting a girl out of the ordinary. The girl, whom the narrator calls “Little Dirty Girl” (or L.D.G.) (3), seems to her to be different from the other ‘clean’ and ‘pure’ children approaching her. The narrator is appalled by this girl’s scruffy appearance, which is described in detail. The girl ends up following the narrator around, at first to her opposition, knowing mysteriously much about the narrator. As they spend more time together, the girl changes, and the narrator grows more and more fond of the girl. She even takes her in and washes her and her clothes, and for a brief moment, she is “Little Clean Girl” (11). Eventually the narrator realises that she is dealing with a ghost through hints she has gotten from the outer world and the girl’s behaviour and ability to turn younger and younger. However, the narrator is not afflicted by this, rather the opposite—she has grown fonder of her. For a while, the girl is absent, but when she returns, she is worse off than ever and says that the narrator has abandoned her. After much hesitation from the narrator, she allows the girl to touch her, and gives her a hug. In their embrace, the narrator expresses, at least in her thoughts and to the reader, how she loves all of the Little Dirty Girl, with all her flaws. After this the girl disappears, and the story changes again. With a direct break the narrator says “But that’s not the end of the story… As you know, I’ve never gotten along with my mother” (18). It turns out this is just as much about her relationship with her mother as it is with herself. The Little Dirty Girl is a part of herself that was neglected by her mother, and herself, but now that she has accepted and embraced this part of herself, she can deal with her relationship to her mother and move herself out of isolation.

Although this short story is mostly fictional, it has some elements that connect the narrator to Joanna Russ, creating an interesting dynamic to the story. It contains some elements of personal narrative and autobiographical aspects, seen for instance in the narrator’s descriptions of her age, occupation, where she lives and some other similarities, but it does not correlate to a degree where it can be called an autobiographical short story. As Mary Joannou contends, autobiographical writers often employ the tools of fictional writing, and “[w]hile the autobiographer purports to tell the life story of a “real” person, the distinction between autobiographical writing and fiction is not clear-cut” (307). Joanna Russ uses autobiography in a subtle but significant way, perhaps imagining a continuation of her own life, or rewriting another version of personal experiences. The melting of fiction and personal details from the author’s life represents the significance also of fiction, demonstrating the ability to reimagine parts of life and tell a story of life in a different manner. It gives the

author the agency to change their own narrative. Inserting the autobiographical information into a story with clear fictional and sci-fi elements such as the Little Dirty Girl's morphing abilities shows an imaginative way of dealing with very real emotions of accepting the self and the past. "The Little Dirty Girl" sets off as being an odd story about a woman encountering cats and children, but it develops to reveal issues of self-hatred, feeling of neglect and abandonment and learning to accept your own history and identity.

The trope of a female child being rescued by an older woman is a trope found in several of Russ's stories, but in this story, the two characters have a connection beyond this, as they really are different manifestations of the same person. The story goes through different stages in the dynamics of the narrator's relations; first in meeting the girl, then continuing to realise she is a ghost and a younger version of the narrator's self, to accepting this and her, to eventually confronting her own mother and finally accepting herself. Through these stages, the narrator comes to accept herself more and display more youthful traits to her personality than she does in the beginning of the story, and in accepting herself and her neglected self as a child she can also confront her mother. When the Little Dirty Girl comes to her, she acts as a maternal figure for her own younger self, and through meeting the L.D.G., she understands more of her own mother and her choices as a mother. Connecting this to tradition of the short story, this could be a form of the Romance trait; a *coup de grâce* or "blow of mercy" (May "Way of Meaning" 180), where in this case the narrator both saves the suffering Little Dirty Girl, and hence also herself. This classic moment of epiphany in a short story is here done with hope and humour in the final scenes of the story, demonstrating how the woman and the Little Dirty Girl have united, and that the woman has become more youthful and playful from it.

The way "The Little Dirty Girl" is framed gives room for several ways of interpreting the story, as well as connecting the reader to the text in a direct manner. Beginning with a mix of *in medias res* and a letter to an unknown recipient, "Dear _____, Do you like cats?" (1), the narrator goes straight to asking this someone if they like cats, continuing to explain different types and how she is allergic to them. Here, Russ demonstrates her humoristic style in describing how the narrator will try to get rid of these cats, as well as alluding to imagery of a woman living on her own and being a cat lady. This unrevealed recipient of a letter could represent different people. At first the reader might think this is directed to the reader, inviting a close engagement between narrator and reader, but this recipient becomes more ambiguous in the end. Whether it is a letter to herself, the reader, her mother, or some unknown character, the narrator wants them to see how the L.D.G. has become part of her, as she is giving the

recipient a photograph of herself and the girl. As the final words state; "… the one thing you desired most in the world was a photograph, a photograph, your kingdom of a photograph—of me" (22), alluding to the phrase from Shakespeare's *Richard III*.[15] This would suggest that this photograph has some great importance while the real significance is that the narrator and The Little Dirty Girl are united. The open 'you' creates a certain tension of not knowing who this is, but perhaps more important is the confidence and humoristic breaking of the illusion the narrator offers in the end.

One often sees ghostly figures or representations of memories signified with narrative stylistics such as italics or special emphasis of some kind, but in this story, they are signified in different manners. In this story, the Little Dirty Girl is narrated like any other character, which also leaves the reader in the dark of who and what she is until later in the story. The choice of not giving her such narrative distinctions both makes her seem normal, but also makes it easier to merge her with the protagonist when the story evolves. Despite the narrator's rejection of her younger self, the form of the story does not differentiate or distance her in any way. In the scene quoted below, the narrator calls The Little Dirty Girl "A.R.", which is the name the L.D.G. claims to have, something the narrator thinks is a joke because those are her initials (4). The narrator calls her A.R. a few times during the story, but mostly in dialogue with her and not in her thoughts. That she implements the name in her thoughts here could suggest her slow acceptance of A.R. and herself. The most revealing supernatural trait of the Little Dirty Girl is her becoming younger and younger as the story progresses, but it is also hinted at slightly before the narrator finally realises it:

> Was this the moment I decided I was dealing with a ghost? No, long before. Little by little, I suppose. Her clothes … the kind no child had worn since the end of the Second World War …; the inconspicuousness of a little twirling girl nobody noticed … And as surely as A.R. had been a biggish eight when we had met weeks ago, just as surely she was now a smallish, very unmistakable, unnaturally knowledgeable five. (Russ 12-13)

By breaking the linearity of the story and its reality, which is possible and common in a short story, the plot allows for freer interpretations of what the Little Dirty Girl represents in the narrative. The few, but important science-fiction traits in this story demonstrates a person dealing with her past and self-worth in a unique way. It makes the reflection of it more dynamic by not following all the rules of the real world but keeping it realistic within the

[15] The original quote is found in act V, scene IV: "A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!" (Shakespeare et al.).

narrative's universe. The unrealistic aspects are treated with such naturalness that it creates a tension between the reader's expectation of a certain reaction to said events and how the character reacts. This tension from downplaying the strange events could push the reader to think in more unconventional ways about identity, past and self-worth from being challenged in their usual expectations.

The story tells not only of a woman saving and accepting herself, it also represents a woman protecting herself from the pains (the narrator also has some physical back pains and signs of aging) of living in a patriarchy. As mentioned previously, the representation of the saviour of a female child is found in several of Russ's stories. Cortiel discusses Russ's stories in relation to psychoanalysis, particularly how they challenge and try to escape from the patriarchal idea of a woman having to have a main connection to a man in her life, and with this relationship also disassociates herself from her mother (Cortiel 130-131). This broader reading of Russ's work gives more room to consider identity of the self as a woman in society. This brings us back to the stereotypical representation of a woman surrounded by cats and the narrator being isolated from other people than The Little Dirty Girl. Her isolation and stereotypical representation could be read as a way of being shunned in a patriarchal society or trying to protect herself from it by isolating herself. Living in a patriarchy can also contribute to conflicting emotions towards the self, living in a constant state of having to work to be level with men or be respected in the same manner. Several of Russ' stories expand on female only utopias, and whereas this story does not do that directly, it still follows only women (with the exception of some young boys approaching her in the beginning), thus, in large it resists a patriarchal environment.

In the final part of the story, the plot abruptly changes to revolve around the narrator's reconciliation with her mother. The narrator and the mother have a conversation, where the mother reveals her cancer diagnose when the narrator was still a child, which matches the age of The Little Dirty Girl when they first meet. This meeting suggests that the narrator felt an abandonment when she was young, that led to her isolating and feeling neglected without knowing the reason for it at the time. Cortiel also connects this journey of saving the self with the reconciliation with a mother or motherhood (142), and sees her coming to terms with herself after understanding a new concept of motherhood with the Little Dirty Girl (147). However, Cortiel reads both the alienation from the Little Dirty Girl and the connection with the mother as a bodily focus (150). In my reading, I find that the alienation of her younger self and parts of herself span beyond her mother's illness and frustrations with her own body, that her self-image is what is most disjointed. For the narrator, the problem with her mother's

cancer was not the illness itself, but how the mother neglected her when she got it. This important meeting and reconnection between a mother and a daughter shows how a woman's relationship to her mother can be so essential for personal growth, as this is the last step before the narrator seemingly comes to terms with herself in the concluding paragraphs, even though their conversation is not a "scene of intense affection and reconciliation", but rather an awkward but honest conversation about their past.

This story does not offer a full reconciliation, freedom from patriarchy, or a full acceptance of the self, it does offer a movement towards it; another recurring theme Cortiel highlights as occurring in most of Russ's 'rescue of the female child'-narratives (140). We see this for instance in the fact that The Little Dirty Girl disappears just when the narrator has started properly caring for L.D.G. and she asks if she can stay: "She said sleepily, "Can I stay?" and I (also sleepily) "Forever." But in the morning she was gone" (Russ 17). The narrator's disappointment is evident, but what L.D.G. is asking is if she can stay with her, i.e. become part of her again, therefore L.D.G. is not gone, but has become more part of the narrator instead of being alienated. Another unsolved issue is in the end when the narrator is talking to her mother, and clearly admits to not have gotten a full solution with her: "I wish I could go on to describe a scene of intense and affectionate reconciliation between my mother and myself, but that did not happen—quite" (Russ 21). These unresolved moments both add to the realism of the story, but also focuses on a process instead of the destination, and they can also be connected to the narrator's greater acceptance of the self and self-love as well as the aspect of an escape from patriarchy, in that this is something that realistically cannot be fully resolved.

Regardless of the story not offering a complete reconciliation, the character development of the narrator is still a positive conclusion to the story, and the final paragraphs playfully reveal some of the story's mysteries. Describing how The Little Dirty Girl is back with her now, demanding to take photographs, and pushing her to go to parties and engaging with other people; she goes on to describe the photograph of the little dirty girl:

> About the picture: you may think it odd. You may even think it's not her. (You're wrong.) The pitch-ball eyes and thin face are there, all right, but what about the bags under her eyes, the deep, downward lines about her mouth, the strange color of her shortcut hair (it's grey)? What about her astonishing air of being much older, so much more intellectual, so much more professional, so much more—well, competent—than any Little Dirty Girl could possibly be? Well, faces change when forty-odd years fall into the developing fluid. (Russ 22)

In this scene, the estrangement the narrator previously presented living alone and shunning away from cats, children, and implicitly other people has with her union and acceptance of her younger self gained both confidence and an escape from isolation. The playful breaking of the illusion of the Little Dirty Girl being anyone else than herself also creates an interesting nod to the reader, considering that some aspects of this narrator are connected to Joanna Russ's life. Perhaps she is reminding the reader that this is not actually a true story, but more of a story for reflection of the memory and past self. These stylistic twists would not have achieved the same effect or believability in a novel or a longer work, but a short story is a great vehicle for creating layers like this, with the possibility and necessity for a relatively abrupt ending to a narrative. With this short story, Russ demonstrates a very intricate way of including personal perspective and details into a fictional story, blurring the lines of reality, truth and absurdity and creates a dynamic relationship between them. The stereotypical image of a middle-aged woman living alone surrounded by cats, evolves to show a woman stronger in her own self after dealing with a difficult past with her mother, moving her out of isolation and into the world, but not reliant upon others than herself to do so.

To conclude this chapter, I have chosen a narrative that interweaves fiction, essay, personal narrative, and identity in a beautiful manner. Gloria Anzaldúa's "Borderlands/ La Frontera" demonstrates both the struggles of living in an environment of several borders, literal and symbolic, and how it is to live as a woman navigating between the different expectations of the different sides. Applying shifts in both form, style and language, this story exemplifies how the form of a story can mirror the content of it. Her multitude of experiences and identities describe a complex landscape of being a woman living in a borderland and wanting and having to rebel from your family and your culture's usual ways.

For most women, the woman or female identity is not the only categorization they sort themselves into, but for some several of their identities are subject to oppression and prejudice. Gloria Anzaldúa describes aspects of her identity and how some of these have sparked negativity and challenges she has gotten from different people of different cultures and social environments in her life. In her story "Borderlands/La Frontera", she describes her experiences of living the Chicano community in Texas with the multitude of different influences and people she meets there, and of the troubles finding agency between them. Especially the traditional and religious parts of her culture she accounts as having some outdated views towards women, expecting them to tend the home and obey the men in the family. An intriguing aspect in this account is her use of language, namely that she uses several languages in the text, which also fortifies her narrative on how she associates with her

different cultures. The text is mainly written in English but has instances of Spanish and Chicano words and phrases within it, which are sometimes translated, sometimes not. Through her culture as a Chicana, both her Mexican and her American heritage become sources for conflict many times. The religiousness and conservative traditions of her family competes with her American and academically associated friends from college, but yet another identity makes her journey more challenging. The greater conflict for her Catholic family is her sexuality.

Gloria Anzaldúa is a prominent name in feminist, lesbian/queer theory, and writing in the Chicano culture. She became known for her innovative writing mixing styles, genres and languages, and telling stories of resisting the norms and expectations of her culture, education and writing (Day 80). With a talent for interweaving experience and creation, Frances A. Day described her writing and its impact as this: "Her prophetic analysis of the intersections of race, gender, class, language, and sexual orientation offers insights into ways that diverse cultures might begin to come together and heal the wounds inflicted by centuries of oppression. Her vision invokes new human possibility, providing hope that profound changes are possible" (78). Anzaldúa's writing is definitely a wonderful melting pot of themes and forms, and her involvement in feminist, queer and race debate gives multiple important perspectives from several arenas. Her most known and recognized work is the book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* which represents her exceptional ability to merge experiences, fiction, prose, style and language. This is also the text I will explore, but in a shorter extracted version.

This text differs from the others in my collection of stories as it is in fact an extracted version of a book. However, I believe it is an interesting item of analysis to see how condensing a story does not make it less powerful and can serve different functions and opportunities than a full book can. Especially the opportunity to reach a wider audience is an essential part of extracting a longer narrative to a shorter one, giving more people the perspective of the story and perhaps leading them to the original work later. Also, in an academic perspective, anthologies with extracts of larger works makes it possible to introduce and explore the works of an array of important authors, without having to research entire libraries. This shorter version is naturally a different product than the book, and the different headers divides the narrative into paragraphs instead of chapters. Unarguably, there are several potential issues with abstracting a work in this way. Clearly, a large amount of valuable content and connections has been removed, but the author's intentions for the text

might also change or be misinterpreted from doing so.[16] However, I argue that this text still functions very well as a shorter text, both connecting it to Young's ideas of capturing moments through shorter writings, and that it makes for an interesting artefact to analyse for the purpose of this thesis. Furthermore, I consider it possible to dissect and concentrate this text and still have a piece of writing that functions on its own due to Anzaldúa's unique style of storytelling. The book was published in 1987, which could be considered a time when the third wave of feminism started to arise. Hence, the feminist ideas and debates that had developed during the second wave were still important, while some new directions and mindsets was likely starting to develop during this time, like for instance, thoughts of considering multiple oppressions affecting each other likely started to form in this period, as Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality only two years later.[17] A perspective which is indeed a significant perspective when looking at an experience like Anzaldúa's.

The troubles Gloria Anzaldua finds in her 'multiple identities' demonstrates the challenges of having to navigate as a woman with a variety of expectations coming into conflict from different arenas of her life. Everyone around her tells her to be something, to be more of one thing and less of another. They do not encourage or support her to be all the different selves she is with all her different experiences. Women are constantly pressured from hundreds of directions at a time, either it is to follow some ideal or to go against it to be truer to themselves, as Roxane Gay also demonstrated. I find Leigh Gilmore's description of how the reader connects and identifies with an autobiography useful here: "The reader sees not so much herself in the autobiography as the representation of her position in relation to other familiar positions within cultural scripts" (23), and whilst this form of identification can lead to some problematic licencing of truth either for or against the "I" in the text, it can also be very helpful for marginalized groups to see a representation and the possibilities of an otherwise underrepresented ideology or cultural position (24). In this manner, Anzaldúa's self-representational text could become an arena for women living in the Chicano culture, queer women, or others living in similar marginalized landscapes to see a representation of their situation and gain hope and opportunity from it.

Although the racist aspects in Anzaldúa's story are marginally less harsh than for instance Morrison's text, it is still evident in the different environments Anzaldúa frequents,

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[16] Both Anzaldúa and the publishers have permitted the reprint version in the anthology used here.

[17] Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses the complex connections between race and gender and how different forms of marginalisation needs to not be understood separately, but as intersections (Crenshaw 139-141). The theory of intersectionality has later developed to include multiple categories of marginalization such as sexuality, class, ability and more.

through hints, small comments, and even in the bonds the Chicana women put on themselves. Racism does not only happen in the minds of white people, as Audre Lorde has noted, racism affects the people of colour too, when it becomes internalised (Lorde "An Interview" 96). Similarly to Anzaldúa, Lorde also describes the criticism she encountered from different groups of people in her life for her different identifications; she was criticised by blacks for being lesbian, whites for being black and she also criticised herself, creating an emotional strain on her self-image and difficulties in choosing loyalties ("An Interview" 96-99). Anzaldúa depicts parts of this internalisation and insecurities of navigating between her different cultures too: "Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe in the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between [sic] *los intersticios,* the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (891). Anzaldúa is torn between the different worlds in her life and this affects how she feels about herself and where she belongs. To be constantly pulled between different identity categories with negative associations can be straining and lead to confusion within the personal identity. Lorde also describes several labels to navigate between in meeting with others: "As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong" (Lorde "Women Redefining Difference" 114). Although not all women or feminists can tick off as many 'othering' characteristics as Lorde and Anzaldúa, the different identities that do not fit within the most stereotypical ideas of a woman or a person is important to have in mind when discussing feminism and identity. In the same paper, Lorde later describes herself as being "…comfortable with the many ingredients of my identity…", whilst still being asked to sort out her different sides and shut down the others ("Women Redefining Difference" 120). Despite her feeling at one with all the different parts of herself, her environment cannot accept all of this and wants her to focus on the parts more similar to their own. Anzaldúa's narrative tells a story about her growing up and learning to become more secure in her different identities, while still 'altering' herself for the different groups of people she is meeting. This is not uncommon for anyone, but it is perhaps more evident when one changes for instance languages to assimilate to a group.

In an article dealing with philosophical and language-related issues in feminist Latina works, Elena Flores Ruíz discusses the multiplicity of Anzaldúa's experience with a philosophic and linguistic focus in the context of the specific situation of the area. When discussing the multiple layers of identity experienced in Anzaldúa's text, it is useful to consider how language forms understanding. Ruíz discusses the way the language forms our

understanding, but might also limit our understanding, and how colonialism might have affected understanding from and through language (424-425). Thinking within these parameters, it is difficult for the people in postcolonial areas to navigate their understanding and where it comes from. Because some ideas or terms familiar in one language might not have a translation in another, the people in such borderlands have created an ability to navigate between languages in hybridity, Ruíz explains (425). But in the many cultures existing in these areas, many do not have a main culture to land in, they are in a borderland of cultures of differing hierarchy and therefore struggle to maintain a unified understanding (Ruíz 425). In this manner, when Anzaldúa uses Spanish (or Chicana) words in her text it is possibly because the English language does not contain the full understanding she has gotten from her many languages and cultures.[18] The blurred lines of the mixed cultures she has grown up in does not have a solid ground in itself—the Chicanos are in many ways ashamed in their own heritage and culture, even between the people they are closest to. Therefore, they must constantly navigate the different backgrounds instead of embracing the multiplicity they live in. The navigation of languages and the resulting confusions of it in turn contribute to an uncertain sense of self.

The array of different experiences and influences she meets in her life is also represented in the form of the text. A large part of the text is personal narrative where she remembers moments of her past, as for instance the section named "The Strength in My Rebellion", where she depicts how she at a very young age had a strong will and sense of self, defying the rules and expectations of her home (887-888). Other sections contain poetic reflections, seen for instance in this passage: "The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin … Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey" (891). This sentence demonstrates how the men and women in this culture and context seem to have a different connection than the black men and women represented in Morrison's text, and not the same sense of unity. She has also added several poems and sayings in both English and Spanish in her text. This mixing of forms and styles leaves the whole text with great dynamic and layers, but crucially, it also mirrors the themes of the narrative. Matching the form with the content in

[18] Anzaldúa offers a list of some of the languages and vernaculars common for Chicanos to use, and which she navigates between: "1 Standard English/ 2 Working-class and slang English/ 3 Standard Spanish/ 4 Standard Mexican Spanish/ 5 North Mexican Spanish dialect/ 6 Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations)/ 7 Tex-Mex/ 8 *Pachuco* (called *caló*)" (895).

this way lets the form magnify the narrative's diversities, I would argue, particularly in this condensed form, as it moves quickly from one way of storytelling to another.

This navigation of languages which also happens in the text, reveals another complication in a potential limitation in the readership of the story. For Anzaldúa, this switching of languages is part of her everyday routine and part of who she is. The limitation comes if the reader is not able to follow her narrative because they do not know Spanish. In my limited knowledge of Spanish, I still needed to research and look up words, but I might still not have gotten all the meanings that may have been intended for it. This puts a potential danger in the reader not understanding Anzaldúa's narrative, but perhaps in the reader's own limitations, they can get a deeper understanding of the struggles of living in a complicated landscape of mixed cultures. The language barrier for a large part of the audience might be an invitation to experience how it is not to understand everything in a story, or even being deprived of knowledge. A similar kind of reader invitation happens in Anne Finger's short story which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Anzaldúa uses or shows different parts of her identity depending on who she is with and in different situations. "An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 22). As Judith Butler comments here, an 'open coalition' could be a solution that allows for multiple, alternating and blurred lines of identity, and without the need to define it within normative or binary limits. Anzaldúa's text offers a look into a space where the personal identity is struggling through the external pressures of fitting into certain boxes and acting through them. Even in her language, she does not follow the limits of using only one but colours the text with her multiplicity of languages. Her identity does not need to be solidified into one thing, and she can alter and mould it in the different social landscapes she finds herself in, without erasing the other parts of herself.

Anzaldúa's work is representative of someone that is not afraid to challenge the norms, represented both in the writing itself, but also through her depicted experiences and actions. Weaving the story with her personal perspective, historical context, fiction and languages, "Borderlands/La Frontera" proves to be a text well suited both for a book as well as a shorter text and comments on important issues of feminism in this diverse community. Her text has been an important voice for the special situation of the Chicano community, dealing with their specific issues of racism, integration, heritage, and language, but also for the women living in these borderlands.

With these four narratives employing different types of autobiographical content and personal perspective, I believe they demonstrate a wide range of women's situations and ways of reflecting on feminism. I wish to return to Roxane Gay's speech pointing to how a little bravery from one woman can lead to another feeling more powerful in a world that defies her. I believe leaving a small part of the self in a story as these four authors did, can make all the difference regarding both credibility, but also a sense of being able to say something with more power and emotion when it is spoken from a personal perspective without a layer of forced objectivity or suppressed opinions. As Leigh Gilmore describes it, confessional writings create the effect of truth on the background that "one *confesses* in order to tell the *truth"*, and thus it is also a political narrative as it aims to "… "speak the truth" at a particular time in a particular place" (226). Daring to let the personal into the narrative gives perspectives to the feminist debate, creating a necessary diversity that can reduce exclusion and spreads perspectives that may not have been represented before. It is an arena to speak for yourself without being spoken for, and a way of stepping out of a patriarchal discourse through sharing a woman's personal views and experiences. The short form helps both to distribute the narrative in more ways and through different channels, but it also lets the authors share an important moment without having to expand in length but leaving much room for reflection to the reader. The short story habitually creates these open spaces, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, relating to the representations of bodies.

Chapter 2: Body Representation in the Short Story

Following Chapter 1 that explored narratives that in some way use autobiographical elements, Chapter 2 will explore some of the ways in which the bodies of women are represented and embodied through four short stories. The concept of a female or woman body is a vastly complicated one in the feminist discourse. As the physical body holds the biological difference between male and female, it naturally is and has been an important subject for feminism and how females have been oppressed, diminished, assaulted, valuated and harassed 'because' of their body. But there are also debates in the very definitions on what makes a gendered body or what qualifies as gender differences—if gender even is an adequate categorization. The body is also way more than the physical, for instance the social body; which, put simply, is how our bodies interact with and are shaped by a community, and what factors lead to inclusion, value, or exclusion in such communities (Lorber and Moore 221-222). There is also the essentialist and non-essentialist way of viewing feminism, essentialist feminism considering physical traits as giving birth, menstruation or nursing as nominators of being a woman, hence excluding those whom do not inhabit these; whereas the non-essentialist perspectives think of gender as a political or social construct, even questioning woman as a category all together (Du Preez xviii-xix). Here Judith Butler's ideas of understanding gender as a performed act inherited down in society through history and created through discourse become relevant. Additionally, Donna Haraway and her thoughts on the cyborg body and identity and how it could alter our way of understanding gender are useful, both thinking in the non-essentialist lines.

Whereas the erasure of gender can lessen the exclusion that a strict essentialist approach prompts, it also makes feminism harder to define, and the oppressions that occur on the basis of being a female or a woman becomes more complicated to confront. Despite this, Butler asks a vital question: if we want to change women's situation in society, we need to grapple with the possibility that the woman category is a social construct that could in itself put women in the position of being oppressed ("Performative Acts" 523). Butler also debates how gender can be the effect of an imitation from others' performance, which in turn produces both a sense of self and the sense of gender ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 960-961), thus making the body a complex part of our identity as well. Additionally, Leigh Gilmore also offers a wonderful way of understanding the body as it is treated in society, though she acknowledges this reading also has its fallacies: "…I seek the body in the world it has made to appear natural, a world in which skin, genitals, and physiognomy, the surfaces of the body, are seen as a manifestation of an inner truth flowing in the blood, a world in which assumptions may be projected onto the body's exterior and then read as proof of an interior

truth" (132). This interpretation describes the real experiences bodies are subjected to because of how they look or function, and it explains the internalisations that can be created within because of these experiences.

In the search for identity, young women have many pressures and expectations related to appearance, behaviour, and the physical body. These expectations often lead to different degrees of body modification, as Abigail Tazzyman explored in an experiment with a handful of young women and their views on body modification and their experiences with it growing up (95-96). Body modifications such as hair-removal (99), makeup, or even the owning of a particular straightener (105), became symbols of a transition into womanhood and being accepted (98). Influenced by their parents and friends' reactions, and a wish to assimilate and connect with others, these changes in appearance and behaviour became important for their social development as women (Tazzyman 101-106). These gendered pressures and the expectations of body modification that many, if not most, young girls in Western culture follow with little criticism, sheds light on a collective wish to become an ideal aesthetically appealing being, and how women's identities are shaped by these ideals. The theme of appearance and body modifications, either literally or insinuated in some way, appears in several of these stories and demonstrates the high preoccupation with women's appearance and how it affects their value, particularly after the emergence of social media.

Differing from the variations of form in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 will focus on the short story and its unique traits and ability to present stories concerning feminism and the body. The short story often gets an unfair reputation of not being complex like a novel, but as Charles E. May argues, complexity and the short story are not opposing terms ("Way of Meaning" 172). On the contrary, a good short story is often crafted very particularly to not have one unnecessary sentence or word, with multiple layers of interpretations, twists, and metaphors throughout. The four short stories analysed here express with unique styles and complexities pertinent aspects for investigating the woman body in a variety of ways.

The stories focus on different aspects of the body, both physiologically and biologically, but also conceptual ways. My first analysis will look at how the body fits into society when it does not function in all the conventional ways. Anne Finger's "Helen and Frida" challenges typical representations of disabled bodies and identities in a playful and dynamic manner. Significantly, this story sheds light on the problematic conception of not seeing a disabled body as a body with a sexuality. Continuing, the theme of motherhood will be explored through Samantha Hunt's short story "A Love Story" and how it shares both current pressures and expectations of being a mother and a woman, but also how the body changes and affects

ones identity. Next, the chapter looks to Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" and explores the fluid gender representations of the story, and a woman grappling with keeping up a certain appearance to the world. Finally, I will explore the cyborg body through Jennifer Egan's "Black Box", looking at how the cyborg traits change the woman body and identity, how her body becomes a tool for a greater mission, as well as the representations of beauty in the story. With this collection, I wish to explore different perspectives on women's bodies, and what the short story gives to the telling of these stories.

To open the discussion in Chapter 2, I have chosen Anne Finger's story, which probes into oppressions associated with physical ability and sexuality in a creative, confrontational, and humorous manner. "Helen and Frida" imagines a meeting between the two iconic women, Helen Keller, and Frida Kahlo, through the production of a movie partially directed by the story's narrator. This story shatters conventional representations of women with disabilities and challenges the audience with common prejudices of disabled bodies, normative beauty, and sexuality. Disability is a complex subject and causes for different layers of oppression in society. While most material accessibility issues have progressed politically and in society, more abstract issues of representation and assumptions are still apparent in society. "Helen and Frida" certainly offers critical thinking on the subject of women and disability whilst also using the form of the short story to do so creatively and playfully.

"In conventional photographs of disabled people, our bodies are posed alone. We stare into the camera, our bodies are posed alone. We stare into the camera, our bodies immobilized, our "defects" displayed. Whatever the story of our life was, it is over. The narrative has happened. Our bodies are ruins" (Finger "Writing Disabled Lives" 611). In this article, Anne Finger is commenting on how most people are so used to seeing disabled people being represented alone, that it becomes almost unnatural for them to see them together with nondisabled people. Although, as Finger argues, whilst the physical segregation of disabled people is improving, the social segregation is still lingering ("Writing Disabled Lives" 611), and with it comes presumptions and opinions people might not be aware of themselves. Literature can be an arena to help change these stuck stereotypes, something Finger does in a creative manner with "Helen and Frida". This short story about a girl falling into a movie set where they create a movie about Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo represents disability in an unconventional, but witty manner. Like Joanna Russ's story, this short story also plays with different modes and narrative techniques and leaves the reader on their toes as to what is real and fake in the story. "Helen and Frida" tackles conventional representations of disability and challenges this in a dynamic, but also unforgiving manner.

Disability Studies is a field that has been growing in the last couple of decades, from being a small literary field involving more medicinal and political debates, to now having an increasing amount of theoretical but also creative writing. In a 2010 paper examining Disability Studies, identity politics, and theories on how all bodies might be deemed as falling short in some way, Taylor Hagood discusses what these different interpretations can do to our perceptions and generalisations of disability (387). Theorising about disability beyond the fundamental medical rights began in the 1960s with the civil rights movement, but it accelerated to be included alongside gender and race studies in the 1990s (387). Some of the theories discussed in Hagood's paper points to an 'able' body to be fabricated term (387), whereas others argue for everyone to be disabled in some way, or evolving into disability (391), leading to reflections and investigations about how abled bodies as well as disabled can struggle with different variations of bodily ideals. Indeed, they "challenge [sic] some of the most basic assumptions made about human bodies and their connection to ideology" (Hagood 387). "Helen and Frida" is a story that challenges many assumptions of human bodies and invites the reader to see disability with new eyes.

As a prominent writer, activist and teacher, Anne Finger uses her writing to tell stories of disabilities, being a survivor of polio herself. She has published both prose, creative nonfiction as well as fiction, and her award-winning short story collection *Call Me Ahab* from 2009 imagines real and fictional characters with disabilities, like for instance Captain Ahab from Moby Dick, or Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo (*American Academy in Berlin*). Published first in The Kenyon Review in 1994, "Helen and Frida" tackles relevant and important issues of feminism and disability many years later. The story is a fresh and energetic one, using both humour, sarcasm, and creative invitations for reader engagement, to make a refreshing counterpoint to the conventional representations of disability and beauty norms. However, the characters in the story readily follow and accept beauty ideals and traditional representations of women, though it is often narrated with sarcasm or exaggeration. The narrative flows through like a dream or a movie, skipping quickly between different scenes and moments. Constantly changing through time and space in a dreamlike scenario, it does not focus much on the narrator's internal life, other than responding to the other characters and scenarios in the story which seem to boss her around. This short story does not let its content shape its form, but the form shapes the narrative. Charles E. May describes this to be one of the qualities of short stories, contrasting the novel's reliability on realistic content progression: "By insisting on a faithful adherence to the external world, advocates of realism, which has

always characterized the novel form, allow content, often ragged and random, to dictate form" ("Way of Meaning" 74).

"Helen and Frida" opens with the narrator lying on the couch of her home, watching "*Million Dollar Movies"* while her leg is in a cast after a surgery. Playing with words already in the first paragraph; her mother has "re-covered" the couch with cheap fabric (Finger "Helen and Frida" 1). After the narrator has stated that she is longing for the days of black-and-white television, the colours suddenly drain from the room and she finds herself on the set of a movie, where she is in the director's chair. The narrative continues with the girl having little control over her changing surroundings, both with time and space, even her own age changing as she moves through the scenes. Importantly, the movie they are making is called *Helen and Frida,* in an imagined meeting between the two legendary women Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo, who both had disabilities. Conflicts arise about who is playing the roles of the two women, starting with a comment that the role of Helen Keller is not played by actress Patty Duke, but rather Jean Harlow, who was another actress of the time, but also viewed as a sex symbol.[19] It is then revealed that the narrator, who was just in the director's chair, is now also playing the role of Frida Kahlo. Later, Dolores del Río, who was a Mexican actress, interrupts to object to someone who is not Latina playing the part of Frida Kahlo, and she takes over the part. The story concludes with a sensual kiss between Helen and Frida as the narrator is thrown back to the original couch, their kiss being too much for her to handle as she plays with thoughts of herself being a lesbian and a final comment of shutting her television-like imagination off: "I will the screen to turn to snow" ("Helen and Frida" 13).

Hagood also explores the theories that consider the terms of ability to be merely fictional and not to have any real measurable ground (387). Although there are many good things that can come out of considering disability as a fabricated term and for everyone to be abled or disabled to different degrees, there is also the danger to render disabled people's specific experiences moot, as Hagood points out (388). Here I believe the literature has the potential to navigate this terrain of terminology through demonstrating both real experiences and emotions of living with disabilities, but also portraying scenarios where these lines are blurred or not important to the plot itself, which Finger's story does several times. Although disabilities are at times described in detail, in other moments and scenes in the text, it can even demonstrate "lacks" in people without disabilities. For instance, we see this in the

[19] Patty Duke actually received an Academy Award in 1963 for her role as Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker* (1962) (Sparks). Jean Harlow, known as the original "Blonde Bombshell" was initially known for her beauty and sexuality before developing her acting career (Editors of Britannica).

superficial descriptions of Jean Harlow and the way she imagines Keller's appearance to change, so that she will look more like Harlow, the actress portraying the role of Keller, instead of the other way around.

This short story plays with different modes of writing and creative narration to challenge normative representations of disability. It plays with time and space, with the narrator falling in and out of reality and imagination in a film, with scenery and style similar to old movie sets. It also uses real anecdotes from the lives of Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo, and references to different films and actors. We see an example of this in the insertion of one of Helen Keller's real poems ("Helen and Frida" 6), within the story. With this, Finger demonstrates how literature can break the boundaries between fiction and reality, and how we adjust to illusions and representations of what we are presented with her focus on representations of real people and with illusions of "carved stone [that] are in fact made of plaster"("Helen and Frida" 2), suggesting a symbolic read in the illusion a movie-set constructs to also exist in humans and in the lines between reality and fiction. It also plays with different voices, interchanging the use of the first-, second- and third person, as the narrator changes voice in the story. Which gives fascinating perspectives to how people can relate to someone else's experience, with the characters literally stepping into someone else's shoes. This is something that is perhaps particularly relevant in a narrative on disability, where people could imagine somewhat an experience with no sight or a crooked back from polio. Finger also does this very directly by involving the reader to get a sensation of Keller's disabilities:

> Lack = inferiority? Try it right now. Finish reading this paragraph and then close your eyes, push the flaps of your ears shut, and sit. Not just for a minute: give it five or ten. Not in that meditative state, designed to take you out of your mind, your body. Just the opposite. Feel the press of hand crossed over hand: without any distraction, you feel your body with the same distinctness as a lover's touch makes you feel yourself. You fold into yourself, you know the rhythm of your breathing, the beating of your heart, the odd independent twitch of a muscle: now in a shoulder, now in a thigh. Your cunt, in all its patient hunger. (Finger "Helen and Frida" 11-12)

This is not the protagonist speaking, but an omniscient narrator that occasionally interrupts the protagonist with broader observations and comments beyond the plot of the story. With this experiment the narrator asks the reader to both step into the shoes of Keller's disabilities and feel what it really is like, but without focusing on the 'inferiority' of it. Instead, she invites to explore the possibilities and attentiveness one can achieve from turning

off two of the senses, but without turning it into a meditative state or a gimmick. What is also interesting is the final line, which suggests an expectation of a female reader to this story. This passage is an interesting manner of experimenting with the reader that forces them to both feel and reflect upon how it is to be in a disabled body.

The narrator in "Helen and Frida" has little control over her environment, but also her own body and actions, almost as if she is an observer even of herself. An example of this can be found already in the first moment her environment changes and she is on the movie set: "I'm grown up suddenly, eighteen or thirty-five … Speed! the soundman calls, and I point my index finger at the camera, the clapper claps the board, and I see that the movie we are making is called *Helen and Frida*" ("Helen and Frida" 2). Although she is thrown into this new environment and role, she immediately reacts to what is happening around her although she initially does not even know the movie they are making. It appears as if the body acts on its own, and that she is the observant, just as she was watching the movies on her television earlier. Moments later, it is revealed that she is also playing the part of Frida ("Helen and Frida" 3), and the narrator moves from the first person narrative to third, describing what Frida as the character is doing, although she is doing it herself in the role. This leaves a vague, or perhaps more accurate covert identity and personality, as the narrator is constantly in a role and being thrown into different scenes and scenarios. On the other hand, she is in the director's chair, but it is as if she is also playing the role of the director. This lack of agency in the character could possibly read as an idea that disability leaves a person 'less in control' of one's body, at least compared to a "more abled" body.

How much a disability is part of a person is narrated with different aesthetics in the story, this represented especially in the contrasting descriptions of Helen and Frida. The two characters are represented as "icons of disability", and the focus is much on how they are viewed from an outside perspective instead of what they do and achieve. The paragraph where the characters of Helen and Frida meet is filled with poetic language and unforgiving imagery, confronting stereotypical ways of showing and talking about disability:

> So now the two female icons of disability have met: Helen, who is nothing but, who swells to fill up the category, sweet Helen with her drooping dresses covering drooping bosom, who is Blind and Deaf, her vocation; and Frida, who lifts her skirt to reveal the gaping, cunt-like wound on her leg, who rips her body open to reveal her back, a broken column, her back corset with its white canvas straps framing her beautiful breasts, her body stuck with nails; but she can't be Disabled, she's Sexual. (Finger "Helen and Frida" 5)

This passage contains multiple fascinating techniques and shifts that point to disability and the many stereotypes and opinions of it. Firstly, the comparison between Helen and Frida, with Helen described as being nothing but her disability, whilst Frida is sexual and therefore cannot be. Both calling Helen nothing but disabled and denying that a sexual person cannot be disabled are both terrible statements but creates the effect of pathos in the narration. Furthermore, this paragraph again appears to be a more omniscient narrator, perhaps of some critic, or a larger impression of society's look upon disabled people.

Within this passage are also vivid bodily descriptions of the two female characters in the film, with poetic language and rich imagery. The four words that are capitalized are "Blind", "Deaf", "Disabled" and "Sexual". These capitalisations focalise the traits, but could also be said to romanticize it, though with an ironic tone, and leaves the whole paragraph very poetic and differing in tone from the rest of the text. The fact that the first three adjectives are connected to disability whereas the last one sexuality, suggests a reading that these things do not need to be different, although the words in themselves state otherwise. Vivid sexual imagery is intertwined with the descriptions of Frida's disabilities and injuries, with the "cunt-like wound" and the "back corset", the last one both a functionality for supporting her crooked back, but also alluding to lingerie. The poetics in this paragraph gives much room for different interpretations and gives an interesting perspective to the complex connection between disability and sexuality, challenging the common stereotypes with its explicit statement that these cannot be combined.

Considering performativity and how identity and the body is connected, Butler's ideas become interesting in discussing disability. "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well." (Butler "Performative Acts" 521) This quote from Butler becomes relevant here; a person is not their body, but their body contains the self. It may, and probably will, affect the identity, but perhaps more in relation to what they choose to do with the body instead of what the body is. What a person can do with their body, despite any drawback, becomes part of who the person is and how they walk through life. And as with the two icons represented in the story, the "drawbacks" of disability can be part of a success in the journey to overcome the hindrances of a disabled body, but the story also reveals the other side of it, where the narrator has no control of her body moving in and out of time and space, changing throughout.

The later meetings between Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo give further interesting perspectives that challenge the usual way to think of perception and strength. One example is

how Frida Kahlo might deal with meeting someone that cannot see her usual artistic strengths and appearance: "…this time your face is tilted, played over by shadows. In all those self-portraits you are simultaneously artist and subject, lover and beloved, the bride of yourself. Now, here, in the movies, it's different: the camera stands in for the eyes of the lover. *But you're caught in the unforgiving blank stare of a blind woman*" ("Helen and Frida" 11; emphasis added)". This final, poetic line demonstrates more of the artistry of this short story with an image of how the blind woman "sees" and feels her in a completely different way than she is used to, when Kahlo's regular strength and artistry lies much in her own appearance. It is also interesting to connect to Finger's essay in how the stereotypical framing and demonstration of disabled people is challenged. Kahlo, an artist already challenging typical ideals of female beauty, is in this narrative confronted with someone that does not see this strength so to speak. We also see suggestions to portray different representations of disability in the close up on Helen, "… we've never seen a blind woman shot this way before: never seen the camera come in and linger lovingly on her face the way it does here … We've never seen before this frightening blank inward turning of passion, a face that has never seen itself in the mirror, that does not arrange itself for consumption" ("Helen and Frida" 11). The focus on how both the camera lovingly lingers on Helen's face, as well as the hunger in Helen's hands as she touches Frida's face suggests a new way of looking at and talking about disability and beauty—to look at it with love instead of pity or disgust. This story leads the reader to look closer, and with more care at disabilities than the conventional representation leaves room for, avoiding glossed descriptions of disability that shields the reader from more honest depictions. "Helen and Frida" is a playfully crafted short story that experiments with voice, form, time, and space to challenge the normative representations of a disabled woman's body. Moving on from the questions of ability, I continue to a contemporary story depicting motherhood in Samantha Hunt's "A Love Story".

Motherhood has long been at the very centre of feminist debate, being in itself a potential factor for inequality, but also a source for discussions about what implications becoming a mother has on being a woman. During the second wave of feminism motherhood was one of the main concerns regarding the "personal is political" slogan, scrutinising the normative role of the mother in the home and at work. Some branches of the movement in the second wave of feminism in USA believed in women taking control over reproduction with for instance Shulamith Firestone, even imagining feminist utopias with technological advancements for reproduction where men would be redundant (Thornham 37).With the third wave of feminism came concerns about women's constraints, particularly mother's constraints, and these issues

were frequently represented in third-wave short stories (Young "Feminist Friction" 145). Conflicts such as the “Mummy Wars”, which dealt with polarised views of the stay-at-home mothers or career-driven mothers, also created new debates in feminism ("Feminist Friction" 140). Accordingly, narratives of motherhood have been essential in feminist debate. Emma Young argues how short stories about experiences of motherhood both illuminate the complexity of motherhood, whilst at the same time demonstrate why it has been such an important element of feminist discourse in a nonlinear, overlapping and dynamic manner (Young *Contemporary Feminism* 67). With this background in mind, the exploration of a short story grappling with issues of motherhood is a crucial addition when discussing body representation and feminism in the short form.

Samantha Hunt has written several novels and short stories, published in several magazines and received awards for her writing (samanthahunt.net n.p.). “A Love Story” was first published in The New Yorker Magazine in 2017 and received broad recognition.[20] The story follows a mother as she reflects on her fears of potential threats to her family life, as well as her struggle with her own identity after becoming a mother. It is a contemporary story of motherhood, the hormonal body, expectations of appearance after becoming a mother as well as the fears which escalate when one’s family is at stake. It represents the physical aspects such as hormonal changes, but also aspects of the social and performed body, especially in relation to the internet and social media.

Differing from Sally in Atwood’s short story, the protagonist in Samantha Hunt’s short story, “A Love Story”, is insecure from the opening, revealing the source of many insecurities to be external factors such as the internet and magazines. The narrator in sets out on a train of thought style of narrating about her experiences of being a mother and what this has done to her identity and sense of self, mixed with sarcasm, humour, fits of rage and moments of despair. There is not much plot in this short story, but instead follows the narrator’s thoughts about struggles of motherhood, unrealistic ideals spread through the internet, and her fears of her family getting harmed. However, as May argues, short stories do not need to rely on plot or even character, but perhaps on an “unspeakable significance by means of reiteration through pattern” ("Way of Meaning" 180-181). The true essence of the story is not in the plot, but rather in the greater emotions of the narrator, particularly fear and anger, which is found both directly and overtly in the narrative. A plot or frame in the story is, however, established in the initial fear of coyotes outside that could harm her children, which develops into a fear

[20] “A Love Story” also appears in Hunt’s short story collection *The Dark Dark* (2017).

of a burglar breaking in and killing her family and eventually, a more metaphorical fear which her husband invites her to face in the closing scene.

The ideals and expectations of motherhood has changed immensely in the last fifty years, in unison with feminist development and thought. Julia Kristeva discusses how motherhood previously was reactionary in some feminist generations, when the concern with getting a professional life and being involved in society was considered conflicting to being a mother, whereas the generations at the time of her writing the text in 1981, more women desired to become mothers and believed it to be achievable and even preferred to combine it with their professional career and feminist engagements (30). Since then, this has increasingly become the norm and the expectancy for women—to have successful careers *and* being ideal mothers. A common expectation is still that the mother takes the largest (if not all) responsibility in child-rearing, tending to the house and cooking the meals for the family. It has, in some communities, become more balanced with the fathers also being expected to take more part, but this expectation is arguably not as high as it is for women. “A Love Story” also demonstrates this to a certain extent; in spite of criticising society’s anticipations, the father in this text is literally absent in her imagination of him being the burglar standing outside their house, and the only time he is mentioned as a father is when he is supposed to protect the family from dangerous creatures from the outside. This demonstrates how the narrator has internalized some stereotypical dynamics of a parent relationship, and she wishes for some of them to stay the same.

The humour and sarcasm in the “A Love Story” is usually laced with a hint of truth and social criticism. We see the first example of edgy sarcasm in one of the first paragraphs of the story, “I tip taxi drivers ten, twenty dollars every time they don’t rape me” (Hunt). Naturally, this statement reads as sarcasm, but it still portrays a hint of real fear of being raped by the taxi driver. Another example follows soon thereafter when she starts accounting for possible reasons why she and her husband are not having sex anymore: “The last time my husband and I had sex was eight months ago, and it doesn’t count because at the time my boobs were so huge from nursing that their power over him, over all men, really, was supreme” (Hunt). Here, the narrator both diminishes her own appeal to her husband by blaming it on the physical change her body goes through from breastfeeding and exaggerates it to become a power that she can use to control all men. This image can be read in several ways, for instance, it could be drawn to ideas of breastfeeding and its connection to development, as

some psychoanalytic theories debate.[21] However, in this context I find the stereotype of big breasts and their allure to men more noteworthy, particularly since the boobs in a way become detached from the woman herself and become an object for controlling men in this scene.

"A Love Story" comments on the ways in which women are expected to look and how the internet bombards women with images of what the ideal body is. As she is imagining all the possible reasons why she and her husband are no longer having sex, she blames her appearance as one of them:

> The fourth reason is that I must look like a chubby English maid: bad teeth, mouth agape, drooling ignorance and breast milk. This reason sends me onto the Internet for hours, researching various exercise regimens and diets hawked by self-tanned women with chemically bruised hair. In the middle of the night, it's easy to hate myself as much as the world hates me. (Hunt)

Whether she actually inhabits the traits she describes or if it is just her imagination, is not known, but she is haunted by the constant solutions the internet claims to have for an ideal appearance. The final line powerfully shows the pressures of the high standards in society, and particularly with the rise of the internet, that women are subject to. The anxieties demonstrated through this narrator portrays a harsh image of what it does to someone if they do not keep up with society's many ideals of being a woman, a mother, and a wife. In her study on body modification, Abigail Tazzyman discusses body images that women are subjected to, especially through the media, and how the woman body is seen as a project to improve upon (95). In it, she expands Lindemann's three-fold categorisation of the body; the objectified and concrete body; the experiencing and practical body; and the experienced body, expanding it to what she argues is a fourth level (97). She explains the fourth level as the "external and objectified body, the ideal body, against which all others are compared and judged"(97). With this distinction she points to the reason for many of the insecurities of the woman in "A Love Story", the ideal body brought on by society and culture. The narrator asks, "What sort of sadist is ruining these Internets? And, more important, how do these blogs constitute acts of violence against women?" (Hunt), demonstrating how especially the internet and blogs produce unattainable goals of both appearance and projected identity. Tazzyman explains that if one cannot attain the objectified body that one wishes to identify with, then they cannot fully embody that ideal identity (97). Hence, the body images which flood the media become a certain psychological violence, affecting women's identity, or their wish for

[21] See for instance Sigmund Freud's or Melanie Klein's theories on breastfeeding, or Edith Frampton's paper on breastfeeding in literature.

an identity. However, it also becomes problematic when someone wants to avoid these ideal identities, or when one identity stands in the way of another, which is partially the case in Hunt's narrative; "'Who am I?' I ask. *Don't say wife*, I think. *Don't say mother*. I want to know if I am anyone without my family, if I am anyone alone. I put my face to the glass, but it's dark and I don't reflect." (Hunt). The narrator does not want to be merely a mother but wants her identity from before she became a mother. The case of her not reflecting could also be interpreted as her insignificance, that she is invisible to the world or to herself. I will discuss a similar imagery in more detail when discussing Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg".

An ongoing theme throughout the text is the narrator's struggle of finding or retrieving her own identity and self-image after becoming a mother. She talks to a friend about it and they discuss how you lose your identity and that society gives you a new one when becoming a mother; "After I became a mom, I asked an older friend, 'How come you never told me I'd lose my identity when I had a kid?' ''Cause it's temporary. They give you a new one. And I kind of forgot.' 'Really?' 'No.'" (Hunt). There is certainly some truth to what the friend is jokingly saying, expectations from society rise when you become a mother, some naturally with the child's interest and safety in mind, whereas others deal more with the appearance and ideal persona of being a mother. To connect this to Butler's theories on performativity, and finding self in the imitations from society ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 960-961), the narrator not feeling like herself could suggest she is trying to imitate the role of a mother as she sees it in society, but since she cannot 'do the performance' according to the ideal, it becomes a mismatch when trying to find the sense of self and identity in the performance. The idea that there is a recipe for being a perfect mother, and that falling outside of this category might lead to women losing their sense of worth, is the kind of reflection this story provokes.

In an attempt to write a manual for expecting mothers, she realises that her background as a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman is uneventful, so she comprises her manual into two lines: "I write, 'HORMONES ARE LIFE. HORMONES ARE MENTAL ILLNESS.' I write, 'EQUALITY BETWEEN THE SEXES DOES NOT EXIST.' And then my job is done" (Hunt). The narrator's focus on hormones and how they are controlling her appear several times through the story. The aspect of female hormones comes with many stereotypes but can also be read as perceptions of time that is connected to the female body. Julia Kristeva debates how female cyclicity and gestation creates a "specific measure of time that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity*"(16), and that this gives females a certain subjectivity of time that goes beyond different perceptions of time throughout history and different cultures. Thinking of this temporal subjectivity in relation to the short form, a short story begins and is

created with the knowledge and expectancy that it is going to end soon. Or as Emma Young puts it: “Like the short story genre, for mothers the issue of time is defined by tension” (*Contemporary Feminism* 55). While a mother is waiting for her child to grow, she also knows that the child will leave her and become independent at some point. Although the body does change with pregnancy, menstrual cycles, and hormones, it is also a common stereotype that these hormonal changes affect women’s subjectivity. Stereotypically, hormones can be used against women in arguments to have something to blame their anger on. This instantly devaluates whatever the woman has said or felt and connects her emotions only to biological functions.

As the protagonist reveals more of her insecurities regarding her husband, and her need for him to protect her and their family, an idea that a strong man is needed to provide safety for a family is insinuated. This reads both as the narrator rendering herself unable to protect her family, but it also leaves room for the reader to reflect on the stereotypical necessity of a man to protect a family. She is not even sure if it is herself that loves Sam, or if it is just hormones controlling her: “Maybe I love Sam because my hormones say I need a man to kill coyotes at night, to bring babies meat” (Hunt). This questions her own agency to love her husband, instead blaming hormones and primal needs as possible causes, and it validates the typical stereotypes of hormones and how it controls women’s minds. In the final scene where it is implicitly revealed that the burglar outside is in fact Sam, the main character is in a long conflict of thoughts and emotions on her fears, her imaginations, why she loves her husband and who she is and who she is supposed to be in this situation. On the other hand, she is also aware of her own complexity and does not want her love for him to be a matter of chemistry. She talks about “the women I collected upstairs, how they’re inside me” (Hunt), continuing a depiction of stories of different strong women around her. She describes how they are a part of herself, revealing, despite her fears and insecurities, an inner strength in her identity.

As I have explored Samantha Hunt’s short story, some outdated tendencies in the relationship between a husband and a wife has been uncovered, despite its many direct criticisms of unhealthy acts and attitudes against women. However, as Roxane Gay’s essay states, one should not exclude a person from being a feminist just because they have some views or preferences that are slightly disconnected from the feminist agenda. The narrator in “A Love Story” describes her complex emotions of being a woman, a mom, and a wife with many fallacies and insecurities. The way it is crafted like a train of thought, makes it honest and confessional, much like the narratives in Chapter 1, although this is a fictional story.

Nonetheless, the story depicts one way of being a mother in the current time, which still stands as one of the biggest themes when debating feminism.

The next story I am going to discuss involves a woman who never became a mother, but in some ways treats her husband like a son. More importantly, though, Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" inverts stereotypical gender norms by containing multiple layers of ambiguity in the story's plot and form. The story becomes an artistic way of challenging binary gender norms, and in many ways portrays a fluid gender, despite the fact that none of the characters reveal any explicit discrepancies from normative gender identities. By being extensively invested in her husband, and what she considers as an immense emotional stupidity in him, the protagonist, Sally, has little to no insight in her own value beyond what is portrayed to the outer world. She manages to erase herself and her importance out of the narrative, by being so obsessive about her husband and her imaginations of what he is really like. While the narrator in "A Love Story" is struggling with being a nothing and not finding herself after becoming a mother, Sally's worth in "Bluebeard's Egg" is measured in comparison to others. The sense of her being nothing because she is aging and never became a mother, seems to be the looming opinions of the dubious narrator. Whilst the story is a twist of a conventional power struggle between husband and wife at first, the end of the story leaves Sally without control, not knowing the real potential of her husband.

Being both a notable and respected author, but lately also very popular to a much wider audience after HBO's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood creates stories that makes the reader reflect on life in new ways, and has had a keen eye to imagine and in certain ways predict future worlds and scenarios from trends found in different parts of the world.[22] Atwood's writings has been recognized all over the world and she has received numerous awards and prizes for her books and poetry (May "Margaret Atwood" 48). Her concerns for social and political issues are displayed in her work both on and off the page, being occupied with themes such as human rights or literary censorship ("Margaret Atwood" 49). The reason I have chosen to discuss "Bluebeard's Egg" is both because of Atwood's importance in the feminist discourse both before and after HBO's adaptation of her book, but

[22] In today's popular culture, few things help an author gain more popularity and global interest than when their work is adapted into a successful film or tv-series. When HBO created the series based on her book(s) *The Handmaid's Tale,* critics, media and the general audience recognized this work as something important and commenting on very real issues in today's society in spite of it being fictional and dystopian. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, the book got far more attention after the release of the immensely popular series on HBO. I will not discuss *The Handmaid's Tale* in this paper, as I am focusing on shorter works, but I believe her popularity and wide reach is an important consideration to have in mind when discussing Atwood's work in relation to feminism in the eighties and today.

also because this piece demonstrates a certain upside-down perspective on how the husband and wife usually acts in a relationship, framed in a style of the haunting Bluebeard trope. It comments on both objectification of bodies, performativity and more conceptual ideas of body and gender through an unstable narrator voice.

In “Bluebeard’s Egg” we follow Sally’s obsessions of decrypting her husband’s inner life, and in a vague and complicated connection between the narrator and Sally, which enables a changing perspective throughout, the story’s unique form and narrative keeps the reader constantly on their toes. The story was first published in 1983, in a collection by the same name. The Bluebeard folklore usually tells the tale of a girl who reluctantly marries a murderous man or wizard. When the new husband is away for a period, she finds the one room the man has told her not to go into, which is filled with the dead bodies of his previous wives. Through an object (usually a key or an egg), the man finds out about the wife’s disobedience, and swears to kill her too, but the girl manages to kill him instead, usually with the help from her family. In Atwood’s remaking of it, the Bluebeard story is also found within the story itself, creating multiple layers of interpreting the classic trope. What first appears to be any regular story about a heterosexual relationship, soon develops to reveal the identities and genders in this story as ambiguous and fluid. Additionally, the changing style of this narrative gives room for many possible interpretations and realities. The focus on appearance and worrying about aging is also a recurring theme, with a protagonist who seems both slightly narcissistic and insecure at the same time. “Bluebeard’s Egg” demonstrates ways of performing confidence and self-esteem as protection, and an interesting powerplay between man and woman.

This short story follows the protagonist, Sally, as she observes and reflects on her relationship with her husband, Ed. In the period of this plot, Sally’s observations and reflections of her husband as a simple and gentle creature soon reveals some doubts and fears Sally has about a potential hidden part of Ed’s mind, unsure if she dares or even wants to figure out his full potential. While the short story in itself is a type of Bluebeard-story, Sally is also participating in a course about storytelling, where one of the tasks is to create their own twist to a Bluebeard-story (153). Through this task, she figures out that her story is about the egg and told from its perspective, which she connects in her real life to be Ed and his mind—an innocent, pure, and pristine egg (157). In the epiphany of the story, Ed and Sally’s friend, Marylynn, appears to be having some sort of affair, as Sally walks in on them while Ed has his hand on Marylynn’s bottom (161). Sally does not bring this up after, and she is more afraid of Ed’s secret life than ever. Whilst the usual Bluebeard-story concludes with the

heroine somehow escaping Bluebeard, Sally is stuck with Ed and her image of the egg, which has turned large and red-glowing: "…she's seeing the egg, which is not small and cold and white and inert but larger than a real egg and golden pink … glowing softly as there's something red and hot inside it ... This is something the story left out, Sally thinks: the egg is alive… [b]ut what will come out of it (163-164)? Like Ed has revealed some of his inner secrets, so has this egg come alive with a secret life about to burst.

The switched genders and playing with stereotypes that manifests in different ways throughout the story, certainly gives room to a non-essentialist feminist reading of gendered bodies. The story opens with Sally peeking at her husband working in the garden through the kitchen window as she makes observations about him (Atwood 131-132). At first, her thoughts seem endearing, but eventually, her admiration develops to reveal an assumption of a naïve stupidity in him. Sally seems to enjoy his simple-minded demeanour, describing him as a "dumb blonde": "Sally knows for a fact that dumb blondes were loved, not because they were blondes, but because they were dumb. It was their helplessness and confusion that were so sexually attractive, once; not their hair. It wasn't false, the rush of tenderness such men must have felt for such women. Sally understands it" (Atwood 132). This kind of objectification and value of naivety mirrors the old-fashioned stereotype of a man just wanting a woman to be beautiful, but not to speak or do anything of importance. This observation clearly swaps the usual men objectifying and observing "dumb blondes", where Sally ends up being the stereotype man and Ed the woman. There is both a suggestion that Ed acts in a way that makes Sally think of him as vulnerable, and associated to the "dumb blonde" stamp, which is a feminine association. To draw on Butler's theories, Ed might be performing in a feminine manner, or Marylynn and Sally might be assigning it to him. In either case, Butler's statement is only highlighted through Atwood's story: "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler "Performative Acts" 522). Ed might, at least in what the narrator reveals to the reader, act in ways that conflict with masculine gender stereotypes, thus discreetly demonstrating how gender and the biological body are not given correlations. This could also be the case for Sally at times, but also in the unspecified gender of the narrator, or the fact that these relationships are changing through the narrative.

Continuously, the twisted gender stereotypes are further developed through the objectification of Ed and his body, as he is diminished and rendered an innocent victim of

dangerous women in Sally and Marylynn's observations. In fact, Sally's initial comments of Ed being an innocent and dumb blonde, soon develops to be part of the problem for Sally. Considering what will happen later between them, Marylynn's jokes about making him into a statue suggests that Ed would merely be the victim of Marylynn's control: "'Ed is cute as a button,' Marylynn said. 'In fact, he's just like a button: he's so bright and shiny. If he were mine, I'd get him bronzed and keep him on the mantelpiece'" (Atwood 137). This could reminisce a stereotypical scene between white men in a 1950s office, talking about women as treasures to show off, which becomes more noticeable when it is the other way around. Sally also quite literally objectifies Ed to an egg with the creation of the Bluebeard story, comparing his smooth complexion and innocent and empty mind to the white egg. This later also connects Ed's possible affair with Marylynn to further suggest that Marylynn is the one to besmirch the innocent egg, as it was likely a symbol of virginity in the folktale (157), breaking Sally's hopes of Ed being naïve and innocent. In a way, Marylynn is what takes Ed's purity from Sally, who in this reading becomes the wizard and not the wife of the Bluebeard trope. Contrary to this, however, Giada Goracci reads Ed as a way more powerful figure in the story.

Giada Goracci also investigates the blurred gender identities and the narrator in Bluebeard's Egg, but argues that the omniscient narrator is really Ed's mind: "The thoughts, objects, and sentences that directly refer to Sally are often represented in terms of female stereotypes, thus implying the hidden presence of an omniscient male narrator:" (81). To follow his argument, Ed is in fact the Bluebeard of the story, controlling and monitoring Sally although it appears to be the exact opposite from her perspective. However, I do not necessarily agree with this interpretation, as there are more perspectives and interpretations on this point. Although Goracci believes the omniscient narrator to be male, I find strong evidence for a more female presence, constantly comparing Sally to other women. It is a competition against other women just as much as it is against Ed. Goracci also argues that the contemporary version of Bluebeard does not kill the wife, but rather incorporates something from their identity onto themselves or steals it (83). This is a valid observation, as the shifted stereotypes often result in Ed having more typical feminine traits, but since Sally is the one who is overtly in control and embodying the male in these switched stereotypes, the stealing of identity traits could go both ways. Goracci states the shifting perspectives in this story manipulate the reader by presenting ambiguous characters whose apparent normality hides in a multi-layered dimension (86). As Goracci contends, plenty of interpretations is left to the reader, thus, interpreting the narrator as feminine or fluid is not necessarily disagreeing with

his view. It could be argued that the reason this uncertainty occurs is because Atwood did this on purpose, leaving yet another non-normative gendered presence in the narrator. However, if one reads the text through Goracci's idea that Ed is really the omniscient narrator, the idea of his queerness being entertained through his wife's eyes (88), is intriguing, and suggests that Sally could have a non-normative sexuality as well. The story's several readings strongly suggests, as Butler defines it, gender as a "free-floating artifice", that does not need to be connected to the biological sex (*Gender Trouble* 9). Another interesting view from Goracci's argument if one reads Ed as the real narrator, is that it creates a certain redundancy for Sally and makes her even smaller than she does herself. We get to know little about Sally herself, but more about how she sees Ed, or how she compares herself to others. Her identity becomes secondary or irrelevant in her own narrative.

Sally is fixated with having things looking perfect to the exterior, both related to their house, how she acts, but also her appearance. Several times she is focused on someone watching her, on having an audience. Her need to look picture perfect is demonstrated especially in her reasoning for getting a new desk: "She knows exactly what she needs it for: she needs it to sit at, in something flowing, backlit by the morning sunlight, gracefully dashing off notes. She saw a 1940's advertisement for coffee like this once; and the husband was standing behind the chair, leaning over, with a worshipful expression on his face" (135). This kind of attention she is seeking reveals her need for showing off a glossed image of herself, which borders on narcissism when combined with her high opinions of herself compared to others, for instance when she claims that she is the princess Ed falls for after the witches and traps from before (132-133). However, it also reveals what she is not getting from Ed and her growing fear of him suddenly leaving her. As for her physical appearance, Sally is particularly worried about aging, envying Marylynn for her strong bone structure and bold confidence of keeping her hair grey, but still realising that Ed probably will not even notice if her skins starts to wrinkle, him not really seeing her anyway (136). This leads to my previously mentioned point of Sally's visibility and relevance in the story.

At several instances in "Bluebeard's Egg", the theme of people noticing Sally or even her being real is hinted at. In discussions with Marylynn they contemplate on how she was a "nothing" before she got divorced (135), and Sally later considers whether she is a nothing too (138). Ed's comment when he is showing Sally the heart monitor is also worrying: "He checked to make sure there was nobody *real* booked for the room" (144; emphasis added), as well as the women not noticing or caring that she was near when they flirt with her husband, as if she was invisible to them (137). Ed's remark can say a lot about Sally and her

significance in their life. Is she not real? Ed's realness on the other hand, is confirmed earlier when Sally worries about her obsession with him: "Ed is a real person, with a lot more to him than these simplistic renditions allow for; which sometimes worries her" (133). All these examples and more point to her stand in the story. The omniscient narrator is also creating a less important part for Sally, sometimes it appears as if she is nothing but an observer in the story, even though she is the protagonist. Whereas she feels like she is superior to both Ed and other women (except for Marylynn) in the story, the omniscient narrator and her surroundings seem to be devaluing her or even creating a doubt of her existence or presence. This, of course, goes against Sally's wishes of being seen and having an audience, but it could also suggest some troubling representations of women.

Considering that Sally is worried about aging and wants to portray a certain image, the fact that both her surroundings and the text overall ignores her could read as society's devaluation of an aging woman, or of a woman without a child. Seeing as she has no children of her own, it almost seems as if she feels the need for excuses to avoid being "nothing", either by working or having interesting hobbies, despite it being more Ed's decision than her own not having a baby. This interpretation, however, becomes more complicated when considering the fluid gender representations. Charles E. May describes the way Sally treats her husband similar to a "doting mother" ("Margaret Atwood" 52), which could suggest that she gets her purpose from infantilising him, creating another unhealthy dynamic between Sally and Ed. This again hints to troubling assumptions of a woman without a child, or an older woman, to be rendered as "nothings". These hints of women's value again points to the multiple ways of reading this short story and the suspicious narrator that might be the one leaving these bad representations in the text.

This fear Sally has of figuring out Ed's secrets and inner mind, and essentially losing the superiority she feels she has over him, escalates through the text, moving up until the epiphany in his infidelity and the final image of the glowing egg. Whereas the initial overt relationship between Ed and Sally is that she is above him in emotional intellect and partially in status, this dynamic changes as Sally becomes more insecure about Ed's mind and consequently, she loses the upper hand in their relationship. Her power arguably lies in her not knowing the complexity of Ed, such that if, or when, she figures him out, she can no longer feel above him. Her insecurities are revealed in imagery and her imaginations of their situation and in how Ed sometimes patronizes her, belittling her insecurities and emotions. Premonitions of the story's ending appear when Sally imagines eerie metaphors for her life with Ed; "(But the hill is jungly, and the house is made of ice. It's held together only by Sally,

who sits in the middle of it, working on a puzzle. The puzzle is Ed. If she should ever solve it, if she should ever fit the last cold splinter into place, the house will melt and flow away down the hill, and then …)" (Atwood 151). This passage hints both to the moment of the epiphany with Sally figuring out one of Ed's secrets when he is seemingly having an affair with Marylynn, and to the image of Ed being the egg in her story, turning red and glowing in the final scene, where the egg might soon reveal what is inside of it.

Atwood neatly twists and turns nuances in "Bluebeard's Egg" to eloquently demonstrate what opportunities the omissions and epiphanies in a short story has, making it almost an experiment of perspectives. The whole story can change every time it is read depending on who or what the reader thinks the omniscient narrator is, whether Sally is trustworthy or reliable, who is the Bluebeard and the victim of the story, and how they interpret the epiphany and final scene of the story. The normative gender roles that are constantly shifting through the story, and the fact that we get to know so little about Sally despite the entire story following her point of view, makes the entire story mouldable for the reader throughout, depending on where they put their trust in the narration. Both Per Winther and Susan Lohafer, discuss how the open and abrupt ending of a short story, or changing where the story ends, can lead the reader having to rethink the entire narrative to make sense of the story (Winther et al. 143-144, 162-163). In "Bluebeard's Egg", however, both the open ending of Sally envisioning the glowing egg as a symbol of Ed, the ambiguous aspects of the story, as well as Sally's focus on appearance and her transparency in the story, can all make the reader discover different understandings of the narrative. It offers layers upon layers of possibilities, never letting the reader in on the full truth of the story. Indeed, it is a story that, as Sarah Copland describes Munro's story, "resists the gap-filling, closure-seeking impulse that many readers bring to them" (147), and although the reader thus can create inconclusive or speculative closures to the story (143), I argue that such a story still encourages and generates useful reflections, despite possible simplistic or "wrong" understandings of the narrative. The human fallibility is however important to consider with an ambiguous story such as this since the reader could walk away from the story with very specific and biased opinions after filling the gaps. This makes "Bluebeard's Egg" a good vehicle for reflecting on both how we understand gender and relationships, seen that the reader meets it with an open and curious mind, but it also poses questions for representation of certain women in society, and how they are objectified and valued for their appearance, much in the way this story objectifies Ed.

Concluding this chapter, I will be exploring a story relevant for the world's current technological state, but also imagining the future of what technology could become, focusing especially on how technological advancements and adjustments might affect the body and gender identity. Literature is certainly no longer limited to print and paper. On the contrary, more and more text is being produced and published on digital platforms. In today's fast society, people want their information and entertainment as quick and easily accessible—and this both challenges and provides new arenas of expression for writers. Since the following short story was initially published as Twitter-posts, it is a great example for discussing current literature and how technology affects perception and production of text, as well as altering the way the reader receives the text for those who followed it on Twitter. It also gained massive popularity, and because of its medium became easy for people to share across borders at a fast pace. However, this story also offers a complex narrative about a part human, part robot woman and how she navigates a difficult mission as a spy; consequently, asking the question: what is a gendered body when it is partially machine?

Donna Haraway demonstrates with her theories, how connecting science, technology, and feminism can reconstruct how we think about dualisms such as man/woman, mind/body, or organism/machine, and how cyborg stories can be a mode for this reimagining and thus be a tool for feminism; "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (181). Furthermore, she imagines how it can help avoid phallogocentrism: "Perhaps, ironically, we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos. From the point of view of pleasure in these potent and taboo fusions, made inevitable by the social relations of science and technology, there might indeed be a feminist science" (Haraway 173). Hence, the merging of machine and human could potentially avoid patriarchal language and ideas, so deeply set in our history. This makes Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" a compelling tool for discussing feminist thinking, embodiment, and control over the body. Discussing different perspectives on what gender identity could or should be in a world of cyborgs, I argue that this texts offers a captivating narrative that gives both powerful and worrying perspectives on a cyborg body and identity, enabling a discussion about feminism and the future.

"People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you've seen pictures" (Egan sec. 1). This is how Jennifer Egan begins her story "Black Box", first published through The New Yorker's fiction account on Twitter in 2012. Egan's interest was to get people to read a story the way they watch series on television today, so the story was published in segments of 140 characters or less, every minute during an hour, ten nights in a

row (Haughney). The story soon went viral on Twitter, people eagerly following and commenting on the story as it was being published: “Biting my nails until the next tweet-stallment of “Black Box” @NYerFiction. Go, @Egangoonsquad, go!” (@ligayamishan). When posting a story on Twitter, the crafting and reading of a story becomes a different experience than a work published in its entirety. While the invested fans would follow up on each bit of the story, some might see only bits and pieces of the work, and perhaps not in the chronology in which it was published. Furthermore, Twitter lets authors easily connect with their audience, and it also lays the foundation for a whole new readership, reaching internationally and providing great marketing potential for both recognized authors and upcoming ones (Rudin). Perhaps more relevant than ever, are Emma Young’s reflections about momentariness of the short story. Posting a short story on Twitter certainly amplifies the momentariness and creates another great space for feminist literature.[23] However, this story is not only experimental in the platform in which it was published, but also in narrative techniques and imagination.

Jennifer Egan has received wide recognition for her unconventional writing style and gripping stories. Egan is an American novelist, short story writer and journalist known for experimenting with the limits of form in her writing (Cooke). A winner of several awards, including the Pulitzer and being featured on the New York Times bestseller list, she has gained wide recognition and attention for her writing, particularly with *A Visit From the Goon Squad* from 2010 and her latest novel *Manhattan Beach* (jenniferegan.com). *A Visit From the Goon Squad* is a collection of interwoven stories told without linearity or chronology, but it also contains the origin of the narrator found in “Black Box”; where the character Lulu continues her narrative in the short story (Gee).[24] “Black Box” is a close encounter with a cyborg woman on a dangerous mission that delves into numerous themes relevant for feminist reflection and issues of body image in a unique format.

In this short story, we follow a cyborg woman on her mission as an undercover spy. Set in an unspecified future, this character has tools and instructions to make her succeed in

[23] The technological world we live in also gives immense possibilities for feminism and activism, which has been demonstrated on several occasions, spreading shared oppressions that might have stayed secret if women did not see other women sharing their stories, as particularly the #metoo movement that set off in 2017 and has continued to raise consciousness on women’s oppressions. In the moment of writing, the world is also seeing a similar widespread activism and consciousness raising after George Floyd’s death, demanding justice against police violence against people of colour and systemic racism. Crucially, the death of George Floyd was caught on camera, making an incident that could have gone unnoticed, visible to the whole world as it was spread online.

[24] Despite this connection, I will not call the narrator in “Black Box” by name, treating the short story as its own work.

the mission, some of which give her the traits of a cyborg. With tracking devices like a camera, a flash installed in her eye and a microphone in her ear, she only has to be near the information she is on a mission to assemble, and with a chip installed in her hairline, she has both the instructions she needs for the mission, as well as a storage that will collect the experiences from her mission, to be given to people on a later mission. In fact, her entire body is the black box of the mission: "Your physical person is our Black Box; without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission. It is imperative that you remove yourself from enemy possession" (Egan sec. 38). Her mission is to get information from a man, the "Designated Mate", situated somewhere in the South of France, and her cover is to be a beautiful woman, a so called "beauty", that can get close to him and the men he meets. Having to fake this identity forces her to accept the horrible things happening to her. After an unsuccessful meeting with another man at a hidden island, the "Designated Mate" leaves the narrator, but she gets to stay with this new man and his many "beauties". The story concludes after a conflict when she is retrieving information from this new man, but she manages to escape with her wounds to a boat where the rescue helicopter reaches her, unbeknownst to the reader whether she survives or if they just her Black Box body.

Egan's story reads as something resembling an instruction manual or a recipe, which incorporates the cold and focused drive of the mission into the narrative technique of the story with breaks of more "human" memories and emotions of the character. This mechanical way of writing fits well for a story about cyborgs and gives great dimension when the narrator's more emotional qualities peek through, seen for instance in the moment when she uses the "Dissociation Technique" to make her not feel what is happening as she has to endure sexual violence:

> Begin the Dissociation Technique only when physical violation is imminent. Close your eyes and slowly count backward from ten … By five, you should be floating a foot or two above your body, feeling only vague anxiety over what is about to happen to it … By two, your body should be able to act and react without your participation … White clouds spin and curl. A blue sky is as depthless as the sea. (Egan sec. 8)

As she is forcing herself to have sex with someone she does not want to, a taught technique helps her leave her body so she will not feel the things that are happening to her. The instructions are clear, before it turns to the more poetic language of taking in the natural surroundings. These poetic breaks contrast the otherwise instructional and emotionless language; hence the language itself becomes almost like a cyborg. These breaks are connected to the person and identity, and not as much to the mission and instruction at hand, but they

also give a pause for the reader to reflect more than the instructional language urges. This is only one of the techniques she is taught or equipped with to help her survive, physically and mentally.

Donna Haraway's reflections are useful when reading these tools the narrator has to protect herself and complete the mission; "Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway 175). The narrators' body is not neutralized or made anew with the cyborg traits, but they have altered and, arguably improved, the original being. The tools give her the possibility to endure horrible situations, making her mind leave the physical body so that the emotional impact of such an event does not manifest itself in her. To amplify this, if the process of the Disassociation Technique did not acquire a gradual disconnect, the body could in theory only be a tool only to complete this act. This, of course, contradicts the ideas of a connected body and mind, as the body also ties to the self and lived experiences, despite not being consciously experiencing it. Then again, a cyborg body might make us rethink this connection altogether. A cyborg narrative gives the opportunity to rethink agency in dealing with oppressive situations, as well as using the body as a tool to survive.

There are several ways of interpreting the different layers of meaning and function for the cyborg body and mind in "Black Box". Amelia Precup employs "Black Box" in her discussions about the posthuman body, and how the text comments on the different possibilities of how the potential posthuman and cyborg body could develop. Precup tackles the implications of how the body is altered, the merging of biological matter and technological enhancements, and what repercussions this has for subjectivity, individuality, and conceptions of gender (Precup 172). Further, Precup categorizes three hypostases of the body in Black Box, namely the technologically enhanced body with instructions and tools to achieve the mission, the body as a black box, and the body of the beauty, seen as a sexual object and ornament to the target (173-174). With this division, it is easier to read the main character as a tool, almost a swiss knife of human and technological traits, created and moulded to get information for the country. The narrator also has the human achievements and personality traits beneath these technological advancements. However, this triad of analysing the main character's body creates a questionable purpose for the other women in the story, the beauties, with seemingly no other traits than being beautiful treasures for the men's pleasure. Although one beauty reveals to have higher status and more value when it is

revealed that she sleeps in the same bedroom and has a child with The Designated Mate (Egan sec. 34), what the text reveals about the other beauties is based on appearance and social games to gain a higher status between the other women. This is revealed both in the descriptions and encounters with the other beauties, but also in the instructions and imitations of the agent posing as a beauty. In a way, this implicit simplification of the beauties forges a chauvinist representation of women in the text.

Through simplifying and objectifying the other women in the story as simply beauties, "Black Box" creates a suggestion that the cyborg woman is superior to the all-human body, beyond the technical functionalities, it gives the cyborg woman more identity than the human women since the story does not provide information on the other women, the beauties, in the plot. We see this simplification when the protagonist meets the beauties: "When you are in conversation with a beauty, it is essential that you be perceived as no more or less than she is" (Egan sec. 11). The main character needs to assimilate herself as much as possible to the other beauties to not attract unwanted attention to herself, but this idea of being more or less than they are gives the beauties little integrity given some of the things she avoids to do throughout the mission. Precup describes it as her needing to assimilate to the sociocultural stereotypical beauty, with little intelligence and who is only looking to please the man (182). This objectification and stereotype is similar to the objectification of Ed in "Bluebeard's Egg", and he might even use his innocence to hide his secret from Sally, but in "Black Box", the innocence is used more directly as a disguise. Since the deeper identity and personality traits are mostly visible for the reader in the main character, the other beauties are diminished to not having individualistic traits or identities other than being trophies for the men they seek to impress, with a few exceptions when the alpha beauty is described (Egan sec. 29). This is the case, despite the narrator's identity only being described through flat instructions with some interrupting thoughts and emotions from her more human mind. Furthermore, these characters are almost never referred to as women, but always "beauties", rendering them simply as one of many objects or trophies for these dangerous men. The exception to this is found when the alpha beauty holds a gun at the narrator and her baby in the other hand, "A woman holding a gun and a baby no longer qualifies as a beauty. No beauty is really a beauty" (sec. 37). This suggestion that a more complex woman who is a mother or able to protect herself with a gun does not qualify as a beauty again solidifies the simplicity of the beauties. However, the next line questions all the depictions about the beauties, pointing instead to more complexity in these women than the story otherwise illustrates.

The narrator in "Black Box" uses both her body and her identity as a tool to achieve the tasks her mission asks of her, and the modifications to her body could also mirror current conflicts in society about body modification. Although the modifications and illusions the narrator makes of herself are motivated by a 'greater cause' they are still modifications on both her body and her identity. Tazzyman argues; "Body modification is the tool which enable us to create the self-image we wish to display to others. It is a highly normative and gendered practice which for the most part goes unquestioned (96). "Black Box" takes this objective to the next level, implementing technological devices to the body to improve it. The fact that the women are chosen to do these missions precisely because they are rendered less probable to be agents or less capable to be a threat than men demonstrates common gender stereotypes. What the beauties in "Black Box" can tell us is the conventional side of body ideals and what is wanted to display to the world. They are both seen as beauties by others, but also gain more power and advantages the more beautiful and complacent they are for the men.

Furthermore, the performativity in this story can be said to be more planned and intentional than usual examples of it in society. Considering how Butler's reflections on people performing gender norms, the performance for the narrator in "Black Box" is both performing a certain normative woman, but she is also performing an identity in and of itself and doing so more intentionally than a typical gender imitation. In describing a short story about a girl forced into prostitution and acting a certain way to please the man, Emma Young describes how the character "becomes a doll as the words and sounds she subsequently speaks are only for the satisfaction of men" (*Contemporary Feminism* 128). Whereas the character in "Black Box" performs to gain something more than acceptance or out of fear of the men in the story, she still performs this act in a similar manner as the prostitute would, 'selling her body' for the good of the nation and not for economic gain, something she also describes in the first case of sexual violence; "Remind yourself that you aren't being paid when he leads you behind a boulder and pulls you onto his lap" (Egan sec. 7). Her aim is to do and be what the Designated Mate wants her to, although she has a more complex agenda and even patriotic intention behind it. The fact that these acts are considered patriotic, one could draw the line to reading her service as the nation making her sell her body and her actions.

"Black Box" contains many aspects and themes to prompt feminist reflection. With its short and unusual form and style, it mirrors its contents and themes, similarly to Anzaldúa's writing, through demonstrating an informational, emotionless language, while at the same time revealing the real emotions and memories of the narrator within it. The special

format of publishing through Twitter is also a creative way of publishing literature and making the message of the story able to reach out to a wide audience, but also calls for a change in form when writing it. We find complicated representations of women's bodies in the cyborg narrator as she is both in control of her mission and uses her body as a tool, whilst at the same time being subject to a larger plot where her body, as an information capsule, is of more value than herself. The cyborg modifications offer reflections about a world where conventional dualisms of gender and identity could be reduced, but also points to dangerous beauty standards in society. The cyborg spy in "Black Box" demonstrates both the good and bad possibilities of such a reality.

Conclusions

Shortness does not mean scarcity. As I have debated in this thesis, shorter forms of writing can be valuable vehicles for grappling with a woman and feminist experience. The short form has long been considered a simpler version of the novel, although this conception has decreased significantly in the later years (Winther et al. 136). Significantly, the history of the short form has in practical terms been an opportunity for women to publish their writing when institutions have limited them. Furthermore, it has many advantages when it comes to distribution and publishing, and in our day and age of shorter attention spans, it has an appeal with its possibility of being read in one sitting. A short narrative usually requires great reader engagement through its omissions and inability to depict extensive descriptions and explanations, hence, the reader needs to imagine and reflect on what the story does not say, as demonstrated in for instance Atwood's or Finger's texts. This kind of reader engagement could in turn generate reflection beyond the plot to be valuable for feminist debate.

Women short story writers have used the brevity of the short story, among other things, to "intensify the sense of constraint experienced by women" or "[exploit] the ambiguous potential cultivated by brevity"(Young *Contemporary Feminism* 144), and as Young continuously describes, "the smaller narrative space of the short story enables an element of ambivalence which is central to contemporary feminist approaches" (*Contemporary Feminism* 144-145). Accordingly, one of the things I have found the short form does for feminism—a term so vast and wide-ranging that it cannot be contained into one simple definition—is to create a room to engage in feminist thought in a dynamic and insightful manner. The imagination that a large reader engagement sparks, leaves room for envisioning new dynamics in society, like hierarchies of race or sexuality, or blurring out the binaries of gender. However, in all literature, but perhaps particularly in short stories, readers can create speculative or biased understandings through the gaps inherent in short stories, as Copland points out (143,147), which is important to keep in mind when examining shorter forms as platforms for feminist debate.

The eight shorter narratives I have analysed in this thesis demonstrate in different manners how the short form has great value in a multitude of feminist discussions, and the authors portray the opportunities of feminism in the short form in remarkable ways. They serve both as historical and political archives of women's experience as particularly Toni Morrison demonstrates, and as a means of reflecting on future gender dynamics like Egan's narrative. The complex connectivity of oppressions is evident in the stories of Anzaldúa, Gay, Morrison, and Finger, whereas an understanding and development of the self is found in the narratives of Russ or Hunt. More conceptual reflections concerning gender and feminism have

been relevant in most of these shorter narratives, but particularly in Atwood and Egan. I have explored these themes with a focus on shorter forms incorporating autobiographical elements and short stories' representations of the body. However, the opportunities for further research of the connections between the short form and feminism are immense, either through other topics, or deeper into the topics explored in this thesis.

With the two overarching themes of the personal and the body, seen through a feminist lens, I contend that these stories show a wide selection of women's experiences and struggles in North America and beyond over the last 50 years, and that they contain some of the core debates of feminism. The authors daring to give a personal perspective demonstrate the importance personal perspective has had in the history of feminism, but it also gives a voice to marginalized women. They can give hope to women in similar situations, to see that also their experience is valid and important. The personal and autobiographical writing is important in the feminist discussion, creating a voice for oneself not being oppressed by men or other suppressive forces, despite autobiography and its male dominance in history, which Gilmore points to (5,13). On the other hand, the body is a topic so important when discussing women's experience in the world. Regarding fertility and ability to bear children, or the high beauty standards created in society for women's appearance, or more conceptual and theoretical discussions about gender and the body found in Butler's and Haraway's theories, these stories express some of the bodies' complexities in feminist thought. The short form, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this thesis, can be a great means of covering feminism in relation to representation of the body, and an author's personal touch to a narrative. These women authors have given many important perspectives to feminist thinking with their shorter narratives. Women who produce literature do not only create powerful and enjoyable pieces of writing but are able to leave an important mark in feminist discourse as well.

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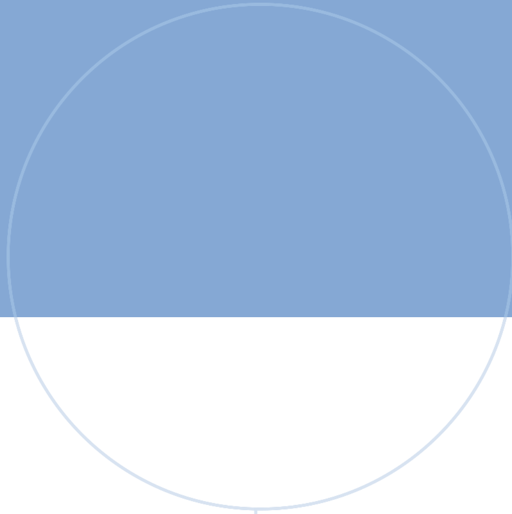
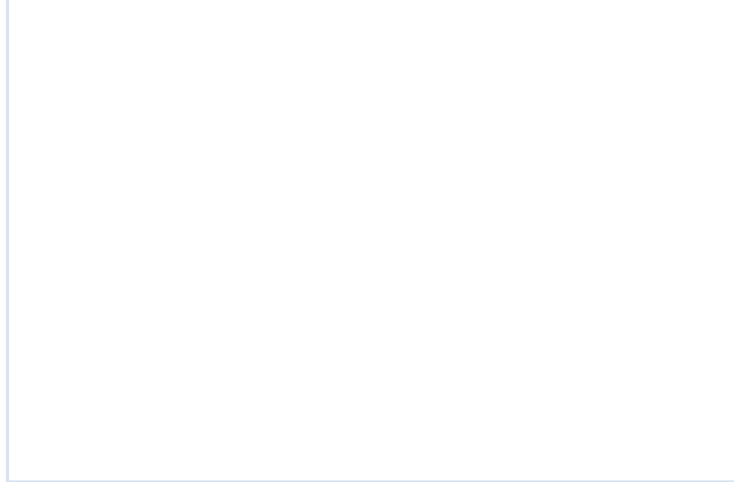

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