

Ask Kristian Bergseth Drågen

“Neither man nor Woman, Neither and Both”:

Exploring Gender/Sex Outside the Binary in
Speculative Fiction

Master's thesis in Equality and Diversity

Supervisor: Elisabeth Stubberud

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Likestilling og mangfold

Læringsutbytte

En student som har fullført programmet, forventes å ha oppnådd følgende læringsutbytte, definert i kunnskap, ferdigheter og generell kompetanse:

Kunnskap

Kandidaten har:

- avansert kunnskap om det tverrfaglige kjønnsforskningsfeltets sentrale teorier, debatter og kontroverser
- spesialisert innsikt i så vel historiske som samtidige endringsprosesser knyttet til likestilling og mangfold i det norske samfunnet, i lys av internasjonale og globale kontekster.
- kunnskap på høyt nivå om hvordan kjønn som sosial og symbolsk kategori kan virke sammen med andre sosiale og symbolske kategorier og fenomener.

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Kandidaten kan:

- identifisere og arbeide selvstendig med praktiske og teoretiske problemer knyttet til likestilling og mangfold i konkrete samfunnsmessige sammenhenger
- vurdere og benytte relevante metoder og teorier for analyse av kjønn og eventuelt andre sosiale kategorier i spesifikke empiriske problemstillinger
- analysere og forholde seg kritisk til problemstillinger knyttet til forståelser av kjønn, likestilling og mangfold på ulike samfunnsarenaer og derigjennom se og anvende flere tilnæringsmåter

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Kandidaten kan:

- gjennomføre et selvstendig, avgrenset forsknings- og utredningsarbeid i tråd med gjeldende forskningsetiske normer
- anvende sine kunnskaper og ferdigheter på nye områder i tverrfaglig dialog og samarbeid med andre eksperter
- formidle resultater av eget faglig arbeid muntlig og skriftlig på en selvstendig måte både til eksperter og allmennhet

Abstract

This thesis examines depictions of gender and sex outside the binary in speculative fiction, focusing on selected novels, including *Venus Plus X* (1960) by Theodore Sturgeon, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy, *Dawn* (1987) by Octavia Butler, *Distress* (1995) by Greg Egan, and *Ancillary Justice* (2013) by Ann Leckie. Addressing the research question of which alternative or non-binary representations of gender are being produced in speculative fiction, my thesis adopts a co-constructionist approach to understand the interconnectedness of gender and sex, using the term “gender/sex” to highlight this relationship. The analysis explores representations of the sexed body, the reproductive system, and acts of reproduction as sites for reimagining gender/sex. Additionally, it explores how the different novels choose to use language as a tool to display new ways of understanding gender and gendering. My findings reveal diverse and imaginative portrayals of gender/sex, spanning from single-sex societies to multigender or no-gender systems. These texts highlight the potential for speculative fiction to challenge and expand traditional binary gender norms but also how central the gender binary seems to remain to our understanding of gender even when we seek to look outside it.

Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven utforsker skildringer av kjønn utenfor det binære innen spekulativ fiksjon med fokus på et utvalg av romaner, inkludert følgende: *Venus Plus X* av Theodore Sturgeon, *The Left Hand of Darkness* av Ursula K. Le Guin, *Woman on the Edge of Time* av Marge Piercy, *Dawn* av Octavia Butler, *Distress* av Greg Egan, og *Ancillary Justice* av Ann Leckie. Oppgaven stiller spørsmålet: hvilke alternative eller ikke-binære fremstillinger av kjønn produseres innen spekulativ fiksjon? Den benytter en forståelse av sammenhengen mellom sosialt kjønn (gender) og biologisk kjønn (sex) som samkonstruert, og benytter termen «gender/sex» (kjønn) for å understreke dette forholdet. Analysen utforsker fremstillinger av den kjønnete kroppen, det reproduktive systemet, og reproduksjon som arenaer for å skape nye forestillinger om kjønn. I tillegg, utforsker den hvordan de ulike romanene velger å bruke språk som et redskap for å fremvise nye måter å forstå kjønn og hvordan man kjønner. Funnene mine avdekker mangfoldige og nyskapende fremstillinger av kjønn som strekker seg fra et ettkjønnssamfunn til flerkjønns- og ikke-kjønnssystemer. Disse tekstene fremhever potensialet for spekulativ skjønnlitteratur for å utfordre og utvide tradisjonelle binære kjønnsnormer, men også hvor sentralt kjønnsbinære ser ut til å forbli i vår forståelse av kjønn selv når vi forsøker å se forbi de.

Preface

I am extremely grateful to my supervisors, Elisabeth Stubberud and Sofia Moratti, for supporting me and believing in my project even when it all seemed beyond impossible. Their expertise and insightful feedback have been invaluable to me in developing and writing this thesis. I would also like to express my gratitude to both them and many others at The Department for Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture for helping me navigate the changes that came with me experiencing changes to my capacity to function in an academic setting and helping me rediscover my academic self-confidence in the process.

This thesis has been long in the making, but the work has proved worth it in the end. I would like to thank my lovely friends and partners for taking care of me and cheering me on this last year, as I have put my life on hold to finish this project. I really could not have done this without your support.

Lastly, I want to say how grateful I am to all the trans and gender-diverse people who have touched my life, however brief, with their wonderful presence. No one has taught me more about the limitless possibilities of gender and self-expression or about questioning norms. You make me believe that a better, safer world for all of us gender-strange people might one day be possible.

Ask Kristian Bergseth Drågen

(He/They)

Trondheim, May 31st, 2024

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1. Introduction

Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of Survival is most urgent. (Butler, 2004, p. 29)

The possibility and potentiality of gender were at the front of my mind as I started this project, and the need I see among my fellow gender-diverse peers worldwide only solidifies the importance of questioning preconceived notions of what gender is and should be. Expanding understandings of gender in general and genders outside the binary remains explicitly highly relevant in a Norwegian context. A healthy, exploratory, and non-sensationalised dialogue about what gender is and can be is essential not only for trans and gender-diverse people but for all as we navigate our relationship with our gendered experience and the norms available to us.

One of the goals presented in The Norwegian government's "Action Plan for Gender and Sexual Diversity" spanning 2023-2026 is to generate a more extensive acceptance of gender and sexual diversity.¹ The current status quo is a society and a legal system that subscribes to a binary gender system and does not recognise those who fall outside the male and female categories. The Act on the Change of Legal Gender from 2016 has made it possible for persons residing in Norway to change their legal gender without medical treatment if the person concerned "experienced being of the other gender than they are registered as in the National Population Register" (Lov om endring av juridisk kjønn, 2016: § 2).¹ In other words, moving between the two binary genders is much easier than before, but those remain the only possibilities.

In 2023, we saw the publication of an investigation regarding a legal third-gender category ordered by the Ministry of Culture and Equality. The investigation sets as one of its principal premises that gender/sex.² is more complex than only concerning men and women (Barne-, ungdoms-og familiedirektoratet, 2023, p.16). The report also recounts the fact that this has been recognised by a majority of parliament on multiple occasions, the first of which took place as part of the preparations for the discrimination legislation passed in 2013: "Society is not comprised of just men and women. Gender/sex is more complex than that: some experience having a gender that is different from the one they were born with; they have a different gender identity. Others feel that they are neither man nor woman."³ This view was also reaffirmed in the preparatory work for the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act that came into effect in January 2018 (Barne-, ungdoms-og familiedirektoratet, 2023, p.16).

While we, in our daily lives, are bound by the laws, regulations and social norms of where we reside, fiction is not held back in the same manner. Not only is it not limited in the

¹ My translation. Original text: "opplever å tilhøre det andre kjønnnet enn det vedkommende er registrert med i folkeregisteret".

² Gender/sex here serves as a translation of the Norwegian word "Kjønn", which encompasses both sex and gender. My use of the term is further elaborated on in my theory chapter.

³ My translation: Original text: «Samfunnet består ikke bare av menn og kvinner. Kjønn er mer sammensatt enn som så: Noen opplever at de har et annet kjønn enn det de er født med; de har en annen kjønnsidentitet. Andre føler at de er verken mann eller kvinne».

Same way, but literature and art are often at the forefront of our human imagination. It serves as a way to make sense of the world around us, but it may also serve as a catalyst for change. "Artists are the visionaries leading us to a bright future, to mourning the past in productive ways, and to sensuously stunning us in the present" (Driskill et al., 2011, p. 220). Speculative fiction is especially relevant due to the genre's status as unimportant 'pulp fiction' and 'low-brow' literature, making it a place where the possibilities for exploring gender and sexuality have been greater than in mainstream fiction (Stryker, 2001). Speculative fiction is a relatively broad genre that includes fantasy, science fiction, utopia, and dystopia, as well as several smaller and more novel genres.

In the introduction of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula Le Guin (1969, p.xvi) touches upon the particular way literature can do this as she writes: "The artist whose medium is fiction (...) says in words what cannot be said in words (...)", before elaborating on specifically on the preconceptions about science fiction. She speaks of how the genre has been conceptualised as carrying out thought experiments, but she views at least her work as describing the present rather than predicting the future. She puts it like this: "All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is a metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from the great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic metaphors (...) Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in function, is a metaphor. (Le Guin, 1989, p. xvi-xvii). In my project, I want to examine how gender is presented in speculative fiction, focusing on texts that question or break with a binary gender representation. Some of the background for this is speculative fiction's radical potential and history with interesting and non-traditional representations of gender and sexuality. Books, like other cultural products, provide an insight into how we understand and wonder about gender. Talking about the presentation of social dimensions such as gender and sexuality in media products such as literature can tell us how people have thought and written about what gender is and can be. My thesis, with its fiction-oriented angle, is not intended to impact the lives of gender minorities significantly. Instead, I wish to remind myself—and those who will potentially read the thesis—of how we as humans have dreamed and thought about gender expansively throughout recent history by looking at a small field, that of speculative fiction, in detail. As I will outline in more detail in my selection of method, I have selected six novels spanning six decades that tackle different but interconnected ways to explore alternative or non-binary understandings of gender/sex. Those being *Venus Plus X* by Theodore Sturgeon (1960), *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guinn (1969), *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (1976), *Dawn* by Octavia Butler (1987), *Distress* by Greg Egan (1995), and *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie (2013).

1.1 Previous Research

Work has already been done that draws attention to how well-established novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* have presented worlds that, among other things, call into question a binary model of gender as a necessary reference point (Aterbery, 2014; Lande, 2014). Stina Lande (2014) examines and compares how Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in my Pockets Like*

Grains of Sand uses both language and portrayal of sexuality to subvert the binary male/female opposition and showcases how innovative use of language can be essential for challenging the gendered perspective of a reader. In the “Androgyny as Difference” chapter of his book *Decoding gender in science fiction*, Brian Atterbery (2014) outlines a number of different depictions of Androgyny, choosing the feminist science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s as his starting point. He concludes the chapter with the statement that as the signs androgyny may move locations, it generates new expressions of identity and thereby new ways of seeing ourselves and evolving the human consciousness. Much work has also been done on the topic of androgyny as a transgressive tool to explore alternatives to a patriarchal society and as a means to propose alternatives to strict sex-role stereotyping or gender roles (Annas, 1978;; Fayad, 1997 Pennington, 2013). Pamela J. Annas(1978) discusses the use of various types of androgynies, such as physical and mental, in feminist science fiction as a tool to resist and propose alternatives to sex-role stereotyping. While Mona Fayad(1997) examines how the physiologically androgynous species, as depicted in Le Guin’s novel, is imperfectly perceived and constructed within the discourse of scientific observation and thereby forced into the socially constructed categories of gender and power by the humans that observe them. With a focus on the anthropological tilt of Genly Ai’s observations and the coloniality of his gaze. John Pennington (2013) highlights the role of the reader to read in a way that is resistant to gender norms and stereotypes when encountering portrayals of gender that break with our own binary understanding.

Alexis Lothian (2018, p.22) has also done work related to queerness and speculative fiction and points out that it is the narratives that lie outside a rigidly defined version of science fiction—here understood as the science fiction that more traditionally focuses on technology and the development of hardware—that open up for more feminist, queer and decolonising impulses. In other words, according to Lothian (2018), the speculative aspect creates more room for questioning central societal norms. This is why I have chosen to focus on the label of speculative fiction to describe these works, even if they could also be described as works of science fiction. As Lothian (2018, p.22) outlines in their book “Old Futures Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility”, it is the act of speculating to imagine something new as a practice—something through which one imagines the world— that gives access to a utopian world of possibilities that lie outside the current dominant paradigm. In this way of thinking, this utopia serves as a counterpoint to hopelessness as it might be experienced in the real world.

1.2 Thesis Statement and Research Questions

In this thesis, I wish to examine the ways in which speculative fiction creates possibilities of gender that lie outside the current binary paradigm by asking the following question: “Which alternative or non-binary representations of gender are being produced in speculative fiction?”

By seeking to examine gender within speculative fiction through a lens of non-binarity and the co-construction of gender/sex, I wish to provide a reading of my chosen novels, which centre an understanding of gender/sex that is radically inclusive of the transgender experience, even when not working with transgender characters or transgender authors. To do this, I employ the three sub-questions to help answer my overarching research question.

Research questions:

1. How do the novels use the reproductive system and the body as sites to explore alternative or expansive representations of gender/sex?
2. What role does the act of reproduction play in how speculative fiction constructs and deconstructs gender/sex?
3. How does speculative fiction use the social importance of language as an avenue to represent new ways of gendering and being gendered?

1.3 Terms and Definitions

Gender/sex: I have elected to include the term 'gender/sex' in addition to the terms 'gender' and 'sex' to highlight the enmeshment between the two phenomena, both in their co-construction and in the novels themselves. This will be expanded upon in the theory section.

Nonbinary: To clarify, non-binary, as it is used in this thesis, is not meant to function as an identity label as is its typical usage, but instead functions as an umbrella term to describe genders/sexes that fall outside the binary model of man/woman.

1.4 On Pronoun Use

As shown in the summaries below, the various novels utilise different approaches and solutions to describing gender as it appears outside the binary norm. This is also the case in terms of which pronouns are used to refer either to everyone as an intended neutral or universal descriptor(Like in Sturgeon, Le Guin, Piercy, and Leckie) or to specific individuals that stand outside the norms (as is the case in Egan and Octavia E. Butler). In this thesis, I chiefly use the pronouns and descriptors that are used in the novels themselves to describe the relevant characters. This choice is meant to both reflect the understandings of gender/sex present in the novels, as well as to follow my own general principle of using the descriptors and pronouns that best reflect people's preferences to the best of my knowledge and ability.

In Sturgeon and Le Guin, he/him is used as the translation for a gender-neutral pronoun, while she/her is similarly used in Leckie's work, and they are all used as general pronouns to refer to an entire population of people. The same is true for the neo-pronoun "per"—derived from "person", which Piercy uses. Both Egan and Octavia E. Butler use he/him and she/her more or less, as one might expect to refer to masculine and feminine genders, respectively. However, they also use an additional pronoun to refer to groups that fall outside those categories. Octavia E. Butler's novel uses "it/its" pronouns to refer to the novel's third gender/sex, *Oolooi*, and Egan likewise uses the neopronoun set "ve/ver/vis" to refer to *asex* individuals.

1.5 Structure

In the following chapter, I discuss the construction and co-construction of gender and sex from a historical perspective using works by Thomas Laqueur, Judith Butler and Merethe

Lie, among others. I also touch upon the relationship between reproduction and our understanding of gender/sex, as well as perspectives on how reproduction could be reconsidered from Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. In the third chapter, I outline the method used for the selection of my textual corpus as well as my analytical approach. I also provide an extensive list of works I considered for this project, along with a short description and some brief summaries of my chosen novels.

The fourth Chapter: "Completely New Clusters of Parameters": Gendering and Sexing the body", concerns itself with how the chosen novels use the body and the reproductive system to explore alternatives to the gender/sex binary. This chapter details how the various novels propose alternatives to the gender binary and how their depictions relate to current and historical understandings of gender/sex.

In the fifth chapter, "The Last Refuge of Women?": Gender and the Act of Reproduction", I move my attention from the parts that make up the body and its reproductive system to the act of reproduction itself and how the defamiliarisation of the act of reproduction is in our current context also a defamiliarisation of gender/sex. I employ perspectives from Merete Lie (2002) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) to do this. This chapter emphasises the novels by Sturgeon, Le Guin and Piercy.

In my sixth and final chapter, "She was Probably Male": Gendering and Misgendering Through Language", I focus on how the novels use gendered language and pronouns to explore different ways of gendering and the implications of the choices made by the various novels. This chapter emphasises the books by Le Guin, Egan and Leckie.

Finally, in my conclusion, I summarise my main findings from the three former chapters and reflect on the limitations of my project before I suggest some avenues for further research on the topic.

2. Theory

2.1 The Gender Binary

In a modern Western context, gender/sex has traditionally been viewed as a binary matter, containing two exclusive and unchanging categories—man and woman—where gender has been seen as following directly from biological sex (Butler, 1990, p. 9), often coupled with an understanding of biological sex as both strictly dimorphic and pre-discursive or a fundamental ahistorical truth that can be found within nature itself. That is to say, the gender binary is often coupled with an understanding of human sexual difference as being either strictly male or female and that this division is a result of nature itself rather than a historical construction. This has, according to Laqueur (1990, p. 6), been the dominant—though not universal—view since the Enlightenment in the 18th century—where the two binary, opposite sexes functioned as a foundational truth for understanding not only the physical traits of the body, but also the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women.

That being said, sexual dimorphism in itself is, in a historical and contemporary sense, “neither a simple fact nor an innocent hypothesis” (Butler, 2024, p.194). Instead, sexual dimorphism and binary understandings of gender function as a norm that structures the way we see, affect our findings, and may sometimes compel people to “deny a host of hormonal and neurological overlaps and complexities rather than accept any challenge to that hallowed framework” (Butler, 2024, p. 194). In other words, if the presupposition is that there are only two distinct and separate sexes, each with a corresponding gender, then bodies that fall outside or between those categories must either be explained away as anomalies or be brought closer to one of the set standards. In that way, the gender/sex binary reinforces itself by invalidating the complexities of human sexual development and gender identity.

2.2 Gender/Sex

On the surface, the divide between sex and gender might appear to be somewhat straightforward and intuitive, as gender is often considered to be the social and cultural aspect. In contrast, sex is frequently seen as more tangible or objective and encoded in the body and its reproductive organs. However, as I will argue in my section “Sexing gender, gendering sex”, the two phenomena are in many ways both contemporary and historically dependent on each other.

I would be remiss here, not to mention my own context, as a native Norwegian speaker who has been experiencing and studying gender while embedded in a Norwegian context. This is notable because Norwegian, like a number of other languages, does not have the same sex/gender distinction as English does. Nor has Norwegian gender research established a corresponding term to the English “gender” or Swedish “genus”. Instead, the cultural and embodied aspects of gender/sex exist as nuances of the same experience. Thus, we speak of gender/sex with the full knowledge that the term allows for both bodies and cultural aspects to be present simultaneously. As Stine H. Bang Svendsen (2020, p.12) writes in her introduction to a collection of translated texts by Judith Butler: “We talk about “kjønn” (gender/sex), knowing that this term points in the

direction of both bodies, discourses and symbols, to name a few. Butler's work offers one of several possible justifications for this choice. When the border between the social and the biological or the cultural and the bodily is drawn in any arbitrary place, why should we draw it at all?"⁴

Therefore, inspired both by the approach to gender/sex found in Norwegian gender research and by some international scholars such as van Anders (2015) and Fausto-Sterling (2019), I have elected to include the term 'gender/sex' as "an umbrella term to encompass both things that are usually labelled as gender (socialisation) and those labelled sex (biology, evolution)" in addition to 'sex' and 'gender' when describing phenomena or discourses that show an enmeshment that makes it hard to sort them into gender or sex respectively (Van Anders, 2015, p. 1181).

2.3 Sexing Gender, Gendering Sex

While it is true that human reproduction relies on the interaction of two separate types of cells, the sperm and the ovum, that is not the sum total of sex either in terms of how one might sex a body or in terms of how sex as a category exists in a social context. Numerous scholars have examined and challenged the idea of sex as a stable binary standard. Both within the social sciences (Butler, 1993; 2024; Laqueur, 1990; Lie, 2002) and within medicine and the study of human biology (Fausto-Sterling, 1993; 2018; 2019; Slagstad, 2018). One seminal example can be found in Thomas Laqueur's "Making Sex", wherein he provides a detailed account of how sex has been understood, constructed and transformed in a Western context since ancient Greece and onward. In this process, he found that the more he "put pressure on the historical record, the less clear the sexual divide became" and that "the more the body was pressed into service as the foundation for sex, the less solid the boundaries became" (Laqueur, 1990, p.viii-viv).

Unlike the strict binary division of gendered/sexed bodies that we see later in history, from antiquity to the Middle Ages, men's and women's bodies are seen as being different but consisting of the same organs and body parts; a vagina was for instance conceptualised as an interior penis, with the vulva corresponding to the foreskin and the cervix to the scrotum (Moi, 2002, p.27, Laqueur, 1990, p. 4). The anatomical differences between men and women were understood to be a matter of their degree of metaphysical perfection. The man's body was understood to be closer to metaphysical perfection as it contained a higher amount of 'vital heat' that enabled him to contribute to reproduction not only in a material manner but also in terms of form—in an Aristotelian sense, whereas the woman was considered to provide only the former (Trott, 2017, pp. 165-166). In this understanding of sex/gender, biology was not held up as the background for social and cultural gender norms—the social order was given by god as part of his plan for humankind (Moi, 2002, p.27). This did not mean that the difference between men and women was not significant; in fact, it mattered a great deal, but there were no efforts to ground this in biology as social categories were just as much a part of nature and the cosmic order (Lie, 2002, p. 6, Laqueur, 1990, p.8-9).

⁴ My translation. Original text: «Vi snakker heller om kjønn, vel vitende om at dette begrepet peker i retning av både kropper, diskurser, og symboler, for å nevne noe. Butlers arbeid tilbyr én av flere mulige begrunnelser for dette valget. Når grensen mellom det sosiale og biologiske eller det kulturelle og det kroppslige dras på et vilkårlig sted, hvorfor skal vi da trekke den over hodet?»

In the late 18th century, there was a shift from a system wherein men and women were arranged according to their degree of metaphysical perfection to a newer model of radical dimorphism (Laqueur, 1990, p. 5). With the Enlightenment, the church no longer served as the purveyor of truth in matters of sex/gender. In this model of radical dimorphism, the difference between man and woman was found in biological divergence and measured not in degree but in kind (Laqueur, 1990, p. 5). That is to say, men and women were not seen as being different versions of the same, but rather, to be hyperbolic, as different—but complementary—species. A woman was no longer considered a less developed version of a man; men and women became two rigid and separate standards. Internal structures considered equal, such as the skeleton and the nervous system, were differentiated to correspond to the cultural understanding of men and the cultural conception of women (Laqueur, 1990, p. 147).

Torill Moi (1993, p. 29) argues that the resulting binary understanding of gender/sex leads to a gender/sex that is deeply ingrained in every cell of the body, seeping outwards from the ovaries and testicles. The focus on the gonads as the source of gender/sex also serves to establish heterosexuality and reproduction as a given (Moi, 1993, p.29). The gender/sex seepage is not limited to understanding the physical body. However, it extends to every aspect of a person's life—domestic labour, care, and selfless sacrifice become womanly or female and heroic feats, science, and philosophy become manly or male. As a result, through the heterosexual matrix, the two-gender model creates an understanding of gender in which any transgression of gender norms, be that in gender expression, sexual orientation or reproductive choices, comes across as "unnatural" and, as a consequence, the "unnatural" woman or man is then not "really" a woman or man at all (Butler, 2006, p.208).

As the 20th century dawns, we see a radical shift in how one conceptualises the seat of sex within the body. After over a century of looking for the originating of sex within the body's organs, attention was moved to the hormonal system (Lie, 2002, p.7). Sex then becomes less tangible as hormones could not be localised to a specific place within the body, could not easily be visually depicted, nor could it become easily isolated for research purposes (Lie, 2002, p.7). In fact, sex hormones were featured in scientific publications before scientists could isolate and extract them, as Lie (2002, p.7) points out. Lie (2002, p.7) writes that this affects the ways bodies are understood and talked about; with this shift, male and female bodies are just not understood as having different organs, but there is also the understanding that chemical substances influence the sexes' emotions, behaviour and to which degree they are fit for various social roles and functions.

In the process of trying to isolate the male and female sex hormones, it became apparent that both kinds of hormones were present in people of all genders (Lie, 2002, pp. 7-8). Lie (2002, p.9) suggests that the discovery of sexual hormones could potentially have led to a modification of the two-sex model—to parallel the more fluid way of understanding sexual differences. Instead, along with the ability to produce hormones for hormone therapy, came the belief that these hormones would be used with sexual specificity—that is, women were to be treated with 'female sex hormones', and men were to be treated with 'male sex hormones' leading to a strengthening of sexual dimorphism (Lie, 2002, p. 8). As Lie (2002, p.9) states, " Nature has more than two sexes, whereas culture, apparently, has only two." This production of sex involves not only determining what constitutes male and female bodies but also identifying which

bodies fall outside the "proper domain of sex" (Butler, 1993, p.23). Thus, hormonal treatment has been used to bring bodies closer to the norms of what constitutes a typical male or female body, respectively. As such, hormonal therapy might be used to align the bodies of those of us who are born with anatomy or hormonal levels that are labelled as typical or undesirable within the binary sex model.

In taking a strong stance on the separation of sex from gender, Lie (2002, p.5) argues that we leave the implication of a silent acceptance of biological differences as the unquestionable, unchangeable biological core that can be found under the sociocultural layer of gender. In that sense, as the sociocultural patterns of gender became the focus of gender research and political debate, the core (sex) was primarily left alone. In speaking about sex as another constructed standard, Judith Butler, in their book "Bodies that Matter," argues that it is not enough to claim that sex is already constructed without explaining how the materiality of sex is produced through highly regulatory practices in much the same way as gender is produced (1993, pp. xi-xii). Laqueur (1990, p.11) also argues that the historical evidence suggests that the matters of sex and gender are too complex to separate—in that "almost everything one wants to say about sex--however sex is understood--already has in it a claim about gender". In other words, the standards of sex and gender are interconnected and interdependent. Gender is not entirely constructed upon the foundation of sex, nor is sex entirely constructed upon the foundation of gender. Instead, their relationship is better explained by the model of co-construction as it "more fully demonstrates how material and social contributions are intertwined in the production of the gendered body" (Butler, 2024, p.33). The construction of sex and gender happens in tandem, and therefore, separating the two for analytical becomes a very delicate, sometimes useful, sometimes flawed, act.

2.4 Reproduction and Gender/Sex

The act of reproduction and understanding of gender/sex are inexplicably intertwined. As Lie (2002, p. 2) points out, pregnancy and motherhood have been understood in a Western context as central to what makes a woman and have functioned as one of the fundamental distinctions between men and women. This understanding of pregnancy and motherhood being central to the construction of womanhood stems from the notion of 'matrigenesis' that it is the mother that gives life to a child, and as this happens, she simultaneously gives birth to herself as a woman (Lie, 2002, p.4).

In her seminal work, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Shulamith Firestone locates women's oppression in sex and sexual reproduction. The obligation placed upon women to conceive, carry, and care for children has made them reliant on men for economic and physical support, physical demands and constraints associated with pregnancy and giving birth. In her mind, "the end goal of the feminist revolution must be (...) not just the elimination of a male privilege, but of the sex distinction itself", ending the cultural importance of genital differences between human beings (Firestone, 1970, p. 10). The end of the sex distinction itself seems here not to mean a world where sex distinctions are irrelevant in all circumstances. Instead, as Loren Cannon (2016, p. 231) argues, "it can best be understood as the culturally produced and supported gender roles of all sorts, including those that are relevant to sex, love and reproduction". In this imagined world post-revolution, "the freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by any means available" stands as essential to achieving equality,

be this through technological advancements or adequate compensations "to reward women for their special social contribution to pregnancy and childbirth" (Firestone, 1970, p.238). The central point being that: "The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either" (Firestone, 1970, p.11). Resulting in the diffusing of both pregnancy and the raising of the resulting children "to the society as a whole, to men, other children as well as other women" rather than just the person who might have carried the child or contributed genetic material to aid in their conception and birth (Firestone, 1970, p.238).

3. Method

3.1 Selection

At the onset of my project, I delved into the vast realm of speculative fiction, wishing to explore its potential for breaking away from the traditional cisnormative and binary notions of gender and sexuality. For this purpose, I compiled a list of books within the scope of speculative fiction that either broke with cisnormative and/or binary ideas of gender and sexuality. It is also worth noting here that both my final selection and much of my list of potential works are literary works produced within the Anglosphere. One reason for this is my own background in studying English language literature, but I was also drawn to focus on this particular section of global literature due to the recognisability of many of the titles both inside and outside queer circles. This already existing awareness of the queerness associated with many of the relevant novels also made the process of getting an overview and making an initial list of possible candidates simpler than it might have been otherwise. There is also the fact that I already had knowledge of the existence of literary works that contained depictions of gender outside the binary, whereas I, for instance, know of very few Norwegian novels that would fit this description.

To accomplish this, I consulted previous academic texts on the topic (Lothian, 2018; Zigarovich, 2019), books that have systematised and summarised genre literature (Bleiler 1990, Garber, E., & Paleo, L. 1983), looked at the list of books compiled by queer readers on social media, as well as examined and read summaries of recently published speculative fiction to obtain a wide selection of texts which I considered to be interesting or relevant to this project. This resulted in a rather exhaustive list of 52 works, some novels, others short stories and anthologies, from the late 19th century to 2019. This is, of course, by no means a comprehensive list of novels and short stories on these topics from this period, but it is a list of the ones I found trace of and that I found notable enough to note down. After compiling this, I continued to whittle down this list to narrow it down to books that specifically feature representations of alternative gender systems or genders outside the binary to a significant degree. This work still left me with more novels and short stories than could feasibly feature in a dissertation of this scale, and my next task came to be to narrow down the material by means of narrowing down a time period.

After looking at my list of possible material, I concluded that starting in the 1960s seemed to give me the largest selection of relevant continuous text as earlier works did not only appear as more scattered upon cursory reading but also seemed more commonly interested in themes of gender switching than exploring that which might lie in-between or outside the limits of manhood and womanhood. In the context of sci-fi as a genre, this does make sense, as while the 1940s have often been heralded as the golden age of science fiction,' in an Anglo-American context, many do argue that the post-war period and the 1950s publishing boom is the genre's actual golden age (Kurtz, 2017, s. 130). This was a time when significant changes were taking place within the genre – it moved away from the small fan communities of pulp SF through changes in not only the genre's editorship, publishing and narrative forms but also a rapidly growing readership—as it reached new audiences (Kurtz, 2017, p.130). It also saw a move from being predominantly published in magazines to gaining a large paperback—and later

hardback market. This is particularly important because of how this changed the constraints placed upon the genre. As Philip José Farmer—among others—has pointed out—in the era dominated by the SF magazines, the authors were beholden to the tastes of a small handful of editors (Lantham, 2017, p.159). One of the most significant changes within SF at the end of the Second World War was the swift expansion of SF magazines and paperbacks—especially in the US (Kurtz, 2017, s.131). As this was happening, we also saw SF entering the world of TV production with significant works such as *The Twilight Zone* (1954-1964)—SF was shifting away from its niche beginnings to become part of popular culture proper (Kurtz, 2017, p. 131). In the world of literature, this can be seen in the flourishing sales of paperbacks that led to novels like Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) becoming bestsellers in both genre and mainstream markets (Kurtz, 2017, p.132).

A metaphor used to describe this turn toward new literary heights and as a platform for cutting-edge social critique is that of maturation—SF was growing up to tackle more serious topics (Kurtz, 2017, s. 130). This led to an increased use of SF conventions for political allegory and satire—critiquing the conservative socio-political state of the era and warning of potential dystopian futures—thereby moving away from the more technological orientation of earlier pulps (Kurtz, 2017, p.133). One of the subgenres developing post-war is that of social SF—while the more classic hard SF is more concerned primarily with the development of technology—social SF was more concerned with philosophical speculation, ethics and exploring the human condition (Kurtz, 2017, p. 137). One of the routes this took was in reflecting critically on the dangers of unfettered scientific advance—through representations of post-apocalyptic scenarios and nuclear disasters (Kurtz, 2017, p.143).

This is perhaps even clearer in the case of women SF authors—who used the genre as a space to express political dissent—challenging both gender expectations and social norms (Kurtz, 2017, p. 148). With the publication of *Le Guin's Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, a number of feminist writers began to work with androgyny as a concept—where they created alternate worlds that based themselves on a unity where “male” and “female” elements are placed in a state of harmony within the individual and/or society as a way to propose alternatives to “sex role stereotyping” (Annas, 1978, p. 146). This was done in a number of ways, such as envisioning worlds in which the people are “biologically androgynous”, presenting societies where male and female “functions and roles” are not sharply differentiated, or societies or worlds where no men do not exist, creating sexual polarization—that is to say, single-sex worlds (Annas, 1978, p.146).

One of my goals in making my final selection was to have a more or less continuous line from the 60s onward without too large a gap between them. Initially, I considered selecting two works for each decade, but that proved impractical in terms of the limitations of this project and the materials available, as the number of relevant works varied immensely from decade to decade. I also concluded that using the framework of the decades to organise my work was not helpful, but I felt artificially limited instead. Therefore, I instead set out to take the approach of creating as even a dispersion as was practical with the works I considered. The goal was to end up with a selection that would give a sense of scope while still interacting in terms of their themes. At the end of this process, I was left with a much shorter list of 6 novels with a span reaching from 1960 to 2013.

As my initial list had, in terms of numbers, a much richer trove of materials from the 1960s and 1970s than from the subsequent three decades, my final selection leaned slightly heavier towards the earlier end of my timeline. There may be many reasons for this; one is that of sampling bias, as both of the books that summarised genre literature that I consulted are quite old, one from the early 1980s and another from 1990. Another explanation might be a point raised by Sheryl Vint (2017, p.193), namely that while some strands of SF continued to have a countercultural tradition throughout the 1980s, other SF embraced the spirit of the decade (privatisation and deregulation as ushered in by Thatcher and Reagan). They tie this rising global capitalism of the 80s and 90s to the development of the cyberpunk genre. Cyberpunk, in some ways, reinvents SF, with its shift from visions of technological transcendence via space travel towards more intimate technologies such as personal computers that are fused with their users; it also carries a much more pessimistic tone as it envisions futures of corporate dominance where humans live are seen as expendable. The end of the twentieth century speculative fiction quickly evolved into a common language for understanding a world increasingly resembling the speculative visions imagined at its start and more importantly, it was posed to become a mode used by diverse communities, creating a more comprehensive and inclusive socio-technical perspective to guide future speculations into the twenty-first (Vint, 2017, p.205).

3.2 Initial List of Works

Title	Year of publication	Author/Editor	Brief description
Mizora	1880-81	Mary E. Bradley Lane	Single-sex narrative.
New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future	1889	Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett	Matriarchal society
An Anglo-American Alliance	1906	Gregory Casparian	One of the first depictions of a surgical sex change.
Herland	1915	Charlotte Perkins Gilman	Single-sex narrative. usual reproduction.
Doctor Transit	1925	Isidor Schenider	Gender switching narrative.
Orlando	1928	Virginia Woolf	Describes the life of a poet who changes their sex from man to woman.
Turnabout	1931	Thorne Smith	Gender switching narrative. The wife makes the husband pregnant.
"Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself"	1934	Radclyffe Hall	Gender-switching themes.
The thing on the doorstep."	1937	H.P. Lovecraft	A woman is possessed by a dead man's spirit. The spirit dislikes having to be in a woman's body.
"No Woman Born"	1944	C.L.More	Brains are in mechanical bodies, but women still perform according to gender.
Venus and the Seven Sexes	1949	William Tenn	Seven different sexes are needed to reproduce.
"Sex opposite"	1952	Theodore Sturgeon	Features an intersex symbiote.
The World Well Lost	1953	Theodore Sturgeon	It features a set of alien gay lovers; one of them reads as a woman to humans.
"Consider Her Ways"	1956	John Wyndham	Single-sex society.

"All you Zombies"	1959	Robert A. Heinlein	A young man (later revealed to be intersex), through time travel shenanigans, impregnates himself and becomes both his mother and father.
Venus Plus X	1960	Theodore Sturgeon	Features a society whose members possess both binary sexes as a result of mandatory surgical procedures.
Lord of Light	1967	Roger Zelazny	Features reincarnation. The sex/gender of the reincarnated bodies/persons differ.
Season of the Witch	1968	Jean Marie Stine	Transgender author. A man is transplanted into the body of his female murder victim as a punishment. They eventually become content with their new body and identify with it.
The Left Hand of Darkness	1969	Ursula K. Le Guinn	Almost all the characters are genderless/sexless most of the time but have the potential of becoming male or female to reproduce.
"I Will Fear no Evil"	1970	Robert A. Heinlein	A man has his brain transplanted into the body of a woman. Her consciousness remains and "teaches him to be a woman.
Son of Man	1971	Robert Silverberg	Featuring androgynous characters that can change their sex at will.
The Female Man	1975	Joanna Ross	Follows four narratives told by four different women living in different realities. One of these worlds is single-sex and features asexual reproduction. In another reality, men and women are at war.
The Transformation	1975	George McBeth	A man wakes up to discover he has become the woman he loves. During the next 15 hours, he navigates a series of relationships and reconciles his new identity before returning to his own body.
Trouble on Triton	1976	Samuel R. Delany	It depicts a world where both gender and sexuality can be changed through medical procedures. The main character undergoes sex reassignment to become his 'ideal' woman.
Woman at the Edge of Time	1976	Marge Piercy	Depicts a gender-neutral society where the gender-neutral pronoun 'per' is used for all. Reproduction happens outside human bodies, and children are raised by three 'mothers' of any gender.
"Houston, Houston, Do You Read?"	1976	James Tiptree Jr.	Single-sex narrative. Set in a future where all men have died off
The Passion of New Eve	1977	Angela Carter	A misogynistic man undergoes a forced sex-change operation. He experiences harassment and abuse as well as discomfort with his body. Only once he has shed his misogynistic beliefs can he become a man once more.
Beyond Rejection	1980	Justin Leiber	Gender switching narrative. A man wakes up to find that his mind has been implanted in the body of a beautiful woman.
<u>Wraeththu Chronicles</u> -The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit (1987) -The Bewitchments of Love and Hate (1988) -The Fulfillments of Fate and Desire (1989)	1987-89	Storm Constantine	The titular Wraeththu are both male and female.
The Morphodite	1981	M.A. Foster	It features an assassin that is genetically engineered to switch gender involuntarily after each kill as a disguise tactic.
Friday	1982	Robert A. Heinlein	About a woman who is an Artificial Person.
The Identity Matrix	1982	Jack L. Chalker	A body swap narrative.
Dawn	1987	Octavia Butler	Humans interact with an alien race that has three sexes.

Steel Beach	1992	John Varley	Changing one's sex is considered a relatively common cosmetic procedure detached from one's identity.
Distress	1995	Greg Egan	It contains seven genders: three aligned with masculinity or manhood, three aligned with femininity or womanhood, and one that stands apart from the binary entirely.
Mission Child	1998	Maureen McHugh	The main character assumes a male identity for safety and goes on a journey of gender exploration, encountering different presentations and identities.
<u>Wraeththu Histories</u> -The Wraiths of Will and Pleasure (2003) -The Shades of Time and Memory (2004) -The Ghosts of Blood and Innocence (2005)	2003-2005	Storm Constantine	The titular Wraeththu are both male and female.
Illario	2006	Mary Gentle	Intersex protagonist
Supervillanz	2006	Angela E. Goranson	Transgender protagonists.
Eon/Eona	2008	Alison Goodman	Features a trans woman as a supporting character.
2312	2012	Kim Stanley Robinson	Genderqueer major characters, a society in which nonbinary and fluid gender and sexuality are embraced
Beyond Binary: Genderqueer and Sexually Fluid Speculative Fiction	2012	Anthology edited by Lee Mandelo	
<u>Imperial Radch trilogy</u> -Ancillary Justice (2013) - Ancillary Sword(2014) - Ancillary Mercy (2015)	2013	Ann Leckie	The central alien race does not distinguish people by gender. The main character struggles to understand gender differences as she interacts with other cultures.
The Mirror Empire	2014	Kameron Hurley	The three plot-central countries each have a different gender system. One has two genders, another three and the last five.
An unkindness of ghosts	2017	River Solomon	Features gender non-conforming and intersex characters.
Meanwhile, elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy from Transgender Writers	2017	Anthology edited by Cat Fitzpatrick and Casey Plett	
Mask of Shadows	2017	Linsey Miller	Genderfluid protagonist
The Tensorate series	2017-2019	Neon Yang	Children are raised with no gender, but there is a rigid gender binary for adults.
Annex	2018	Rich Larson	A trans woman is liberated from social expectations by the apocalypse and begins living an authentic life while fighting off aliens.
All Out: The No-Longer-Secret Stories of Queer Teens Throughout the Ages	2018	Anthology edited by Saundra Mitchell	
The Brilliant Death	2018	A.R. Capetta	Features characters who shift between genders using magic.
The Fifth gender	2019	Gail Carriger	A murder mystery where a human encounters an alien species with five genders.

After carefully considering each option, I ultimately decided on six novels to add to my reading list: *Venus Plus X* by Theodore Sturgeon (1960), *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guinn (1969), *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (1976), *Dawn* by Octavia Butler (1987), *Distress* by Greg Egan (1995), and *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie (2013).

My primary reason for selecting *Venus Plus X* was its unique portrayal of a world with only one sex/gender, which I found fascinating and thought-provoking. Additionally, it served as a precursor to feminist-oriented science fiction, which became more prevalent in the following decade. *The Left Hand of Darkness* was chosen for its similarities and differences to the single-sex/gender worlds depicted in other novels on my list. *Woman on the Edge of Time* was selected for its imaginative portrayal of a non-gendered society and its innovative approach to reproduction. I felt compelled to include *Dawn* by Octavia E. Butler because of its interesting depiction of an alien three-gender system. *Distress*, by Greg Egan, stood out to me for its portrayal of a multigender system and its emphasis on individual identity and expression rather than reproduction and gender inequality between men and women. Finally, I selected *Ancillary Justice* for its continuation of the trend of not centring the understanding of sex/gender on reproduction, as seen in Egan's work, and for its reflection of the non-gendered society depicted in Piercy's work, while also reversing the outsider narratives found in both Sturgeon and Le Guin.

3.3 Analytical Approach

The first step in my analysis was to create my textual corpus as I have outlined in the section on "selection" above.

When approaching a literary analysis, there are many available approaches and aspects of the chosen text or texts to consider. When doing the initial coding for my project, I used thematic analysis as my approach. Nowell et al. (2017, p.2) note that there is some disagreement on whether thematic analysis should be a separate method or a tool that assists researchers in doing their analysis, but that they consider it to be a method, albeit one that can be widely used across a large "range of epistemologies and research questions". Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, organising, and describing themes that are found within a data set (Nowell et al. 2017, p.2). The advantage of using this as my starting point was that it gave me a chance to structure my approach to summarise the key features of my dataset (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2).

Before I started reading my chosen novels, I created a list of probable themes based on my previous knowledge of the books and the topics that I would like to focus my analysis on, namely how binarity or non-binarity manifests in the various societies presented in the novels. I expected to need to modify or add to these as I went. This is what Nowell et al. (2017, p.8) describe as a deductive manner of generating themes. Themes are here understood as what brings together components or fragments of ideas and experiences found within the material that might appear insignificant or meaningless when viewed on their own (Nowell et al. 2017, p.8). I started with the following themes: binarity, non-

binarity, implicit societal representations of gender, and sexuality. In this context, "binarity" refers to beliefs about gender and sex that adhere to a binary understanding of these concepts, precisely the idea that there are only two genders/sexes: man and woman/male and female. On the other hand, "non-binarity" encompasses expressions and understandings of gender that fall outside or go beyond this binary framework. I also used the term "implicit societal representations of gender" as a catch-all for instances of gender/sex or gendering that do not fit neatly into these categories. Additionally, I used the term "sexuality" to refer to both general references to sexual activity and sexuality as an identity. If I were to start over, I might separate these categories to improve clarity. Finally, as I was working, I also ended up adding two more themes: "artificiality/naturalness" to mark when the novels expressed ideas about what would make gender/sex outside the binary natural or artificial, and "sameness/difference" to mark discussions of sameness or difference between men, women, and other genders, often used in conjunction with binarity and non-binarity.

I colour-coded my physical books with the use of tabs by these themes as I read and underlined the relevant text and noted on the tabs either what prompted the tab or what aspect of the theme could be found. I often coded sections with multiple themes at once, both for specificity and to aid me in seeing the nuance when revisiting the texts. In an instance where I coded for binarity and societal representations of gender, I, for instance, added "motherhood" as a clarifier. In another example where I coded for both binarity and non-binarity, I added the note "discussing binarity in a non-binary society".

After this was done, I returned to the novels and digitised the most relevant quotes, and started work on dividing them into three overarching themes that I had inductively identified as I was coding: the first being "gender/sex in relation to the body and reproduction," the second being depictions of "gender/sex as it relates to language" and the third was about the centring of the binary the depictions of gender/sex in these novels. This was later revised to "gender/sex and the body", "gender/sex" and the act of reproduction", and "gender/sex and language", which came to form the basis for my three analysis chapters.

Nowell et al (2017, p.2) highlight that the flexible nature of the thematic analysis may lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing the themes from the research data, but that this can be promoted by explicitly applying an epistemological position that can serve to coherently underpin the themes and findings of the project. My analysis of these novels is informed by an understanding of gender and sex as co-constructed, and I am inspired by queer studies/queer theory and trans studies.

Queer approaches to texts often focus on "authors, characters, or formal aspects of various texts" that demonstrate (explicit or implicit) elements of queerness or resistance to normative sexualities (Hébert, 2022, p.124). While it is true that my thesis is concerned more with gender/sex than it is sexuality, sexuality nevertheless remains one of the factors in how we understand gender/sex. So, in looking for elements that display resistance to normative sexualities, the resistance of normative understandings or gender/sex is often not far behind. A queer approach also considers if the "gendered sexuality" of the reader, their "queer eye" might make a difference to the meaning or significance of the texts (Somerville, 2020, p. 4). I would be remiss not to consider and mention how my own lived experiences as a queer and transgender person have come to shape both my understanding of gender and sexuality and, therefore, how I interpret the

findings of both within my chosen works. Reading with a “queer eye” or a “trans eye” might mean having easier access to the queer or gender diverse that might lie in-between the lines of the text before us, or it might be that the nuances of those texts might read differently when one has certain types of lived experiences. Gloria Anzaldúa (2021, p.171) (describes it like this “Queers (including cultural Others) can fill in the gaps in a lesbian text and reconstruct it, where a straight woman might not”. This is not because there is some fundamental difference between a queer and a non-queer person, but rather that a non-queer reader would likely not catch the many of the undercurrents relating to queer sexualities and sexual experiences unless that person is somehow engaged in queer culture (Anzaldúa, 2021, p. 171). Anzaldúa is here specifically speaking of reading works written by lesbian writers, but I think the point made about who might have access to these undercurrents holds true even if those undercurrents are not deliberately placed by a queer or transgender author.

I look to trans studies for its attunement to questions of embodiment and identity in relation to gender/sex, and the understanding of gender as a process of categorising people “that allows desire to take shape and find its aim” (Blackston, 2022, p.9) As David Getsy (2014, p.48) points out — even if trans people and their experiences must remain the focus of trans theory, the field still provides lessons that require to be used in a broader context. In other words, philosophising about gender is not only helpful in questioning norms and injustice. It is also central to creating dignified, unfolding lives—both for those of us who recognise ourselves in a binary gender model and those of us who do not. For me, in particular, these perspectives have enabled me to critically examine not just how these novels explicitly portray their representations of gender but also engage with the more implicit layers of how gender, sex, and sexuality are intertwined and the related implications of this. I am also inspired by David Getsy’s notion of transgender capacity. Interpreting through the lens of trans capacity does not mean to suggest that all forms of a trans potential—in a historical or fictional context—refers to explicit or actual transness—instead, it positions the reader to systematically oppose normative assumptions about gender that historically have led to the erasure of certain groups and individuals (Getsy, 2014, p. 48). It is a potential methodological tool for discussing gender, both in trans people and in general, as expansive, multiple, and dynamic. I will indeed deal with the representation of gender in fictional worlds. However, I still want to explicitly talk about how these ways of imagining gender exist in a context where those who break with the norm of a binary system are often trans and intersex persons.

3.4 Summaries of the Novels

Here, I provide a summary of each of the novels to provide an overview of the basic plot and the relevant aspects of these novels to this thesis and a convenient place to refer back to as needed when reading the following chapters.

3.4.1 *Venus Plus X* (1960)—Theodore Sturgeon

The novel *Venus Plus X* follows the protagonist, Charlie Johns, an American man who gets transported into the world of the *Ledom*. He is told that homo sapiens like him, who

have a societal strict sexual dimorphism, have gone extinct and that the *Ledom* have only one gender/sex. Their bodies appear androgynous and have the ability to both become pregnant and impregnate others. They also speak a different language, but Johns is able to understand it by means of technology; their language uses gender-neutral pronouns that Johns subconsciously translates to the English pronoun "him".

The *Ledom* society does not adhere to a binary (man/woman) system, and they consider it flawed. The *Ledom* believes that sexual differences and the discrimination that arises from them are the root of humanity's problems. They view themselves as a superior and separate species from homo sapiens, considering treating citizens differently based on their sex as unjust and unscientific. While their official story claims their bodies' unique characteristics result from a mutation, Charlie later discovers they were achieved through surgery. He also learns that the *Ledom* are not from the future but an experimental population parallel to American society.

3.4.2 The Left Hand of Darkness (1969)—Ursula K- Le Guin

This narrative is told from the perspective of an Earthman but from a different version of Earth than we know. In this universe, humans have spread across the galaxy and have numerous different societies on different planets. The narrator, Genly Ai, is tasked with convincing a society called the *Genthians* to join an interplanetary alliance, the *Ekumen*.

The novel introduces us to the *Genthians*, who are described as bisexual or ambisexual—here, meaning that they possess both sexes. They are generally neutered or unsexed, but once a month, they enter a state called *kemmer*, during which they become either male or female to reproduce. They are one of many descendants of humanity who live throughout the galaxy, but their unique biology sets them apart. We are told that pronouns are used differently depending on the *Genthians'* breeding cycle, with gender-neutral options for those who are not currently breeding and separate words for male and female animals. However, the novel tends to use "he/him" as the translation of the general pronoun. (Le Guin, 1969, p. 94).

The political tension between the two main nations of Gethen, *Karhide* and *Orgoreyn* plays a large part in the plot of the novel. Genly Ai begins his work in *Karhide*, where he is faced with suspicion, partly due to his permanent maleness, despite the aid of Prime Minister Estraven. Estraven faces exile and Genly travels to *Orgoreyn* where he initially finds a more supportive reception, but he is soon imprisoned in a labour camp. Estraven rescues Genly, and they embark on a dangerous journey wherein they develop a strong bond that has romantic undertones. As they return to *Karhide* there has been a change in rulers and Genly is able to convince the new ruler to consider joining the *Ekumen*, but Estraven does not survive their return.

3.4.3 Woman on the Edge of Time (1976)—Marge Piercy

This novel centres around—and is narrated by a Mexican American woman named Consuela "Connie" Ramos, who lives in 1970s New York. As becomes apparent at the start of the novel, she has lived a life marked by poverty, marital abuse, and mental health struggles. We first meet her as she is being forcibly readmitted to an asylum after

being violent towards her niece's pimp. During her time at the institution, Connie begins telepathically communicating with Luciente, a person from a utopian future and learns that she can travel to the future. In her travels, she encounters two contrasting futures: one is a society ruled by capitalist patriarchy, and the other is a utopian future where class inequality, race, and gender have been abolished. In this utopian future, everyone is referred to as either 'person' or 'per', and the language is generally gender-neutral. Reproduction in Mattapoisett, where Luciente resides, takes place outside of human bodies, and children are raised by three "mothers" regardless of gender.

At the end of the book, Connie loses the ability to contact Luciente. It is unclear if this is because Luciente's future no longer exists or because Connie has become too filled with despair to imagine the future and Luciente anymore. Throughout the novel, Piercy examines themes of social and gender inequality, mental health, institutional oppression, and the power of collective action. As Connie grapples with her own personal struggles, she also confronts more significant societal issues and challenges readers to question societal norms and envision a better future.

3.4.4 *Dawn* (1987)—Octavia E. Butler

The story follows Lilith Iyapo, one of the few remaining humans, after a nuclear war. She finds herself in an alien society, the *Oankali*, who have captured her and other humans. The novel begins with her awakening from a suspended sleep, where she meets an *Oankali* named Jdahya. He is responsible for getting her accustomed to the presence of the *Oankali*, including their appearance and how their society works. In addition to the male and female categories, the *Oankali* have the third gender of "ooloi". While all *Oankali* can perceive a person's genetic biochemistry, only the *ooloi* can manipulate genetic material, enabling gene trading. They build offspring from their mates' genetic materials, and a typical family unit consists of an adult of each of the three genders and their children. Jdahya brings her back to his family, and she is put in the care of his *ooloi* child Nikanj, with whom she develops a close relationship. The *Oankali* informs Lilith that she must awaken more humans and teach them how to live among them before they can be allowed to return to Earth. The *Oankali* are genetic traders who seek to exchange genetic material with the humans aboard the ship. *As Lilith awakens the other humans, she encounters a range of reactions, from fear and hostility to disbelief and rebellion. The humans are disturbed by the idea of losing their human identity and autonomy.* After they have all been awakened, the *Oankali* drug them to make it easier for them to introduce themselves to the humans without fear, and they are assigned *ooloi* mates. However, a fight breaks out between the *ooloi* and the humans as the humans attempt to flee. There are casualties on both sides of this conflict, and the remaining humans are then transported to Earth. Lilith finds herself pregnant as she is tasked with awakening another set of humans. She hopes to teach these humans how to survive and escape.

3.4.5 *Distress* (1995)—Greg Egan

This novel is set in the year 2055. The main character—Andrew Worth—is a journalist with the science channel SeeNet who has previously made a documentary on gender

migrants. gender migrants is the term used to refer to people who move from the role of a typical woman/man (in this world referred to as *enfem* and *enmale*, respectively) to either an alternative form of masculinity or femininity or remove themselves from the system altogether. Notably, this category does not necessarily include transgender people as they could move from the category of typical woman to typical man and vice versa. In other words, gender migration is a transgressive act of gender mobility in a way that binary gender transition is not in the context of the novel. This novel contains seven genders: three of them seem to be aligned with femininity/womanhood: *ifem*, *ufem*, and *enfem*; three aligned with masculinity/manhood: *imale*, *umale*, and *enmale*; and the last *asex* refers to someone who defines themselves outside the binary categories of man/woman. The main character is currently making a documentary on the South African physicist Violet Mosala, who is trying to discover a unified theory of everything (*TOE*) that has the goal of unifying all the fundamental interactions of nature (gravity, strong interactions, weak interactions, and electromagnetism). To do this, he turns down the opportunity to make a documentary on a mysterious new mental illness—the titular *Distress*. These are the two driving factors of the plot, and it is revealed that these occurrences are, in fact, interconnected— as he speculates that it is the moment where the *TOE* is fully realised/fully understood that triggers the distress. It is later revealed that it is not the complete understanding, but rather the incomplete understanding— called ‘mixing’. After the full realisation of the *TOE*, a utopia without gender and sexuality is realised.

3.4.6 *Ancillary Justice* (2013)—Ann Leckie

Thousands of years into the future, the *Radch* Empire rules over the human-controlled parts of the universe. They use AI-controlled spaceships that commandeer human bodies, often those of fallen enemy combatants, they are then stripped of their original identities and serve only as tools known as ancillaries. The narrative follows Breq, the last remaining ancillary of the starship *Justice of Toren*. The *Radch* have no concept of gender, and the protagonist struggles as she tries to navigate other gendered societies.

The plot alternates between two points in time. In the present, Breq is seeking justice for the destruction of her ship. The other takes place after the destruction of the *Justice of Toren*, where the only surviving ancillary, Breq, seeks justice for the loss of the ship, and a timeline that takes place 19 years earlier reveals the events that have led up to her current situation. In the past timeline, the *Justice of Thoren* discovers that the ruling lord of *Radch*, Anaander Mianaai is, in fact, also a multi-bodied entity who has split herself as a means to govern the vast empire and that two of her ancillaries are embroiled in a conflict. To prevent the exposure of this fact, the *Justice of Thoren* is destroyed, and the Lieutenant accompanying her is executed. In the present timeline Breq has been awaiting an opportunity to help the more peace-minded version of the conflicting Mianaais to win against the other, the Mianaai responsible for the destruction of Breq's ship.

4 “Completely new clusters of parameters”: Gendering and Sexing the body.

This chapter concerns how the various novels propose alternatives to the gender binary, focusing on the body and how this relates to current and historical understandings of gender/sex. Here, I seek to explore how the novels use the reproductive system and the body as sites to explore alternative or expansive representations of gender/sex. The three earlier novels, those by Sturgeon, Piercy and Le Guin, all present us with societies that, in different ways, have just one gender/sex. In Sturgeon, we are presented with humans who are physically androgynous down to their reproductive capacity. While Le Guin shows us a version of humanity that usually has no sex nor gender but that becomes either male or female as needed for reproductive purposes. On the other hand, Piercy presents a world where people are presented as being either male or female on the level of sex, but on a societal level, there is no concept of gender—nor is sex particularly relevant to how they navigate their world. Octavia Butler’s novel is somewhat of an outlier of these novels as it does not concern itself with human gender outside the binary limits but rather with how humans react to and interact with a three-sexed alien species. Egan’s novel takes a very different approach than the earlier novels, both in that it concerns itself with an expanded number of human genders rather than a combination of—or rejection of—the binary genders of man and woman. *Auxiliary Justice* by Ann Leckie does seem to lean backwards toward the earlier novels in its portrayal of a main character who comes from a society with much the same model of understanding gender/sex as Piercy. Still, unlike that novel, Leckie does not touch upon the topic of bodies as a way to explore gender at any great length. It does remark that sometimes people’s bodies may indicate how to gender someone, but that the protagonist does not find it to be reliable.

4.1 Both and Neither: Existing “Outside that Probable Fiction.”

In Theodore Sturgeon’s novel *Venus Plus X* we encounter two opposing discourses about what can and should constitute our understanding of natural sex/gender. One is expressed by the main character, Charlie Johns—who is, as far as we know, an average American man from the 50s—and the other is expressed by the *Ledom* society. At the novel’s beginning, Charlie and the readers encounter a mysterious group of people called the *Ledom*, whose understanding of gender/sex and how that relates to bodies differs significantly from what might be considered the norm in a modern Western context. On a societal level, the *Ledom* have only one gender, which is both male and female, yet at the same time, neither. They read as physically androgynous to Charlie, and they all possess both a penis and two uteri that enable them to participate in ‘both’ kinds of reproduction—that is to say, a *Ledom* is capable of both becoming pregnant and impregnating another. It is suggested to us that after the evolution of having only one gender, their society experiences less conflict and is more harmonious than that of homo sapiens. Moreover, it is precisely the ‘combined’ state of their gender/sex—and its origins—that become the subject of these discourses around what is a ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ gendered body. Both we, as readers, and Charlie Johns are told throughout most of the book that their gender/sex is the result of a natural mutation and that the *Ledom* people are the next step in natural human development. Johns is also told that he has been brought from the past to assist some of their scientists. We are later informed—to John’s horror—that this is not the case; not only has no time travel occurred—but the combined sex/gender is also surgically engineered—and therefore artificial.

The binary understanding of gender as natural and all-encompassing— described in Laqueur as difference in kind— lays the foundation for the discourse on the gender binary as natural and elementary that Johns uses to navigate the world. Gender/sex outside the binary here can be understood as something artificial and unnatural—which is created with an ulterior motive that might seem logical—at least it seems logical to the main character—but which ultimately ends up with a gender system as rigid as one had before—and which, like that system, corrects children's bodies to maintain it. This is a parallel to how a cisnormative binary society polices trans and intersex bodies as a way to maintain the status quo. "Why is what we have done worse to you than a genetic accident?" asks one of the leaders. "(...) A mutation would have been natural," replies Charlie (Sturgeon, 1960, p.152). In this sense, their bodies themselves are not the issue; it is that they do not conform to what is considered a natural body, in his opinion—a natural body being an unaltered body. The main character seriously takes a stand in opposition to the *Ledom* in this conversation. The truth, as Charlie sees it, can contain a gender/sex that is not male or female if they 'naturally' stand outside—or within both—of these categories. In that way, both he and the *Ledom* agree that it is the body and its reproductive functions that decide what gender/sex can be—the same conclusion with different worldviews behind it. Charlie sees the body as defined because it is given by nature, and changing it is, therefore, wrong. The *Ledom* sees the body as the cornerstone of gender because they define it in terms of function. A *Ledom* has the 'correct' gender/sex when they can reproduce through both ovum and sperm simultaneously—and modification sits at the centre of that.

In a lesson given to Johns, their origins are explained by first starting by arguing how to arbitrate specific gender differences by putting the spotlight on those who are born with, or later in life experience, bodies that are not easily placed into the categories of male and female. It starts with the following statement: "Charlie Johns, (...) you cannot be objective about this discussion. But try (...) you have been indoctrinated, sermonized, drenched, imbued, inculcated and policed on the matter since first you wore blue booties." (Sturgeon, 1960, p.123) Pointing out the social aspects to his understanding of sex/gender, as the *Ledom* see it, he has been taught gender—it is not the 'basic fact' Johns considers it to be. The statement continues, "You come from a time and a place in which the maleness of the male and the femaleness of the female, and the importance of their difference, were matters of almost total preoccupation"—not only is the gender binary in their mind constructed they also consider the degree of importance placed on the idea of what a man is and the idea of what a woman is to be ridiculous (Sturgeon, 1960, p.123).

The novel argues that conclusions can only be drawn statistically regarding secondary gender characteristics (such as body hair, voice, and muscle proportion). "There are more basic similarities than differences between men and women." he is told; this is followed by the following elaboration: "In the area of secondary sex characteristic, it is only statistically that we can note significant differences" as "many women had more body hair than many men, many men had higher pitched voices than many women (...)" (Sturgeon, 1960, pp. 123-124). It also brings up endocrinology and sex hormones in this context. It states: "both male and female could produce male and female hormones" and that changing the balance of them—can bring about quite drastic changes: "In a few months you could produce a bearded and breastless lady and a man whose nipples (...), could be made to lactate." (Sturgeon, 1960, p.123). All leads to the ultimate point of this lecture that calls for him to "examine the cases, in their vast numbers, which exist

outside that probable fiction, that norm"—the fiction here being that of a strict line dividing the gender binary as "even with the sex organs themselves, have variations in development (...) its occurrence is easily within the limits of what has been, since prehistory, possible to nature." (Sturgeon, 1960, p.124).

In the Hanish Universe created by Le Guin—where both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and a number of other books are set—, many descendants of humanity live throughout the galaxy—yet the *Genthians* remain unique in their biology. Genly Ai, a man from Earth, serves as the main character for most of the novel and, therefore, also as our entry point for understanding gender/sex in a *Genthian* perspective. He serves the role of the outsider as, just as we, the readers, do, he has lived his life in what the novel describes as a bisexual society—a society containing two distinct sexes, male and female.

The *Gethenians*, as we meet them in "The Left Hand of Darkness", are described as ambisexual, possessing both sexes like Sturgeon's *Ledom*. However, unlike the *Ledom*, this is not a set state of being, as they move between the state of being entirely female and entirely male (Le Guin, 1969, p. 85, p.247). However, despite this, the *Genthians* spend most of their time in a state of being unsexed until they, once a month, enter a state called *kemmer*—in which they become either male or female to facilitate reproduction. In other words, their hegemonic understanding of gender/sex is fundamentally enmeshed with reproduction and the heterosexual intercourse that precedes it. Generally, the process of becoming sexed is presented as an indiscriminate act, but it is not only noted that some try to influence this by ingesting artificial hormones but also that the sex of their partner may also affect how their bodies end up (Le Guin, 1969, p. 94). This can, for instance, be seen when the *Genthian* Estraven becomes female to match Genly's permanent maleness when he enters *kemmer*. The few (3-4%) *Genthians* that are permanently male or female are sterile and tolerated with disdain (Le Guin, 1969, p. 63). Not only are they incapable of aligning with the norms of gender/sex within their society, but their infertility also casts them as both perpetually able to participate in sexual intercourse but never able to fulfil the reproductive role of either the "man" or the "woman" of the man-woman, and therefore unable to perform gender adequately.

Throughout the novel, Genly remarks on his struggles to see the *Genthians* as they are when it comes to their gender/sex. To him, both sexual dimorphism and the social layer of the gender binary heavily shape his understanding of himself and others. It also leaves him blind to possibilities that lay outside or between the categories of man and woman. He, for instance, comments that he often catches himself seeing a *Genthian* first as a man, then as a woman—thus forcing them "into those categories so irrelevant to [their] nature and so essential to my own" (Le Guin, 1969, p. 11). Towards the end of the novel, he is also able to express that he had in some ways been afraid to see even his lover as he was because he had not wanted to give [his] trust, [his] friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man." and therefore "refused him his reality". (Le Guin, 1969, p. 249). Not only does he refuse to see them as they are, but he, at one point, denies their joint humanity. Genly phrases it thus: "Neither man nor woman, neither and both, cyclic, (...) changelings in the human cradle, they were no flesh of mine, no friends; no love between us". (Le Guin, 1969, p. 215).

To him, as to many others throughout history, access to the category of human is contingent on conforming to the accepted norms of gender/sex.

It is not only he who finds the *Genthians* strange—we are multiple times reminded of how Genly's existence, just like the existence of those within their own society for whom gender/sex is permanent, is considered strange or offensive. He is, among other words, referred to as "a sexual freak", "an artificial monster", "disgusting", "coming from a society of perverts", or "the pervert" (Le Guin, 1969, p.32, p.36, p.182). The *Genthians* consider those with a permanent reproductive sex not just to be gender failures, as I speculate above, but also to be perverts--as their status as permanently sexed in their mind means that they are also permanently sexual (Le Guin, 1969, p.34). When one of his fellow prisoners learns that everyone in Genly's society is, as the *Genthians* put it, "in *kemmer* all the time"—that is, always possessing a gender/sex and theoretically, therefore, being able to reproduce—he asks if it is a place of reward or punishment, to which neither he nor Ai has an answer (Le Guin, 1969, p.183). In other words, Genly has come to question the merit of his own gendered understanding and lived experience as a result of this cultural exchange with those who experience gender/sex differently.

Later, in a conversation with a dear friend, Ai is asked if the sexes differ much in how their minds work and if they are so unlike that they are like different species if gender/sex difference is measured in kind, not in degree. To which he answers no, men and women are not like different species. However, he still stresses the impact of the gender binary on the people living under it: "the heaviest single factor in one's life is whether one is born male or female", he informs "in most societies, it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food. Women...women tend to eat less...It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones." (Le Guin, 1969, p. 234).

4.2 "Of Course I'm Female": Piercy and the Perceived Importance of Sex.

In Piercy's work, the main character, Connie, is trying to navigate her understanding of masculinity and femininity in relation to her understanding of men and women as she meets the "genderless" people of Mattapoisett. By genderless, I here mean that there are no social or cultural expectations placed upon those who live within this village and that there seems to be no differentiation of people on the basis of their assigned sex. In this utopian future, we are told that class inequality, race and gender have all been abolished as a part of the people's liberation, and everyone is either 'person' or 'per' rather than using gender-specific pronouns.

When the main character first meets Luciente, who serves as her guide to the future, she assumes per must be a man due to per muscular build until she discovers that per has breasts.

she first exclaims surprise that per is a woman before concluding accusingly and offensively that no, Luciente cannot be a (cisgender) woman; per must be "one of those sex-change operations"—as if not being able to pass or being muscular and androgynous necessarily means a woman is transgender and that being transgender would be a negative feature (Piercy, 1976, p. 67). "Of course I'm female", Per responds "", somewhat disgusted" at being accused of being otherwise—be it that per is disgusted by the idea that someone would think per is a transgender woman (Percy, 1976, p.67). Or it might be at the suggestion that people who are assigned female at birth cannot look and act as per does. However, as per exists in a society that has eliminated gender roles and stereotypes, the former reads to me as a more likely explanation. Nevertheless, which of

those explanations might ring truer. This instance does nonetheless illustrate that while this society is effectively post-gender, it leaves the biological core of sex unexamined. Despite the categories of man or woman being irrelevant to the people of Mattapoissett, Luciente still sees the assigned sex of enough significance that per will be offended at being misread. It also exemplifies the tendency of analyses of gender/sex that, in their examination of gender, leave the notion of sex alone as an unchanging standard has a tendency toward conceptualisations of gender/sex that lends itself to allying with if not outright espousing transphobia and transmisogyny.

The protagonist responds that Luciente is “well-muscled for a woman” before she internally concludes that if Luciente is indeed female, but still not conforming to the standards of womanhood as Connie knows them. Drawing on the heterosexual matrix, if per sex cannot account for the discrepancy, then she guesses that per must be a lesbian. This makes her remember a bar she used to pass by in Chicago where Chicana butches played pool, “curs[ed] like men,” and would call out to women passing by (Percy, 1976, p.67). She also remembers that despite their masculinity, “they had never given her that sense of menace a group of men would—after all, under the clothes, they were only women too.” (Percy, 1976, p.67).

After Connie has learned of Luciente's sex, she remarks that she now thinks Luciente looks like a woman—and raises both the lighter clothing and her own expectations as possible explanations for this shift. In Connie's mind, per passes for female, and therefore, as a woman, “if not feminine” as per is too confident, assured, and aggressive to be read as such in her opinion. Luciente is here able—whether it be due to her clothing or Connie's knowledge of per assigned sex to pass to Connie as a woman—even if per does not pass as ‘the right kind of woman’ per face and body is “too confident, too unself-conscious, too aggressive, and sure and graceful in the wrong kind of totally coordinated way to be a woman” (Percy, 1976, p.104). Because Connie is aware of Luciente's admitted femaleness, she moves from what she perceives as an unacceptable form of gender, that of trans womanhood, to a place of non-conforming cis womanhood or non-conforming ‘femaleness’ and therefore becomes more acceptable to her.

4.3 A Sex Unfamiliar: Alien Sexual Trimorphism in Butler

As mentioned earlier, Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, unlike the previously mentioned novels, follows a human as she interacts with an alien gender system rather than an alternate human one. That being said, there are still insights that can be gained both from how the humans react to other ways of understanding gender/sex and the alien third gender/sex. As the main character, Lilith, encounters the first alien at the start of the novel, she asks, “I don't mean any offence, (...) but are you male or female?” (Butler, 1987, p.12) She is here seemingly looking to orient herself and place where she is, and one of the first things she inquires about is the sex of the person who is there to meet her and introduce her to her new alien reality. She seeks to be able to place him within her own understanding of gender/sex, wherein there are two options: one is either male or female. The alien responds that he thinks it's wrong for her to assume that he must be a sex she is familiar with but that he is indeed male. This a statement that both interrupts her understanding by questioning the universality of a system of sexual dimorphism but also assurance that at least this alien fits within her expected parameters of gender/sex.

"Good," she thinks in response to learning of his sex ", ' it' could become 'he' again. Less awkward". (Butler, 1987, p.12).

In her early interactions, she remarks that her alien charge, Nikanj, sometimes reads as too human to her and that if she were not looking at it, she would have assumed it was a man (Butler, 1987, p. 24). It is important to understand here that Nikanj is, in fact, not male, but instead of the third sex, *ooloi* and that her instinct to assume it to be a man is primarily a response to her trying to fit it into the gender/sex categories she views as available to humans, man or woman and choosing the one she might fit it the most based on their personality and behaviour. Lilith later comes to understand better how sex/gender works for the *Oankali* and acts as a conversational partner for another human who is experiencing similar feelings to what she was earlier in her stay. The other human man asks her if her *ooloi* "seem[s] male" to her, to which she, after some reflection, replies, "No. I guess I've taken their word for what they are." The man expands upon this by saying, "When they woke me up, I thought the *ooloi* acted like men and women while the males and females acted like eunuchs" and that he's never lost the habit of thinking of the *ooloi* as either male or female. (Butler, 1987, p.99). He seems to base this interpretation on the *ooloi*'s active role in reproduction, whereas males and females, who provide the genetic materials have a more passive role.

The sexes of male and female within *Oankali* society are framed as closely related, but the third sex is framed as an other even within their own society. The third sex takes on the role of a 'treasured stranger', thereby occupying both the position of a stranger and a relative simultaneously and critically (Butler, 1987, p.118). They serve the function of helping their male and female counterparts to prevent unfavourable concentrations of genetics through a set of 'sensory arms' that only *ooloi* have (Butler, 1987, p.57). This third—leading role—in terms of reproduction serves a central role in disrupting not only the surface of the gender binary but also the layers of heteronormativity as well as the givenness of radical dimorphism—the notion of men and women as complimentary, but separate species (albeit in a non-human context). That being said, one might argue that *Dawn* proposes a radical trimorphism instead, wherein the male, female, and *ooloi* come together to form a complementary trinity.

4.4 "Nature was Tampering with Itself": Sexual Dimorphism in Question.

Like in Sturgeon, the sexual dimorphism in humans is questioned but in a different manner. While the gentians in Sturgeon's work argued that the separation into a binary itself was flawed,— Greg Egan's work suggests that the binarity once existed but that the genders are now converging. In that sense, despite the novel dabbling within new ways of understanding gender, it also toys with the notion that if we go far enough back, there is some "hallowed framework" of sexual dimorphism that once was, even if that is now changing. Egan's *Distress* presents us with seven genders: three of them seem to be aligned with femininity or womanhood in some way (*ifem*, *ufem*, and *enfem*), three are aligned with masculinity or manhood (*imale*, *umale*, and *enmale*), and the last (*asex*) refers to someone who defines themselves entirely outside the binary categories of man/woman. Each of these categories has its own parameters that, in their way, play into the understanding of gender/sex as being in a state of flux moving towards a convergence. One of the theories presented in the novel is that humans have spent the

last few million years “reversing the ancient mammalian extremes of gender dimorphism” by gradually evolving “biochemical quirks which actively interfered with ancient genetic programs for gender-specific neural pathways” but that “the separate blueprints” were still inherited genetically, but are kept from being fully acted upon due to hormonal effects on the embryo in the womb (Egan, 1995, p. 75). In other words, in the context of this belief, every female embryo is more masculinised than what would be expected from the blueprint, while the male embryos are more feminised than would be expected from the blueprint. Homosexuality is, in this framework, understood to be the result of this process going “slightly further than normal”. (Egan, 1995, p.75). This convergence is presented as an inevitable result of nature: “In the long term—even if we (...) refused all genetic engineering—the sexes were already converging. Whether or not we tampered with nature, nature was tampering with itself.” (Egan, 1995, p. 75)

4.5 “He’s Migrated out of that Gender”: Modification and the Fracturing of the Gender Binary.

The categories of *enfem* and *enmale* seem to most neatly correspond to a binary understanding of men and women, as these are established as the ‘default’ categories from which the others migrate. Moving from one of these categories into one of the other five is referred to as gender migration, with the people who choose to undergo gender migration being referred to as gender migrants. The two categories of *enmale* and *enfem* are also shown to be the two categories that transgender people move between as they transition.

Perhaps as a reaction to the novel's suggestion of a convergence of genders, one of the gender aspects presented in Egan's novel are the *umales* and *ufems* who seek to play into the extremes of masculinity and femininity as part of their self-expression and seek alterations to achieve this. We are given the following descriptions of a passerby that the main character speculates to be *umale*—he is heavily muscled and “probably facially sculpted” given his appearance (Egan, 1995, p.45). In their process of aligning their bodies with their idolised understanding of what a woman and man should be, *ufem* and *umale* individuals seek to “exaggerate well-established facial gender cues” (Egan, 1995, p.45). The main character’s friend Gina remarks that she thinks that the fact that the *umale* passerby wants to have a heavily muscled physique is fine, perhaps somehow even understandable, but that his desire to modify his face to align with his understanding of his own gender is baffling. The way she sees it, “it’s not as if anyone would be likely to mistake him as anything but *enmale*, without it”, not grasping that being seen as one type of man is not sufficient for this individual. (Egan, 1995, p.45) Andrew responds that being mistaken as *enmale* would likely insult him as “he’s migrated out of that gender as surely as any *asex*” (Egan, 1995, p. 45). Clarifying that the choice to play into sexual dimorphism is as much a departure from the norm as trying to step outside it in this society. As the representations of sexual dimorphism taken to the extreme, they seem to be harking back to an understanding of gender/sex difference as a difference that should be greater, if not in kind, than at least as something that should be strengthened through avenues such as surgery and possibly hormonal treatment. However, the latter is never specified in the novel itself. one might even wonder if they are closer to the once supposed lost purity of mammalian sexual dimorphism that the novel references, and to reclaim a once great lost binary gender of the past. In fact, the

main character at one point claims that “the point” of being *umale* is to distance yourself from the “perceived weakness of contemporary natural males”—to claim that their masculinity is so much more ‘potent’ that they must entirely belong to another sex than both unaltered cisgender *enmale* individuals and transgender *enmale* individuals (Egan, 1995, p.45).

When it comes to the topic of *ifem* or *imale*, we see not the draw toward traditionally masculine or feminine features, nor the removal of them; it is crucially “not at all ‘halfway towards’ androgynous” but is instead its own distinctive look—intentionally modelled after a “completely new clusters of parameters, which would set them apart at a glance ” (Egan, 1995, p. 128). These genders of *ifem* and *imale* are recognisably outside the binary man/woman understanding as we know it. Yet, they are assumable—by their names— in some way aligned with or connected to either maleness/masculinity/manhood or femaleness/femininity/womanhood, respectively. Their gender cues are made from “completely new clusters of parameters”,—allowing the reader to examine the new arbitrary borders of gender from an outside perspective. There is in this gender system gender whose features or traits we cannot fully grasp as we lack the cultural cues. This presentation of gender, in some ways, gives the reader the opposite experience from Auxiliary Justice—where the protagonist cannot tell if someone is a man or woman as those are not categories that are relevant to her—she is not used to looking for gender cues—meanwhile, the reader presumably is. Here, the protagonist is aware of what cues signal a person being any of the seven genders presented in the novel, while we, as readers, cannot.

Asex or neutrals is used as an umbrella term in this novel to describe “a broad group of philosophies, styles of dress, cosmetic-surgical changes, and deep-biological alterations” (Egan, 1995, p.44). One of the characters notes that “there are neutrals that look no different”—that is, they look like gender-conforming men or women—some *asex* individuals differ from their *enfem/enmale* counterparts only in that they tick the *asex* box in the census; some might choose an “*asex* name”; while others might opt for some or all of the following bodily modifications: “breast or body-hair reduction, voice timbre adjustment, facial resculpting, empouchment (surgery to render the male genitals retractable), all the way to full physical and/or neural asexuality, hermaphroditism, or exoticism” (Egan, 1994, p.44). The only thing all these *asex* people necessarily have in common is the view that vis gender parameters—neural, endocrine, chromosomal and genital—were “the business of no one but verself, usually (but not always) vis lovers, probably vis doctor, and sometimes a few close friends”. (Egan, 1995, p. 44) In other words, while *asex* is a category that can affect how one wishes their bodies to neutralise both its sexed characteristics and, therefore, its gendered implication. It can also primarily be a choice to remove their bodies as a factor in their gender/sex entirely.

4.6 Conclusion

The novels discussed in this chapter explore gender/sex in a rich tapestry of alternative societies and perspectives, challenging conventional understandings and inviting readers to reconsider the intricacies of identity and embodiment. In *Venus Plus X* by Sturgeon, we are presented with the *Ledom* society, whose singular approach to gender/sex prompts a critical examination of the binary framework's naturalness and rigidity by way of their twice-sexed bodies. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* introduces us to the

Gethenian menwomen, whose fluidity challenges both Genly Ai's and our preconceptions. Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* offers a utopian vision where gender distinctions have been abolished. Yet, Connie's initial misinterpretation of Luciente's identity exposes the persistence of ingrained biases and the complexity of navigating a post-gender society that does not also analyse and deconstruct its understanding of sex as an unchangeable biological fact. Butler's *Dawn* presents a fascinating exploration of an alien gender system and how humans struggle to perceive them correctly due to their own biases regarding gender/sex. While Egan's *Distress* takes us further into the realm of possibilities with its depiction of seven genders. The novel's speculation on the convergence of genders prompts reflection on the nature of change and adaptation in our own understanding of gender and sex. Leckie's novel does not spend much time on how bodies relate to gender/sex at all beyond noting that bodies might not be a reliable indicator of how to gender someone correctly.

In conclusion, the diverse narratives examined in this chapter invite readers to interrogate established norms and embrace the complexity of gender/sex. By exploring alternative visions of society and identity, these novels challenge us to imagine new possibilities and cultivate a more inclusive and expansive understanding of the human experience.

5 “The Last Refuge of Women?”: Gender and the Act of Reproduction.

Even if reproduction is often considered a natural process, it is also, as Lie (2002, p.3) points out, deeply embedded in a number of social institutions, notably those of kinship and the family. Mother and fatherhood are not a result of ‘biological facts’; instead, they are created by the cultural theories of reproduction, which relate to larger systems of beliefs (Lie, 2002, p. 4). Lie (2002, p.2) writes that “pregnancy and motherhood are central to the understanding of what a woman is, and function as a fundamental distinction of women and men in Western culture”. Therefore, it does make sense that one of the central touchpoints of the gender exploration in four of the novels is pregnancy and or motherhood. By defamiliarising the process of reproduction, they also defamiliarise aspects of how we understand gender. But exactly what role does the act of reproduction play in how speculative fiction constructs and deconstructs gender/sex?

Reproductive differences between those who possess the ability to become pregnant and carry children and those who can impregnate others have also been seen by some as one of the foundations of women’s oppression, and some feminist theorists, like Shulamith Firestone, have argued for the importance of alternatives to traditional modes of reproduction and pregnancy. Some of these ideas can also be found in some of the novels I discuss in this thesis. Both Sturgeon and Le Guin, by way of their masculine coded, androgynes both use the image of the pregnant ‘man’ as one of the moments of cultural shock for their main character as a way to show that in these novels gender/sex is not as the reader might expect. Meanwhile, Piercy chooses to move the site of reproduction outside of the human body entirely as a means to facilitate an equal, post-gender society. Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* undergoes a process of defamiliarising reproduction. However, as I will argue, it is not a means of defamiliarising gender/sex, but instead, as a vehicle to address the humans’ lack of agency in their reproduction. Leaving them dependent on aliens and cross-species reproduction as a means of survival. The two novels closest to our contemporary time are much less concerned with reproduction, whereas Egan does not touch upon the topic at all. At the same time, Leckie offers fascinating, if brief, insight into how reproductive technologies might be used to enable people of all bodily configurations to have children should they wish to do so.

Firestone’s ideas of reproduction as a site of gender equality are somewhat reflected in the three first novels. In Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, we are shown a society wherein all of its inhabitants are able to both impregnate and become pregnant without any changes being made to their biology. Showing us a society where “[a]nyone can turn his hand to anything” and wherein “everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be (...) ‘tied down to childbearing’”(Le Guin, 1969, p.93). This has led to a society where “[b]urden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make” so that no one is quite so “tied down” as women elsewhere and no one is quite so free as a free male anywhere else (Le Guin, 1969, p. 93). Both *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Venus Plus X* depict utopian visions wherein advancements in technology have eradicated reproductive distinctions, one by way of bodily modification and the other by moving pregnancy and gestation outside the human body entirely and into tanks. This allows the characters to confront and undergo conflicting feelings regarding the elimination of conventional, gendered parental responsibilities.

In two of the novels, *Venus Plus X* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the authors imagine worlds in which pregnancy is at least theoretically possible for most, either all the time or some of the time, respectively. The *Ledom*, as presented by Sturgeon, possesses “both sexes, in an active form” and, due to their two uteri, always give birth to fraternal twins (Sturgeon, 1960, p. 60). The converging of the sexes, as discussed in the previous chapter, serves as an equalising force even within the realm of reproduction. The *Genthians* of Le Guin's novel have the ability to serve either function in the reproductive process. A scientist observing them remarks that, in her mind, it is wrong to describe them as “neuters” as she finds thinking of them as “potentials or integrals” more descriptive (Le Guin, 1969, p.95). After becoming pregnant, the *Genthian* will remain female for the gestation and breastfeeding of their child before returning to their neither/both state. In a note made by one of the early researchers who observed *Genthian* society, she notes that as everyone here runs the same risk of becoming pregnant, both burden and privilege end up being shared somewhat equally (Le Guin, 1969, p. 95).

5.1 Heir of the Body or *Kemmering*-son: the Spectacle of the Pregnant “Man.”

Playing with the main character's adherence to Lies's (2002) description of pregnancy has been seen as a function that fundamentally distinguishes men and women; both Sturgeon and Le Guin, the figure of the pregnant man, are used as a way to induce culture shock in both the main characters and the readers of the novel. Quite early within the novel, Sturgeon's main character expresses shock to see what he reads as two pregnant men (this is before he learns of the double nature of the *Ledom*'s gender/sex), which causes him to try to reassess whether he is gendering both these passersby as well as the *Ledom* walking with him. While their pregnancy bellies and “very smooth chin[s]” and “uh— (...) very prominent pectoral muscles” with areola “considerably larger than those on a man” seem to him to be congruent, the addition of their strong faces, well-muscled and sturdy legs along with their masculine demeanour do not (Sturgeon, 1960, p. 17). This experience of incongruence within him prompts him to reconsider his reading of their gender, concluding “if ‘he’ were a woman, then they were all women” (Sturgeon, 1960, p. 17). In his mind, the category of man is incongruent with the ability to gestate and carry children, and the category of women to be incongruent with masculine features. In that sense, the very image of the pregnant ‘man’ here serves to prime both him and the reader to the revelation that the *Ledom* are in fact, both men and women, in one way upholding the connection between pregnancy and womanhood. Not in the sense of exclusivity, but in that to gestate and bear children, some proximity to womanhood or partial womanhood is understood to be needed.

In Le Guin (1969, p.98), the sensationalising of the pregnant man can primarily be seen when Genly Ai learns that King Argaven is pregnant and makes the following statement: “The king was pregnant. I found this funny.” This appears funny to Genly Ai, not due to any intrinsic humour embedded in the act of male pregnancy, or assumed male pregnancy as is the case here, but because in his understanding of gender, the pregnant man himself is an oxymoron. The portrayal of the cisgender pregnant man as something freakish or humorous in its absurdity has been seen as one of the more widespread understandings of male pregnancy (Jacobsen, 2022, p.1; Verlinden, 2012, p.108). The

king here, of course, is neither a man, he is a man-woman who will have a body that remains sexed female until he can give birth, nor is he subject to Genly's binary understanding of gender. This is apparent in the reveal that Genly's humour in the king's pregnancy is shared with the king's subject, but for very different reasons; his subjects think he is too old to be carrying any children himself.

Genly Ai's surprise is also reflected in his reflections on his "landlady", never having been personally pregnant and given birth to any children as "he was so feminine in looks and manner" (Le Guin, 1969, p.48). Genly is all the more shocked when his superintendent reveals that even if he had not given birth to any, he had, in fact, sired four children. "it was one of the little jolts I was always getting," Genly Ai comments, the jolts or shocks here being the possibilities of a feminine or womanly fatherhood or a masculine or manly motherhood for lack of a better formulation (Le Guin, 1969, p.48). He continues this by commenting that the cultural shock he was experiencing was nothing compared to the "biological" shock he is undergoing as a permanently male human man amongst "beings who were, five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters"(Le Guin, 1969, p. 48). The *Genthians* have separate concepts for children you bear yourself and those you do not. The children the king has fathered are known as *Kemmering*-sons, while this child he bears now will be an heir of the body, a king-son. (Le Guin, 1969, p. 98). This indicates that while there is no binary distinction in terms of sex/gender, the mother/father distinctions remain, even if the same individual can hold them both.

Genly Ai's struggle to see the *Genthians* as they are, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is also apparent in how he navigates the *Genthian* way of reproduction, as we can see in a conversation where his conversation partner mentions his struggles with staying warm during pregnancy. Ai thinks to himself that it is hard to imagine this hard, shrewd, and jovial politician as a young mother. (Le Guin, 1969, p. 116). *Genthians*, we are told, tend to have children young and then proceed to use contraception after the age of 24, and as they reach their 40s, they might still become female in their reproductive phase but cease to be fertile. The implication is that they may still be fertile should they become male in their reproductive phase. This again raises the question of why, from a reproductive standpoint, the even gender/sex split remains. In addition to facilitating the ability to reproduce, *kemmer* also seems to serve a role in upholding the heterosexual matrix as we do learn that their partner's sex is central to which sex a *Genthian* comes to inhabit: "(...) either a male or female hormonal dominance is established (...) and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role (...) If there are exceptions, resulting in *kemmer*-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored." (Le Guin, 1969, p. 90).

5.2 "Mother the Machine.": Reproductive Technologies and Notions of Motherhood in *Piercy*

Unlike the two novels mentioned thus far, *Woman on the Edge of Time* does not shift the situating of who does the childbearing within the human race. Instead, she moves it to be outside the human body altogether. The future Luciente presents to Connie seems utopian to her in some ways. The inhabitants make explicit references to the breaking down of structures of power and oppression—they also mention that sex/gender—and the gendering of reproduction were the last ones that needed to be broken down. Connie

seems at first very confused by the lack of gendering the inhabitants of Luciente's village—Mattapoissett—and is at times upset about the degendering and modification of experiences that have brought her hardships in life—like giving birth and motherhood. In Mattapoisset, reproduction happens outside human bodies aided by technology, and children are raised by three 'mothers' who may be of any gender.

When she is first introduced to the machines that aid them with reproduction, Connie finds the experience profoundly alienating and paints the following picture: "All in a sluggish row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine . Like fish in the aquarium at Coney Island." (Piercy, 1976, p.106). Uncanny and mechanised, even unhuman, this way of becoming a mother is worlds away from her own experience of the intimacy of having carried her own child and given birth to her. "How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart?" she asks, continuing: "Who has never borne a baby in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child" (Piercy, 1976, p. 111). Suffering is, to Connie, one of the defining traits of motherhood, just as motherhood is intrinsically tied to womanhood in her mind. Connie's reaction here seems to mirror what Lie (2002, p.4) highlights as the dominant Western cultural understanding of motherhood—that of matrigenesis—which is to say it is the mother that gives life to a child and that the mother-child relationship is conceptualised as natural—a product of nature--as a maternal instinct—while no corresponding concept of fatherhood as a natural phenomenon exists. In this understanding, as the woman 'gives life' to a child, she is simultaneously giving birth to both the child and herself as a mother (Lie, 2002, p.4). When learning that the people of Mattapoisset do not bear young themselves but instead use incubators, she likens this to how a wealthy white couple was given the child that was taken away from her, her "flesh and blood. All made up already, a canned child, just add money" (Piercy, 1976, p.111). As Connie recalls how her daughter was taken from her at four years old by the authorities to be given to a wealthy white family and the bond she had fostered with her through her pregnancy and breastfeeding her, she expresses her anger at the idea that there are other ways experience motherhood than the one she has had. Perhaps just because her most significant connection to the child that was taken away from her so young remains in her mind her pregnancy and her genetic link to the child.

Lie (2002, p.2) writes, "Pregnancy and motherhood are central to the understanding of what a woman is, and function as a basic distinction of women and men in Western culture." She also writes about the symbolic connection between women and nature and how this relates to the standard Western understanding of nature as pure and distinct from culture (Lie, 2002, p.2). According to Lie (2002, p. 3), new reproductive technologies influence a number of conceptual distinctions, including the nature/culture split. In this conceptualisation, reproduction is understood as a natural, biological process as well as the central seat of understanding when it comes to sexual difference, as the capacity to conceive and give birth generally are considered to be the features which distinguish woman from man. This feminine connotation to pregnancy is also noted by Isak Jacobsen (2022, p.46) in his master thesis on transmasculine pregnancy. However, he also highlights how his informants challenged this understanding of pregnancy by either renegotiating it as a masculine act or through the lens of unisex pregnancy. This understanding of pregnancy as unisex, he writes, serves "largely as a challenge to binary normative narratives of pregnancy (...) by refusing to ascribe the pregnant body a specific sex or gender at all" (Jacobsen, 2022, p.47). Whereas this novel does not feature an exploration of unisex pregnancy, it does something similar with its removal of

pregnancy from the human body along with its portrayal of an unisex form of motherhood.

The understanding described by Lie (2002) in the paragraph above is also reflected in Piercy's novel. When narrating how their society came to be the way it currently is, Connie is told that in breaking all the "old hierarchies", there was one thing women had to give up—the nature given the power to give birth. The notion that in Mattapoisett, motherhood is dependent neither on the act of being pregnant and giving birth to a child nor on a person's gender/sex is understandably shocking, given her experiences and convictions. "What do they know of motherhood?" she asks, before expressing her anger toward this new way of reproduction: "She hated them, the bland bottleborn monsters of the future, born without pain, multicolored like a litter of puppies without the stigmata of race and sex" (Piercy, 1976, p.111). In Christian mysticism, stigmata are marks on the body, scars or pains that correspond to those of the crucified Jesus Christ (be that the wounds on the hands and feet from the crucifixion itself or on the head, shoulders and back from the crown of thorns or carrying the cross). The stigmata is seen as a sign of a mystical union with the suffering Jesus faced and comes with a connotation of heroic virtue. Connie's anger with the "bottleborn" babies assumably connects to her own experiences with racism and sexism; they are disconnected from her experiences by virtue of living in a society that does not discriminate against them due to their skin colour or bodily configuration.

Her adverse reaction to this society's neutral motherhood continues as she comes across a bearded person nursing a child. Per is described as having breasts similar to what a flat-chested woman might have while chestfeeding, a red beard and the stern "face of a sunburnt forty-five-year-old man" (Piercy, 1976, p. 142). As per nurses, this child we are told that an expression of serene enjoyment spreads across her face. As Connie recalls her experiences nursing one of her children and how her husband made her stop, she feels anger. "How dare any man share that pleasure," she thinks to herself (Piercy, 1976, p. 143). She feels that her experience has been invaded by someone she sees as a man and, therefore, also as an oppressor. She feels that the "women" of Luciente's society have abandoned "the last refuge of women": they had let the "men" steal "The last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and milk" (Piercy, 1976, p.143). "What was so special about being a woman here?" she asks herself (Piercy, 1976, p. 143). I suppose the answer is nothing. In a post-gender society, there is nothing special about being a woman, no different from there being anything special about being a man, if such concepts even exist.

Connie's difficulty accepting and comprehending the restructuring of parenthood allows, as Sapp (2012, p. 119) argues, Piercy to address "nearly the full range of feminist stances on the institution of motherhood as well as the sacrifices imperative for the creation of the utopian Mattapoisett life". On the one hand, we have Connie's conviction that the "last power" women retain in relation to men is their ability to give birth and, therefore, control the means of human reproduction in such a way that the more male-dominated fields of science and medicine working to instate some control over human reproduction is in some way usurping it from the female body (Sapp, 2012, p.119, Rowland, 1984, p.368). whereas Luciente and the people from Mattapoisett have a more Firestonan understanding, in that in their mind, true equality cannot exist as long as only one gender/sex has the sole responsibility of gestation, childbirth and chestfeeding the resulting child. As is apparent when per states, "as long as we were biologically

enchained, we'd never be equal", and by that same metric ", males would never be humanised to be loving and tender" without breaking the gender binary (Piercy, 1976. p.110). For men and women to become equal, birth and motherhood had to move from the realm of nature, being sex-dependent, to the realm of culture with the help of new reproductive technologies and social reform. In other words, to be rid of the patriarchy and gender inequality, the notion of a separation between motherhood as one who carries and cares for a child and fatherhood as one who provides genetic material and protects needs to be discarded and replaced by a new way of conceptualising parental care. It is not one of gender neutrality or parenthood but one of universal motherhood. Even within this society that has seemingly done away with gender, the connotations of motherhood and the raising of children remain on a linguistic level.

5.3 "We Reproduce Like Anyone Else": Decentring and Desensationalising the Act of Reproduction.

Reproduction remains a significant theme of Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn*. However, unlike in other novels, it does not serve as a site used to defamiliarise or disrupt our understanding of gender/sex. However, reproduction does serve a role in the main characters' gendered experience as the novel serves to "reframe notions of black maternity, figuring black female reproduction as essential" to human development "rather than ancillary or antithetical"(Mann, 2018, p.62). There is also the matter of *Oankali* reproduction; both their internal reproduction and the reproduction that happens across species with humans is not a matter between two individuals but three. That being said, the role of the third, the Ooloi, is a role of genetic engineering, reminiscent of a scientist creating a custom child. Reproduction in *Dawn* centres around the *Oankali* imperative of genetic trading, the creation of a new and better hybrid species, and the ways in which they coercively control human reproduction to this end. So, while a black woman features as central to humanity's survival, Lilith still is not given agency relating to this.

In *Egan*, the next novel chronologically closest to *Dawn*, reproduction does not feature at all. We see in Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* a resurfacing of the relationship between reproduction and gender/sex. However, unlike what we see in the novels from the 60s and 70s, it is not a significant part of either the novel or how society is organised. It is, however, crucially related to one of the questions asked of the protagonist by an outsider in response to learning that her society places no emphasis on gender. When the question is asked of how people in her society reproduce, the protagonist, Berq, answers that they "reproduce like anyone else", by which she means that they do to their doctor and decide on one of the following options: deactivating their contraceptive implants to be able to get pregnant if they should wish to, arrange to use a tank for their child to grow in, have surgery to be able to carry a pregnancy if they cannot already, or they can hire another person to carry the child for them (Leckie, 2013, p.104). The option to surgically acquire the ability to carry a pregnancy has some similarities to what we see in *Sturgeon*, with two crucial differences here: the surgery is carried out on consenting adults and is not done with the intention of creating a dually-gendered individual, but presumably just to allow the possibility of pregnancy. The use of tanks sounds similar to that employed in Piercy's novel but, again, is not presented as a universal practice. Leckie's novel comes the closest to showing an understanding of pregnancy as unisex by refusing not just to gender the act but also not assigning the act as specific to any sex.

All these options are presented as equal and just as part of regular reproduction as the others. In other words, reproduction does not seem here to be the same kind of touchpoint for understanding and interrupting gender roles and binary understandings of gender as in the first three novels, but it does acknowledge that reproduction in relation to gender/sex seems to be an important topic for those coming from societies that mark gender.

5.4 Conclusion

Overall, these speculative fiction narratives challenge us to reconsider the ways in which reproduction intersects with gender/sex, power, and identity. If we again return to the matter of matrogenesis, changes in reproductive practices also affect the understanding of what "turns a woman into a woman" (Lie, 2002, p.9). One element of this is the increased insight into the internal process of the pregnancy by means of ultrasound, scanning and laparoscopy such that the pregnant person no longer is the primary source of information on the foetus (Lie, 2002, p. 11). Thus, Symbolically, " the woman is no longer 'the creator of children' (...) but rather one of several participants involved in a process" (Lie, 2002, p.11). Another is the real-life availability of in vitro fertilisation, surrogacy and the donation of egg and sperm, which has served to decouple the biological act of reproduction from the social acts of parenthood. In light of this, it does make sense that the novels become decreasingly interested in the act of reproduction as a site to disrupt gender/sex, as well as how the return of the topic when it comes up in Leckie's work carries a much less significant role and is spoken of in a much different way. By defamiliarising the process of reproduction, these narratives invite us to imagine alternative ways of understanding these relationships and thereby also invite us to critically examine our own.

6 “She was Probably Male”: Gendering and Misgendering Through Language.

This chapter delves into the aspects of gender that are not encoded in the body or seen as being part of the body. It discusses how gender is represented in language and cultural contexts. One of the central aspects I thought about is how the novels chose to use pronouns and other forms of gendered language. John Pennington (2000, p.352) writes that in creating her world of androgynes, Le Guin is faced with the catch-22 of being beholden to the language and gender conventions of the world of her reader. The same can be said for all of all of these depictions of alternate modes of gender/sex. Ann Bodine (1975, p. 130) notes that because of the social significance of how one refers to each other, “personal pronouns are particularly susceptible to modification in response to social and ideological change”. Whereas she focuses on two historical instances of this—namely “the prescriptive grammarians’ attack on singular ‘they’ and ‘he or she’ ” while favouring ‘he’ as a gender-neutral generic pronoun spanning from the 18th century and onward, as well as the (...) feminist attack on sex-indefinite ‘he’, which began in force about 1970—” I will be looking at how authors imagine pronouns to be used in alternate context, be that that they continue a set norm, like Sturgeon’s *Venus Plus X* and Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, use binary language in an unexpected way, like Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice* or invent new terms to further their exploration, like Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Egan’s *Distress*.

6.1 “Less Specific than the Neuter or the Feminine”: Gendered in Translation.

Both Le Guin’s and Sturgeon’s novels use “he” as a generic ungendered pronoun to refer to the *Gentian* menwomen and dually gendered *Ledom*, respectively; in both cases, “he” is framed as the English translation of a gender-neutral pronoun, but the reasoning for this is framed somewhat differently. In *Venus Plus X*, the main character, Charlie Johns, is by means of some wondrous technology made able to understand the language of the *Ledom* and automatically, perhaps due to his own biases, his mind translates the singular gender-neutral pronoun in their language to “he” or “him” in his own mind without initially noticing it. As he learns more about the society he finds himself in, he starts examining his understanding of the language, paying extra attention to his understanding of the pronouns and some gendered terms. As “he examined the pronoun “him” by itself for the very first time”, he finds that “it had gender only in his own reference” and that “it translated to “him” in English because, for some reason of his own, Charlie preferred it that way.” (Sturgeon, 1960, p.57). While there is no reason explicitly stated as to why Charlie prefers “he” as his internal translation to the *Ledom* pronoun, there are several avenues worth exploring. The first, which I will detail more in the following section regarding Le Guin’s novel, is the general acceptance of “he” as a sex-indefinite or gender-neutral pronoun in Charlie’s time; it might also be due to the same sexist bias that leads him to initially read all the *Ledom* as men or another explanation might be that he gravitates toward the pronoun he himself uses. Nonetheless, it is made clear that the personal pronoun is personal—here, meaning that unlike the English “it”, it cannot be used to describe objects, and without gender. This is

further clarified by Charlie explicitly acknowledging that his initial translation is a mistake. When asking if Le Guin “eliminated gender” from her novel, why do so many of the readers still manage to find it within? Pennington (2000, p.352) offers the answer “because male and female readers cannot escape their own gendered perspectives conditioned by society”; because even if the novel offers up an alternative mode of understanding gender, the novel still requires the “readers to resist a gendered reading of the narrative”. Similarly, here, the main character and the reader need to resist either their own or Charlie’s reading to access this alternative understanding of gender.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, we, the readers, follow Genly Ai as he learns to understand more of what it is like to live outside the constraints of a binary understanding of gender and the gender roles that come with it. However, the novel remains coloured by the protagonist’s binary gender perspective, as he stands in for the readers’ assumed assumptions as the narrative progresses. In this book, Le Guin chooses to use a narrative voice that uses masculine pronouns and terms as an intended neutral default instead of attempting to create new or redefine already existing gendered terms. Le Guin’s pronoun use in *The Left Hand of Darkness* has been much-discussed. As Misha Grifka Wander (2023, p. 146) puts it, “Much ink has been spilled on whether the use of “he” as a neutral pronoun “ruins” Le Guin’s gender experiment” and even Le Guin (1989, p.170) has commented that while the use of a universal “he” is grammatically correct, it also carries with it sexist connotations. Unlike in Sturgeon, where the use of the masculine pronoun is attributed to a single person, here it is a deliberate choice on the part of the humans that come into contact with the *Genthians*.

In text, we are given the following reasoning as to why humans have chosen to use exclusively the masculine in referring to the *Genthians*: “the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine” (Le Guin, 1969, p. 86). We are also informed that “it” would be inappropriate in their minds as the people of winter are not neuters; instead, they are “ potentials or integrals—manwomen or androgynes” (Le Guin, 1969, p.88).

In her novel *Dawn*, Octavia E. Butler’s choice to use “it” as the pronoun used to refer to the third-gender *ooloi* serves to underline the novel’s exploration of human-alien relations and the otherness experienced by the *ooloi* not only from the human in the novel but also within *Oankali* society—as they are set apart from their male and female counterparts by their status as treasured strangers, as I further explain in chapter 4. They are not neuters either, but their lack of connection to either maleness or femaleness leaves them in a set state of otherness in their contact with humans. The choice to here use “it” as the chosen pronoun not only serves to underline the alien nature of this particular gender but it also serves to disrupt what pronouns we might think of as proper to use when addressing sentient beings, as we see in both Sturgeon and Le Guin an explicit reluctance even to consider “it” to be suitable for this purpose.

The manner in which the novel uses masculine coded language as an intended neutral default, the man of the “man-woman” becomes, at least on the surface, the more prominent of the two. This choice makes it possible for a potential reader to consider the *Genthians* without re-examining their own biases and perspectives regarding gender. It may predispose them to read the *Genthian* as man-adjacent— or maybe even as a man who is sometimes a woman instead of internalising the dual nature of *Genthian* gender/sex in its entirety. We do also see this happening in the text as the researcher Oppong remarks in her notes that “the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me

continuously to forget that the *karhider* I am with is not a man, but a man-woman" (Le Guin, 1969, p.76).

Wendy Gay Pearson (2007, p.186) offers an additional perspective to this as she points out that while much criticism has been focused on the choice of pronouns' apparent masculinisation of the *Genthians*, there is another layer to unpack in their gendered characterisation. This is the monthly cyclic sexual/asexual or gendered/agendered state "linking their experience of sex and gender to human women's experience of menstruation" (Pearson, 2007, p.186). With this point in mind, I propose that even if the *Gentian* menwomen are, in fact, primarily read as men, they then must also be read as either as men who experience menstruation, as men who take on specific traits of womanhood or even as men who are sometimes also women. All of which is inherently in some way disruptive to a binary cis-normative understanding of gender/sex. In that sense, the use of "he" or "she" or any other pronoun is in no way inhibiting the disruption inherent in imagining gender outside the typical binary constraints; as Pearson(2007, p.196) writes, "The very act of imagining hermaphroditic, androgynous people with no comprehension of gender as a hypostasized ontological category is an act of asserting that the world might be different". The act of imagining or hypostasising other ways of inhabiting gender/sex, or new ontological categories for us to inhabit, remains radical even if it uses language that might, in hindsight, be read as essentialist, binarist or intersexist.

6.2 "Everyone Stereotyped at a Glance?" Gender in Flux in Egan

In Egan's novel, we encounter a gender system with seven genders, as has been discussed before in chapter 4. However, a critical component to this is that this expanded understanding of what gender can be is not seen as the societal norm or default. In this section, my main focus will be how the novel frames *asex* individuals and the language used to describe them. Like in both Sturgeons and Le Guin's works, the main character is here a cisgender man who seeks to explain the marginalised gendered experiences of others and acts as our entry point. He is posed as somewhat of an expert on these topics due to his journalistic experience relating to the topic, and he seems to be affirming but still very much on the outside. This can, for instance, be seen in his interactions with his friend Gina, who is cast as a sceptic regarding gender migration, primarily arguing that she does not consider gender and, therefore, gendering people correctly to be necessary. Andrew responds that gender migration, in his opinion, is largely political, in that for many, specifically he mentions those that 'go no farther than superficial *asex*', it is an act of protest, like leaving a political party or renouncing your citizenship (Egan, 1995, p.46). It is not clearly defined what is meant by "superficial *asex*" here. However, if I were to speculate, I would guess that this refers to the aspects of *asex* identification that do not necessitate surgery, body modification or a change in gender expression, which might be a change in identity labels, preferred language and pronouns, and maybe choosing an *asex* name. As a departure from most of the other novels, with the exception of Piercy, *asex* individuals are typically referred to using neopronouns (ve/ver/vis) in this work. This choice very explicitly sets these individuals apart from the other genders discussed, as all of these are typically addressed by either "she" for the feminine-aligned genders or "he" for the masculine-aligned genders. In general, using neopronouns opens up a considerable level of freedom regarding gender

expression as there is no limit to what they can represent or contain, and, in theory, there is no limit to what kind or how many can be invented or used by any individual. When talking more specifically about the disruptive potential of a specific set of established neopronouns, it lies mainly in two factors, the first being the lack of preconceived notions attached to that set of pronouns, the second being that when encountering an unfamiliar set of pronouns, the reader has to stop and consider not just how this new set of pronouns relate to gender, but also how and why it might be used. Piercy also utilises a type of neopronoun in her novel in that all of the inhabitants of the village of Mattapoisett are referred to as either "person" or the shortened version "per" instead of using gendered pronouns. The main distinction here is that in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, this acts as a universal gender-neutral pronoun, while "ve" is introduced as specifically a gendered, or perhaps deliberately ungendered would be a correct descriptor, pronoun that is used explicitly for asex individuals—even if that is not necessarily the case by the novels end as I will get into more detail about below.

According to the main character, Andrew, the most common reasons to choose to undergo gender migration is that they, the migrants in question, are tired of "self-appointed gender-political figureheads and pretentious Mystical Renaissance gurus claiming to represent them" as well as binary gender stereotyping in general (Egan, 1995, p.45). In other words, identifying and living outside the binary is here just as much a question of self-realisation and expression as it is a question of opposing gender inequality and stereotypes. Gender/sex here seems to be in a state of flux, but it is, as Andrew states, impossible to know whether the shake-up resulting from the emergence of gender migrants will end in either changing attitudes enough to "remove the whole reason for migration" or if the population will end up evenly distributed between the seven genders over the upcoming generations (Egan, 1995, p. 46). This prompts the question of whether having seven strictly defined gender categories is any more useful or liberating than having just the two that have been historically understood as universal. The main character's friend, Gina, expresses her scepticism regarding gender migration by stating: "Everyone stereotyped at a glance; seven pigeonholes instead of two isn't progress." (Egan, 1995, p. 47). Andrew responds that no, that is not necessarily progressing, but maybe the result of the current gender flux-state will be that in the long run, we will end up with two kinds of genders, one type for those who "want to be pigeonholed" in the form of *ufem* and *umale*, and one for those who would instead remain more mysterious, in the form of the vast category of *asex*. (Egan, 1995, p. 47).

Unlike Le Guin's Estraven, Akili is unapologetically neither a man nor a woman and cannot easily be read as such as we are both told and shown how ve rejects all parameters that should signify traditional binary gender and sex difference. Not only does the description of ver identity leave no room for that interpretation, but their choice to radically change their body to suit their experience better. A choice that had irrevocably changed their relationship with their family, with whom ver parted ways when they chose to migrate to *asex* at age sixteen by having affirming surgeries. As the *asex* character, Akili, reveals the results of ves surgical gender migration, vis perfectly smooth chest with no nipples, their lack of genitalia, Andrew is hit with a wave of grief and anger as he demands to know how ve could hate vis body so much. Ve replies that they did, in fact, not hate ver body, nor did ve worship it either. Akili's modified body is here both a result of their understanding of themselves and their personal understanding of gender/sex that has been heavily shaped by their multicultural upbringing as ve had lived

in thirty different cultures by the time ve was fourteen years old, which led ve to the conclusion that sex, both in relation to gender and intercourse, was, in vis words, “for dumb conformists” (Egan, 1995, p.286). A connection is here drawn between asex as a physical—non-gendered/non-sexed—state of being and Akili’s asexuality— or lack of interest in sex. Ve’s very presence and identity, both in this moment and others, seem to unsettle the protagonist and make him defensive—with his need to bring the conversation instantly from ves disinterest in both to the fact that some need both gender/sex and sexuality—as a facet of their identity—to create meaning (Egan, 1995, p.287). The rejection of these two facets of the human experience that he thinks of as inherent and necessary for a happy life registers as in some way offensive to him, but as the novel goes on and he develops a positive relationship with Akili, this changes.

Anat Karolin (2016, p.16) argues that the asex state of being in Egan is seen as a preferable state of being both in comparison to the gender migrant state of being, but also in terms of the more ‘default’ *enfem* and *enmale* ways of doing gender. Unlike the uncanniness explored in Sturgeon, Le Guin, Piercy, Butler, and even Leckie, the lack of gender, or as it is in some of the cases, a lack of recognisable gender, is not seen to be less human, but instead, as a more liberated human subjectivity that is free from the constraints of gender (and in Egan’s case also sexuality). The people born in the utopia that come after the *TOE* are born without the “crutches” of sexuality and gender, as once the all-encompassing truth is known, there is no need for it (Egan, 1995, p. 422). All the characters we are introduced to after this point are referred to using the ve/ver/vis set of pronouns, but as Karolin (2016, p.28) argues, this does not necessarily mean that they are asex in the manner Akili is shown to be, but that is instead past the need for gender as an important category. The utopian future in Egan, like in *A Woman on the Edge of Time*, is shown to be post-gender. However, unlike Piercy’s depiction, this future is also post-sex, as neither of the categories remains of importance in the end.

6.3 “I Could Make Trouble for Myself if I Used the Wrong Forms”: Gender from an Outsider Perspective in Leckie.

Leckie's novel stands out from earlier works in a significant way - it does not rely on a protagonist with a preconceived understanding of gender norms that might seem familiar to the readers, unlike the protagonists of Sturgeon, Le Guin, Piercy, Octavia E. Butler and even an extent the protagonist of Egan. Instead, the narrator is an outsider navigating gendered societies, struggling to interpret their signals relating to gender/sex. The *Radch* empire of which she is a citizen does not seem to make any distinction between gender and sex, as neither are categories of importance to the organisation of their societies. The relationship between the two does not seem fixed in other societies they encounter either, as the main character states after accidentally misgendering someone, “I can't see under your clothes, and even if I could, that’s not always a reliable indicator” (Leckie, 2013,p.104). By adopting this perspective of a person raised outside of gender/sex, Leckie invites the reader to explore gender as a social construct from a radical, ungendered, and unsexed point of view. The narrator's difficulty categorising the genders of individuals from other cultures adds weight to the question Leckie poses with this choice: What would it be like to be part of a society where the body and its reproductive abilities are of little social consequence? Moreover, how would someone who has internalised this framework navigate interacting with cultures where sex/gender is an

essential social category that governs not only how one interacts but also how one speaks? If we consider the idea that gender shapes how we think of sex, then in a society without gender, the biological variations we often label as sex might be considered simply as aspects of individual genetic expression—on par with how we today consider hair colour or freckles.

In Le Guin's novel, the protagonist presents the androgyny as uncanny at first. However, in Leckie's novel, the protagonist only comes to see how uncanny her people can be perceived as outsiders/those they have incorporated into the *Radch* empire after having spent a long time apart from her people, chiefly amongst peoples that consider gender/sex to be a significant distinction and social factor. "I saw them all, suddenly, for just a moment, through non-Radchaai eyes, an eddying crowd of unnervingly ambiguously gendered people. I saw all the features that would mark gender for non-Radchaai (...). All of this matched randomly with bodies curving at breast and hip or not, bodies that one moment moved in ways various non-Radchaai would call feminine, the next moment masculine." (Leckie, 2013, p. 283). Upon encountering these individuals whose genders are not immediately apparent, the person in question experiences confusion due to years of habit, which has conditioned her to choose the correct pronouns and forms of address. However, as she realises that she does not need to deduce their genders, she feels a sense of relief and can let go of this worry. This realisation brings her comfort and ease, allowing her to feel at home. This mirrors how Genly reacts to seeing people from his own binary-gendered society again. When Genly meets members of his own people again, he experiences a reverse culture shock—they seem other or even alien to him, and he thinks that the men and women look like they could be animals of different species (Le Guin, 1969, p.241).

The lack of importance of sex/gender as a social category does, however, not mean that the main character does not recognise the existence of sex/gender as an important category for other cultures. As we do see at one point note that she "know[s] that Seivarden was male, that one was easy" even if she cannot correctly ascertain the gender/sex of the other person she is conversing with at that time (Leckie, 2013, p. 4). This, like most instances of the narrator thinking about or remarking on gender, happens when she needs to communicate in a language that marks gender, either by pronoun or grammar. As the main character remarks repeatedly throughout the novel, "Radachai don't care much about gender(...) and the language they speak—[her] own first language—doesn't mark gender in any way" (Leckie, 2013, p. 3).

One of the many cultures she interacts with also "professes" gender to be insignificant, with men and women acting, speaking and dressing in ways that are not seen to be distinguishable, at least to an outsider. The main character notes that even having been in this person's apartment and seen her belongings, she still feels unsure which forms would be appropriate for them. Nevertheless, they do have a language that requires the language to mark gender, and as our main character notes, "no one I'd met ever guessed wrong" they do take offence when the wrong forms are used or if the speaker hesitates for too long before gendering them (Leckie, 2013, p.77). At this point, she notes that she has not "learned the trick" of deducing someone's gender/sex, and these categories do seem to remain pretty inscrutable to the main character even after being more exposed to other gender systems. (Leckie, 2012, p.77). However, she recognises the importance of accurately perceiving and naming gender to avoid standing out as an outsider when interacting with people who see gender as an important social category, primarily as she seeks to hide her cultural background at points in the novel. As can be seen in the

following quote: “the language we were speaking now did [mark gender], and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms” (Leckie, 2013, p. 3). The ability to partake in a gendered society is a skill needed to be able to interact with the people of this society properly. However, it is a skill the main character is not proficient in. Her struggles to pick up on gendered signals could instantly mark her not only as an outsider but also mark her specifically as *Radchaai*. As we later learn: “Only a Radchaai would misgender people like you do” (Leckie, 2013, p.104). This here refers to both the ignorance her people have regarding what marks gender for other societies and also their power to get away with misgendering people without social sanctioning due to their status as an imperial and colonial power.

As previously noted in the section on pronouns, this novel employs the English translation of a gender-neutral pronoun as she/her. Unlike Le Guin and Sturgeon's works, which use he/him as the translation of their respective universes' gender-neutral pronouns, this novel does not draw attention to the translation within the text itself. The use of gendered language in this novel, both pronouns and gendered titles, is, therefore, something that is not touched upon within the novel itself— but is nonetheless part of how the novel frames this ungendered society. As mentioned earlier in the pronoun section, this novel uses the English translation of a gender-neutral pronoun as she/her. This differs from the works of Le Guin and Sturgeon, who use he/him as the translation of their respective universes' gender-neutral pronouns. However, unlike those works, this novel does not draw attention to the translation within the text itself.

The use of gendered language in this novel, including pronouns, is not addressed explicitly. Instead, we are informed that the main character's language is ungendered, leaving readers to deduce that “she” here is an unmarked pronoun based on context. Using “she” as a generic, ungendered pronoun challenges the cultural norm of considering feminine language or pronouns as less universal than masculine ones. It subverts the use of the masculine as the default or unmarked gender in these novels. In that manner it disrupts and defamiliarises our understanding of gender. This use of “she” not only challenges the cultural norm of considering feminine language or pronouns as less universal than masculine ones but also subverts the use of the masculine as the default or unmarked gender in two of the earlier novels. The use of the universal “she” might shake the habitual and unconscious ways in which we think about language more than the use of the singular they, at least in the cases where it is paired with masculine titles or in statements like the following: “She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike pattern quilting her shirt” (Leckie, 2013, p. 3).

Unless it is specified that she is speaking a language that marks gender, she will use “she” as an intended neutral default. For instance, the character may use “she” to describe someone in her internal dialogue and later note that the person is male, using the appropriate gendered language when necessary. This can, for instance, be seen in her description of her acquaintance Seivarden, who, in narration, is referred to using only “she/her” pronouns. In contrast, she will make sure to use the masculine “he/him” when addressing them when conversing with people who are more conscious of gender (Leckie, 2013, p. 4). Just as Sturgeon’s and Le Guin’s choice to use the generic ungendered “he,” this novel's use of a generic ungendered “she” impacts the reader's experience of the novel and colours their expectations regarding the characters' genders.

The focus in Leckie’s novel is, like in Piercy, primarily concerned with societal gender neutrality, and neither focuses much on the body's relationship with gender/sex, at least

when compared to the other novels that showcase bodies that either combine or stand outside normative understandings of bodies as either wholly male or wholly female. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Piercy leaves the biological core of sex mostly unchallenged, as it remains a relevant category even within their post-gender society. By comparison, sex and sexual differences remain mostly either non-present or in tandem with gender, not as a separate category in Leckie's work, as bodies are seen as sometimes being indicative of what gender someone is and how they should be addressed and sometimes not, but is otherwise of little consequence, partly due to the alterations that are made available in the realm of reproduction, as discussed in the previous chapter. In other words, while the concept of sex is not deconstructed explicitly in this novel, the lack of separation created between the categories of gender and sex nonetheless can be read as moving toward an understanding of the two as being co-constructed.

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of gender in literature, as seen in the works discussed, reveals the intricate interplay between language, culture, and societal norms in shaping our understanding of gender. Across various novels, authors have employed different strategies to challenge traditional gender constructs and imagine alternative modes of gender expression.

Authors like Le Guin and Sturgeon utilise the more traditional generic "he" to depict their gender-expansive characters. Nevertheless, other factors still serve to act as disruptive elements toward binary understandings of gender. Similarly, Leckie's use of "she" as a generic pronoun serves both to challenge traditional gender assumptions and disrupt readers' expectations while also functioning as an "answer" to the choices of the two former. Whereas Octavia E. Butler's use of "it" disrupts our notion of what is considered proper address in regard to sentient beings or persons, and Piercy and Egan showcase how the creation of neopronouns might serve to disrupt the binary by either creating a universal new pronoun or adding additional ones.

Additionally, these novels explore the fluidity and complexity of gender identity as characters navigate between different gender roles and expressions. Whether it is Akili's rejection of traditional gender categories in Egan's *Distress* or the protagonist's encounters with diverse gender cultures in Leckie's Radch universe, the narratives challenge readers to rethink their assumptions about gender. In essence, the exploration of gender in literature serves as a catalyst for critical reflection on societal norms and individual identities. By presenting alternative visions of gender, authors provoke readers to question their own perspectives and embrace the diversity of human and non-human experiences.

7 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have employed a qualitative approach to analyse how a selection of speculative fiction novels employ different aspects and understandings of gender to probe the limits of the gender binary by examining which alternative or non-binary representations of gender are being produced in speculative fiction. I have analysed the ways in which gender/sex appear in these novels, using perspectives on the historical and current co-construction of sex and gender from Butler (1990; 1993; 2006; 2024), Moi (1993), Laqueur (1990) and Lie (2002). I have explored ways to defamiliarise this often taken-for-granted structure to examine which alternative representations of gender are being produced within the genre of speculative fiction by looking at six examples of the genre spanning from 1960 to 2013. These novels include *Venus Plus X* by Theodore Sturgeon, *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy, *Dawn* by Octavia Butler, *Distress* by Greg Egan, and *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie. *Venus Plus X* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* explore single-sex worlds, while *Woman on the Edge of Time* portrays a non-gendered society. *Dawn* by Octavia E. Butler presents us with an alien three-gender/sex system. *Distress* by Greg Egan explores a multigender system with a larger focus on individual identity. *Ancillary Justice* was picked due to its reversal of the outsider narrative found in the earlier novels as we here experience this non-gendered society from an insider point of view.

I have analysed these novels using a thematic analysis with an analytic approach that is inspired by queer and trans studies and using the following research questions:

1. How do the novels use the reproductive system and the body as sites to explore alternative or expansive representations of gender/sex?
2. What role does the act of reproduction play in how speculative fiction constructs and deconstructs gender/sex?
3. How does speculative fiction use the social importance of language as an avenue to represent new ways of gendering and being gendered?

These novels, which span over the last six decades, play with the gender binary in very different ways. In the two novels from the 1960s, we see a questioning of the borders of the gender binary primarily by modifying the body away from the normative categories of male and female and expanding the reproductive capacity of the human race to become universal. This is not only done as a mode of disrupting the traditional understanding of pregnancy and motherhood, being the central distinction between men and women. This is in these novels done by way of "addition"; by this, I mean that in creating their speculative gender/sexes, these authors combine traits of what has been considered male and female to create something that is crucially both male and female instead of neither. In that sense, one could argue that these genders cannot be said to be "outside the binary" per se, but they break one of the crucial aspects of the gender binary as a system: the exclusionary nature of the two categories. A person who might both be described as a man who is also a woman and as a woman who is also a man, as is the case with Sturgeon's *Ledom*, or someone who is sometimes a man and sometimes a woman, as is the case with the *Genthians* as presented by Le Guin, are by their nature breaking out of the constraints of the gender binary. These two novels explore the concept of gender/sex primarily through the lens of physical embodiment and reproductive functions rather than focusing solely on social constructs. However, they still offer insightful commentary on the peculiarity of restricting someone's potential based on

their gender/sex and the harmful effects of gender stereotypes within the protagonist's own societies.

Reproduction is one of the central ways in which gender/sex is interrogated in Piercy's novel, but here, the site of the exploration of the relationship between reproduction and gender/sex is not within the body but instead moved outside of it entirely by way of technological advancements. Thus, the normative binary body and the notion of sex as set and dimorphic remains unchanged even if society has no concept of gender or gender roles. Unlike the two earlier novels, which both employ a view of gender that favours either masculine language or a mix of masculine and feminine language, this novel largely employs a radical degendering of its language. The novel explicitly speaks of the traditionally gendered concept of motherhood as a universal parental experience and elects to use "per" as a personal pronoun for all the inhabitants of the utopian society it depicts.

In *Dawn* by Octavia E. Butler, we, along with the protagonist, are told that in encountering this alien race, it is wrong for us to assume that they would have sexes that seem familiar to us, but as it happens, two of the three genders/sexes in this novel correspond at least on the surface level to that of the human notion of male and female. Octavia E. Butler proposes an alternate gender/sex mode for sentient beings with the *Oankali's* sexual trimorphism that serves not only to showcase how this shapes this alien society but also to underline the arbitrariness of the gender binary in human society. Reproduction is an important aspect in this novel, as the alien species wishes to combine their genetic materials with those of humans, but it is not used as a vehicle for the novel to disrupt a binary cisnormative view of gender/sex.

While gender/sex exploration and reproduction are somewhat decoupled in Octavia E. Butler's "Dawn," this link is absent when we get to Egan's novel. Gender/sex, as we initially meet it in *Distress*, seems to be in a state of flux as new categories have established themselves. Some people use and modify their bodies as they seek to embody their identities in relation to gender/sex and express them to the world around them. Still, ultimately, as the novel concludes, both this desire and the entire existence of such categories are ushered out by the dawning of a new utopia. It is a utopia wherein its inhabitants are more human because of their lack of divisions along the lines of gender/sex, as gender is not understood as a basis for humanity. That being said, it also showcases the importance of self-determination and expression in a world wherein gender/sex remains an important social category and notes the potential political aspect of defining your gender outside the binary.

In *Ancillary Justice*, we are presented with a radically ungendered point of view, a reversal of the other novels. The ungendered individual becomes our point of access both to her own society and as an outsider in societies that have gender systems that more resemble our own. Reproduction is not absent from this novel, but it features only as a brief aside when the main character is asked by an outsider how they can reproduce if they are all of the same gender. Leckie's novel shows us a post-gender society from within, where the focus lies not in the body or on reproduction but instead on how one might try to navigate gender/sex as an outsider.

A common trait among these alternate depictions of gender that fall outside the binary is that to speak these possibilities into their reality and to make them known to us, they constantly have to be in negotiation with both the gender binary and our understanding of sexual dimorphism. The term non-binary itself, which I have chosen to use as an

umbrella term in my exploration of these novel's depictions of gender, centres the binary in its definition. It is not on its own a claim of a specific gender/sex, but instead a refusal, a step outside the set normative boundaries as part of a process to expand the possibilities of human self-expression.

In societies like the contemporary Norwegian society wherein I reside, where the gender binary is not only taken for granted but also legally prescribed, it may be difficult to imagine anyone being able to move outside that and question the arbitrariness of binary gender categories beyond the realm of gender stereotyping and norms. By presenting these alternative understandings of gender through alternate worlds or futures, these works of speculative fiction provide an entry point for readers, which creates less friction as it offers them a critical distance to the topic. Gender/sex is, for many, both a complex and sensitive topic as it makes up not just a large part of our lives within the societies we live within but also on a level of personal identification. Therefore, it might provide an entry point for exploring gender/sex as well as their own cultural norms and assumptions. Speculative fiction then might prime us to wonder and explore gender possibilities outside of our current framework and help us discover those possibilities within ourselves or others.

7.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

To the best of my ability, I have chosen novels that are relatively representative of their contemporaries. I have managed to cobble together one of the many possible narratives and use a non-binary lens to examine gender within speculative fiction. Here, I have only been able to look at a few choice texts within the rich tapestry of alternate gender representations within speculative fiction. There are still plenty of interesting speculations and reflections on gender/sex to be found that might serve to enrich our understanding of historical explorations of gender as well as challenge our conceptualisations of gender/sex. A major limitation of my project is that my selection was limited to novels published within the anglosphere. It might prove interesting to compare these depictions of gender/sex to those found within literary works with other geographical origins, both those that have received no or very limited translations to other languages and those that have received more widespread international attention. For those interested in exploring this topic further, I have compiled an extensive list of novels in my methods chapter that might prove useful as a starting point to creating a more nuanced timeline than I could fit within the confines of this project. Future projects might also benefit from taking a more intersectional stance than has been done here; I particularly think a larger focus on an intersex perspective or coloniality and gender/sex or the interconnectedness of gender/sex and race would prove interesting and fruitful work.

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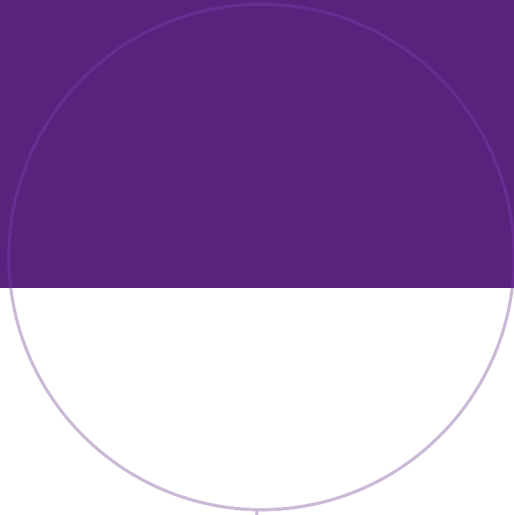
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