

“The Story That Takes You Somewhere New”

*Form, Fiction, and Authority in Three English-Language Narratives of Gender Transition from  
1928 to 2016*

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## Preface: “A Wonderful Problem”

For as long as people have written, they have written about gender transition. For the oldest named author, the Akkadian priestess Enheduanna, “to turn man into woman / woman into man” were among the most central manifestations of her goddess Inanna’s omnipotence.<sup>1</sup> Depictions of the journey from one gender category to another across human history are as varied and uncountable as the cultures, moments, and gender systems which produce them. Across the relatively recent development of vernacular English literature in the past half millennium, stories of gender transition were continually present—not only in the sensationalized anecdotes which continued to circulate in popular histories and wonder books, but also in the testimony of writers like Charlotte Charke/Charles Brown, who described with wit and frankness in 1755 their<sup>2</sup> own adventures in crossing the borders of gender.<sup>3</sup> Stories of journeys across, between, and beyond genders have been part of literature for as long as trans and gender-nonconforming people have—which is to say, since always.

It is a testament, then, to the remarkable culture of taboo and binary sexism which has dominated European and settler colonial societies, particularly across the imperial 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, that in the English-language literature of the past century such stories could appear so radically new. It is the constructed novelty of erasure, as C. Riley Snorton observed in the media response to the 1993 murder of Brandon Teena, which produces the uncanny effect of one “first-ever” trans story after another, after another, across the twentieth and even into the twenty-first century—“a kind of hermeneutical sleight of hand,” writes Snorton, “in which a narrative, formally and as a vehicle of ideology, accrues its meaning by constructing other forms of knowledge as unthought.”<sup>4</sup> This appropriative accommodation of repressed stories and voices is a familiar dynamic in the perpetual push-and-pull of hegemonic ideology in European and settler

colonial societies, and the vexed status of 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglophone trans stories reflect many of the same ideological entanglements which have haunted European and settler colonial feminism more broadly. Put plainly, an author who is determined to bring a story to the eyes of readers despite intense social hostility must use whatever strategy they can to do so. Genre, form, fictionality, and especially voice all must function to establish the authority that constitutes authorship, in the eyes both of their publisher and of their reading public—and “since,” as Susan Lanser writes, “such appropriations may of course backfire, nonhegemonic writers must strike a delicate balance in accommodating and subverting dominant rhetorical practices.”<sup>5</sup> Those who write after must contend with the choices of those who wrote before, and form and fictionality, language and voice, are continually redefined by the perpetual struggle of trans and queer people to be free—a messy and miraculous dialectic that Leslie Feinberg once described as “a wonderful problem.”<sup>6</sup>

This is the story we will explore here: three authors writing in English across the past century, bringing three vibrantly distinct stories of gender transition to the page, in continual conversation with each other and the ever-changing realities of society and literature. In 1928, a new novel by Radclyffe Hall—known to friends as John—makes an impassioned plea for the rights of “sexual invert,” and immediately ignites a ferocious backlash which sees the book banned in the United Kingdom until the late 1940s. *The Well of Loneliness*, as it is titled, is a runaway success wherever it is legal, and becomes a constant, if troublesome, touchstone for discussions of lesbianism and transmasculinity in contemporary English literature. Nearly four decades later, in 1967, and fifteen years after she had unwillingly become one of the most famous women in the world, Christine Jorgensen sees her autobiography published. Though the paperbacks are still wrapped in sensationalistic quotes and “before-and-after” photographs, in

their pages she tells her life's story in her own words—a remarkably honest, witty, and insightful counterbalance to the voyeuristic public narrative which will, nonetheless, continue to overshadow her legacy for decades to come. Finally, in the next and current century, a young writer named Kai Cheng Thom in Toronto, unceded Indigenous territory, brings to publication a slim yet sublime volume whose title is a statement of intent unto itself: 2016's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*. Playful and poignant, confident and un beholden, the book's kaleidoscope of forms and magical, indeterminate fictionality make visible and malleable the very same invisible literary mortar which so stubbornly fastened Hall's *Well of Loneliness* to novelistic realism and Jorgensen's narration of her life to nonfiction autobiography.

Each text's form and fictionality is unique, shaped both by the ever-shifting demands of hegemonic ideology and by the continual struggle and evolving discourses of trans and queer communities themselves, and this thesis will consider them comparatively and in conversation. The first section (I) will examine the paratext and prefatory material, including contributions by the sexologists Havelock Ellis in *The Well* and Harry Benjamin in Jorgensen's autobiography, as well as the authors' own prefaces and introductions, to assess the framing and form of each book in relation to fictionality, genre, and the developing historical and literary context. The second section (II) will focus on narrative voice and structure, and the innovative ways in which the texts, which differ profoundly in how, and to whom, their narrators speak, make use of genre expectations, formal variation, and creative pacing to draw readers into the unique perspective of each story.

Yet for all their formal divergence, we will find that these three books are united in their deep sincerity, their emotional power, and their staunch determination to bring their unique,

irreducible, and vibrantly honest stories of gender transition to the eyes, minds, and hearts of readers. It is no idle sentiment to say these stories were written with love—love for all who traverse the perilous territory of gender, a dangerous love, bold and free. In the words of Kimaya, *Fierce Femmes*' matriarch of the Street of Miracles: “Love’s the story that takes you somewhere new.”<sup>7</sup>

### I. “Dangerous Stories”<sup>8</sup> *Paratext and Prefatory Materials*

The first glance is a crucial moment for any story, even more so those subject to taboo and prejudice, and at the first glance, these three publications could hardly seem more different.

Their covers and paratext set out the

contrasting and even conflicting

positions which the texts have

established at the confluence of

their authors’ visions and the

complex realities of publishing. The

1928 UK edition of John Radclyffe

Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* bore

“a sombre black binding and plain

jacket” in a deliberate, and

thoroughly unsuccessful, attempt at

avoiding controversy by its publisher,

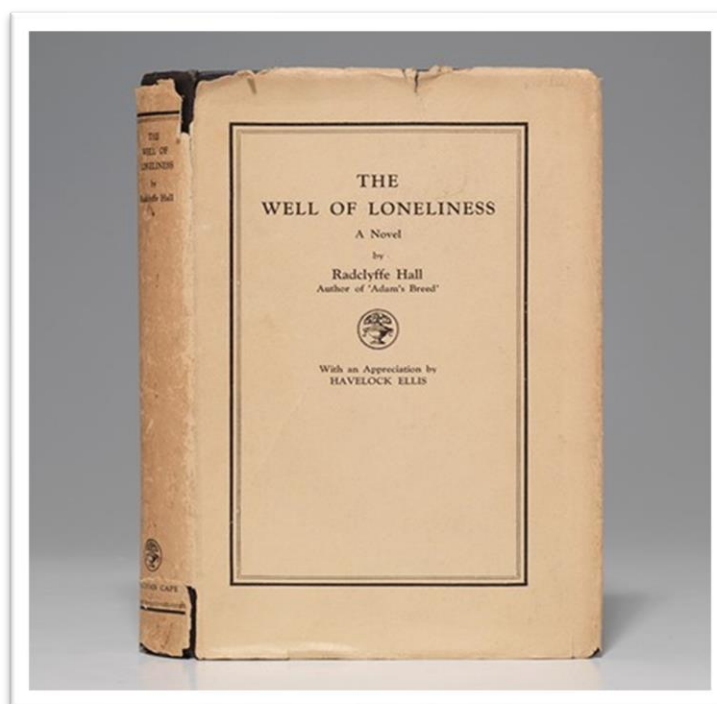


Figure 1: John Radclyffe Hall’s own copy of the 1928 Jonathan Cape edition of *The Well of Loneliness*. Image retrieved from <https://www.baumanrarebooks.com/rare-books/hall-radclyffe/well-of-loneliness/116386.aspx> on November 8, 2021.

Jonathan Cape, who expressed his fear that its legality “may be called into question unless it is soberly and carefully published.”<sup>9</sup> The front cover of this very first edition (Figure 1) advertised

“an Appreciation by Havelock Ellis,” the prominent English sexologist whose theory of ‘sexual inversion’ expanded on those of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Richard von Krafft-Ebbing—both of whose work appears diegetically in the novel—and was embraced by Hall, who described Ellis as “the greatest living authority on the tragical problem of sexual inversion.”<sup>10</sup> This detail played a pivotal role in the book’s US publication by an upstart firm called Covici-Friede after its UK ban and subsequent withdrawal of planned US publisher Knopf. As quoted by Leslie Taylor in their 2001 article on *The Well*’s US publication and obscenity trial, Donald Friede of Covici-Friede was comforted that *The Well* “carried the endorsement of Havelock Ellis, which certainly precluded the possibility of its being merely another bit of pornography.”<sup>11</sup> Reassuringly sober and avoiding any hint of sensation, these early covers of *The Well* reflected their publishers’ strategies to navigate a repressive legal regime, whose scrutiny was only made more certain by the massive demand for, and runaway success of, censored and taboo stories generally and particularly this new novel by John Radclyffe Hall. Yet long after it was republished in the UK in 1949, editions of *The Well of Loneliness* have tended to retain this understated presentation, preferring—with the exception of certain mid-century paperbacks—to use paintings from European art when depicting a lesbian couple, and just as often presenting a solitary figure, or in one particularly strong choice by the 1993 Triangle Classics edition published by Quality Paperback Book Club, the hands of a rider on horseback, clutching the reins, in reference to the protagonist Stephen Gordon’s lifelong, gender-affirming love of riding.<sup>12</sup> *The Well*’s somber tone and tragic arc, its profound investment in both a kind of literature and a kind of masculinity inseparable from British imperialism, and the baggage of the very same field of sexology whose endorsement was so key to its publication, have all conspired to surround the once-banned novel in an air of Edwardian prudishness and obsolescence—its restrained, fine-art covers belying both

the firestorm of controversy it ignited and the frustration and debate it has provoked for feminist readers in the ensuing decades.

In sharp, even surreal, contrast to *The Well*, the binding of the 1968 Bantam Books paperback edition of Christine Jorgensen's *Personal Autobiography* (Figure 2) is so sensationalistic as to be, in the plainest terms, insulting and transphobic. Featuring a picture of

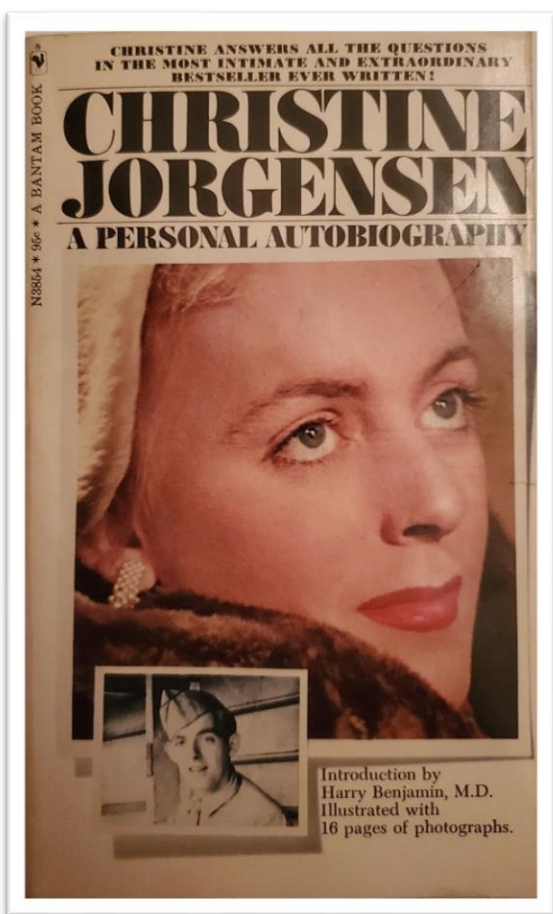


Figure 2: The front cover of the 1968 Bantam Books mass market paperback edition of Christine Jorgensen: *A Personal Autobiography*. Image taken by the author of author's own copy.

Christine in uniform before her transition prominently displayed on the cover, it promises that “Christine answers all the questions in the most intimate and extraordinary bestseller ever written!” On the back, in type nearly as large and bold as the author’s name, is splashed the infamous newspaper quote from fifteen years earlier, when Jorgensen had been cruelly outed to the tabloids while convalescing from a surgery: “Ex-G.I. Becomes Blonde Beauty!”<sup>13</sup> And nestled between the ‘before-and-after’ photographs on the front cover are two further advertisements: “Introduction by Harry Benjamin, M.D.” and “Illustrated with 16 pages of photographs.” It is a bizarre wrapping for an autobiography in which Jorgensen recalls in detail the devastating betrayal of her outing and the excruciating experience of being, in the words of Susan Stryker paraphrasing Jorgensen herself, “the most written-about topic in the media [...] in a year [1953] when hydrogen bombs were

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being tested in the Pacific, war was raging in Korea, England had crowned a new queen, and Jonas Salk was working on the polio vaccine.”<sup>14</sup> That dissonance reflects the way in which Jorgensen rose to meet journalism’s disrespectful gaze and insisted on taking ownership of her own public image, leveraging the media obsession to share her story and advocate for trans people and her own rights until her death in 1989—as Leslie Feinberg wrote of her in his foundational 1992 book *Transgender Liberation*, “somehow she paid this punishing emotional price and survived with grace and dignity. It took great courage.”<sup>15</sup> Yet the honesty and complexity of her autobiography remain hidden behind the alienating, sensationalizing covers, and in much the same way Jorgensen’s legacy is still overshadowed by the media circus surrounding her transition and by exploitative ‘adaptations’ of her story like the films *The Christine Jorgensen Story* (1970) or Ed Wood’s *Glen or Glenda* (1953), as well as by her association with the influential 20<sup>th</sup>-century endocrinologist and sexologist Harry Benjamin, who credited both her and her Danish physicians in the preface to his book *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, and who played a central role in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century establishment of transsexuality as a medical category—a category whose gatekeeping and restrictive binarism has been a central concern for queer and trans studies alike in recent decades. It is not surprising then, though it is certainly sad, that the most recent reprint of Jorgensen’s *Personal Autobiography* by Cleis Press is now two decades old, and despite containing an introduction by the same renowned historian Susan Stryker quoted above, still bears a cover more reflective of the 1952 media sensation than the 1967 autobiography it contains: “In 1952, She Was a Scandal,” it proclaims, with a “Daily News” banner splashed across the top and a Newsday quote misgendering and dead-naming the author in the bottom-right corner, an insult which even the 1968 edition managed to avoid.<sup>16</sup> In the paratext of this singular autobiography, we see both the



journalistic discourse and the medical, in the continued tradition of the clinician's preface, attempting to position Christine Jorgensen's story as a case study or a social event, a representative story, asserting that, as Jay Prosser writes of Benjamin's preface, "this book has (is) a categorical life."<sup>17</sup> Yet the autobiography itself is rightly titled a *personal* autobiography, and Jorgensen in her preface clarifies "the personal meaning: my life simply as a woman, and as a human being."<sup>18</sup> In its pages, past the alienating packaging, we find Christine Jorgensen in her own voice, a real person narrating her very unique life, even as publishers and journalists, doctors and scholars alike have continued to reduce her to the "Christine Jorgensen Case."<sup>19</sup>

The cover of our third and most recent publication, Kai Cheng Thom's 2016 *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*, could by no means be called somber, nor is it sensationalizing—though it is certainly, joyfully, attention-grabbing (Figure 3).<sup>20</sup> In vibrant gradients of pink and blue, the book's remarkable title is nestled among elements from its story: the switchblade, the mermaid, the red heels, the cloud of bees, the pair of hands, one in a position of benediction, holding a cigarette, and the other seemingly extended in invitation, and a slice of red cake. Each of these are drawn from the narrative, and indeed five of these images feature on the title pages of each of the book's five parts. In contrast to the unyielding flatness of *The Well's* covers or the journalistic superficiality of those of Jorgensen's autobiography, the cover of *Fierce Femmes* produces its own depth, not separate from or in conflict with the narrative but integrated into it, such that when one returns to the cover after finishing the book, it has become a collage of the story itself, its themes of grief and courage, trauma and healing, hunger and love, already immanent in the book's outer wrapping. This is first and foremost a testament to the vision and collaboration of the author and designer, but medallions from the Writers' Trust of Canada and Lambda Literary Awards on the cover also

reflect a radically different publishing environment by the 2010s for queer and trans stories, after many decades of effort by LGBTQ authors, activists, and readers. Indeed, its back cover bears endorsements not by a cisgender physician, as our older texts do, but by Casey Plett and Trish Salah, both trans authors of renown who have themselves written about the history and the complexity of the genre of trans memoir—Salah’s quotation in particular speaks directly to the book’s unique relationship to that genre and to fictionality, as she writes: “The first lie is that this book is a memoir, the second is that it is not.”<sup>21</sup> The confidence and thematic depth of its cover design reflect

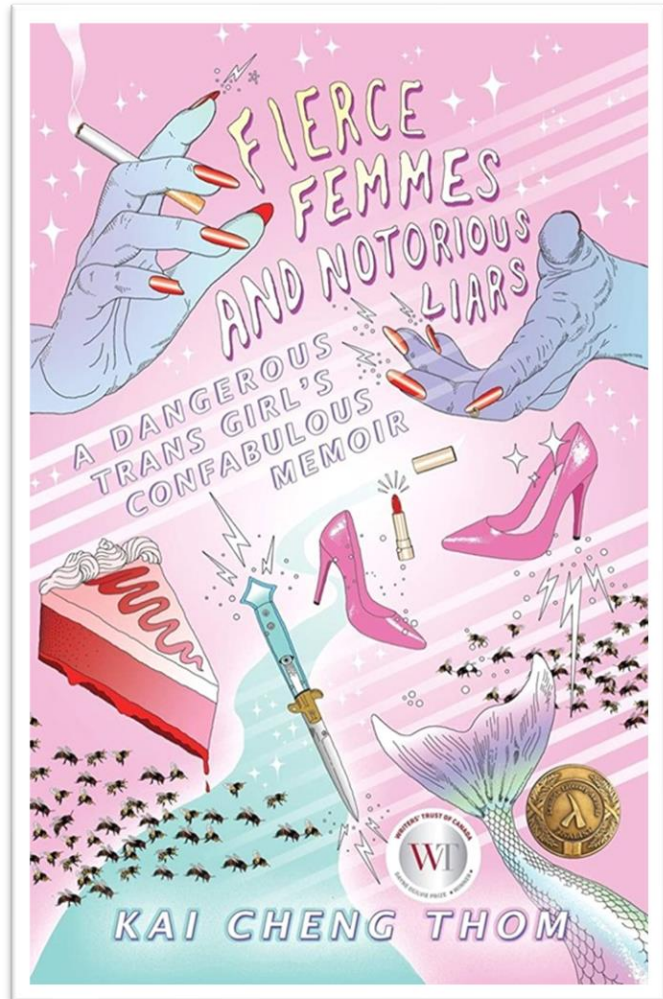


Figure 3: The cover of the original Metonymy Press edition of Kai Cheng Thom’s *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir*. Retrieved from <https://metonymypress.com/shop/print-books/fierce-femmes-notorious-liars-dangerous-trans-girls-confabulous-memoir/> on November 8, 2021.

this formal independence—in contrast, we see how desperately the paratexts of *The Well* and Jorgensen’s autobiography seek to categorize and authorize their stories in reference to external literary, journalistic, and medical discourses. *Fierce Femmes* vouches for itself, and as we move past the cover, the voice that so evocatively prefaces and frames this story is Thom’s alone.

“Dangerous Stories,” which precedes part one of *Fierce Femmes*, begins by describing what it means for a story to be “dangerous:” “The kind of story that doesn’t wait for you to invite it to enter, but bursts through the doors of your rat-infested house like a glittering wind, hungry, hungry, to snatch up the carpet and scatter your papers and smash every single plate in the kitchen.”<sup>22</sup> Uninvited, wild, destructive and hungry, dangerous stories are threatening both to social order, “like the voice of a mad angel whispering of the revolution you are about to unleash,” and to you, the reader, radically altering the course of your life like the story “that made your poor starving grandfather cross an entire ocean in search of the unbelievable riches someone once told him were waiting on the other side.”<sup>23</sup> They are, in a trans context, most emphatically not in that well-analyzed and constantly troublesome class of transition stories of which Sandy Stone wrote that “besides the obvious complicity of these accounts [Niels Hoyer’s 1933 *Man into Woman* and Hedy Jo Star’s 1955 *I Changed My Sex!*] in a Western white male definition of performative gender, the authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification.”<sup>24</sup> This type of memoir is what the author/narrator of *Fierce Femmes* describes as “a very old archetype that trans girl stories get put into: this sort of tragic, plucky-little-orphan character who is just supposed to suffer through everything and wait, and if you’re good and brave and patient (and white and rich) enough, then you get the big reward ... which is that you get to be just like everyone else who is white and rich and boring.”<sup>25</sup> *Fierce Femmes* is framed from the start as a repudiation of this archetype, and the scene described in “Dangerous Stories” is, in both content and narrative function, a comprehensive deconstruction of the burdensome legacy of “the same old story that makes us boring and dead and *safe* to read about”—expressed in Thom’s disarmingly conversational and poetic language.<sup>26</sup>

“The other day,” recalls the author/narrator, “I was watching some post-sex television when a beautiful white trans woman in a flowy white organza gown appeared on the screen. She was making a speech. Everything about her was very white, like she was about to be buried and crushed into a diamond.”<sup>27</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> century discourse of transsexuality is inseparable from whiteness, its subject-making process, like in much European and settler-colonial feminism more broadly, often reliant on the hegemonic power of white supremacy. C. Riley Snorton, in his chapter “A Nightmarish Silhouette” from *Black on Both Sides*, analyzes the way in which Christine Jorgensen’s public impact as a white transsexual women delineated a trans subjectivity defined by legal and medical factors and freedoms dependent on whiteness—he writes, “if Jorgensen’s media figuration came to represent a form of freedom, it also signified upon the various kinds of unfreedom that marked and continue to animate black and trans temporalities.”<sup>28</sup> In an explicit embrace of white supremacy, *The Well of Loneliness* bears a preface by Ellis, a eugenicist, and erases any doubt about its enthusiastic investment in racism when its narrator describes a Black character as having “the patient, questioning expression common to the eye of most animals and to those of all slowly evolving races.”<sup>29</sup> This is entirely consistent with *The Well*’s project and form, in which the discourse of imperialism is a perpetual undercurrent that galvanizes and facilitates the protagonist Stephen Gordon’s unjustly denied manhood, from the aristocratic privileges of fox-hunting and tailored suits to the fervent nationalism of Stephen’s dysphoria-inducing exclusion from the “moment of splendid national endeavour,” as Hall describes the first world war.<sup>30</sup> The form of the English realist novel more broadly—a form which *The Well* embraced despite its relative old-fashionedness even by 1928—often relies on racism as a fundamental tool for the ideological construction of personhood, subjecthood, and cultural value. “It should not be possible,” as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminded us in her

1985 essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” “to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English.”<sup>31</sup> In her subsequent analysis of the subject-making process in *Jane Eyre*, Spivak observes that the racially othered character of Bertha Mason “renders the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate, so that a good greater than the letter of the Law can be broached,” and *The Well*’s use of both the authority of scientific racism, in the figure of Havelock Ellis, and of the axiomatics of imperialism in formulating the demand for Stephen’s rights, reflect this ubiquity of racism as a narrative, and a political, tool.<sup>32</sup> The appeal to whiteness as constitutive of personhood is a distressingly familiar strategy for feminism and queer and trans movements in Europe and the settler colonies—a devil’s bargain which generally fails to win any concession from hegemonic ideology, as in the case, according to Gail Bederman, of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who found her racist feminism ineffective in challenging a patriarchy all too capable of reconciling discourses of ‘primal’ masculinity with white supremacy.<sup>33</sup> Though explicitly racist formulations like Gilman’s, Ellis’ and Hall’s diminish across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the continued centrality and universalization of white perspectives in feminist, queer, and trans literature plays an essential role in stifling dangerous stories.

“But,” the author/narrator of “Dangerous Stories” continues, “I’m not hating on her for being rich or famous or white or anything (not much anyway). No, what really works me up is the way that this whole story is being told: Everyone look at this poor little trans girl desperate for a ~~fairy godmother~~ doctor to give her boobs and a vagina and a pretty face and wear nice dresses! Save the trans girls! Save the whales! Put them in a zoo!”<sup>34</sup> Here Thom gets right to the heart of the power imbalance and reductive narrative that defined the 20<sup>th</sup> century medical and

public discourses of transsexuality—healthcare and legal validation withheld by doctors unless restrictive sexist requirements and a sufficient quota of pain and suffering were met. This is, of course, fundamental to the role of the clinician’s preface in trans narratives—as Jay Prosser describes in his indispensable 1998 book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, “like white abolitionists’ prefaces to slave narratives, the clinician’s preface ‘grants’ the autobiographer a narrative voice, vouching both for its representationality (authenticity) and its representativeness (exemplarity).”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, it is Harry Benjamin’s introduction to Jorgensen’s autobiography that Prosser uses as an example, tracing the reciprocal formation by which Benjamin presents Jorgensen’s story as both authorized by and proof of his understanding of transsexuality. Benjamin explains that “medically, Christine presents an almost classic case of the transsexual phenomenon [...] Her life story should forcefully support all those institutions and individuals who endorse and provide hormonal and surgical help for transsexuals.”<sup>36</sup> It is, of course, a tangible good that such treatments became more available, and Benjamin’s legacy, like that of many boundary-pushing sexologists, should not be entirely defined by his failings. Yet in reducing the whole of Jorgensen’s story to an object of medical evidence, he is embodying the same medical arrogance that would eventually see the HBIGDA (Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, now known as the World Professional Association for Transgender Health) Standards of Care issued in his name become widely despised as rigid, draconian gatekeeping, even if his own theories as outlined in *The Transsexual Phenomenon* admitted somewhat more complexity and variation in gender, as discussed by Julia Serano.<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, in his introduction, certainly treats Jorgensen’s story as an intellectual football in the debate between sexology and psychoanalysis, arguing that “These [early childhood trauma theories] are still the favorite theories of many psychologists and psychoanalysts to explain the

transsexual state, but they do not fit into the childhood of Christine Jorgensen.”<sup>38</sup> He positions himself as a judge of Jorgensen’s “success as a woman,” which is “no longer in doubt,” and makes sure to spotlight her “dislike for homosexual inclinations” to demonstrate that “there was in him [Jorgensen, pre-transition] a woman’s love for a man, not that of a homosexual.”<sup>39</sup> Though he expresses respect for Jorgensen, and she for him, the clinical preoccupation of his introduction is so reductive and so objectifying of this rich and complex life story as to generate a sensation of tonal whiplash.

Christine Jorgensen, for her part, uses her own preface to delineate and distinguish the discourses she is navigating and to carve out space for the story she will tell. The preface is framed around “three seemingly unrelated incidents—one medical, one professional, one personal—[which] can be cited as representative of my life since my return from Denmark, in the culminating series of events that was to make me, unwillingly and unwittingly, an international controversy.”<sup>40</sup> The medical incident, which she describes as “the most significant” despite the focus of her autobiography being on the personal, is a letter from Benjamin thanking her and informing her that she will be credited in his book, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*.<sup>41</sup> Jorgensen is at once bemused by Benjamin’s gratitude—“at the time I received his letter, I gave it no further thought until I received a copy of his book and read the glowing tribute to my trials and tribulations”—and humbled by it, demurring that “if, indeed, I had made any contribution, it must be admitted that at the time of my transition it was purely an unconscious one. To me, it was a matter of survival.”<sup>42</sup> In this way she establishes the distance between the meaning which Benjamin assigns to her transition and her own experience of it, which she frames not in terms specific to the medical narrative of transsexuality but in the universalizing terms of self-actualization, as she writes: “As the object of one of Nature’s caprices, I was merely searching

for my own personal expression of human dignity, with no thought of what the consequences might turn out to be.”<sup>43</sup> The professional incident which she brings up refers to one such consequence, as she recalls, and quotes a news release regarding, the decision of the US Army in Germany to refuse to allow her to perform for US troops. This transphobic decision from 1965, delivered by a US Army spokesman who, interestingly, genders “Miss Jorgensen” correctly while explaining the ban, is juxtaposed alongside a series of other incidents from her stage career—“most of them extremely pleasant and rewarding, some of them highly amusing, a few painful.”<sup>44</sup> Though she emphasizes that transphobia has not defined her professional life, the litany of discriminations she encountered demonstrates its prevalence, and the repeated exclusions by the US military in particular betray the limits of her acceptance within the hegemonic discourse of whiteness and US imperialism. Finally, Jorgensen turns to the personal incident, which is sparked not by a world-famous doctor or the US military, but by an overheard conversation between two young women who had seen her perform—“trivial perhaps,” she writes, “though significant to me.”<sup>45</sup> She eavesdrops:

*Always a dangerous pursuit, it is one which I admit finding irresistible, particularly when I am the subject of discussion.*

*“Christine Jorgensen is a shock!”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“Well, I mean she is. I thought she was going to look—well, you know, different. But she’s as feminine as we are. Wears clothes like a fashion model. I read someplace she was engaged or married, or something. I mean do you think it’s possible?”*

*“Anything’s possible, but I wonder what she’s really like, personally?”*

*What is she really like—personally? It was a question that echoed in my mind. That, coupled with the medical contribution of my “case,” and the stir my professional aspirations continued to cause everywhere, led me to review the events and people who had contributed so heavily, both positively and negatively, to my whole existence. For the first time in many years, I read through the thousands of words printed about me in the newspapers, periodicals, journals, and scandal magazines. I tried to regard it all as objectively as possible, and was made aware again that much of the information about the “Christine Jorgensen Case” was confusing, often biased, or made sensational and bizarre by the press. I thought it small wonder that I have been*



*regarded, occasionally, with suspicion and mystery over the years, although there had been perhaps thirty cases of sex conversion on record before mine. [...]*

*Another surprising fact was brought to my attention during this critical survey, one that hadn't occurred to me before. Never once, in all those acres of newsprint, had I been asked about my faiths and beliefs, both of which had played important roles in my life. What I slept in, apparently, was considered more important than what I believed in.<sup>46</sup>*

Christine Jorgensen here forcefully asserts her self, her irreducible reality as a person, against the hollow and reductive artifice of the “Christine Jorgensen Case,” and frames the genesis of her *Personal Autobiography* as a corrective to that objectification. The final line quoted above is a scathing indictment of not only the fetishizing gaze directed at her transsexual identity, but also of the condescending misogyny which refuses to acknowledge women’s intellectual and spiritual interiority. Jorgensen’s preface, by the inclusion of this overheard question, thus reframes both the medical and journalistic approaches to her “case” as incomplete, not satisfying to the curiosity of these overheard women—and uses that curiosity to invite us, as readers, to listen to her own, more complete, telling of her story: “my life simply as a woman, and as a human being.”<sup>47</sup>

Let us return now to “Dangerous Stories,” as the author/narrator finds the genesis of her book in the frustration of this same limited and restrictive genre of trans stories which Christine Jorgensen is at once challenging and contributing to. “Looking at the ivory face of the trans lady on the TV,” the author/narrator of *Fierce Femmes* writes:

*I decided then and there that someone had to write us girls a dangerous story: a transgender memoir, but not like most of the 11, 378 transgender memoirs out there, which are just regurgitations of the same old story that makes us boring and dead and safe to read about. I wanted something kick-ass and intense with hot sex and gang violence and maybe zombies and lots of magic.*

*Which is, you know, pretty much my life, right? So I thought I'd give writing a try.<sup>48</sup>*

Thom here, with characteristically disarming ease, broadens the scope of ‘safe’ and ‘dangerous’ stories to address the question of fictionality itself. The nonfiction autobiography form, with its legacy of being read as medical or scientific testimony, obfuscates the magical elements of life—which include the affective, the spiritual, the repressed and the incomprehensible—and in doing so not only flattens the story but dulls its power to entertain and engage readers. Similarly, though *The Well of Loneliness* is not a “transgender memoir,” its overt novelistic realist fictionality does all of the above and, in addition, does so in an even more ideologically controlled framework for the lack of a testifying “I.” Considering Havelock Ellis’ “Commentary” at the inception of *The Well*—which is quite short compared to Benjamin’s in Jorgensen’s autobiography—we can see the necessity of such fictionality in threading the ideological and legal needle in England in 1928. Describing *The Well* as “the first English novel which presents, in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us to-day,” Ellis is, like Benjamin four decades later, quite satisfied to vouch for the accuracy of a story that conforms to his theoretical model.<sup>49</sup> Unlike Jorgensen’s autobiography, however, John Radclyffe Hall’s novel hews so closely to Ellis’ favored category of “sexual inversion” because it is also Hall’s favored category, and as a work of fiction, it is explicitly written to confirm and uphold the medical theory. This is not to suggest that *The Well* is dishonest, or that it fails to reflect Hall’s own experience. Rather, it is perhaps the only way that the story Hall wishes to tell, in the repressive cultural and legal moment of its publication, could be made manifest—Ellis testifies that “the poignant situations which thus arise [from inversion] are here set forth so vividly, and yet with such complete absence of offence, that we must place Radclyffe Hall’s book on a high level of distinction.”<sup>50</sup> How else could such irreconcilable dictates as “so vividly, and yet with such complete absence of offence,”

conceivably be met but with a fictional story? Indeed, the only prefacing of *The Well* we get from its author is the boilerplate disclaimer of fictionality, its origins as a defense against libel suits still a very active function here, insisting that “all the characters in this book are purely imaginary.”<sup>51</sup> Specifically, the author is compelled to mention that “a motor ambulance unit of British women drivers did very fine service upon the Allied front in France during the later months of the war [World War I], but although the unit mentioned in this book, of which Stephen Gordon becomes a member, operates in much the same area, it has never had any existence save in the author’s imagination.”<sup>52</sup> Besides emphasizing the nationalism whose sacredness is so central for Stephen, and we assume for Hall, that the nonfictional heroism of this ambulance unit must be affirmed, this bizarre fictional doubling of the unit makes clear the absolute legal and cultural demand for the plausible deniability of fiction. Nor is this fictionality a mere compromise, but rather core to the novel’s form and project, relying on what Catherine Gallagher, in her 2006 chapter “The Rise of Fictionality,” describes as “that apparent paradox—that readers attach themselves to characters because of, not despite, their fictionality.”<sup>53</sup> Still, the strict formal confines of realism and the conservative and imperial entanglements of the novelistic form leave the fictionality of *The Well* quite literally a century behind the insistently indeterminate and magical “confabulosity” of *Fierce Femmes*.

“Dangerous Stories” concludes with a broken TV—which will play a significant role in our discussion of the book’s narrative structure—but not because the author/narrator indulges her “hot spiky anger” and kicks through the screen, as she feels the urge to do:

*And I would have done it too. It was my boyfriend’s television, and he’s got a good job and everything. And I could have said my foot slipped.*

*But ultimately, I just couldn’t. Because at the end of the day, she’s still my sister, you know? And as much as I don’t like her or am jealous or whatever, I still feel the need to keep the*

*sister love flame burning inside my heart. I don't want to become one of those bitter old activist types who has to hate everything.*

*So instead of kicking, I blew a kiss at the TV. A spark jumped from my lips, skipped off my palm, and darted through the air to touch down gently on a close-up of her face. The screen exploded in a glorious symphony of electricity and shattering glass, and a thousand razor shards flew through the air and turned into crimson butterflies that danced through the room on their way out the window.<sup>54</sup>*

This remarkable image of productive and beautiful destruction profoundly captures the shattering of the homogenizing 20<sup>th</sup> century category of transsexuality and the return of what Sandy Stone called the “emergent polyvocalities of lived experience.”<sup>55</sup> It is a moment, which, by its magicity, disrupts the factual imperative of medical discourses and by extension the entire hegemony of white-supremacist, normative ideology over the meaning of “trans.” The overwhelming, screen-filling presence of the white trans celebrity and her “same old story” is transformed, by the kiss of “sister love,” into a thousand distinct stories, “a thousand razor shards”—every one of them dangerous.

## II. “Drawing a Map of Myself in the Stars”<sup>56</sup> *Narrative Voice and Structure*

True to their drastically differing forms, the three stories of gender transition we are considering take radically different approaches to the voice and structure of their narratives. Yet as published stories of gender transition, they have in common many of the same pressures and problems to navigate, and their authors certainly share an insistence on telling them regardless. “The act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it,” according to Susan Lanser in the introduction to her 1992 book *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, “—like my own act of writing a scholarly book and seeking to publish it—is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence.”<sup>57</sup> The ways in which these three books construct that discursive authority reflect with some neatness

the three types of narrative voice which Lanser analyzes in *Fictions of Authority*: the authorial, the personal, and the communal. These approaches to narrative voice are of course intimately tied to the genre and form of each book—the authorial voice is a key feature of the realist novel, even “fiction in the personal voice is usually formally indistinguishable from autobiography,” and Thom’s genre-defying work, whose narrator speaks directly to “trans girls like you and me” and frequently cedes narrative authority to other characters, builds on what Lanser calls the communal voice, “a practice in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community.”<sup>58</sup> In each case, the authors find ways to disrupt or subvert the expectations of genre and form, and to use their distinct narrative voices to express the unique stories they tell.

*The Well of Loneliness*, which opens with the birth of the protagonist, Stephen Gordon, at “the country seat of the Gordons of Bramley,” enthusiastically embraces, for the most part, a bildungsroman structure in a realist novel form, barely registering the impact of the modernism contemporaneously taking the English literary world by storm—as Meredith Miller notes, “at the moment when high modernism staged its radical formal expression of the subjective turn, queer narrative reached at least halfway back towards the established forms of nineteenth-century realism.”<sup>59</sup> Its omniscient, third-person narrator reaches freely into the minds of its characters and engages in the kind of maxim-giving, commentary and “extrarepresentational acts” that Lanser considers the hallmarks of “overt authoriality.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, by the very nature of the novel’s opening, in which Stephen’s parents dream of and plan for the birth of a son, and her<sup>61</sup> father insists on keeping the name ‘Stephen,’ we the readers are made explicitly aware of the central element of the narrative, one which remains obscured and difficult to accept for the characters

themselves—“the grammar,” as Jay Prosser puts it, “upon which the entire plot of *The Well* is predicated: Stephen should have been male.”<sup>62</sup> This sense of denied manhood accompanies Stephen through her youth, as she dresses up as a young Horatio Nelson and takes part in a breathlessly joyful fox-hunt with her father, through to her young adulthood, as first her companionship with Martin Hallam and then her infatuation with Angela Crossby are undermined and frustrated by the fact that Stephen is, in Angela’s words, “what you obviously are.”<sup>63</sup> Our awareness of the expectations of the genre and our access to the narrator’s omniscient knowledge of Stephen’s situation prime us to react with empathy and indignation to Stephen’s suffering and her exclusion from the role which she is so clearly, narratively, meant to play.

In the haunting conclusion of *The Well*, when its stubborn realism finally gives way and Stephen is surrounded and possessed by the ghosts of other ‘inverts’ she has known, the voices of those ghosts merge with Stephen’s and with the narrator’s:

*And now there was only one voice, one demand; her own voice into which those millions had entered. A voice like the awful, deep rolling of thunder; a demand like the gathering together of great waters. A terrifying voice that made her ears throb, that made her brain throb, that shook her very entrails, until she must stagger and all but fall beneath this appalling burden of sound that strangled her in its will to be uttered.*

*‘God,’ she gasped, ‘we believe; we have told You we believe . . . We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!’<sup>64</sup>*

This remarkable climax is by far the most formally innovative and experimental moment in a novel that otherwise hews closely to the conventions and expectations of formal realism. This final moment, when the authorial voice which has been so carefully curated throughout slips into alignment with Stephen’s in the explicit project of demanding “the right to our existence,” and when its realism is so jarringly upended by the gothic intrusion of the ghosts, animates and illuminates the function of the novel’s overarching voice and structure by sharp contrast. *The*

*Well* functions as a kind of frustrated bildungsroman, whose narrative failure to climax with the resolution of the love story is reflected in the collapse of the realist form and the authorial voice, sharpening into a final, externally directed, plea against the injustice of Stephen's exclusion from manhood and the cruel repression of 'sexual inverts.' This infamous "implausible ending in which Stephen 'nobly' turns Mary over to a man," in the words of Esther Newton, can be a source of frustration to us as feminist readers, as can much of the novel's characterization of its women, but the impact of this tragic and isolated ending serves to highlight the empathic identification we have formed with Stephen through the familiar subject-making process of the bildungsroman.<sup>65</sup> Meredith Miller writes of Stephen that "her experiences in war, family exile, and various love affairs all provide the classic structure of Bildung, in which a radically continuous subject develops against a shifting array of encounters with 'the world' that form the narrative substrate of Stephen's emerging identity."<sup>66</sup> By disrupting that structure and in the same moment collapsing, though not entirely eliminating, the distinction between Stephen's voice and the authorial narrator's, 'the world' itself, its inadequacy and injustice, are called to account for Stephen's tragedy—and so, by extension, are we as the readers, thereby animating the novel's activist imperative.

This political potential of what Catherine Gallagher terms "characters' peculiar affective force" is central to the role of the realist novel in English-language literature, but Gallagher elucidates many of the limitations inherent to the form, particularly in the context of third-person narratorial omniscience, writing that "novelistic characters seem already penetrated in the very act of their construal [...] we seem to encounter something with the layers of a person but without the usual epistemological constraints on our knowledge."<sup>67</sup> The innate reductivity of a form that thus subjects the interiority of its characters to the intrusion of an authorial narrator

granted, in Lanser's words, "the demands and powers of divinity itself, trusted at once to know all and to judge aright," is prone to reproducing patriarchal forms of objectification—and in a political context often dehumanizes the very people for whom it intends to generate empathy.<sup>68</sup> It is a testament to John Radclyffe Hall's skill as a novelist that the Stephen Gordon we encounter in *The Well* does feel so alive and so human, but many of its other characters, notably Angela Crossby and Mary Llewellyn, suffer from reductive characterization, exacerbated by the narrator's ability to reach into their heads and inform us that for Angela, "Stephen was becoming a kind of strong drug, a kind of anodyne against boredom," or that Mary "discovered that at heart she was neither so courageous nor so defiant as she had imagined, that like many another woman before her, she was well content to feel herself protected."<sup>69</sup> The sexist portrayal of Stephen's lovers conforms to the novel's realist project of generating empathy for Stephen specifically as a man, albeit in the elegiac mode which Jay Prosser describes as "what ought to have been—the mood of transsexual loss," and furthermore as an aristocratic British man for whom whiteness, nationalism, and landed privilege are inextricable from manhood.<sup>70</sup> Yet the novel's success lies in communicating Stephen's specific joys and pains and building such strong empathetic identification with her, even at the expense of the women and girls in the novel, as when the narrator addresses us in the place of a very young Stephen, who has just been belittled and compared to the despised neighbor Violet Antrim while riding in the fox-hunt, a crucial moment of gender euphoria and masculine embodiment tainted: "She had fat, wobbly legs too, just like a rag doll—and you, Stephen, had been compared to Violet! Ridiculous of course, and yet all of a sudden you felt less impressive in your fine riding breeches. You felt—well, not foolish exactly, but self-conscious—not quite at your ease, a little bit wrong. It was almost as though you were playing at young Nelson again, were only pretending."<sup>71</sup> The power of *The Well* to generate



empathy for its trans protagonist has endured, and it continues to move and captivate new readers today. Yet the narrative tools it uses to do so, much like the sexological discourse which Hall embraced, carry their own burdensome legacy and limitations.

As will hopefully be clear from section one, the narrative tools of autobiography in a trans context similarly bear a great deal of baggage, deriving in large part from autobiography's central role in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ouroboros of medical gatekeeping—the immense pressure of the knowledge, for trans people seeking treatment, that “as the past's recounting is compelled by the knowledge that the future of one's sex is to be determined by what one has to say for oneself, there has probably never been so much at stake in oral autobiography [...] In effect, to be transsexual, the subject must be a skilled narrator of his or her own life,” as Jay Prosser writes.<sup>72</sup> Christine Jorgensen is certainly one such skilled narrator, and she narrates her autobiography with confidence as “the envisioning, knowing ‘I,’” always thoughtfully attuned to the entire universe of her awareness at the moment of writing in the 1960s, from the impact of historical events on her childhood to the particular misrepresentations and misunderstandings of her depiction in the press.<sup>73</sup> She writes, in other words, as an autobiographer *par excellence*—in her narration, to borrow Prosser's words, “the desultoriness of experience acquires chronology, succession, progression—even causation; existence, an author.”<sup>74</sup> It is a powerful form for a woman who so steadfastly insisted on authoring her own identity—indeed, in the narrative we find Christine purchasing and taking ethinyl estradiol by herself and defending her desire for transition against the questioning of Dr. Joe Angelo long before any physician validates for her the concept of transsexuality.<sup>75</sup> Jorgensen's narration produces the “gendered coherence” that Prosser considers as “inextricable from the narrative coherence of the genre,” bringing together episodes from childhood, adolescence, and her pre-transition adulthood in continuous

womanhood, but it also troubles in some ways Prosser's assertion that "all life events in the autobiographies seem to lead toward the *telos* of the sex-changed self."<sup>76</sup> Her recounting of her childhood brings together her persistent sense of gendered difference and moments of cruel repression, as in one particularly painful moment when a young Christine is mocked and humiliated by her teacher for keeping a piece of needlework in her desk, but also emphasizes elements like her grandma's support for her childhood expressions of femininity, and the "spirit of rebellion," the strength of will, which at the age of four or five led a little Christine to walk all the way home from the grocery store after being denied candy.<sup>77</sup> Most fundamentally, transition in Jorgensen's *Personal Autobiography* is neither sudden nor climactic, but a gradual process which actually concludes by the midpoint of the book—at which point the highly unique and specific experience of public scrutiny, fame and infamy takes the narrative focus, as Jorgensen writes through the decade and a half after her return from Denmark. There is no specific moment of transition in Jorgensen's narrative, and certainly not one centered on genital surgery, like that which Sandy Stone observes in Jan Morris' 1974 *Conundrum*, among others.<sup>78</sup> Transition is rather a multi-year journey, one that culminates, if anything, in the writing of her coming-out letter home to her family: "So, you see," she writes, "the task [of medical transition] was not so difficult at that; not nearly so much so as this letter is for me to write."<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, if any moment emerges in the narrative as one of rupture and radical, instant transformation, it is the arrival, after her coming-out to family and while still undergoing treatment in Denmark, of a reporter bearing a news dispatch announcing to the world: "BRONX GI BECOMES A WOMAN."<sup>80</sup> She describes, in painfully evocative language, that moment:

*It was all so unreal, like the moment of receiving a mortal blow, and I closed my eyes hoping I could shut out the nightmare. In the first shock-waves, the world seemed to disintegrate around me with sickening finality. I know at first I felt fear for the safety of my family and horror at the disclosure of an intimate and highly personal event in my life, but the initial shock was*

*replaced by a towering rage. I was livid with anger and I don't hesitate to admit it. To me, that message was a symbol of a brutal and cruel betrayal. A lifetime of agonizing unhappiness, two years of medical treatment and two surgical operations had been telescoped into a couple of succinct lines on a telegraph form, and I knew without being told that it would go far beyond that hospital room. [...]*

*Finally, my fury began to subside and I turned to the young woman beside me. "Who did this unforgivable thing?" I asked.*

*She answered me quietly and sympathetically. "I truly don't know," she said. "You'll have to prepare yourself, Miss Jorgensen. Tomorrow's newspapers will carry this story in banner headlines. I'm a reporter for Information. Will you give me an interview?"<sup>81</sup>*

The textual violence that the press unleashes on Christine Jorgensen, the very “telescoping” which she has set out with her *Personal Autobiography* to correct, is reinscribed as the turning point of her narrative. In a brilliant subversion of genre expectation, the very same salacious curiosity that made her life an object of public interest, and that presumably led more than a few readers to her autobiography, as its cover was so clearly designed to do, intrudes into and transforms the story just at the moment when such readers might expect medical details, or an affirmation of the stability of patriarchal gender constructs—“an audience,” Prosser suggests, “that is more than likely drawn to reading in expectation precisely of such scenes.”<sup>82</sup> Instead, they find themselves—we find ourselves, by the very fact of our interest in this intimate, exposed moment—leering and intruding, and in an instant the story shifts from Christine’s struggle for womanhood to society’s reaction to her womanhood, which is in fact already so simply real that the attention and controversy it generates takes on an air of absurdity. Rather than provide what Prosser calls “the ‘pain’ of the classic transsexual story,” which “in its very telling threatens to subvert the transsexual as authorial subject and transform him or her into absolute other for the reader’s horror and/or fascination,” the pain on which the narrative of Jorgensen’s autobiography pivots is exactly that process of othering itself, the disrespectful gaze of sensationalism made vividly visible. Even readers who have come into the story with such a perspective are thus

invited to remove the scales from their eyes, see Christine Jorgensen “simply as a woman, and as a human being,” and to hear the story she is really telling: “I found the oldest gift of heaven—to be myself.”<sup>83</sup>

The narrative voice employed by Kai Cheng Thom in *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* is, as we have seen from the opening section, quite consciously designed as a counterpoint to the personal, autobiographical voice that speaks to the non-trans audience. When she asks, in “Dangerous Stories,” “Where are those kinds of stories about trans girls like you and me?” she establishes a narrative authority based on shared community, and a voice of dialogue that positions the reader within that community. Rather than, in Lanser’s words, “speak both for and as an entire community,” *Fierce Femmes*’ author/narrator develops a voice at once personal and communal, sometimes addressing the reader, sometimes her sister in the regular epistolary interludes, and sometimes ceding narrative authority entirely to the multiple voices of other femmes on the Street of Miracles in two notable “overheard” sections which take the form of play dialogue.<sup>84</sup> In pursuit of what Lanser describes as “not only structural equality among voices but contexts in which difference is not subordinated to similarity, where voices may be communal and still diverse,” we are able to hear from several other trans women on the Street of Miracles, who engage with their womanhood in diverse ways and who take up radically different positions in the community-shaking debate over how to respond to transphobic and misogynistic violence.<sup>85</sup> The medical and scholarly discourses which have been so front and center in *The Well* and Jorgensen’s autobiography intrude either as violent exploitation, as in the terrifying Dr. Crocodile, or as amusingly disconnected privilege, as in the Social Justice Warriors of the Ivory Tower, who once paid Ivana, one of the femmes in the community, “a hundred bucks just to sit and talk about her life on tape”—“I mostly just made everything up,” she cheerfully admits, “but

it was kind of fun, actually. They're okay types, and they have lots of money."<sup>86</sup> The highest discursive authority belongs here to each and every femme, and even the author/narrator, whose personal voice remains central, not only accepts but celebrates the limits of her epistemological reach.

"This is the story," begins part one of *Fierce Femmes*, titled "Runaway," "of how I became a dangerous girl and the greatest escape artist in the world."<sup>87</sup> In sharp contrast to the aristocratic estate of the Gordons in *The Well* and to the idealized white US immigrant story of the Jorgensens that Christine Jorgensen recounts in the first chapter of her *Personal Autobiography*, "Runaway" opens with "a crooked house in a place called Gloom," a fictionalized North American city on the coast. The description of Gloom that we receive is historical, demonstrating the author/narrator's knowledge and extratextual authority, but in a way that forcefully repudiates the hegemonic narrative of colonialism and its accompanying exclusion of emotional and magical realities from history: Gloom was founded by Indigenous nations, and "for thousands of years they lived in this place without external invasion, until white people came from Europe with guns and diseases and their hearts full of conquest. These white people built a city of stone and glass as a monument to their victory, and because they had won it in so corrupt a fashion, the sky and the ocean have been sad ever since."<sup>88</sup> From this crooked house in the city of Gloom, the author/narrator must escape the story that her parents have laid out for her, a story born of hunger and fearful hope, for "when they [her parents] looked at me and my sister," the author/narrator writes, "even their love was hungry."<sup>89</sup> She ponders that she might have been content to remain stuck in this story of another's creation, "except for two things that threw a monkey wrench into my parents' carefully devised plans: I was always wild at heart, and I wanted to be a girl."<sup>90</sup> Not only does this line throw its own, disarmingly

effortless, monkey wrench into the demand for gender coherence that was so central to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century discourse of transsexuality as to render ‘wanting to be’ virtually unthinkable, but it further sets up the wildness, the refusal to be confined, that drives the book’s form as well as its narrative. As the author/narrator escapes from Gloom to the City of Smoke and Lights, leaving her sister Charity behind in a heartbreaking scene, and “Runaway” comes to an end, the prose narrative shifts first to poetry, deeply intimate looks into the notebook of the author/narrator, and then to a letter to her sister, an epistolary form which will accompany the end of each part, a formal reflection of the distance and the entanglements that make escape and self-determination so messy. In a similar fashion, the distinct and often conflicting perspectives and worldviews of the women of the Street of Miracles, the community that the author/narrator discovers in the City of Smoke and Lights, are highlighted by “Overheard” sections that take the form of play dialogue. These dramatic interludes focus on the conflict within the community over responding to the transphobic and misogynistic violence that constantly intrudes upon the Street of Miracles, and the formation of the ‘Lipstick Lacerators’ to fight back, prompting a police response—notably, both of these sections involve a leader in the community, Valaria the Goddess of War in the first and Kimaya in the second, having their worldviews privately challenged in ways that complicate their narrative role and authority, as when Lucretia (a character who has been something of an antagonist to our author/narrator) poignantly tells the militant Valaria that “the reason things didn’t work out between us is because you loved your imaginary revolution more than you loved me, Valkyrie.”<sup>91</sup> These formal variations underline the diversity of voices and perspectives of the femmes of the Street of Miracles, from which Thom builds relationships and conversations whose richness and honesty are alarmingly effective at making at least this reader burst into tears.

Near the end of *Fierce Femmes*, in part five, titled “Escape,” after our author/narrator has run away from home, found the Street of Miracles and its community of trans women, helped form the Lipstick Lacerators to fight back against transphobic and misogynistic violence, killed a cop to save Lucretia, learned to forgive herself, baked a delicious and redemptive cake, and started dating a rich trans boy named Josh, we encounter a passage with the title “Full Circle:”

“So Josh came home and found his smashed-up TV this afternoon.”<sup>92</sup> We find ourselves suddenly past the moment which has framed the story since the beginning, with a narrator who has suddenly ceased to be, in Prosser’s words, “the subject who knows the end of the story.”<sup>93</sup> Indeed, the very nature of the story is at this moment an open possibility, for in the section just prior, the protagonist has asked Kimaya, matriarch of the Street and founder of the Femme Alliance Building, the critical question on which the whole book hinges: “Kimaya,” she asks, “what do you think the difference is between hunger and love?”<sup>94</sup> The occasion of this question is her new relationship with Josh, a seeming happily-ever-after that mirrors the teleological heterosexual resolution of the bildungsroman, a terrifying and overwhelming dream:

*And then I'll get published and become a super-famous Transgender Writer, and we'll get married and be a Transgender Power Couple, and have Transgender Children and raise them on a cloud of Transgender Happiness™.*

*And the thing is, I want that. I want it so, so bad. So bad I want to put it on a plate and stab it with a fork and stuff it in my mouth and down my throat until I hit that place deep down inside that has never, ever been full.*

*Hence the question: “Kimaya, what do you think the difference is between hunger and love?”*

*She looks up sharply. Takes my hand in hers. Maybe someday I'll play mother to a hundred trans girls of my own.*

*“Darling,” she says quietly, “you are going to do a lot of things in your life. A lot of things you never thought you could. Just like every femme in the world, you have that gift. But you don't have to do anything you don't want to.”*

*“But how can I know what I want?” I say, choking a little bit, because it hurts that she believes so much in me, my goodness, my potential, and I still don't, can't, won't.*

*“Every time I want something, I hurt somebody,” I say so quietly, it comes out like a tiny thread of smoke from between my lips.*

*Kimaya still hears me. Sees me.*

*“Honey, you hurt yourself,” she says, “because everybody around you hurts people and is hurting and that’s just the story you were given. You can’t get stuck in that. Don’t get stuck in any one story, not even your own.*

*“That’s the difference between love and hunger,” she says. “Hunger is a story you get stuck in. Love’s the story that takes you somewhere new.”<sup>95</sup>*

She chooses, after we have come full circle, after we have rejoined the voice who shattered the TV screen into a thousand crimson butterflies to face the unknown, to leave. “I told you,” she reminds us, “from the very beginning, way back at the beginning of the book, that this was the story of how I became the greatest escape artist in the whole goddamn world.”<sup>96</sup> Refusing the happy ending, refusing, indeed, any ending, Thom shows us what it means to choose love over hunger, to escape the confines even of those stories which give us comfort, stability, and acceptance, and to journey someplace new. “Really?” she asks, “You still don’t know why I’m leaving? Honey. It’s because I ran away to find myself, and so that I would never, ever be stuck in a story that someone else wrote for me. Because I said goodbye to my body full of bees and my heart full of ghosts, and now it’s time to fill my body and my heart with something new. I’m putting on my short skirt and my candy-red heels, and I’m flying away to see if I know who I am, what I might still become, so I can find out how far I can get and if I can find my way back. Drawing a map of myself in the stars.”<sup>97</sup>

Conclusion: “Keep the Sister Love Flame Burning”<sup>98</sup>

A novel from 1928, an autobiography from 1967, and a confabulous memoir from 2016—so radically divergent in form and voice, framing and fictionality, and yet what emerges most prominently from the complex story of their differences is the authority they share, an



authority crafted from the narrative tools chosen by each but ultimately deriving, not from any textual feature, but from their authors' unshakeable conviction in their knowledge of themselves, from the radical act of self-authorship which is always, already, the trans condition. Trans stories have been subject to enormous hostility in readership, not least in academia where, in the words of Alexander Eastwood, the "focus on the impossibility of textual integrity, coherence, and legibility is at odds with the transsexual's deep-seated desire to determine how he or she is read."<sup>99</sup> John Radclyffe Hall, Christine Jorgensen, and Kai Cheng Thom have all, as we have seen, deployed their considerable literary talents to produce texts whose coherence and legibility actively guide readers away from such suspicious reading and lead us to engage respectfully with the irreducible personhood of their trans protagonist, author, and author/narrator respectively. Across the century that has passed between the three publications, the continual struggle of trans people to be free has shattered the single story of trans identity into a thousand crimson butterflies—a diversity and polyvocality of experience predicated, on the most fundamental level, on respect for the self-authorship of every trans person. It is this foundation of love, the kiss which explodes the screen, which opens up the infinite possibilities of trans experience. As the author/narrator of *Fierce Femmes*—and, we hope, Kai Cheng Thom herself—promises at the very end of her remarkable book: "I'll write it all: everything we were and are and are trying to become. I'll write for the girls who came before, and the girls who come next. For you and for me, for all of us dangerous girls.

Love,

*Your sister*"<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Betty De Shong Meador, *Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart: Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna*, p. 127.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, the singular they will be used to refer to historical figures whose pronoun usage was unclear or mixed, as well as to contemporary scholars whose pronoun preference I was unable to locate. They/them is used here to avoid making a specific pronoun or gender assignment, and is not meant to indicate any specific non-binary gender identity. In the specific cases of John Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness*, and its protagonist Stephen Gordon, I will use she and her in accordance with Hall's consistent usage, but this is not intended to preclude a trans-masculine identity—in the case of the character of Stephen, a trans-masculine interpretation is the very basis of *The Well's* inclusion in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke*, part IV.

<sup>4</sup> C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation*, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Kai Cheng Thom, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> Thom, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Baker, *Our Three Selves: The Life of Radclyffe Hall*, p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p.157; Baker, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> Leslie Taylor, "'I Made Up My Mind to Get It:' The American Trial of the Well of Loneliness," p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> See the appendix for a selection of covers from various editions of *The Well of Loneliness*.

<sup>13</sup> Jorgensen's own account of how her story came to the attention of the US press is contested by, among others, Susan Stryker, who claims in *Transgender History* that "she herself, denies to the contrary, seems to have first called her story to the attention of the press" (Stryker, 65). Stryker does not provide a specific source for this claim, but I was able to trace it to the sexologists Vern and Bonnie Bullough, whose relationship with Jorgensen is unclear, and who made the claim in a 1998 anthology titled *Current concepts in transgender identity*, edited by Dallas Denny. The claim was repeated in Joanne Meyerowitz's 2004 *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, for which she references Denny's anthology and a personal conversation with Vern Bullough (Meyerowitz, 62, 300). Both Denny and Meyerowitz present the Bulloughs' version of events as unproven. There may well exist substantive evidence for the claim that Jorgensen outed herself to the press, but in the absence of such, I choose to accept Jorgensen's version of her own story. Sources for Denny and Meyerowitz are as follows:

Denny, D. (1998). Black telephones, white refrigerators: Rethinking Christine Jorgensen. In D. Denny (Ed.), *Current concepts in transgender identity*, pp. 35-44. New York: Garland Publishing. Retrieved from <http://dallasdenny.com/Writing/2014/02/16/black-telephones-white-refrigerators-rethinking-christine-jorgensen-1998/> on November 11, 2021.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, Harvard University, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, pp. 65-66; Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography*, p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> Feinberg, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> See the appendix for the cover of the 2000 Cleis Press edition of *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography*.

<sup>17</sup> Prosser, p. 126.

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<sup>18</sup> Jorgensen, p. xv.

<sup>19</sup> Jorgensen, p. xv.

<sup>20</sup> Cover designed by Samantha Garritano, information at <https://www.samantha-garritano.com/>

<sup>21</sup> Trish Salah, cover endorsement. *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* by Kai Cheng Thom, Metonymy, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Thom, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Thom, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Sandy Stone, “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Thom, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Thom, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Thom, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Snorton, p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> John Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, p. 362.

<sup>30</sup> Hall, p. 267.

<sup>31</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Spivak, p. 247.

<sup>33</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>34</sup> Thom, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Prosser, p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> Jorgensen, pp. ix, xii.

<sup>37</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Jorgensen, pp. ix-x.

<sup>39</sup> Jorgensen, pp. ix, xi.

<sup>40</sup> Jorgensen, p. xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Jorgensen, p. xiii.

<sup>42</sup> Jorgensen, p. xiii.

<sup>43</sup> Jorgensen, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Jorgensen, p. xiv.

<sup>45</sup> Jorgensen, p. xv.

<sup>46</sup> Jorgensen, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>47</sup> Jorgensen, p. xv.

<sup>48</sup> Thom, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Hall, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Hall, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Hall, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Hall, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," p. 351.

<sup>54</sup> Thom, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Stone, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> Thom, p. 186.

<sup>57</sup> Lanser, p. 7

<sup>58</sup> Lanser, pp. 19-20; Thom, p. 1; Lanser, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> Meredith Miller, "Lesbian, Gay and Trans Bildungsromane," p. 244.

<sup>60</sup> Lanser, p. 17.

<sup>61</sup> See note 2 regarding pronoun usage.

<sup>62</sup> Prosser, p. 158.

<sup>63</sup> Hall, p. 149.

<sup>64</sup> Hall, p. 437.

<sup>65</sup> Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," p. 293.

<sup>66</sup> Miller, p. 246.

<sup>67</sup> Gallagher, p. 356.

<sup>68</sup> Lanser, p. 85.

<sup>69</sup> Hall, pp. 147, 420.

<sup>70</sup> Prosser, pp. 158-159.

<sup>71</sup> Hall, p. 41.

<sup>72</sup> Prosser, p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> Prosser, p. 117.

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<sup>74</sup> Prosser, p. 116.

<sup>75</sup> Jorgensen, pp. 77-79, 83-84.

<sup>76</sup> Prosser, p. 116.

<sup>77</sup> Jorgensen, p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Stone, p. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Jorgensen, p. 113.

<sup>80</sup> Jorgensen, p. 125.

<sup>81</sup> Jorgensen, pp. 125-126.

<sup>82</sup> Prosser, p. 129.

<sup>83</sup> Jorgensen, pp. xv, 300.

<sup>84</sup> Lanser, p. 254.

<sup>85</sup> Lanser, p. 254.

<sup>86</sup> Thom, pp. 57-59, 102.

<sup>87</sup> Thom, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> Thom, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Thom, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Thom, pp. 8-9.

<sup>91</sup> Thom, p. 100.

<sup>92</sup> Thom, p. 184.

<sup>93</sup> Prosser, p. 117.

<sup>94</sup> Thom, p. 177.

<sup>95</sup> Thom, pp. 179-180.

<sup>96</sup> Thom, p. 185.

<sup>97</sup> Thom, pp. 185-186.

<sup>98</sup> Thom, p. 4.

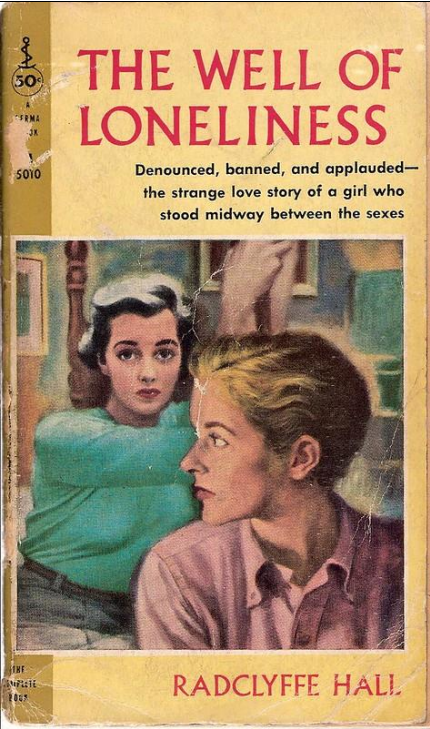
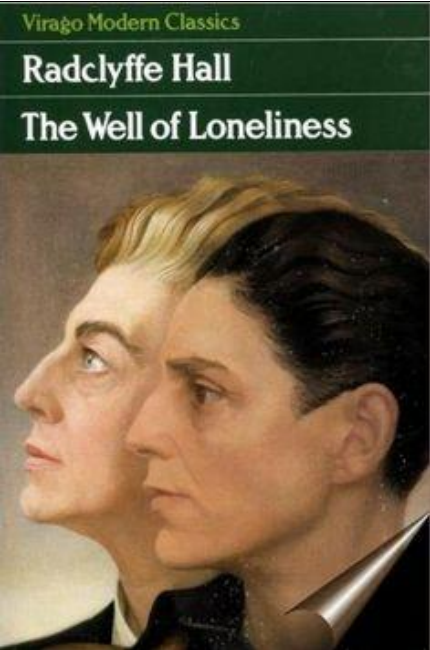
<sup>99</sup> Alexander Eastwood, "How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read? Notes toward a Trans Literary History," p. 593.

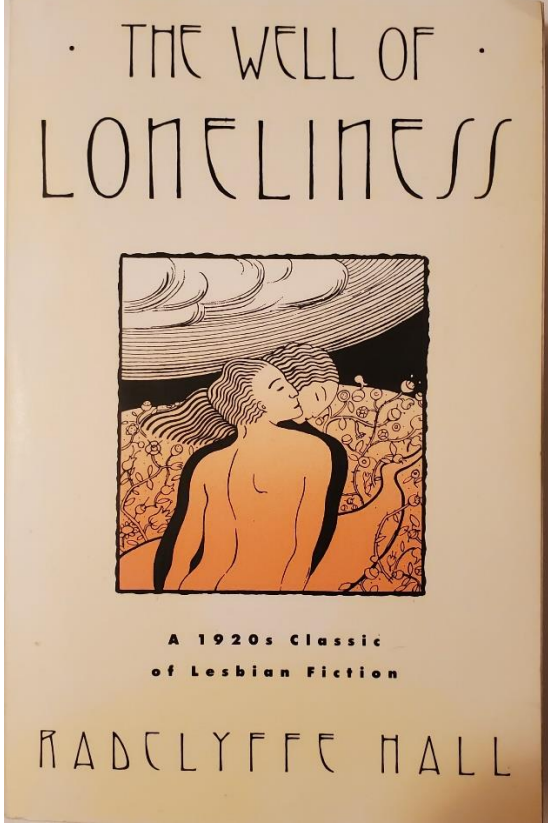
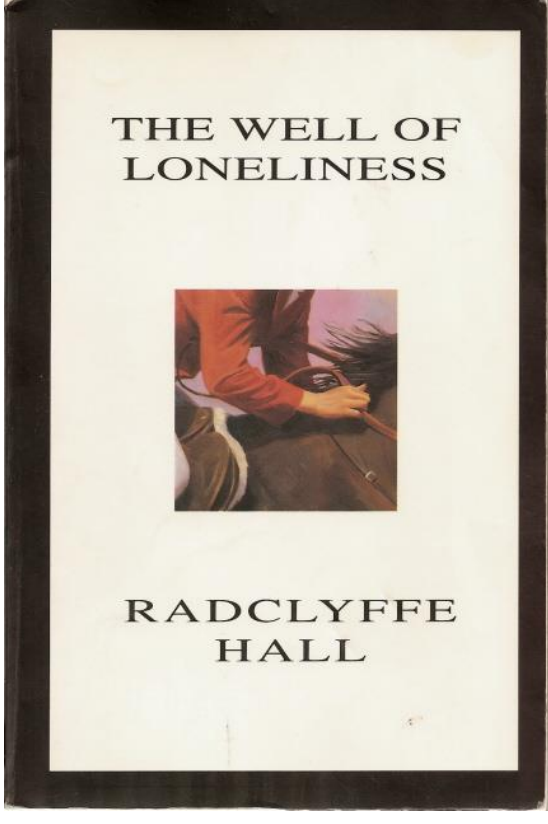
<sup>100</sup> Thom, p. 188.

### Acknowledgements

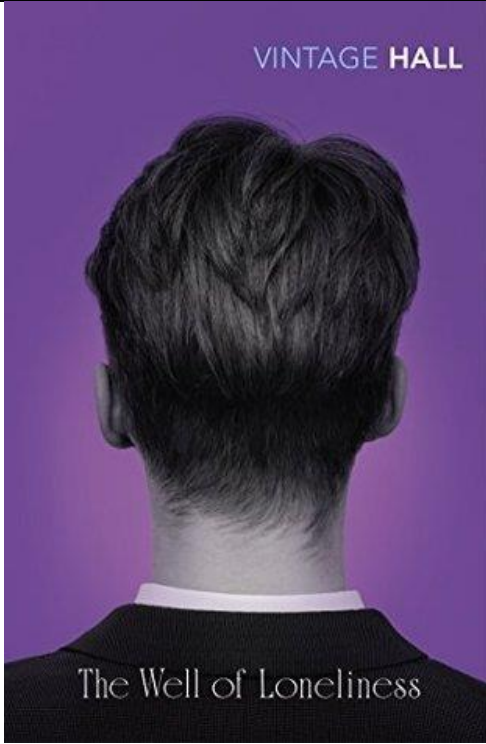
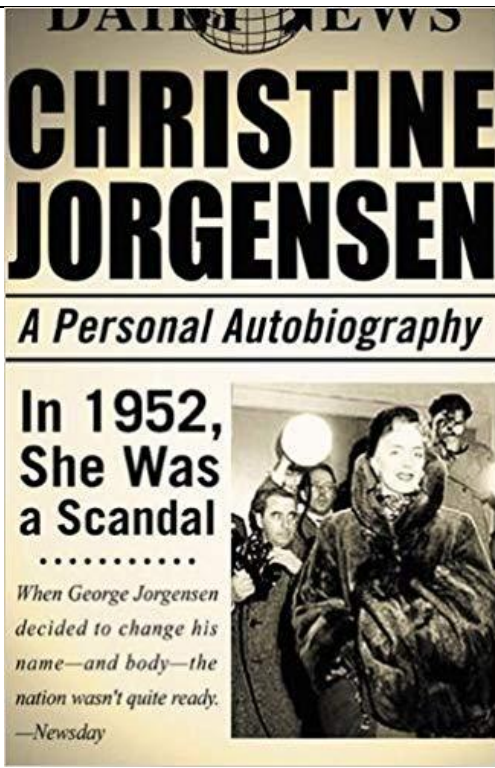
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## Appendix: Additional Cover Images

<p><i>The Well of Loneliness:</i></p> 	<p>Year: 1959</p> <p>Publisher: Pocket Books, division of Simon and Schuster</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13500537-the-well-of-loneliness">https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13500537-the-well-of-loneliness</a></p> <p>Retrieved on: November 10, 2021</p>
	<p>Year: 1990</p> <p>Publisher: Virago Press</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11178239-the-well-of-loneliness">https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11178239-the-well-of-loneliness</a></p> <p>Retrieved on: November 10, 2021</p>

	<p>Year: 1990</p> <p>Publisher: Anchor Books, division of Random House</p> <p>Source: Image taken by author of author's own copy</p> <p>Taken on: November 10, 2021</p>
	<p>Year: 1993</p> <p>Publisher: Quality Paperback Book Club</p> <p>Source: <a href="https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/179011.The_Well_of_Loneliness">https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/179011.The_Well_of_Loneliness</a></p> <p>Retrieved on: November 10, 2021</p>



	<p>Year: 2015</p> <p>Publisher: Vintage Books, division of Random House</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25859591-the-well-of-loneliness">https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25859591-the-well-of-loneliness</a></p> <p>Retrieved on: November 10, 2021</p>
<p><i>Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography:</i></p>	
	<p>Year: 2000</p> <p>Publisher: Cleis Press</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/125723.Christine_Jorgensen">https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/125723.Christine_Jorgensen</a></p> <p>Retrieved on: November 10, 2021</p>

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