

**Good Girls and Tough Guys, Prigs and Pornographers:
Constructions of Gender and Sexuality in Recent and Contemporary
Australian Fiction**

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP AND SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines in detail the ways in which gender and, as a corollary, sexuality are represented in a selection of contemporary Australian fiction. It encompasses both short stories and novels across a range of genres. The texts I have chosen invite a focus both on the construction of gender in relation to characterisation, and, in turn, on how these constructions can be read as conforming to, or subverting, gender stereotypes—particularly with regard to expressions of sexuality. This thesis comprises analyses of *The Mint Lawn* (1991) by Gillian Mears, *Praise* (1992) by Andrew McGahan, the short story collection *Suck My Toes* (1994) by Fiona McGregor, *Loaded* (1995) by Christos Tsiolkas, *The River Ophelia* (1995) by Justine Ettler, *Eat Me* (1996) by Linda Jaivin, *Camille's Bread* (1996) by Amanda Lohrey, *Steam Pigs* (1997) by Melissa Lucashenko, *The Pillow Fight* (1998) by Matthew Condon, *Pants on Fire* (2000) by Maggie Alderson, *The Architect* (2000) by Jillian Watkinson, *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2003) by Nikki Gemmell, *Taming the Beast* (2004) by Emily Maguire, *Rohypnol* (2007) by Andrew Hutchinson, Fiona McGregor's *Indelible Ink* (2010), Josephine Rowe's short story collection *How a Moth Becomes a Boat* (2010) and Krissy Kneen's collection *Triptych* (2011), as well as the short stories "Victoria Shepworth's Big Night Out" by Jessica Adams and Rachel Treasure's "From Tarot to Tractors" from the *Girls' Night In* collection (2010), edited by Jessica Adams.

The ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed in the novels and short fiction focused on here are evidence of the limited ways we understand, represent and conform to gender. I address these limitations through an explicitly feminist framework that identifies and critiques the power dynamics that dictate constructions of gender and sexual relationships. I draw evidence from feminist and literary theory, as well as contemporaneous publications that engage with feminism and/or discussions of gender in Australia—such as news sources and recent cultural or sociological research, but also non-academic sources such as online social media, feminist media, and blogs. These popular sources frame

contemporary attitudes towards gender in Australia, bringing into question the extent to which Australia can be considered non-discriminatory, liberal or progressive with regard to gender and sexuality. Feminism allows for a consideration of the ways in which hegemonic and patriarchal norms are limited and limiting for women and men. This thesis explicitly critiques heteronormative expectations with regard to gender roles and sexuality.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that while fiction does not simply mirror its cultural context, it certainly explores the concerns and norms of the culture in which it is produced. I address contemporary trends in the ways gender is discussed in Australia and consider discussions surrounding the rise of post-feminism, the 'masculinity crisis', evidence of a 'rape culture', violence and sexual taboos. I argue that the fiction addressed in this thesis uses these cultural norms in its constructions of gendered characters, but most seem to rely on these uncritically or even unconsciously. The adherence to cultural norms both signifies their entrenchment and indicates that alternatives are elusive, since they are elusive even in fiction. I argue that attempts to subvert gendered norms by interrogating or breaking dichotomous expectations of gender in characters' traits or actions, allow us to (re)consider the ways in which such norms demarcate and constrain how we understand gender and sexuality in Australia.

INTRODUCTION – GOOD GIRLS AND TOUGH GUYS, PRIGS AND PORNOGRAPHERS

[W]e are seized at that fragile spot of our subjectivity where our collapsed defences reveal, beneath the appearances of a fortified castle, a flayed skin; neither inside nor outside, the wounding exterior turning into an abominable interior, war bordering on putrescence, while social and family rigidity, that beautiful mask, crumbles within the beloved abomination of innocent vice. A universe of borders, seesaws, fragile and mingled identities, wanderings of the subject and its objects, fears and struggles, abjections and lyricisms. At the turning point between social and asocial, familial and delinquent, feminine and masculine, fondness and murder. (Kristeva, *Powers* 135)

Fiction offers a means for writers to represent and for readers to interpret elements of our cultural context. Geir Farnes asserts that fiction is constructed to resemble the “real world” and the actions that occur in the fiction can “provide insight into the patterns of the real world, conveying information on reality in this indirect way” (41). Xavier Pons concurs, stating, “Literature is never a mere reflection of the society in which it is produced, but it can be expected to address the preoccupations of that society, to reproduce or oppose its received ideas, to resonate with echoes of the battles fought on non-literary fronts” (97). While this cultural context influences its production, literature also allows for the exploration of alternatives within a clearly demarcated framework of non-consequence, and is therefore the ideal location from which to challenge constrictive gender norms. This thesis examines fiction that purports to challenge conservative representations of gender and sexuality. It will argue that this challenge is often manifest in explicit or confronting representations of (sexual) behaviour, yet despite contesting sexual stereotypes, the texts nonetheless fail to

confront gendered stereotypes and archetypes and are thus ultimately limiting and limited in the extent to which they can be understood as real subversions of prevailing heteronormative and patriarchal constructions of gender. The adherence to cultural norms both signifies their entrenchment and indicates that alternatives are elusive, since they are elusive even in fiction. Whenever there is a reliance on conventional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, heteronormative constructions of sexuality result.

I will demonstrate the ways in which attempts to deviate from or challenge heteronormative stereotypes of gender and, as a corollary, sexuality evident in selected texts are predominantly unsuccessful, and I will indicate the normative if not conservative attitudes that shape such representations; however, this thesis also discusses texts that, I argue, construct viable alternatives through their disruption of heteronorms. I question the extent to which representations rely on hegemonic and patriarchal constructions of characters and the extent to which alternatives to heteronormative sexualities are trialed. This thesis will examine the role of cliché, and the acceptance of difference, subjection, marginality and deviance in relation to particular texts. I will also interrogate stereotypical and other essentialist constructions of gender manifested in character constructions, along with representations that do not offer ways to exist outside expected norms. Whether or not these options are represented as positive, negative, or viable alternatives will also be discussed. I argue that conservatism with regard to gender roles, and ambivalence, apathy, or anger towards feminist attitudes, are evident in fiction published across the past two decades, and that these attitudes resonate within their cultural context.

My analysis addresses a selection of Australian fiction published between 1991 and 2011, when this project began. The beginning of the 1990s is of particular interest because of the publication of eminent theoretical texts—namely *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler, and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—which have had

significant influence on discussions of gender and sexuality during the period discussed.¹ The dissertation comprises analyses of the following texts: *The Mint Lawn* (1991) by Gillian Mears, *Praise* (1992) by Andrew McGahan, the short story collection *Suck My Toes* (1994) by Fiona McGregor, *Loaded* (1995) by Christos Tsiolkas, *The River Ophelia* (1995) by Justine Ettler, *Eat Me* (1996) by Linda Jaivin, *Camille's Bread* (1996) by Amanda Lohrey, *Steam Pigs* (1997) by Melissa Lucashenko, *The Pillow Fight* (1998) by Matthew Condon, *Pants on Fire* (2000) by Maggie Alderson, *The Architect* (2000) by Jillian Watkinson, *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2003) by Nikki Gemmell, *Taming the Beast* (2004) by Emily Maguire, *Rohypnol* (2007) by Andrew Hutchinson, Fiona McGregor's *Indelible Ink* (2010), Josephine Rowe's short story collection *How a Moth Becomes a Boat* (2010) and Krissy Kneen's collection *Triptych* (2011), as well as the short stories "Victoria Shepworth's Big Night Out" by Jessica Adams and Rachel Treasure's "From Tarot to Tractors" from the *Girls' Night In* collection (2010), edited by Jessica Adams. I have selected these texts because they invite a focus on the construction of gender in relation to characterisation, and, in turn, on how these constructions conform to, or subvert, gender stereotypes—particularly with regard to expressions of sexuality.² A number

¹ I acknowledge that the term 'gender' can be considered problematic, particularly whilst discussing Butler; this will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. I do not use the term 'gender' to argue that there is an explicit distinction between gender and sex, but for its political implications with regard to feminism. As Anne Cranny-Francis argues, the distinction allowed feminists "to articulate the oppression of women under patriarchy" and interrogate that oppression as necessarily social, and as a result ensuring that "Women's oppression could no longer be viewed as a 'natural' result of women's 'natural' inferiority, subservience and masochism." (*Engendered* 18). 'Gender' is useful for its explicit recognition of particular traits related to masculinity and femininity as constructed, and such constructions are the focus of this thesis. The term, and its implications of a necessary removal from 'natural' biology, is also of value for feminist literary analysis of fictional constructions.

² There are more female authors than male authors in this thesis; four are authored by men, while the rest of the texts are women-authored. While this is not an explicit study of women's writing, the feminist approach and discussions of gender throughout have meant that most of the fiction that offers the best examples for this study were written by women. It is, of course, the genders and sexualities of the protagonists and secondary characters that are the focus of this thesis. The genders of these protagonists are more even: there are nine texts which are women-centred, five which feature male protagonists, and the remaining four texts shift focus between protagonists; considering the theoretical position of this thesis, this is an appropriate balance.

of these texts—namely *The Mint Lawn*, *Pants on Fire*, *Rohypnol*, *How a Moth Becomes a Boat* and *Triptych*—have not previously been the focus of substantial literary analysis. Other texts, such as *Suck My Toes*, *Girls' Night In*, *Taming the Beast* and *Eat Me*, have been the focus of other studies that centre on genre, and therefore differ substantially from the ways in which they are studied in this thesis.

I have chosen to focus on representations in Australian literature specifically to interrogate what I consider to be conservative and problematic trends regarding constructions of gender in Australia. I draw evidence from feminist and literary theory, as well as contemporaneous publications that engage with feminism and/or analyses of gender roles in Australia—such as news sources and recent cultural or sociological research, but also non-academic sources such as online social media, feminist media, and blogs. These popular sources, which have largely been absent from previous studies of gender in Australian fiction, frame contemporary attitudes towards feminism in Australia, discussing gains in terms of gender equality and bringing into question the extent to which Australia can be considered non-discriminatory, liberal or progressive with regard to gender and sexuality. I will discuss the influence of neo-conservative post-feminism, evident in both the external sources and the literature included for analysis, on Australian cultural values regarding the expectations of gender roles—especially women's.

For the time period that is the focus of my thesis, limited research is available that focuses on gendered identity from a feminist perspective; hence, my feminist analyses within

Moreover, I wish to distance myself from making totalising statements about the differences between 'women's writing' and 'men's writing' or suggesting that the gender of the author affects how they construct gender, particularly because a main argument of this thesis is *against* a definitive idea of gendered norms. Throughout this study, I do not refer substantially to the gender or sexuality of the texts' authors, unless they have formally contextualised their own gender or sexuality in terms of the texts discussed; for example, Nikki Gemmell describes that her novel reflects her own views, and Fiona McGregor explains that *Suck My Toes* is often interpreted in terms of her own sexuality.

this dissertation offer an opportune contribution to contemporary Australian literary study. Moreover, most recent studies that address gender have focused solely on one particular genre of writing, and thus the broader scope of my analysis is also a constructive contribution to the body of scholarly literature in this field. I examine both 'literary' and 'popular' fiction in this dissertation. Anne Cranny-Francis's *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (1990) discusses the value of examining popular fiction for feminist purposes. While the genres she discusses—science fiction, fantasy, utopian fiction, detective fiction and romance—are not included in this thesis, her consideration of frequently denigrated forms demonstrates the value of a feminist interrogation of genre fiction. There are three main reasons for including popular forms: first, 'popular' fiction is no less immune from cultural influence than 'literature', nor can its influence on culture be disregarded; therefore, in order to interpret constructions of gender and sexuality in fiction in relation to cultural constructions, it is necessary to include popular forms. Secondly, it is not only popular or genre fiction that is limited in its experimental capacities of representing gender and sexuality, and literary fiction is, I argue, frequently as restricted/restrictive in its representations of these aspects of characterisation. Thirdly, I am unwilling to draw concrete distinctions between what constitutes popular and literary forms, to favour one form over another, or judge the extent of either's influence, because such distinctions are arbitrary and say little about a text's content—which is, of course, the focus of this thesis. In this thesis I discuss the genres of chick lit, grunge fiction and 'posh porn'; this is not to suggest these are the only genres that include deliberate constructions of gender and sexuality, but they include these elements of characterisation as a necessary part of their generic conventions, rather than these being subsumed into their wider generic conventions. The genres themselves, though, are not the focus; my research centres on the representation of gender in the construction of sex and sexuality, rather than on generic convention itself. The discussions of genre in this thesis attempt to encapsulate a particular pattern of

representation, but the texts discussed are considered individually rather than as broader representations of their genres.

Two texts have been especially influential for the formulation of my analysis:

Engendered Fiction: Analysing Gender in the Production and Reception of Texts (1992) by Cranny-Francis and *Messengers of Eros: Representations of Sex in Australian Writing* (2009) by Pons. *Engendered Fiction* (1992) was consulted early in my research for its examinations of the ways in which women are represented, and I use some of Cranny-Francis's methods to analyse texts that do not rely on a patriarchal discourse of gender (*Engendered* 5). Her text discusses the representation of gender in a range of media including literature, and asserts that the "manipulation" and "antipathy" of patriarchal constructions of femininity and masculinity "ultimately motivates the inequities which pervade textual production and reception practices" (ix). The representations of masculinity and femininity play a part in how a text is "engendered", and how it "engenders" its consumers. These representations "have a powerful normative effect; they establish particular ways of behaving as feminine or masculine, so that any individual who attempts to dress, behave or even think differently faces the social sanction of being, by (patriarchal) definition, abnormal" (2). Along with discussing representations in texts, Cranny-Francis also addresses the particular power structures that influence the construction and interpretation of texts, such as women's and men's unequal access to "textual production" (4). Production necessarily changes the kinds of texts produced, and, as a consequence, alters "the discourses they articulate, as well as the continuing perception of what kind of person produces texts" (4). *Engendered Fiction* offers a mode for reading and analysing pervasive patriarchal (re)constructions of gender that is useful for negotiating one's subjective analysis of these discourses—including, in this thesis, a range of feminist and queer theories. While Cranny-Francis has been helpful for considerations of gender, Pons focuses specifically on representations sex and sexuality in Australian fiction, and his work offers close readings of a range of fiction. Some of the texts he explores and the issues he covers are the same as those discussed in this dissertation, and

elements of his argument are incorporated and/or questioned throughout this thesis. Our theoretical frameworks, however, differ markedly: Pons tends to utilise a psychoanalytic perspective, predominantly Freudian, in his analysis of contemporary culture (48-49). At times, he seems to apply a post-feminist reading to fiction produced in Australia, where, in contrast, I employ an explicitly feminist agenda.

Defining 'Australian literature' is difficult. Constructs based on nationality are problematic because they can assume a singular and uniform experience, and it is hard to discuss the aspects of a text which are Australian without appearing essentialist; every effort will therefore be made to avoid totalising statements alluding to 'Australian-ness'. There is, in current Australian literary studies, a tendency towards global and world literature that moves *away* from "specific sets of institutional, cultural, personal and geopolitical frames that determine the reception of a work of literature" (Dixon and Rooney ix). I maintain that there is a particular value in addressing texts in terms of their immediate cultural context; the cultural context and the text's content can be considered in relation to and in conversation with one another. This is not to suggest that the texts are influenced by this context alone, or that texts could not be read from different perspectives, but rather I maintain that a particular cultural climate in which a text is written *can* influence and be evident in the text itself. This context facilitates the analysis of not only the literature, but also the cultural influences that underpin representations. Graham Huggan aptly states that, "The claim of a national literature is at least implicitly a political one" (8), and this appropriately addresses the purpose of this thesis. While I am not arguing for an inherent Australian-ness or nationalism in the texts included here, I have chosen to focus on representations in Australian literature specifically in order to interrogate what I consider to be increasingly conservative and problematic trends regarding constructions of gender in Australia.

Huggan's observations of Australian literature, in *Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007), have been useful in framing my definition of Australian literature. He claims that "Australian literature need not be set in, or even make reference to, Australia"

(13) but that Australian writers tend more towards creating an ideological position that caters to the needs of a “specific group of people at a specific time and place” (11-12). This vague yet appropriate assertion encapsulates the texts in this thesis—texts that do not necessarily employ nationalistic, stereotypical, or transnationally recognisable representations of Australia, but which engage with political and cultural issues. Similarly, Graeme Turner, in *National Fictions* (1993), identifies ‘Australian’ elements as a particular language within texts, which draws on a currency of myths, connotations and symbols (19). While Turner is relatively essentialist with regard to a concept of national character, his account acknowledges the influence of feminism and the rise of ‘women’s writing’ as well as the effect of multiculturalism and regionalism on the dominant tradition. Huggan’s and Turner’s definitions are used in my assessment of Australian fiction for their focus on shared cultural context, rather than a fixed identity. A character’s identification as ‘Australian’, or as another nationality, is not a central concern in defining Australian literature for the purpose of this thesis: migrant and ‘ethnic-minority’ characters, for example, frequently identify as belonging to one or more nationalities in addition to being ‘Australian’.³

The acknowledgement of race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism is necessary in discussions of Australian literature, and there are a number of recent studies that examine literature in terms of postcolonial theory. Huggan interrogates the ways in which “whiteness” is, in Australian literature and culture, a kind of inconspicuous neutrality, a normative power structure that is “often invisible to those who continue to benefit from its privileges”, and also “an assertion of ordinariness” (Huggan 71). While it is necessary to address differences in experience because of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well as experiences of cultural

³ There is one exception to this, which is *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2003) by Gemmell. While Gemmell is an Australian author, the text is set in England, Morocco and Spain, and the unnamed protagonist is assumed to be English. I have included this text because of Gemmell’s discussion of the ostensibly feminist intention of the text and her role as an Australian author (see interviews with Babiak, Bunbury, Sales, and Freedman), and because its popularity, and its effects have had an important impact on the reception of erotic literature in Australia.

stereotypes, racism, and marginalisation, I have chosen not to include a specific chapter on writing by Australians from ethnic minorities, as many texts about Australian writing do. I am not attempting, in any way, to subsume multidimensional experiences of marginalisation into an assumedly dominant (white) experience; rather, I am concerned that relegating texts written by people from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds as ‘different’, but similar to one another, suggests an ‘othering’ of these texts, which ultimately reinforces assumptions of white-ness equating to Australian-ness. To counter this, rather than employing postcolonial theory to acknowledge marginalisation in the focus literature, I utilise the theory of intersectionality to address elements of identity that impact on individual experience in addition to sexism and heterosexism—in some cases, the racism that remains pervasive in Australian cultural productions.

Intersectionality, a term first employed in relation to feminism in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes the ways in which elements of marginalisation, such as race or gender, are frequently framed as mutually exclusive categories, yet they are necessarily ravelled, and unable to be unravelled because discrimination and marginalisation are not singular issues (140, 167). Writing from an American context, Crenshaw explains that the experiences of women of colour cannot be encapsulated either by dominant feminist theories or by anti-racist politics, because both focus on the most privileged groups’ members and therefore cannot sufficiently account for the ways in which Black women are subordinated (140). Intersectionality, a pivotal factor in contemporary feminist thought, has been integral in framing my analyses of texts that address marginalising aspects of identity: *Steam Pigs* by Lucashenko and *Loaded* by Tsiolkas both address the intersection of ethnicity, culture, gender and sexuality.

Contemporary feminist thought can be understood at a basic level in one of two ways—that of third-wave feminism or that of post-feminism—and both respond to criticisms

against ‘traditional’ second-wave feminist values.⁴ Post-feminism is related to neo-conservative perspectives about femininity and normative roles for women and will be discussed in more detail in reference to Chapter One. Explicit ideologies of third-wave feminism are non-essentialism and the necessary inclusion of women who are non-white, non-heterosexual and non-middle-class. It is frequently defined in generational terms and attributed to women born after the Women’s Movement of the 1970s (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2,3). While specific definitions of third-wave feminism are difficult to formulate and are occasionally contradictory, the ‘third-wave’ generally attempts to acknowledge the limitations of the second-wave and address differences in women’s experiences which are tied into other aspects of identity (Garrison 33). Thus, third-wave feminism is concerned with issues of intersectionality in the acknowledgement that these different aspects of a person’s identity—such as ethnicity, culture, class, sexuality—influence their subjective experience *along with* their femininity. While third-wave intersectionality purports to challenge the essentialist and hegemonic nature of earlier identity politics, it has been criticised for viewing ethnicity, class and sexuality *in addition to* gender. This suggests the white, heterosexual middle-class woman—as the ‘default’ femininity— was/is the basis of feminism and that these supplementary elements of identity are now ‘acceptable’ additions to the default gendered experience.⁵ The consideration of the multidimensional aspects of identity, and acknowledgement that experiences of multidimensional marginalisation cannot

⁴ This is not to discount the continuing activity of influential second-wave feminists such as Germaine Greer, Anne Summers and Eva Cox, who remain key spokeswomen in a range of cultural platforms. Equally, radical and separatist feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys, remain active and influential—although Jeffreys is also more frequently considered offensive and problematic, predominantly because of her views on gender, especially regarding transpeople (Williams “Shame”). As Judith Butler describes, Jeffreys seems to “aspire to a kind of feminist tyranny” (Williams “Interview”).

⁵ There are further criticisms of third-wave feminism: the first is that, despite purporting to be inclusive and less limiting than second-wave feminism, its description as the third of a number of waves only reflects the Western (namely American) feminism, and still ignores feminist achievements, and therefore women, of other cultures. Secondly, the term ‘feminism’ itself is considered gynocentric for ignoring gender politics associated with the experiences of transgendered people.

be solely accounted for by one movement, is necessary for any theory or movement that aims to discuss experiences of marginalisation. Addressing the ways that women's experiences are different from one another is an important step to challenging the ways in which women are treated differently. Intersectionality also necessarily addresses the distinctions between gender and sexuality, and the differences between experiences for heterosexual and non-heterosexual women, and between trans- and cisgendered⁶ women. It is therefore a mandatory theory in this thesis.

Distinctions between waves of feminism are not purely ideological, but are also manifest in generational divides of women who identify as feminist. A number of influential Australian texts about contemporary feminism were published in the 1990s, frequently with reference to *The First Stone* (1995), Helen Garner's account of a sexual harassment case. The text focuses on the two young women at the heart of the case, whom she described as 'victim' feminists and "wimps who ran to the law to whinge about a minor unpleasantness, instead of standing up and fighting back with their own weapons of youth and quick wits" (40). Garner extends her judgements of the complainants to young feminists in general, arguing that her subjects' inability to deal with a "nerdish pass" (38) shows that young women, in her view, have taken feminism to an extreme—but in the wrong direction. Other prominent second-wave feminist theorists, such as Anne Summers and Beatrice Faust, shared Garner's perspectives on a generational divide between feminists and have publicly denounced 'the next generation' of feminists for their perceived lack of activism and engagement (Summers 505-28; Faust "Time"). They, like Garner, discount the perspectives of a younger generation of third-wave feminists as naïve and "not ready to pick up the cudgels and continue the fight"

⁶ 'Cisgender' is an increasingly accepted term, popularised on internet forums, for transgendered people in the 1990s, and used in publications such as *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* by Julia Serano (2007). The term is used to define people whose gendered identity is aligned with their sex. It is not without criticism, as its use arguably maintains a cis-trans dichotomy, and remains problematic for intersex people with non-binary gender identities.

(Summers 523). *The First Stone*, however, was a catalyst in Australian third-wave feminism. A range of feminist texts written in reaction to *The First Stone* was subsequently published, such as Jenna Mead's *Bodyjamming* (1997) and *Generation F* (1996) by Virginia Trioli, and these texts exemplify third-wave feminist attitudes regarding sex, power and misogyny that remain relevant to contemporary Australian culture.

In direct contrast to the accusations of 'priggishness' and victim feminism in younger feminist women was the publication of Catharine Lumby's *Bad Girls* (1997), which addresses the perceived hyper-sexualisation of women and examines the role of the media on sex and feminism along with pro-sex perspectives. Also produced in the 1990s were *DIY Feminism* (1996) by Kathy Bail, which promotes the 'new' feminism associated with a younger generation through interviews with prominent Australian women, and can be considered post-feminist for its endorsement of liberalism, individuality and choice. These texts champion remarkably similar values to more recent Australian third-wave feminist texts, such as *The Great Feminist Denial* (2008) by Monica Dux and Zora Simic and *Princesses and Pornstars: Sex, Power, Identity* (2008) by Emily Maguire. While this supports my contention for the ongoing relevance of third-wave feminist theory, it is also disquieting because it suggests that little has changed over the decades, and the extent to which feminism has 'achieved' 'goals' appears limited. In a similar observation, Germaine Greer asserts in *The Whole Woman* (1999):

Thirty years on [since arguing that equality legislation could not give me the right to have broad hips or hairy thighs, to be at ease in my woman's body,] femininity is still compulsory for women and has become an option for men, while genuine femaleness remains grotesque to the point of obscenity. (Greer 2)

Her sentiment remains evident in recent texts written another decade later; while women's gains in terms of social and economic equality have been marked—although these goals are not entirely attained—the ways in which women are viewed in terms of their perceived

obligations to femininity remain constrictive and denigrating. The collection of essays *Destroying the Joint: Why Women have to Change the World* (2013) edited by Jane Caro and published in response to commentator Alan Jones's assertion that women are "destroying the joint" (Caro ix),⁷ offers an array of perspectives from politicians, commentators, comedians and authors that challenge the alleged incapability of women in positions of power. A number of essays in the text assert that women's attainment of positions of power is not enough to consider feminism successful.

Recent and contemporary models of feminism underpin my assessments of the ways that characters are constructed in fictional texts. Strong stereotypes of gender roles were evident in much Australian fiction of the past, and there are elements of this priggishness and conventionality apparent in recent fiction discussed in this thesis. These representations seem resistant to change, despite developments in gender and queer theory, and are therefore significant in any feminist reading of texts. As a corollary to discussion of conservative stereotypes of gender, I also address constructions of women and girls embracing or rejecting their own sexualities—marked by a disjuncture of internal processes and external behaviours—as well the endorsement (or non-endorsement) of ambivalent attitudes to self with regard to gender and sexuality.

Throughout this thesis, I frequently link gender and sexuality as related elements, which is not unproblematic; there is a necessary difference between sexuality and gender, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss sexuality without acknowledging the ways in which cultural constructions of gender shape expectations of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Gayle Rubin argues, "Because sexuality is a nexus of relationships between genders, much of the oppression of women is borne by, mediated through, and constituted within, sexuality" (165). Despite this, she asserts feminism is not an appropriate theory through which to view

⁷ Alan Jones is a conservative and divisive radio broadcaster for the radio station 2GB in Sydney.

sexuality, because feminism theorises gender, not sexuality: “To assume automatically that [feminism as a theory of gender oppression] makes it the theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire, on the other” (169). In this thesis, however, I extend feminist perspectives to representations of sexuality. While there are, indeed, necessary differences and distinctions between sexuality and gender, and feminism alone cannot account for sexualities that lie outside of hegemonic and heteronormative expectations of sexual desire and behaviour, I argue that the ways in which patriarchy manifests in society is equally evident in sexual experience because sexual experiences can be affected by masculine privilege. Elizabeth Grosz acknowledges:

All sexual practices are made possible and function within the constraints of heterosexism and phallocentrism, but this indeed is the condition of any effective transgression from them: we must no longer understand them as megalithic systems functioning in their immutability and perfection; rather, if they are systems at all, they are contradictory, fraught with complexities, ambiguities, and vulnerabilities that can and should be used to strategically discern significant sites of contestation. (*Space* 174-75, emphasis in original)

In order to interrogate these ‘complexities, ambiguities and vulnerabilities’ that remain, I argue for the ongoing relevance and necessity of feminist analysis of sexual practices; while only allowing feminist interpretations of sex acts can be limiting and discounts individual sexual experience, to disregard feminist considerations of sex is problematic. Therefore, I have incorporated considerations of queer theoretical perspectives in framing my discussions of sexuality to ensure that these discussions are not limited by totalising or essentialist assumptions of women’s experiences.

Michel Foucault, in 1976, described Western society as the “Other Victorians” because of the ways we prohibit, censor and deny sexuality (10). *The History of Sexuality* argues that we view sex as “condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence” (6). In order to

transgress this repression of sex, what is required is a complete overhaul of the power structures in which our understanding of sexuality operates. Foucault states, “nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required” (5). It is prohibition that gives discourses surrounding sex power and a “will to knowledge”; if sex were not prohibited its value and role would be perceived differently (12). Foucault asserts that in defying the power structures that control sexuality, we “ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making” (6-7). Looking to the future, however, discounts the current potential to subvert “polymorphous techniques of power”, the discursive methods that “permeate and control”, that effect, that stop and quash but also provoke the ways that we talk about sex and how we enact it (11). Talking, or writing, about sex in a way that goes against the constrictive normative discourse seems to be a “deliberate transgression” (6), and the person that publicly engages in such discourse “upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom” (6). I argue that this still seems to be the case for Australian literature. While writing about sex is, of course, more transgressive than not writing about it, so much of the fiction addressed in this thesis superficially appears to be transgressive, yet, I argue, works within the confines of the dominant discourse of sexuality and, more obviously, gender.

There are distinctions between women’s fiction, feminist fiction, and post-feminist fiction, all of which are discussed throughout this thesis. Pons suggests that using the term ‘women’s writing’ or ‘feminine writing’ assumes that there is such a common thing, and that it denigrates writing by women on the basis of its “unbecoming predominance of emotion over reason” (179). The term ‘feminine writing’ is thus presumed to encapsulate “the social experience of women, whom the ruling patriarchal order circumscribes within so-called ‘feminine’ activities, places and emotions” (180). My thesis amounts to a sustained attempt to oppose this tendency to discount the themes and qualities of women’s writing and to confine

women's writing as a genre in itself. Gender is not a genre. The majority of texts I discuss here—with a view to explicating the particular differences between texts—are written by women. While some texts explore 'feminine' activities and concerns, others do not; throughout this thesis I argue that the extent to which specific content can be considered feminine, or associated with women, is suspect at best, and essentialist and misogynistic at worst.

Feminist fiction is less problematic to define than 'women's writing', but such a definition is not without its challenges. Rosalind Coward questions what it is that makes particular novels 'feminist' novels:

Is it that these novels are carrying out subversive politicization, drawing women into structures of consciousness-raising without their knowing it? Or is it that the accounts of women's experiences which they offer in fact correspond more closely to popular sentiment than they do to feminist aspirations? (53)

These questions are addressed throughout my analyses; often, texts that have centred on women's experiences purport to have feminist perspectives, yet they cannot be read as feminist texts only because of their construction of women characters. Similarly, some of the texts that I argue are successful feminist texts are not explicitly political, but subvert or challenge dominant agendas with regard to gender.

Cranny-Francis asserts that feminist writers construct a 'feminist reading position': "that is, a position at which the contradictions within the text are explained as if the reader sees them from the perspective of a feminist discourse" (*Feminist* 205). Gayle Greene, in "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory", differentiates between feminist writing and women's writing:

Not all women writers are women's writers and not all women's writers are feminist writers, since to write about 'women's issues' is not necessarily to address them from a feminist perspective. ... [A] novel

may be termed 'feminist' for its analysis of gender as socially constructed and capable of being reconstructed and for its enlistment of narrative in the process of change. (291)

In *Space, Time and Perversion* (1995) Grosz puts forward the following requirements of what a 'feminist text' might be and might accomplish. First, the text will illuminate the "patriarchal or phallogentric assumptions" (22) that control the context/s in which it works, and examine the power of those assumptions in how the texts are produced, received and assessed (22-23). Secondly, a feminist text will in some way problematise the standard ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation,⁸ challenging the patriarchal and authoritative position of 'the one who knows' (23). Thirdly, a feminist text will help to produce new, "unknown, unthought, discursive spaces—new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms—that contest the limits and constraints" of current modes of textual production and reception, as well as interrogating accepted patriarchal norms (23).

These criteria offer viable definitions for determining feminist texts. Extending Cranny-Francis's, Greene's and Grosz's definitions, my own definition requires feminist writing to employ a specific agenda—one that endorses feminist viewpoints with regard to gendered roles, rights and power. For the purpose of this thesis, texts will be considered 'feminist' when there is an evident engagement with, and/or analysis of, specific social issues surrounding gender. Moreover, the gendered experience of women must be evident, as must the promotion of feminist change. I argue that most of the texts examined in the course of this thesis do not meet these criteria, and engage in forms of symbolic annihilation of genders and sexualities that do not conform to cultural norms.⁹ Texts that maintain an acceptance of

⁸ By 'enunciation', Grosz is referring to the Derridean notion of the necessary gap between the writing and reception of a text, and taking both what is written and what is not written into account.

⁹ The term "symbolic annihilation" was first coined by George Gerbner in 1972. It describes the pervasive tendency for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer communities to be "ignored, trivialized, or condemned" in various media, including literature (Venzo

essentialist and stereotypical gender roles as natural and given, and that use narrative to perpetuate these gendered stereotypes, will be considered throughout this thesis for their conventional representations of both femininity and masculinity; the failure to challenge problematic norms is tantamount to acceptance of them. Such writing is evident in particular texts which construct women in terms of archetypes and stereotypes,¹⁰ or as subordinate in some way; however, these gendered norms are also evident in post-feminist texts, which may incorporate discussions of feminist achievements and newly accepted potentialities in terms of gender roles, yet do little to challenge constructions of gender. These sites of contestation will be emphasised throughout this thesis.

In my research I have incorporated these feminist and queer theoretical perspectives to form an appropriate methodology for analysing the portrayals of sex acts, sexuality and gender roles in a range of texts. This methodology allows for arguments against anti-feminist and, to an extent, post-feminist ideals and gratuitous pornographic inclusions in literature, without denigrating the agency and views of those who produce such texts, while specifically critiquing the content of these productions. We can critique gender and identity in fiction because representations of individual characters are explicitly constructions; the analysis of protagonists' characterisations can be undertaken without needing to consider a

and Hess 1540): "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence, absence means symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner 43; Venzo and Hess 1541). The terms was also employed by feminists in the 1970s to describe the consistent marginalisation, stereotypical, or absence of representations of women in the media, and that this "captures the position of women ... -their real lack of power" (Tuchman 533). Representation and visibility of marginalised people ensures against symbolic annihilation.

¹⁰ Archetypes and stereotypes work within concepts of gender and rely on conventional understandings of femininity and masculinity (Cranny-Francis et al. 103). Stereotypes rely on the assumption of particular traits, whereas archetypes refer more to complete character types. Because of the typical assumptions necessarily entwined in stereotypes and archetypes, both are, by definition, limiting, and work to smooth over complexities and difference as well as to reinforce dichotomous power dynamics (Cranny-Francis et al. 143). The recognisability of archetypes and stereotypes work as a kind of shorthand for readers and ensure both that readers understand the relevance of particular characters and situations, while also reinforcing the archetype's value. Texts employ these archetypes and stereotypes specifically because of the expectation that a reader can recognise their connotations.

range of substantiating factors that could influence the actions of a 'real' person. The characters of fiction are necessarily 'disembodied', and the inscription of social expectations is a complete fabrication; the authors choose to construct their characters in a particular way, and the basis of this construction will be analysed through the utilisation of theories of corporeal feminism, predominantly those formulated by Grosz, to address fictional representations. I also outline intratextual justifications by characters of their decisions to/not to engage in particular sex acts *because of* purported feminist perspectives. Examining characters' constructions is valuable because it allows reflection on the extent to which perspectives or behaviours of the characters are prevalent, normalised, or censured. The construction of narrators can be examined for the same reason. Thus, characterisation and narration act as lenses through which to focus on social and cultural expectations in order to analyse them.

This thesis is situated simultaneously within two distinct fields: Australian literary studies and feminist literary studies. It is possible for this thesis to be considered solely as a study in Australian literature or within feminist studies, but part of its original contribution is its position in the intersection of these fields. As part of the Australian literary studies discipline, I focus on texts that have engaged with Australian life. While, in literary studies, there is a tendency towards a world literature approach in some quarters, I argue throughout this thesis that the local, political context in which a text is produced can influence its content, and, equally, that elements of this context are evident in the text. This thesis offers a snapshot into particular trends in contemporary Australian literature. It contributes to Australian literary studies by offering analyses of both canonical and non-canonical texts, and it emphasises the ways in which place helps to frame assumptions of characterisation.

Equally, because this thesis examines the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed from an explicitly feminist perspective, its position as part of a feminist literary studies tradition is evident regardless of its local context. The feminist approach taken to my literary analysis is part of the third-wave feminist movement, and I maintain that a feminist

reading of cultural productions is necessary both to critique them and to influence the creation of pro-feminist productions in the future. However, the 'Australianness' of these texts influences how I have read constructions of gender and sexuality in characterisation, and therefore there is an important intersection between Australian literary studies and feminist literary studies. I argue that the way gender is constructed in Australian fiction reflects a hegemonic, heteronormative ideal of femininity and masculinity that is evident in contemporary Australia.

The theoretical framework and the cultural context presented in this introduction are the basis of the rationale that has underwritten my thesis. In addition, each chapter contains its own introduction to the specific theoretical positions relevant to the arguments in it. The following discussion outlines the main theoretical positions, which are extended in subsequent chapters.

Chapter One focuses on constructions of gender as conventional, stereotypical, and, at times, archetypal. Following Cranny-Francis's project in *Engendered Fiction*, I examine how the texts articulate gender; texts frequently construct women as "passive, helpless, emotional, nurturing" while "men are constructed as active, competitive, rational and heroic" (*Engendered* 1). These constructions are both "the product of and part of a particular view of what it means to be female or male in our society; that is, these images are determined by a particular view of sexuality and they simultaneously (re)construct that view" (1). Essentialist norms, and how they are normalised, will be interrogated throughout this chapter.

The genre of chick lit is included in the discussions of texts in this chapter—exemplified by the short stories by Adams and Treasure, and *Pants on Fire* by Alderson—in order to consider the ways in which popular texts rely on these expectations of gendered performance as an element of the genre itself. The value of the genre lies in its attempts to create appealing women characters, and its popularity indicates the extent to which such gendered characterisation is prevalent, accepted and expected. The chapter also addresses *Camille's Bread* by Lohrey and *The Mint Lawn* by Mears, both of which simultaneously

construct and critique the specific feminine roles of mother and lover. I then present an analysis of Rowe's short stories in *How a Moth Becomes a Boat*, which use particular gendered tropes to *allude* to gender without confirming it, allowing for a non-prescriptive or less controlled construction of character. Her flash fiction¹¹ plays with expectations of gender and sexuality, through her construction of characters that suggest gender through certain traits and through her use of imagery, destabilising expectations while relying on assumptions about femininity and masculinity in literary characters.

Heteronormative constructions of gender and the increasingly influential perspective of post-feminism are also discussed in Chapter One. In Australia, current feminist thought tends to take two main conceptual directions. While third-wave feminism, as discussed, tends to remain concerned with established feminist agendas (such as addressing issues of equality and power, misogyny, and sexual and contraceptive rights), post-feminism manifests in purportedly feminist views that appear to be increasingly conservative and heteronormative. The definition of post-feminism is contestable, but that which is employed in this thesis reflects cultural theorist Angela McRobbie's assertion of post-feminism as the "co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life", liberalised, individualistic and reflexive freedom of choice, along with a quasi-acceptance of feminism as the predominant political precursor to post-feminism ("Post-Feminism" 255-56).¹² Second-wave feminism is thus acknowledged by post-feminists for its historical

¹¹ 'Flash fiction' generally denotes stories under one thousand words in length.

¹² There are various arguments against this definition; frequently third-wave feminism is described *as* post-feminism which confuses the issue; for example, Ann Brooks argues that post-feminism is "about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks" (4). This is not inaccurate, but fails to take into account the neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism manifest in post-feminism. Brooks's definition more closely reflects what I describe as third-wave feminism. There are also arguments against the actual existence of post-feminism because concrete examples of post-feminist ideologies appear to exist predominantly in

significance in ameliorating sexism, but is not considered as a continuing valid position. As McRobbie posits in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, in post-feminist ideology, feminism is considered and incorporated into “political and institutional life”, but post-feminism draws on concepts of “‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’” to endorse “a much more individualistic discourse” than second-wave feminism (*Aftermath* 1). The ideology is concerned with overcoming the perceived restrictions of second-wave feminism, specifically those around marriage, motherhood and physical portrayals of femininity. Rosalind Gill, too, asserts, “postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas” (443). In Chapter One, I argue that this re-evaluation of feminism promotes conventional feminine gender roles together with (hetero)sexually liberated behaviours, and enforces a conservative social arrangement in terms of gender and sexuality. The conservatism of values with regard to marriage and motherhood sits alongside an acceptance, if not expectation, of an increasingly sexualised femininity, frequently referred to as ‘raunch culture’, a term coined in 2005 by American feminist theorist Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. As Levy explains, while it appears that “the rise of raunch” is in opposition to the “conservative moment”, “It actually makes perfect sense” because “Raunch culture is not essentially progressive, it is essentially commercial” (29):

It’s not as though we are embracing something liberal—this isn’t Free Love. Raunch culture isn’t about opening our minds to the possibilities and mysteries of sexuality. It’s about endlessly reiterating one particular—and particularly commercial—shorthand for sexiness. (30)

cultural productions such as film and television: the stereotypical spokespersons for post-feminism are, for example, fictional characters such as Bridget Jones, Carrie Bradshaw and Ally McBeal.

Raunch culture refers to the markedly increased objectification of women in line with post-feminist perspectives of embracing femininity and sexuality. The rise of burlesque, pole dancing for exercise and overtly sexual/sexualised pop stars are portrayed as evidence of this 'raunch culture'. The pro-sex perspectives clear in the acceptance of raunch culture are argued to be empowering through allowing women to embrace their sexuality, yet raunch culture also sets up a kind of normalising sexuality through its promotion of uninhibited sexual behaviour. Levy argues that the "simplistic, plastic stereotype" (197) of women's sexuality is used as evidence for women's sexual liberation, but that this dominant model relies on one specific version of women's sexuality—which is, ironically, the same limited and objectified version fought *against* by second-wave feminists. The acceptance of other avenues of sexual expression would allow empowerment and liberation to a far greater extent than the hegemonic conception of 'sexy' prevalent in contemporary culture.

McRobbie argues that post-feminist "new young women" are ambivalent about marriage; they "brazenly enjoy their sexuality, without fear of the sexual double standard ... and the degree of suffering or shame they anticipate in the absence of finding a husband is countered by sexual self-confidence" ("Post-Feminism" 262). The need to find a husband is no longer related to future financial security, because the women are capable of supporting themselves. With this, however, comes "demarcated pathologies" such as "leaving it too late to have a baby" or "failing to find a good catch", which play into concerns regarding the kind of life one *should* be living, but does not necessitate, for most women, an interrogation of gendered expectations and an acknowledgment of the need for feminism ("Post-Feminism" 262). McRobbie thus argues that young women predominantly do not see the relevance of feminism when their primary concern is regarding the range of options currently available to them; their focus is directed towards their perceived liberty, rather than their perceived limitations.

Evidence of the truth of McRobbie's statements is apparent in a number of female characters in this thesis, particularly the protagonists of chick lit novels considered in

Chapter One. (Hetero)sexuality, long-term relationships and the performance of femininity are the core concerns of chick lit. The recent origination of the genre at the same time as post-feminism's influence intensifies is significant: chick lit engages with the core values of post-feminism, offering an opportunity for an assessment of how post-feminism can emerge in fiction. A critical examination of post-feminism in Australian literature, specifically as it manifests in the genre of chick lit, is timely because of the increasing popularity of post-feminism in the media and in creative fields such as literature.

The ways in which the bodies of characters are represented brings into question particular gendered norms, especially with regard to the concept of beauty. As Grosz states, "Inscriptions of the corporeal differences between bodies can be seen to produce body-subjects as living significations, social texts capable of being read or interpreted" ("Inscriptions" 63). Inscriptions on bodies can occur violently, but also through "*less openly aggressive* but no less coercive means, throughout cultural and personal values, norms and commitments" (65, emphasis in original). The specific ideals and norms of a culture mediate the ways that we inscribe our bodies, and equally how they are read by others. The differences between bodies give those bodies particular value, but also make them simultaneously subjects and objects; in Mears's *The Mint Lawn*, for instance, Clementine's secret attempts to replicate her mother's idiosyncrasies and behaviour alter the ways in which the actions of both are read. The body is thus intertextual, and the social intertext influences our preferences and performances. This reflects Gilles Deleuze's assertion that "a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality" ("Ethology" 58). The body is not a limited form, or a substance or a subject (59) but its value lies in its 'affective capacity'. As Deleuze summarises, "You do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination" (60), and thus the body is not limited to the expected norms; its capacities are unknowable.

As Brian Massumi defines in his foreword to Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, the term 'affect' describes

an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. (xvi)

Embodiment is not limited, then, and is necessarily social; one's affect, according to Deleuze and Guattari, extends *beyond* emotion, and encompasses desires, pleasures and sorrow, the actions that the body performs and has the potentiality to perform, as well as the ways in which that body is affected by those around it. Affect is tied to corporeality, and is necessarily reciprocal. Grosz avers, "The body becomes a 'text' and is fictionalised and positioned within those myths that form a culture's social narratives and self-representations" ("Inscriptions" 66); moreover, those values with which we inscribe bodies limit conceivable corporeal alternatives, in turn, "stimulating and stifling social conformity" (66). The entrenched cultural myths and inscriptions—these *expectations*—regulate the ways in which we interpret bodies as gendered and direct the extent to which we will accept or endorse particular bodies and censure others. I address potential deviations from these normative myths further in the following chapter.

Chapter Two extends the discussion of gender and sexuality through examining the ways in which characters deviate from expectations of femininity and masculinity. Deviance is analysed in representations of sexual behaviour that defy cultural norms and embrace taboo, as well as in representations of bodies that are read as different or 'other'. This chapter demonstrates how disrupting expectations of gender and sexuality creates dissonance and difficulty in the reading of these dissident, 'deviant' characters. This chapter incorporates a consideration of a number of 'grunge fiction' novels, such as McGahan's *Praise*, Tsiolkas's *Loaded* and *The River Ophelia* by Ettler. Each of these novels, which were written in the early- to mid-1990s, depicts young adults' disillusioned preoccupation with sex and

satisfaction.¹³ Chapter Two also explores Maguire's portrayal of a taboo sexual relationship between a teenaged girl and her English teacher in *Taming the Beast*, which represents a problematic power dynamic but questions assumptions about victimhood, consent and innocence. McGregor's and Watkinson's respective representations of deviant bodies in *Indelible Ink* and *The Architect* also question cultural expectations and the extent to which we read value and erotic expectations as written on bodies. I argue that the 'othering' that defines bodies as 'deviant' is not in itself specifically gendered; rather, the fact of their deviance can influence the extent to which they are understood in terms of gendered and sexualised constructions. In *The Architect*, for example, Jules's vulnerability as a result of his disfigurement—his arm amputation and prominent scars—is sexualised, while in *Indelible Ink*, Marie's numerous tattoos mark her as subversive within her particular privileged context and her body is, in turn, interpreted by those around her as sexually deviant.

Cranny-Francis argues that "the body of the woman, the feminine body, is never neutral; the notion of biological neutrality conceals the fact that, in our patriarchal culture, the masculine body is actually designated as the norm, and is therefore represented as neutral, while the feminine body is aberrant" (*Engendered* 24). Cranny-Francis's *The Body in the Text* (1995) and her co-edited collection with Terry Threadgold, *Feminine, Masculine and Representation* (1990) have also been important resources in shaping the reading of gendered bodies in this thesis. Each discusses the challenges of representing the corporeal. Cranny-Francis argues in *The Body in the Text* that a reconceptualisation of the corporeal allows for the representation or production of bodies "not limited by the regulatory practices of the past" (xi), which is also an aim of this dissertation.

My discussion of the representations of bodies—especially women's bodies—in this thesis, but particularly in Chapter Two, also employs the theory of abjection. Julia Kristeva's

¹³ Two other 'grunge' texts, Jaivin's *Eat Me* and McGregor's *Suck My Toes*, are included in Chapter Four.

concept of abjection refers to that which is neither subject nor object, but sits between these concepts. It represents that which is outside of the symbolic order,¹⁴ signifying taboo and transgression, and disturbing social reason (Kristeva, *Powers* 256). This concept is important in analysing not only subjects' responses to their own bodies, and indeed as a means of differentiating subjects from their bodies, but also the way in which subjects transgress the symbolic order and thereby defy, or pervert, social norms (Kristeva, *Powers* 255). While Kristeva's theory pertains to embodiment, it is applicable to literature. Realist fiction relies on the same organisational structures of 'real life', yet it is a way to interrogate both subjectivity and objectivity because it is simultaneously a representation and yet relatable to reality. Characters' adherence to, or transgression of, norms relies on an understanding of the symbolic order.

The arguments of Chapter Two necessitate the utilisation of queer theory—predominantly that of Butler and Sedgwick—and Grosz's corporeal feminist theory in order to address the ways characters deviate from normative constructions of gender and sexuality. Queer theory, which has developed over the past twenty-five years, both locally and internationally, acknowledges a range of sexualities that cannot be limited to hetero- and homosexuality and seeks to destabilise heterosexist assumptions. Queer theory is valuable in examining individual gendered experience and the ways in which gender is socially constructed and, consequently, limited. These qualities of queer theory speak to a number of the limitations and failures of feminism that are inherently tied to the predominant focus on heterosexual and cisgendered women and the lack of acknowledgement of the variety of

¹⁴ Kristeva's variant of the Lacanian symbolic order refers to the organisational structures of the social and cultural, such as language as a signifying system, representation and reason, positions and propositions, that underpin the self as an individual, speaking subject; it is also that which structures the unconscious, and it is regulated by paternal/patriarchal authority. (See *Desire in Language* (1980) and *The Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984); see also Grosz, *Sexual* xxii-xxiii, 47-49 and Moi, *Sexual* 11, 161-62) I use Kristeva's theory of abjection predominantly in terms of its bodily/corporeal implications in experiencing the world; this thesis does not employ substantive psychoanalytic literary theory.

gendered and sexual experiences. In this thesis, queer theory is frequently more appropriate in analyses of sexual portrayals than feminist theory to describe both sex acts and the sexuality of those performing said acts. Queer theory allows for autonomy in accounts of individual sexual desire and perceptions of pleasure. It also aids in acknowledging the embodied experience of queer individuals whose gendered identity may not be congruous with the category of 'woman' or 'man', and extending the ways one can consider non-heteronormative gendered and sexual experience.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that the aim of the text is "to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized" (viii), meaning that options for gender are not limited to femininity for women, masculinity for men—or even femininity or masculinity at all. The concept of gender has the potential to be no longer limited to one of two options, collapsing the further expectation of one gender's privilege over the other and depending on a designated and pre-discursive assumption of natural, biological sex. Butler asserts that the differentiation between gender and sex is problematic, in that it is based on the assumption that gender is cultural and social, and sex is natural, innate, essential and always already there, and, consequently, it suggests the relationship between sex and gender is purely arbitrary (*Gender* 11). Butler brings the relationship between sex and gender into question. She holds that sex is never neutral, never unscripted, and thus it is as constructed as gender. There is no possibility of constructing gender without the assumption of one's natural sex until the framework by which we understand sex and gender is brought into question (xi). Butler asserts, "It is not possible to oppose the 'normative' forms of gender without at the same time subscribing to a certain normative view of how the gendered world ought to be" (xxii). This thesis relies on normative judgements of gender in order to "decide between subversive and unsubversive expressions of gender" (xxii), which is not unproblematic in that it still implies particular dichotomised judgements; it also employs what Butler calls a 'descriptive account' of gender, which "includes considerations of what makes gender intelligible, an inquiry into its

conditions of possibility" (xxii). However, I question these norms, and the frameworks that they rely on, throughout this dissertation as part of my attempt to destabilise the normative assumptions that underpin gendered constructions in the texts. The construction of gender in fictional characters removes the factor of biological bodies completely; throughout this thesis, I analyse the way that authors are inscribing the corporeal relations between sex and gender.

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler proposes that focusing on bodies and questioning the norms and power structures that regulate and maintain norms we apply to bodies is more useful than simply accepting that gender is the social construction of performing one's sex. Gender norms rely on the repetition of specific constructions until they become naturalised, as representations, unquestionable. It is the norms that show the space for alternatives to take place, the gaps in the construction of gendered characters that allow spaces for alternatives (Butler, *Bodies* 10). Throughout this thesis, I argue that authors of fiction have the potential to explore these spaces. Such an exploration enables an interrogation and a disruption of the ways in which we necessarily link particular constructs of characterisation with particular confined genders; exploring these spaces without representations of punishment for deviance can only be a positive step to breaking down the dominance of heteronormativity.

Grosz's writing on the embodied experiences of women as a site of difference, and also of denigration, has been integral to feminist and queer thought as it is applied in this thesis. The body, in terms of biological determinism and cultural expectations regarding appearance—especially those regarding secondary sex characteristics—is necessary to consider in terms of feminine experience. These aspects of corporeality ultimately influence the perceived self-worth of women. Imposed on women—and often by women—such physical expectations are limiting. The dominant model of corporeal normality assumes that the heterosexual, white, masculine body is a kind of neutral 'universal'. There is an automatic and constant denigration of women's bodies as different and lesser, with an enforced binary

between women's and men's bodies that designates "two mutually exclusive categories" as the only possibilities, which contradicts the multiplicity of bodies and types that exist in reality (Grosz, *Volatile* 58). Bodies are thus given value and limitations because of their determined sex. This simultaneously assumes necessary differences and essential similarities between the defined and discrete categories of women and men.

The social confines of the body encourage the subversion of restrictive norms with regard to bodies, gender and sexuality. Butler asserts that it is problematic to construct "the category of women as a coherent and stable subject" because it necessitates "an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations" (*Gender* 7) and creates essentialist assumptions of some shared quality that is reliant on the "heterosexual matrix": the heteronormative assumptions of gendered roles and performance (7). However, to avoid the consideration of the category of 'women' as something that is part of a shared experience of people designated by this category means ignoring the ongoing assumptions and expectations that continue to exist. While questioning the role of sex and gender is necessary, Grosz maintains that an acknowledgement of sexed differences remains pertinent, because there is an inherent social, political and physical difference in the way that women experience the world:

Women's bodies and sexualities have been structured and lived in terms that not only differentiate them from men's but also attempt, not always or even usually entirely successfully, to position them in a relation of passive dependence and secondariness to men's. ... [T]he only socially recognised and validated representations of women's sexuality are those which conform to and accord with the expectations and desires of a certain heterosexual structuring of male desire.

(*Volatile* 202)

Thus, although arguing from similar positions that critique patriarchal and heteronormative structures that dictate expectations of women's gendered roles, Grosz and Butler differ in

their views of the extent to which we should acknowledge the category of women, as well as how we should focus on the differences in embodied experiences. As Grosz argues, “It is the *social inscription of sexed bodies*, not the imposition of an acculturised, sexually neuter *gender* that is significant for feminist purposes” (Grosz, “Inscriptions” 73, emphasis in original). The way in which the categories of masculinity and femininity are inscribed on characters—the way in which certain factors are chosen to gender characters—is useful for my feminist readings of gendered characterisation in this thesis. How the inscriptions, relations and dynamics of gender are represented in a fictional world, where sex is undeniably as deliberate and as constructed as gender, brings into question how easily we recognise and accept particular representations.

Embodied experiences of women and queer characters in fiction are often portrayed as abject, foreign or abnormal. Portrayals of both queer and heteronormative sex in fiction are worth examining for their treatment of power dynamics and enacted gender roles. While Annamarie Jagose contends that sex viewed as political is generally presumed to be queer or ‘non-normative’ sex (519), I argue that representations of heterosexual sex are equally of political value. Heteronormative cultural constraints undeniably influence and limit sexuality and the performance of gender for non-queer people. To consider only queer sex as political discounts the extent to which it is viewed as ‘other’, or oppositional to heteronormative perspectives, and suggests that there are no political issues within depictions of heterosexual relationships, which is emphatically not the case. While queer sex is often interpreted as other, and, as such, is far more visible than heteronormative relationships because of its difference from the heterocentric norm, sexual politics is not limited to that which transgresses norms, and that which is ‘normal’ requires equal interrogation.

The norms and construction of deviance with regard to gender and sexuality discussed in Chapters One and Two are also evident in texts with particular thematic narratives; Chapter Three focuses on representations of violence, and Chapter Four examines power dynamics and gender roles in erotic fiction. Chapter Three looks at four novels in

which characters are the victims or perpetrators of violence, or both; it questions the extent to which gender is associated with expectations of particular behaviour regarding brutal acts, and how characters are represented as responsible for or deserving of aggression. I examine power and control throughout this chapter, as well as the impact of gendered dynamics on readers' expectations of victimhood. Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* and *The Pillow Fight* by Condon each offer representations of intimate partner violence, but from distinct gendered perspectives and different cultural contexts. In *Steam Pigs*, Sue, as a young Murri woman, experiences violence very differently to Condon's protagonist Luke, an upper-middle-class white man assaulted by his wife. Hutchinson's *Rohypnol* focuses on sexual violence through 'date rape', and the ways in which the association between violence and masculinity permits a culture in which rape is not only normalised, but also has become the responsibility of the victim. Maguire's *Taming the Beast* is again incorporated into the discussion of the role of violence within relationships, which shows the ways in which sexual deviance in women is 'punished' or regulated and controlled through violence.

While Chapter One focuses predominantly on normative constructions of femininity, Chapter Three extends to discussions of masculinity. Constructions of masculinity and femininity are dichotomous; specific traits and behaviours associated with femininity are those that lie in opposition to masculinity, although these are not constructed as equal. Cranny-Francis states, "Patriarchal femininity and masculinity are complementary, but at an enormous cost to the individuals who accept those positionings", because they are the site of an ongoing power struggle (*Engendered* ix). In her overview of literary masculinity studies, Alex Hobbs describes the rise of masculinity studies as a necessary subsidiary of gender studies that "celebrates a multiplicity of masculine identities over socially embedded stereotypes" and that seeks to quash the "myth" that men benefit from patriarchy (384). She argues that assumptions of masculinity for men are as damaging as assumptions of femininity are for women, and both are the result of a patriarchal society. The concept of

hegemonic masculinity has been an important feature of men's studies; R.W. Connell's formulation distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from other masculinities:

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.

(832)

This idealised masculinity, associated with power, force and ascendancy, is not ahistorical, and new forms of idealised masculinity, equalling entrenching patriarchy, replace the old (Connell and Messerschmidt 833). The challenge to achieve or acquire this masculinity reiterates normative expectations of gender, and this unattainable, unstable masculinity is an element of the ongoing moral panic surrounding the 'masculinity crisis' (Hobbs 386). Largely attributed to the shift in gender roles due to the successes of feminism and the striving for hegemonic constructs, men are assumed to be either becoming less masculine—feminised, weak, impotent—or unable to control their masculinity, characterised by anger and violence, and frequently touted as an influencing factor in the number of suicides committed by young adult men.

Pons notes, "Australian culture is in large measure a celebration of maleness, a concept which is always a construction rather than an objective reality, and which comes in many different guises" (97), and that these constructions figure heavily in the cultural and artistic productions of Australia. Australian masculinity figures in direct opposition to femininity; Australian men's *bonhomie*—which, like Sedgwick's observation of homosociality and "male-dominated kinship systems", is associated with "obligatory heterosexuality" (*Between* 3)—is a necessary element of their construction, and women, in the form of wives and girlfriends, are represented as obstacles to be negotiated in the achievement of 'natural' masculinity. In a country that celebrates archetypal and hegemonic constructions of 'blokes'

and 'mates', the idea that these are under threat is met with simultaneous resentment, trepidation, and perhaps derision.¹⁵ The crisis lies in the confusion over which elements of masculinity should be valorised and which should be censured, and these are changing cultural values (Hobbs 386). The shifts in patriarchal expectations of power, too, disrupt expectations of gender.

Pons observes that the "equation of masculinity with brutality ... has been used to justify male standover tactics and predatory behaviour" (106) and that this creates an ingrained association between masculinity and power that is "so entrenched that it has taken on an essential aspect, as appears from words such as 'potency' or 'impotent' which conflate sexuality with authority" (106). He argues that this construction of masculinity works to alienate both men and women, stating, "If power is a male preserve, then women are automatically disempowered, reduced to subaltern status" (106). The crisis, then, inherent in a binary construction of masculinity and femininity, is that the empowerment of women is considered to equal the disempowerment of men, which is interpreted by those who fear a crisis in gender as a threat to normative social structures.

Katherine Bode claims the perceived 'masculinity crisis' in Australia is manifest in the assumptions that "men no longer have access to, or are unable to fulfil, masculine roles" and that "men are emotionally disconnected from one another, and male relationships, especially those between fathers and sons, are thus impoverished" (Bode, "Unexpected" 444). If the objectification of men, especially men who are in some way damaged or weakened, is, as Bode suggests, evidence of such a crisis through the men's simultaneous sexualisation and

¹⁵ Various studies on Australian writing utilise the masculine archetypes, such as the 'bloke', the 'digger', the 'surf lifesaver' as well as tropes of 'mateship'; therefore while these concepts shape an understanding of hegemonic masculinity in Australia, these are not discussed specifically in this thesis. For further discussion of these specifically Australian constructions of masculinity in fiction, see Laura Cain's 2001 PhD thesis *Reading Culture: The Translation and Transfer of Australianness in Contemporary Fiction*.

disempowerment, I argue that such representations are, in fact, propitious as they disrupt normative roles and expectations of gender. Moreover, femininity has not been considered as 'in crisis' despite the pervasive objectification, sexualisation, and disempowerment of women; such a 'crisis' for masculinity merely reiterates the relevance of feminism. The representations of violence in Chapter Three focus on the relationship between gender and violence, and how the 'crisis' affects both genders as perpetrators and victims. The chapter challenges the acceptance of violence as necessarily gendered and interrogates the extent to which the characters, and their corporeality, are valued and/or denigrated. It demonstrates how violence is characterised as a product either of culture or of biological essentialism—and as either normative masculinity for men or deviant femininity for women.

Chapter Four explicates how deliberately sexually provocative texts do not necessarily offer a progressive view of sexuality or gender. This chapter examines the ways in which fiction relies on dominant expectations of femininity and masculinity, as well as heteronormativity, in its representations of sex. It discerns whether or not the texts explore constructions of sexuality that deviate from those gendered norms. It discusses cultural norms and taboos, and seeks to measure the extent to which power, equality and social morality affect the ways in which we interpret fictional sex. McGregor in *Suck My Toes* and Jaivin in *Eat Me* each offer a number of alternative sexual scenarios through experimental forms that allow for the incorporation of various intertwining characters and viewpoints, reiterating the subjective nature of sexuality and sexual experience. Gemmell's *The Bride Stripped Bare*, a bestselling novel despite, or perhaps because of, its erotic content, relies heavily on heteronormative expectations combined with sexually deviant secrets. Chapter Four also analyses Kneen's deliberate playing with taboo and sexual ethics in *Triptych*, in which she attempts to create jarring scenarios that bring into question the extent to which norms and morals can be applied to all sex acts.

The books discussed in Chapter Four, with the exception of *Triptych*, were published prior to the best-selling erotic novel (or, rather, romance novel with explicit sex scenes) *Fifty*

Shades of Grey, and their marketing as mainstream fiction, rather than genre fiction, suggests the growing proliferation of women's erotica over the past few decades.¹⁶ The genre of 'posh porn' is also of interest; the recently coined term is used more frequently, and is applied to popular texts with erotic content that explore "subversive sexual behaviours" (Miller 375). This labelling seems to justify the growing popularity and mainstreaming of erotic texts, and classifying increasingly acceptable texts such as *The Bride Stripped Bare* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* as 'posh porn' or 'mummy porn'—rather than pornography or erotica, which remain othered—somehow minimises their transgressive capacities.

While discussions of sexuality are evident in texts discussed throughout the thesis, the texts included in Chapter Four employ sex as an indispensable element of the narrative. Pons argues that "Sex mirrors the power relations in the wider society" (4), but he tends to place inherent value on those power dynamics in society that can influence sexual encounters. He maintains that in Australian literature, sex is an oppressive force:

The pleasure experienced by one of the partners is the counterpart of the other's humiliation. This is the power conception of sex, which denies reciprocity and equality. It appears in a good many Australian works of fiction featuring heterosexual as well as homosexual characters. (4)

To some extent, Pons's interpretation is supported by a number of texts discussed throughout this thesis—especially in Chapters Two and Three. He observes, "The loss of control over one's body when it is offered up for sex to someone who is not desired, whether

¹⁶ *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012) by E.L. James was originally erotic fan fiction based on the teen vampire romance series *Twilight* and published on fan fiction websites. James later changed the characters from *Twilight* protagonists Bella and Edward to her own creations Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey, and published the stories on her own website before they were independently released as a novel in e-book format by the Writers' Coffee Shop and, later, in print by Vintage Books. Two sequels were subsequently published and a film adaptation was released on 14 February 2015. The texts have developed their own cultural capital, and the erotic content adds to their popularity *because* it is taboo. The series' popularity increases its perceived value, thereby its cultural capital.

a stranger or a husband, is a very significant expression of social impotence” (4). This explanation is an apt description of the ways in which sex is used as a safety measure or as placation, distinguishing its function from an act predicated solely on pleasure or desire. The texts discussed in Chapter Four differ from those discussed in earlier chapters, however, because in the woman-led narratives the women actively seek the sexual encounters in which they engage and through which their agency is asserted. The power dynamics within the texts discussed in this chapter do not indicate the oppression of women, but, rather, endorse active and agential sexual power. This is not to say, however, that the sex is unproblematic. Representations of sex in fiction do indeed demonstrate power. The necessary implications of power dynamics in sexual behaviours support utilising feminist theory in analyses of heterosexual sex in literature. Equally, sex can be represented as empowering when it is agentially (and consensually) sought, evident in the texts discussed in this chapter that affirm certain sex acts through choice and transgress expectations and gendered stereotypes.

Analysing fictional portrayals of sexual behaviour can be challenging. The effects of the “feminist sex wars” of the 1970s and 1980s—debating sex, consent, power, sex workers, sadomasochism and other sexual issues—between the ‘sex-positive’ movement, evinced by Rubin, among others, and ‘anti-sex’ perspectives patent in the writing of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon are still evident in current feminist theory (Henry 90). Avoiding succumbing to either extreme of these debates has involved negotiating distinctions between erotica and pornography; analysing texts for their deliberately inflammatory, or consciously absent, depictions of sex acts; and focusing predominantly on the way that gender is constructed in sex scenes, as well as power dynamics, the role of consent and constructions of ‘innocence’. These erotic texts necessarily centre on sex, but the dynamics between characters evident in representations of sex, and the ways in which the characters consider and value their own sexual behaviour, differ substantially. Fiction allows aspects of sexual or gendered experience to be explored from particular perspectives or with a specific intention

in mind, thereby politicising such experiences; for example, McGregor attempts to present a BDSM¹⁷ party in a comic way, in order to diminish taboo and decentre stereotypical expectations. I argue that the deliberate construction of sex that confronts stereotypes and taboos is that which opens potentialities to accept a range of sex acts and which brings constrictive norms into question.

This thesis undertakes an analysis of constructions of gender and sexuality in recent and contemporary Australian fiction. The analysis is informed by feminist and queer discourses, as well as by contemporaneous accounts of the social and attitudinal changes towards sexuality and gender roles, which are thus correlated with fictional representations. Fiction offers a safe space to examine personal or private thoughts and practices, because such examinations are not critiquing the lives or experiences of embodied women; rather, representations can be evaluated with critical distance. The analyses of particular behaviours are not encroaching on, or imposing judgements about, subjective sexualities or gendered experience, and the depictions can be read from a removed and considered perspective—but also, as Kristeva says, from “that fragile spot of our subjectivity” (135). Throughout this thesis, I contend that dominant and pervasive norms need not restrict the “universe of borders, seesaws, fragile and mingled identities, wanderings of the subject and objects, fears and struggles, abjections and lyricisms” that can be shown in literature (Kristeva, *Powers* 135). There is a multiplicity of ways sexuality and gender can be represented that offer alternatives to the conventional, heteronormative, stereotypical constructions that are endorsed and maintained in Australian society and culture.

¹⁷ The acronym ‘BDSM’ is used to describe an interest in Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism.

CHAPTER ONE – NORMS

THAT IS THEIR FATE

This chapter examines gendered norms and stereotypes, and the ways in which these are manifest in fictional characters in Australian literature. I examine the dichotomous paradigms of femininity and masculinity and the extent to which these categories are used to create and, at times, delimit characterisation. I argue that constructions of gender limit the ‘choices’ that are perceived to be available to the characters and that gender can also confine the expression of *sexuality*. Throughout this chapter, I interrogate the ways in which gender stereotypes and roles are perpetuated and the extent to which such conventions are represented as ideal or ‘natural’.

Normative constructions of gender rely on assumptions of binaries. These binaries stem from the assumption of two sexes and genders: man and woman. An acceptance of this binary as natural by Western patriarchal systems leads to presumptions of gendered difference—and, in turn, a hierarchy that esteems that which is attributed to men. Such an acceptance also necessitates limits and closure against that which disrupts such expectations. In textual constructions there is, in Cranny-Francis’s words, a “propensity of patriarchy to define the feminine as the negative or ‘other’ of the masculine” (*Engendered* 117).¹⁸ One of the more pervasive ideas regarding gendered binaries is that there are essential, biologically determined traits of masculinity and femininity—men, for instance, are aggressive,

¹⁸ This tendency is not confined to texts, and, as Toril Moi summarises, has a long history:

From Antiquity to the Middle Ages women’s anatomy was not seen as inherently different from men’s, only as a different arrangement of the same parts. ... The vagina was considered an inverted penis, the womb an interior scrotum. Since male and female reproductive organs were not taken to be fundamentally different, anatomical differences were pictured as hierarchical as opposed to complementary. Man was on top and woman at the bottom of the same scale of values. (*What* 10)

ambitious, competitive, dominant, strong, and self-sufficient; women are compassionate, kind, emotional, gullible, yielding (Moi, *What* 103). These stereotypical tendencies, among a range of others, are perpetuated by the assumption that they are innate, creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In contemporary Australia, there is, for women, a post-feminist embracing—a re-sanctioning—of gendered roles regarding domesticity, marriage and motherhood; because women are able to choose particular roles, the valorisation of choice disguises the endorsement of these norms and it is therefore not readily questioned.

Like assumptions of gender and gendered traits, heteronormative assumptions are ingrained in Western thought. Heteronormativity, first coined by Michael Warner in 1991, refers to the entrenched assumption of heterosexuality as well as adherence to stereotypical roles performed by cisgendered bodies and, as a corollary, particular power dynamics assumed in heterosexual relationships. These assumptions of sexuality and gender are the accepted and assumed cultural norms regarding identity and sexual relationships, and deviating from these norms creates dissonance in terms of particular understandings. Failure to adhere to any of these heteronorms—which, in terms of gender, would mean that gendered women in ‘female’ bodies are sexually attracted to gendered men in ‘male’ bodies, and identify with concepts of femininity, and vice-versa—positions individuals as dissident and other, regardless of which aspect of these norms they have disrupted (Butler, *Gender* vii, viii). Heteronormativity is not limited to sexuality and gender, but suggests an adherence to normative constructions of femininity and masculinity with ‘natural’ roles. Catharine MacKinnon asserts that in Western culture, women’s sexual desire is “socially constructed as that by which we come to want our own self-annihilation”, and that “our subordination is eroticized” (54): “femininity as we know it is how we come to want male dominance, which most emphatically is not in our interest” (54). An *automatic* adherence to normative gender roles perpetuates patriarchal power dynamics and achieves little in terms of equality and empowerment for women.

Heteronormative cultural assumptions, or, as Butler describes in *Bodies that Matter*, 'heterosexual hegemony', are concerning because they enforce an agenda that does not match the gendered identity and sexualities, behaviours and roles of a range of people.¹⁹ What is also problematic is the assumption of dichotomous genders; as Derrida states, binary oppositions are "violent hierarchies" (41). Drawing on Butler, I maintain that while it is commonly accepted that sex is biological and gender is socially constructed (Moi, *What* 3), there is still a pervasive conceptual link between biological sex and gender; we assume that gendered women will match with a similarly sexed body. With regard to trans* bodies, there is an (albeit limited) acceptance of, for instance, gendered women in male bodies, but this still assumes that, in terms of gender as a social construction, culture has only constructed *two* genders—and these align with the assumption of two biological sexes. Thus, there is little opportunity for the idea of 'gender' to exist outside of the feminine/masculine construction. Despite the acceptance that gender is not biological and not innate, and masculinity and femininity are not predetermined but socially produced, there is still an inability to move past essentialist assumptions of gendered identity and the 'reading' of others' bodies. As Julie Abraham argues, conventional texts replicate heteronormativity in their plots by "correlating sexuality and gender", and, therefore, "femininity and masculinity are ensured by heterosexuality, and ensure heterosexuality" (3). Abraham likewise draws on Butler's heterosexual matrix as that which defines our understanding of the dominant model of gender and sexuality. Jonathan Dollimore, too, argues that homophobia works as a conflation of "two other classic binaries: masculine/feminine; hetero/homosexual. It is often observed that misogyny and homophobia go together", and he argues that the "conflation of binaries enables a merging of misogyny and homophobia, each of which then potentially

¹⁹ Heterosexual hegemony is referred to as the 'heterosexual matrix' in *Gender Trouble*, but reworked in later texts.

expresses the violence of the other" (*Dissidence* 236). Gender and sexuality, here, are correlated in understandings of deviance.

Sexuality, as a construct, is as fraught as gendered norms. In 1984, Rubin's "Thinking Sex" analysed the way in which sex is policed in society, and arguably, many of her assertions remain valid. Her contention that "Sexuality in western societies has been structured within an extremely punitive social framework, and has been subjected to very real formal and informal controls" (150) remains applicable to contemporary Australia, despite the sex positivity evident in popular culture. 'Sex positive' feminism refers to the idea that sexual liberation is necessarily intertwined with women's freedom, and, in turn, perceived restrictions on sexual identity contributes to women's oppression; as such, 'pro-sex' perspectives oppose any kinds of restrictions on sexual behaviour for women and men. However, the norms evident within, say, media representations of sex contribute to the "sexual ideology" which has an important role in how we experience sex and sexuality. Because of this ideology, "definitions and evaluations of sexual conduct are objects of bitter contest" (Rubin 161). The ways in which people are expected to engage in sex are endorsed and policed by cultural norms. Because of increasing permissiveness regarding sexuality in contemporary Australian society, the 'choice' to engage in sex acts with partners with whom one is not in a monogamous relationship, is ostensibly accepted and, more frequently, expected. However, while minimal social censure towards decisions about sex means that women have more control over their own bodies and lives than if sexual behaviour outside of marriage was completely unacceptable—a positive step in terms of women's sexual identities—'liberation' regarding sexuality is often interpreted as meaning that sex, whether within marriage or extra-marital, *should not* be refused. As Maguire asserts, women's choices are consistently constrained: "members of an oppressed group have fewer and less attractive choice than non-oppressed people. We're not talking about *the decisions* of individuals ... we're talking about the scope for decision-making that is available to individuals" (*Princesses* 11, emphasis in original). Hence, there exists an obligatory pressure

to engage in particular sex acts. I would argue that these problematic elements regarding women's 'choices' are evidence of the ongoing importance of feminism.

Constructions of femininity in fiction are frequently limited. Alyson Miller contends that literature is "a form that requires strict guidelines in order to meet expectations of its socio-cultural role" (380) and that subverting constructions of feminine sexuality, for instance, invariably alters the role that fiction normally plays. She maintains that there is evident apprehension in society towards "literature that represents women and sexuality", and that the "persistent link between controversy and narratives concerning female sexuality ... suggests a deep-seated cultural anxiety about women and gendered behaviour" (368).

Constructions of motherhood are also important to address when discussing femininity. The assumption that women have particular qualities because of their maternal capacities is pervasive and tied to essentialist biological assumptions that the role necessitates innate kindness, nurturing, patience and selflessness, as well as a knack for domesticity. With it also comes the assumption that women are already mothers, or will be mothers, or else there is some kind of flaw in the woman. The reclamation of conventional femininity is evident in cries that "Feminism stole my babies" (Dux and Simic 73), in which the second-wave ideal that women can 'have it all' is ostensibly responsible for women's decisions to delay, or refuse, motherhood—which they later regretted. Motherhood is endorsed as an essential ideal for women, and the failure to reproduce is associated with 'ambitiousness' and selfishness, traits which subvert normative femininity.

In Australia, as in other Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland, complacency and acceptance of women's experiences has contributed to the adoption of post-feminist ideals. There is an inherent acknowledgement of feminism's value in terms of equality, particularly with regard to sexual mores, and civil and economic rights. With this, though, comes an assumption of feminism's success and completion: the view that Western women have achieved equality with men with regard to rights and

choices—that is, the right to choose from a select range of potential lifestyles—is adopted as a new kind of feminism.

Post-feminism, as a theoretical position, has developed in a similar vein to postmodernism and post-structuralism and responds to some of the critiques of second-wave feminism regarding intersectionality—the idea that there are a number of different facets of identity that affect our experiences in the world, which means the assumption of women’s shared experiences is problematic. Post-feminism ostensibly takes into account the influence of different aspects of identity, thus endorsing empowerment through individual experience. The theory advocates for freedom of expression and choice regarding gender and sexuality. Post-feminist ideology discounts social responsibility, continuity and collectivity endorsed by second-wave feminism and holds that all individual choices that women make have credence; it is thus argued that because feminism has succeeded, desiring a particular lifestyles is not succumbing to gendered expectations, but rather is an active and empowered ‘choice’. And while this is true— in Australia, getting married or becoming a mother, for instance, are, in most cases, choices—this does not discount the extent to which actual choices are limited by ingrained social constraints. Marriage and children, in contemporary society, have particular cultural capital and are marketed as the ultimate end, and they are an expectation rather than an unmediated choice.²⁰ While valuing choices made by individual women is important, the problem with post-feminism is that it implies all choices women make are thereby feminist, and thus it discounts the extent to which the options that women have are limited by the patriarchal structures within which they have to operate.

²⁰ For instance, in a 2014 article published in *The Wall Street Journal*, Susan Patton recently advised young women to “smarten up” and spend more time “hunting” for a husband rather than developing a career. The “P.C. feminist line” is, according to Patton, misleading, and “traditional roles” are “perfectly natural and even wonderful”—and apparently preferable to alternatives revealed by feminism.

Post-feminism's individualism and related focus on the body as an object of consumerism privileges capitalist ideals and modes of consumption. Rosalind Gill discusses "neoliberalism and gender relations" in post-feminist discourse. She states that both neoliberalism and post-feminism "appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves" ("Culture" 443). The "autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism" shares a number of similarities with "the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism" (443). Along with this, however, comes the obligatory onus of post-feminism to lie solely with women: "in the popular cultural discourses examined here, it is women who are called to self-manage, self-discipline. ... [W]omen are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen" (443). In post-feminism, 'choice' functions within a neo-liberal and neo-capital agenda of individualism and consumerism, and the options available exist within capitalist expectations of consumption. The idea of freedom of choice ties into these prescriptive modes of Australian existence. It remains important to acknowledge different facets of identity; however, the rejection of collectivism associated with feminism can have negative consequences in terms of women's equality and ignores the overarching patriarchal power structures that remain pervasive in Australian culture. Because of the social limitations imposed on women that remain prevalent, I argue that feminism has not achieved enough for post-feminism to be viable in Australia.

Post-feminist conceptions of women's bodies rely substantially on the construction of a hypothetical yet specific normative body that is ideal and unattainable. A sense of physical dissatisfaction, I argue, is a necessary element of the post-feminist conception of feminine bodies. Women's bodies are also interpreted in comparison to other bodies; one is reliant on representations of other bodies to interpret oneself as a viable subject (Grosz, *Volatile* 38). The accepted options for women's appearance, in terms of their face, weight, shape, dress,

hair, are dictated by particular social norms, which are always changing but always restrictive, and to deviate from these is to be positioned outside of accepted femininity and therefore—intentionally or unintentionally—identifiable as other, unfeminine, undesirable, vulnerable. Jean Baudrillard asserts that the body, particularly women's bodies, have become commodified, a 'consumer object' (277); the body is the site of value, and liberation, and in which we should invest. He argues that we have "reappropriated" the body "to meet 'capitalist' objectives", and we are expected to alter and care for it as a "*signifier of social status*" (279, emphasis in original):

The body is not reappropriated for the autonomous ends of the subject, but in terms of a *normative* principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability, in terms of an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the code and the norms of a society of production and managed consumption. (279, emphasis in original)

Baudrillard states that the omnipresence of the body is manifest in society as a whole—evidenced by our preoccupation with "the hygienic, dietetic, therapeutic ... [and] the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatments and regimes" (277). For women, the importance of beauty has become undeniable and necessary, and is read as "**the** basic, imperative quality of those who take the same care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls" (Baudrillard 279, bold emphasis in original). Women's physical appearances also affect their perceived 'value' and, therefore, the extent to which they are censured or admired. This view of the body as an object with specific value also ties into Levy's views on contemporary raunch culture and how the normalising of hypersexualisation results in the commodification and further objectification of women's bodies—particularly by other women. Raunch culture ostensibly suggests sexual empowerment and liberation through the breaking down of conservative sexual expectations, but it ultimately reflects patriarchal values and internalises the 'male gaze', stereotyping feminine sexuality and affecting expressions of sexuality and expectations of how femininity should be performed.

Post-feminist ideology is evident in contemporary Australian society and, I would argue, this influences particular constructions of gender in fiction that, in turn, perpetuate specific norms; thus, there is a dialogue between constructions of gender in texts and 'real life'. The simultaneous tendency to accept and perpetuate particular norms is also evident in representations of femininity. Throughout this chapter, and indeed this thesis, I argue that challenging the dichotomous representations of gender and gendered traits allows for an interrogation of our acceptance of the limited and limiting constructs of masculinity and femininity.

Fiction offers the opportunity to challenge particular constructions because of its very fictionality. Constructing women characters that subvert expectations regarding femininity and sexuality means that such alternatives can be presented without actual social pressure. Such destabilisation is exemplified in the discussion of Rowe's stories later in this chapter. Rowe does not employ gendered pronouns or character names in her short stories, and thus her characters can be read as any gender—or without gender at all. Despite this potential, Australian "women's writing" is generally expected to focus on the domestic sphere, particularly mothering and relationships. Bronwyn Cran questions the particular qualities that mark the distinction between 'women's writing' and 'political writing', focusing on women authors (including Lohrey) whose shift in focus to the domestic sphere marks a departure from their previously published, more political novels. She argues that these "mark a shift from an engagement with the public sphere and its machinery of work, class and institutional politics to a more private sphere and the texture of everyday life" (Cran 35). The novels thereby bring into question the differences between political fiction and 'women's writing', and what it is that constitutes 'the political' in fiction.

Cran identifies the tendency for particular themes in women's writing to ensure that texts are relegated to the genre of women's writing, where similar content in a novel written by a man might be considered political (37). Cran suggests that it is assumed domesticity is the 'natural' realm for women's writing and thus the focus for women writers, and that the

political novel, such as Lohrey's *The Reading Group* (1988), is less often associated with writing by women. Cran argues that despite feminist attempts to highlight the relationship between "everyday life" and the "political", "a dichotomy between the public and private spheres is still insisted upon to determine the nature of the 'political' in writing by women" (37). However, while domestic content—particularly when contrasted with previous explicitly political writing—may suggest a disengagement from political concerns, it certainly can also be representative of an evident "reformulation", potentially "emblematic of more complex shifts in notions of the 'public', the 'private' and the 'political'" (35). The 'political' is evident in much 'women's writing'; I argue that both Lohrey's *Camille's Bread* and *The Mint Lawn* by Mears engage with significant political concerns in their novels by unambiguously interrogating gendered power dynamics from within the domestic sphere. While both rely on conventional expectations of gendered roles throughout their novels, these expectations are not represented without consideration, and the consequences of performing particular roles and conforming to expectations of one's gender are addressed both explicitly and implicitly throughout the texts.

This chapter will also incorporate a discussion of the genre of chick lit. The appeal of genres such as romance and more recent chick lit suggests that the texts speak to particular problems and tensions in women's lives. While it is easy to laugh at genre fiction—especially that directed towards women—and denigrate it as trite and superficial, it is also important to look beyond the mockery and embarrassment to understand its ongoing appeal. As Tania Modleski argues, the ways in which the genres and predictable narrative arcs have evolved "can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but to invest their situations with some degree of dignity" (5). While this does not discount the occurrence of such themes in more literary texts, the popularity of prosaic generic texts exemplifies the appeal of the particular narrative arc.

The genre of chick lit is simultaneously valuable and insidious. Some feminist literary critics argue that chick lit has developed to offer realistic portrayals of the primary concerns

in women's lives in a way that is not condescending, but rather humorous and empowering, and that the genre as a whole shows a generous expression of sexuality and relationships. The focus on 'Mr Right Now' as opposed to 'Mr Right' means that most of the sex that occurs is an expression of sexual desire, rather than a contract of undying love. By giving the female protagonist a number of sexual partners and experiences, chick lit lets the story of the heroine's growth stand on its own, rather than focusing only on the attainment of love and then ending, as is the case of popular romances. In addition, because accepted conventions regarding sexual behaviour have changed and "it is not only accepted but also expected in contemporary culture that young women will have had at least some sexual experience before settling into a serious long-term relationship or marriage", the "more experienced heroines" in chick lit novels are supposed to be more relatable to readers (Mabry 202). In chick lit, sexual experience is esteemed over sexual 'purity'. Despite this, I would argue that because most texts of the genre end with the protagonist in, or at the very least beginning, a relationship with the Perfect Man, the genre is in keeping with earlier conventions of romance and courtship novels, still relies heavily on heterosexist assumptions of romance and the role of men as husband. Moreover, despite its liberal perspectives on sex, chick lit perpetuates gendered norms rather than offering any alternative. The opportunity for subversion is there, but the actual conventions of the genre limit the possibilities that anything rather than stereotypical and heteronormative constructions of gender and relationships can be evident. The representation of sexual freedom—within delimited paradigms—in conjunction with neo-conservative desires for particular forms of heteronormative relationships reinforces the link to post-feminist ideology. The genre is therefore of interest in analysing manifestations of post-feminism in fiction.

Modleski argues that derision towards particular forms associated with women's consumption, such as romance novels or television soap operas, because of assumptions of inferiority or superficiality discounts their value as forms that can exemplify women's desires and spaces for displacing patriarchal traditions (106-07). I agree that it is

important to examine these forms critically, rather than assuming immediately that they contain little purpose or value. Moreover, while they remain an easy target, their role as feminine genres is useful in the examination of constructions of femininity. The importance of these texts lies in their challenges to dominant cultural norms, so we can attempt to avoid simply repeating and endorsing conservative ideals of femininity that ultimately limit constructions of women. I maintain that, while the overarching power evident in dominant social discourses is undeniable, literature and fiction have always challenged dominant political discourses. Constructions of gender and sexuality are part of these discourses, and thus fiction has the potential to offer alternatives regarding such constructions.

“Does he think I’m attractive? Do I think he’s attractive? Would he make a good husband?”: Australian Chick Lit by Jessica Adams, Maggie Alderson and Rachel Treasure

Chick lit is of importance in discussions of representations of women in fiction, because, as Stephanie Harzewski argues, it “has changed the representation of single women in literature by portraying not figures of pity, illness, or derision, but a cast of funny, usually capable women not looking to settle” (vi). The genre of popular fiction specifically focuses on sexuality and gender roles and is of value because of its attempts to present “affirmative notions of female identity, sexuality, and community” (Mabry 205). While the options to deviate from the expected and accepted norms for women in popular fiction are limited, there is an attempt to exemplify and endorse variations in women’s sexualities in a way that extends conventional tropes. Chick lit, as a genre, purports to represent the lifestyles of contemporary women, and it upholds a particular relationship between femininity and sexuality. The genre is ultimately frivolous, easily consumed and predictable, but the content ostensibly represents—or is at least endearing or relatable to—its contemporary readership. The popularity of the genre means that there is some element of appeal. Because it is widely read, addressing constructions of the protagonists allows for insight into an idealised

feminine form. The way in which the roles of women and sexual relationships are developed in the texts invariably promotes a particular value system about femininity.

Although the genre is more commonly associated with British and American writing, it is still active in Australian popular fiction. Treasure, Adams and Alderson are among a range of authors who focus on the work, domestic and sex lives of women protagonists in their popular novels. This section will address *Pants on Fire* by Alderson, and two short stories from the *Girls' Night In* collection, edited by Adams: "Victoria Shepworth's Big Night Out" by Adams and "From Tarot to Tractors" by Treasure. Each of the stories, though very different, echoes elements of *Pants on Fire*, showing particular 'Australian' tropes in their characterisation and their setting. The texts also rely on their 'Australian-ness' in their marketing. The 'praise' on the back cover of *Girls' Night In*, for example, includes such endorsements as, "As girly as a pyjama party... this is a book to dip into like a packet of Tim Tams". This, of course, relies on Australian advertising clichés that link women and iconic chocolate biscuits, and intimates that the book in no way purports to be substantial but exists solely for the purpose of superficial enjoyment. *Pants on Fire*, too, by Alderson, similarly repeats such generic banalities; its cover boasts a headless cartoon woman wearing stilettos, and its blurb a reference to the protagonist Georgia "looking forward to immersing herself in the Tim Tam-eating sisterhood of women's magazines. Not to mention being whisked off into the dusty Australian sunset by a suntanned, Akubra-hatted fantasy man". Both books thus employ stereotypically Australian and 'feminine' fantasies and desires, which are recognisable to both characters and readers. Georgia's 'Australian' experience in *Pants on Fire* includes the Mardi Gras, Tim Tams, and wealthy farmers from an extensive property. The name-dropping of fashion labels in the novel is as much about R.M. Williams and Akubra as Dolce and Gabbana. Likewise, the 'hilarity' of Georgia being unaware of what a 'ute' is and the crassness of her Australian colleagues in comparison with her British ones act as markers to assure both Australian and international readers that this chick lit is *different*.

The genre of chick-lit is usually quite prescriptive, in that it involves professionally successful and affluent women, generally between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five who are serially single and seek a potential husband. The protagonist usually engages in a variety of sexual encounters that culminate in disaster, but the text invariably ends in romantic success. Most texts are written from the first-person perspective, in an attempt to position the narrator as subject, rather than the object of a male gaze (Mabry 195-96; Modleski 56), and they offer a contemporary perspective on sex and romance for women. Chick lit fictions, therefore, can be read as examples of post-feminism. Harzewski states that chick lit allows for the consideration of “contemporary sexual politics and the intersections of heterosexuality and economic value” (xiii). Anna Kiernan, too, posits that chick lit, more so than romance novels, offers “sophisticated insight into the lives, loves, and aspirations of the women it speaks for and to: ‘anticipating pleasure’ has largely been superseded by actively seeking and experiencing pleasure” (208). Mabry also addresses the positive elements of chick lit, arguing that an important facet of chick lit, and one to which women can relate, is that “the primary focus of each of these texts is not simply on the woman but on the woman’s place in the world in general and in sexual relationships in particular” (200). The ‘romance’ is “often given much less narrative and emotional weight than the heroine’s own experiences and relationships — both platonic and sexual — with other characters” (200), which shows an important shift from generic romance novels: chick lit ostensibly attempts to encapsulate contemporary women’s experiences, not simply to focus on the love story.

Sex within these novels is an aspect of these experiences, and the person/s with whom the protagonist has sex is not limited to ‘Mr Right’. Mabry argues that in chick lit novels, sex is “a way for the woman to explore her own identity and express her own desires” as opposed to being just a small part of a wider “romance narrative that emphasizes traditional gender roles” (Mabry 200). Kiernan, too, states that “sex, romance’s new variable, has heralded a new phase of women’s fiction—one that raises questions about how feminine desire is constructed, articulated, and received in and beyond fiction” (208-09).

As a genre, chick lit's importance in terms of feminism lies in its specific focus on sexuality and gender roles. Despite the encouraging elements of the genre outlined by Harzewski, Mabry, and Kiernan, there are a number of restrictive elements evident in the post-feminist values that the texts favour, and the genre enforces a conservative social arrangement in terms of gender and sexuality. While there may be different or progressive alternatives offered, a number of chick lit texts still maintain that the ultimate ideal is to settle into a monogamous heterosexual relationship, and this ideal can work to silence the outspoken women's voices (Mabry 204). Thus, according to Mabry, chick lit, in its various forms, can be "just as conservative" as generic romances in novels and films, because they are still created from within a patriarchal culture (205).

Female protagonists are *lacking* because of their unmarried status, regardless of achieved success in other elements of their lives. Women are damaged by men, but can be redeemed only by a man. The capacity for a (hetero)sexual relationship to make or break women is evident in most of the female characters in *Pants on Fire*, in that the women who struggle with issues such as excessive drug use or eating disorders developed these detrimental behaviours after traumatic experiences with men, but manage to overcome them in the arms of another one. The way in which sexual relationships are portrayed as a solution to problems discounts serious issues and perpetuates the superficial manner in which women are portrayed. Similarly, the inability to find and keep a man is shown to be some kind of deficit within the female protagonist. The verb 'find' occurs frequently in the focus texts, as though the perfect individual is out there and will be discovered if the protagonist sleeps with enough people. Sexual liberation, in these texts, is used as a means for catching another individual rather than for pleasure, and promiscuity can be justified only by eventually 'settling down'; the negative perspective held towards women who do not seek permanent monogamy remains evident in the overarching moral perspective of the text.

Along with the prescriptive constructions of heterosexuality, the assumption of heteronormativity is also a problematic element of the genre. The texts reinforce the

conventional perspective of marriage between men and women as the ultimate end. Heterosexual relationships are the *only* romantic relationships considered valuable within these texts: there is little space for queerness in chick lit romances. Abraham stresses the difficulty of representing lesbianism in conventional heterosexual plots. She argues that in their constructions of women, heterosexual plots are necessarily heteronormative, because “regardless of whether love or sexuality are the subjects of the text” they provide “a basis for narratives into which the heterosexuality of the subjects can disappear”; heterosexuality remains the normative assumption for the sexuality of characters (Abraham 3). The plot of chick lit texts invariably relies on heterosexual romance, and the desire for love means that the dynamics of heteronormativity dictate their plots, discounting the possibility of lesbian plots that do not rely on heterosexual norms. There is, of course, space for same-sex friendships, and there are gay men as friends (who are generally limited to the predominantly asexual role of shopping-and-dancing partner), but these are not the end goal of the texts. Gay men and their relationships are commonly fetishized within the genre, and their roles as unconditional friends are unchallenged and embraced.

In *Pants on Fire*, gay men are an integral part of Georgia’s milieu and social engagements. She reflects, “I couldn’t imagine life without my gay friends. The camper the better. They were the centre of my universe. The chilli on my hot dog. The pom poms on my mules” (73). To her surprise, her dependence is juxtaposed with her friend Liinda’s aversion; she asserts that she does not “like really camp men” (73):²¹

‘I thought all strong women loved gay men,’ I said, suddenly missing my boys in London terribly. ‘They’re like oxygen for me. I prefer them to straight men most of the time ... [b]ecause you know they like you just for you. With straight men there’s always that element of

²¹ Liinda has changed her name from Linda because it is ‘better’ in terms of numerology.

thinking: Does he think I'm attractive? Do I think he's attractive? Would he make a good husband? With gay men you don't have to worry about all that.'

'I think that's really weird,' said Liinda. 'But then I'm not sure I really like any men much, and I certainly don't trust gay ones any more than straight ones. I think that's such a fallacy. They all hate women deep down.' (73-74)

Both Georgia and Liinda's perspectives are disconcerting in their totalising essentialism, as though gay men are of a particular kind and camp equates to personality. Where Liinda's feminism supposedly puts her at odds with gay men, Georgia seems to rely on them for a particular kind of masculine reassurance. The preoccupations with love and marriage that ostensibly affect her ability to have male friends reveal the heteronormative assumptions regarding interactions between opposite genders that are implicit in Georgia's paradigms. Her statement that 'all strong women love gay men' also brings into question the dichotomies inherent in her statement: does this mean 'weak' women do not 'love' gay men? Strong women do not love straight men? Gay men befriend strong women? Such questions are not addressed in the texts discussed in this chapter. However, Georgia's statement essentially implies an ingrained similarity between all gay men, as though each must have particular 'lovable' qualities that appeal to 'strong' women. Gay men are, however, stereotyped perhaps even more so than women in chick lit novels; the singularity of the gay man stereotype here entails sassiness, bitchiness and an eye for fashion, as well as a safe space in which to share the woes of friendships and romance. As an aside, Liinda's disdain for men does not mean that she is destined to be single; she, too, finds love, with a non-conventional man who has dreadlocks, showing that all likeable characters can always end up with a 'good' man to complete them.

Chick lit texts endorse, in both appearance and behaviour, conventional femininity in women — and masculinity in men. The specific requirements for masculinity may differ, but

they usually involve undeniable handsomeness in the eyes of the protagonist and her friends, assertiveness and prowess, and often some kind of uniform or, in Australian chick lit, owning a large property and some livestock. The embracing and elevation of femininity ultimately promotes particular values, gender roles and aspects of physical appearance. Femininity, in chick lit, requires consumerism in terms of merchandise, men and sex, and the genre focuses on women's bodies and attractiveness, which are tied into an inherently consumerist culture. Expensive fashion and cosmetics are essential and are specified throughout the collection. Physical appearance is valorised, middle- and upper-class values and idealisations of white bodies emphasised. Women's bodies are likewise commodities, not only because of what they are covered with, but because their beauty is an instrument for the gaining of happiness.

In *Pants on Fire*, stereotypes of gendered behaviour in relationships are reflected in the headlines and articles published in *Glow*, which tend to be based on the sexual dalliances of the *Glow* staff. (The role of women's magazine editor is common for many chick lit protagonists, but also reflects author Alderson's career.) Georgia's 'famous' expensive handbag collection adds to the genre's endorsement of expensive consumption and constructs her status as belonging to a particular crowd. Deviations from the stereotypically feminine—or, perhaps, an over-feminisation to the point of deviance—occur within *Pants on Fire* in the forms of drug use and eating disorders.

Throughout the novel, drug use is permitted as a form of entertainment, but abuse and the negative effects on some users are shown to outweigh the fun times. The novel thus maintains moralistic undertones, commenting on addiction and the problematic nature of using drugs to deal with grief and sadness. Liinda, for instance, is a recovering addict, and her sobriety is pronounced throughout the novel. Liinda explains to Georgia that her father was violent when she was growing up, and that she was later raped by her mother's boyfriend. While she was dux of her high school (because characterisation of affable characters must be positive in some ways), she began using drugs to deal with her past—and because her boyfriend used them, indicating the pattern of influence that men have on Liinda's life (68-

69). Trauma is offered as a kind of explanation and almost justification for drug abuse, yet it is shown to be an undesirable way of dealing with such issues; drugs are for fun, not for healing. Debbie's excessive drug use, represented as crossing the line into abuse, is also attributed to her grief over the death of her fiancé. Drug abuse is shown as a response to an overflow of negative emotion and an inability to cope with that emotion, and thus dangerous drug use is reactionary and pathological. Controlling one's body is an important expectation of femininity.

Zoe's eating disorder, too, is represented as a particularly *feminine* pathology. Eating disorders are certainly shown as dangerous illnesses in the novel, but they are also shown as destabilising the expected regulation and control of women's bodies and appearance. The commodification of women's bodies is an important element of the narrative—*Glow* is, of course, a fashion magazine—and the objectification of the disordered body is at odds with the feminine ideal. These ideals are discussed in the novel: for example, when Zoe hires an anorexic girl for the cover of the magazine and states, "I don't think she's thin," *Glow* editor Maxine is furious, and angrily avows, "We can't use these pictures—they're dangerous to young women" (156). While Maxine acknowledges the dangers the beauty industry faces promoting particular ideals, the novel still presents all the female staff as slender and beautiful, and thus the focus on appearances, reiterated throughout the text, does little to challenge conventional expectations of 'beauty' that contributes to the existence of particular norms. Equally, the way Zoe's bulimia is discussed in a shocked and almost mocking way—for instance, "I remembered Zoe's desperate little monkey face on the treadmill" (Alderson 127)—alongside eating cakes and working out at the gym located in the *Glow* building, shows that there is a fine line between acceptable eating and bodily control and that which is unacceptable. Toeing this line ensures a regulated and appropriate feminine body.

The manner in which sex is represented in *Pants on Fire* invariably intersects with stereotypical expectations of masculinity and femininity; Georgia's perspective on masculinity is removed from sexuality; worthy men are those who are able to provide for

their dependants, both financially and emotionally. These provisions are simultaneously conservative, in that assumptions of financial support work within a quintessential framework, but the emotional support endorsed by the novels highlights contemporary expectations of masculinity.

Equally, the short stories in *Girls' Night In* endorse a particular kind of man—a man who is simultaneously masculine and sensitive—who meets his ideal match in the female protagonist. Men who do not make the grade are evident to the readers in a number of ways, whether stated explicitly or through the reader's understanding of the genre's conventions. The professions of ardent desire from the seemingly indifferent male lead shows that, according to Modleski, despite the power dynamic, the woman was capable of bewitching him, and therefore shows that she was wielding power without her knowledge; thus, the women characters have power in their very characterisation (7). The most desirable male romantic lead is often unavailable, for a variety of reasons—heartbreak, grief and miscommunication are common—but the convention of admissions of love towards the end of the narrative show that, indeed, the female protagonist was always the object of desire. I would argue, however, that this does not necessarily equate to “evening things up”, as Modleski asserts (7), because the relationship still relies on a dynamic in which the protagonist must *wait to be loved*; rather than being an active subject, she is an object of his love.

The notion of waiting for love is both ingrained and rejected in “Victoria Shepworth's Big Night Out”, as Victoria actively seeks the perfect man but is ultimately pursued by, and settles for, one whom she has previously rebuffed. Victoria is single, though still in ambivalent contact with her ex-boyfriend Bill (who is in a relationship). Victoria puts an advertisement in the newspaper asking for a Valentine's Day date—the most unacceptable night of the year to be dateless. She travels from Sydney to Melbourne to date five men in half an hour, because the men in Sydney are inadequate, as Victoria's friend Hilary declares:

Never forget, Victoria. We live in Sydney, a city ruled by inner-city boys in their late thirties with Triple J promotional condoms and Winona Ryder stickers on the fridge. We live in a city populated by ferals. 'Footy Show' men. Criminals. Paedophiles. People from Bondi who wear sunglasses that make them look like blowflies. Men who wear their baseball caps backwards. Failed performance poets. Ageing backpackers with small feet. Mummy's boys who own four-wheel drives and live on the North Shore. And barristers. (Adams 3)

As luck would have it, Victoria's ex-boyfriend 'Bill the Boffin' shows up to save her from the men that look like 'sea monsters' who have responded to her newspaper advertisement. Bill has broken up with his girlfriend, and the two spend Valentine's Day together. The hints of the love that still exists between them are evident, despite the apparent aggravation that Victoria previously felt in their relationship. Although nothing has really changed, the story ultimately seems to suggest that a tumultuous heterosexual relationship is better than being single. While Bill is not constructed as an idealised romantic interest, the story suggests an undeniable 'connection' despite their apparent incompatibility, underlining the perceived necessity for a woman to have a boyfriend, and suggesting that suitability is based on a range of criteria separate from emotion or affinity, and predominantly led by availability. The physical descriptions of both men and women throughout the story stress the importance of appearance: men with bad sunglasses and men who wear hats backwards are rendered feral. While Hilary's statement is obviously intended facetiously, the superficiality inherent in the story diminishes the significant differences between these apparently 'unsuitable' criteria, emphasising the extent to which the proposed values in the story are flawed.

Such a snapshot of Sydney is also evident in *Pants on Fire*, which positions Georgia as a member of a particular urban tribe—artists, musicians, designers, and other influential and creative types who are famous and create popular movements as opposed to subverting them. While Georgia observes, "Sydney's a big place" (Alderson 298), her friend Zoe

elucidates the defined strata and explains that its society is “divided up into very distinct sets”—which closely match those identified by Hilary in the earlier passage. Thus, Georgia’s friendship circle is limited to a specific subculture:

‘Take you—you’ve arrived here and moved straight into the Eastern Suburbs groovy A list. Fashion, art world, media, some stylish foodies and a few glamorous stockbrokers, that’s pretty much it. They all live in Potts Point, Elizabeth Bay, Paddington, Woollahra and Bondi. Right?’

I ran through a mental rolladex of my friends. ‘And Surry Hills.’

‘OK. And maybe the odd one in Point Piper, but that’s it. Now I move partly in that set, because of my job, but I’m really one of the Eastern Suburbs young professionals B list. I’ve been part of it since I was born. ... That’s my scene. Remember how we went out on Mardi Gras night and bumped into a crowd of my friends? ... You didn’t relate to them at all, did you? ... It’s not your crowd. I bet you’ve liked every single friend of Debbie’s you’ve met. Right? ... That’s your tribe, you see? The different Sydney scenes don’t mix much.’ (299)

Zoe goes on to list the other ‘tribes’ that exist around Sydney—“the alternative feral crowd”, “the groovier inner-city feral trendies”, “inner-west yuppies”, “the super-straight Mosman young mums and dads”, “the Upper North Shore Liberal Brahmins”, and the “well-off artsy boho set” (300-1)—explaining why Georgia cannot fit in elsewhere. The very particular descriptions of these different groups and their value status reflect the definitions of the requirements of subcultures: they are “focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture” and that they can be “merely loosely-defined strands or ‘milieux’” or have “a clear, coherent identity and structure” (Clarke et al. 94). These Sydney groups are distinct, and rarely overlap. That Georgia is unable to enjoy the company of people from other groups

shows the tight structures and restraints implicit in the membership of these tribes, and an explicit reliance on particular roles and archetypes in order to contain the narrative. It also exemplifies the differences between Australia, specifically Sydney, and much larger urban centres such as London.

In “From Tarot to Tractors” by Treasure, the importance of appearance is also evident; however, men in nice suits are shown as lacking masculine authenticity in comparison with a man with “a rugged jawline, rough with stubble” and “coarse and work-worn hands” (Treasure 593). The demands placed on men to live up to certain standards of appearance and behaviour are as strong as those placed on women: men are viewed as items for consumption, who must meet high standards. Treasure’s story reflects the pastoral ideal, also evident in *Pants on Fire*, in its presentation of Australian farm life as difficult and yet more ‘authentic’, in a way, than its urban alternative. The story tells of Eliza’s trip to the country to visit her happily married and maternal friend Sam. Eliza attempts to leave Sam’s farm in the evening for a rendezvous with a city man (who wears a suit); however, various inconveniences, or ‘bad omens’, prevent her departure: a storm, broken windscreen wipers, a tree down in the driveway. Eliza decides to stay the night at Sam’s, where the dashing Owen arrives, bringing pizza, a tractor to move the tree, and news that he, too, must stay the night at Sam’s; such a serendipitous conclusion of the romance between Eliza and Owen is not rare in chick lit, but it is used efficiently here in concord with the story’s preoccupation with fate.

Discussions between Sam and Eliza about the men they desire, or, rather, the *masculinity* they desire with/in the body of a man, reveal the stereotypical qualities that a man must have to be desirable, which (in this case) are those evident in farmers: good Australian men who live in the unspecified, yet always immensely prosperous, location of ‘The Country’. These qualities—goodness, wealth, physical viability, knowledge of the land and a love of animals—are associated with an innate and genuine masculinity, as though an ability to fix things and work outdoors are strong indicators of authenticity. Eliza and Sam

discuss these aspects of ‘manliness’, underlined here by the ownership of tools and similar accoutrements:

‘It’s kind of sexual, isn’t it?’ Eliza said, surveying Jeremy’s shelves. ‘All these male and female bits that fit into one another or screw onto one another. It’s a turn-on really. Very macho.’

‘Why do you think I fell for Jez? I love a man with diesel on his hands and dust on his boots. A real man. You know.’

‘Yep. You picked a beauty. He’s a machinery man to the core. So masculine and sexy.’ And suddenly Eliza wished for a machinery man herself. (Treasure 593)

The comparisons of men with machinery are disconcerting, not only for their dehumanisation of men—the transformation of men into a *product*—but also for their reinforcement of a stereotype of masculinity. That is, a man must resemble a tractor, and complements a feminine woman by doing so. The imagery of machinery later manifests as sexual innuendo —“Maybe you could show me your massive tractor later? I love a good tractor” (597)—further exemplifying the extent to which this specific definition, or assumption, of masculinity is a desirable trait.

The assumption that women inherently want to “settle down” in a particular kind of lifestyle is also apparent, as Sam assumes she knows what Eliza must want: “‘Come on,’ Sam says with a gleam in her eye. ‘I can tell. You’re longing for it. Only you don’t know it *yet*’” (589, emphasis in original). Few details are given of Eliza’s hectic city life, apart from her “chasing suits in the city” (586), but it is shown to be in direct opposition to her friend Sam’s lifestyle, and ‘settling down’ in a pastoral environment with some kids and a machinery man, though not necessarily presented as ideal, is portrayed as preferable in this story. While the pastoral is not generally promoted in chick lit, the promotion of a farming lifestyle is more common in Australian chick lit, emphasising not only an idealised image of the bush, but also endorsing a particular kind of Australian man associated with this environment.

While *Pants on Fire* is set in Sydney, the wealthy men from farming families are the most desirable, predominantly *because of* their specific Australian masculinity. Despite Georgia's sexual sorties with various men throughout the novel, Rory is continually represented as Georgia's ideal man, and the audience is given clear indicators that Rory is right for her. He is creative (his art is on display in the Art Gallery of New South Wales), traumatised (his brothers died in a tragic accident), responsible, loyal and considerate (he is staying on the farm to look after it for his parents, despite his lack of ambition), wealthy (so, so rich, and this is reiterated throughout) and handsome, of course—but not stereotypically handsome, which explains why he is available. Rory's behaviour initially may suggest that he has no interest in Georgia, but readers are able to recognise him as the love interest and his actions as those of *being in love*—rather than, say, disdain or indifference. Tanya Modleski states that because of a text's adherence to generic conventions, "the reader, acquainted with the formula and hence in possession of what Wolfgang Iser calls 'advance retrospection,' is always able to interpret the hero's actions as a result of his increasingly intense love for the heroine" (32). While Iser refers to a re-reading of a text, familiarity with the genre's formula allows this sensation to occur; one knows the tropes and thus can reflect on the hints of the generic pattern.

In keeping with generic conventions, Georgia's entitlement to Rory is clear to the reader throughout the novel. She is beautiful, smart, funny and successful, because she must be justifiably desirable. She is also single because her ex-partner was not a good man, which means she is not inherently flawed. Georgia, as the protagonist, must be likeable, personable and unaware of her attractiveness (just like you, readers at home!). Her 'competition', in contrast, is presented negatively to reinforce that she is 'right' for him. As Rory dances with a woman at a party that Georgia is attending with Jasper, whom she has been sleeping with for months, Georgia's discontentment is clear:

I asked Trudy who she was and he didn't know, so she clearly wasn't part of the 'in' crowd. In between spins and turns, I took a good look at her.

She was wearing a dark red suit with a very short skirt, natural-coloured pantyhose and black shoes. Lots of fussy gold jewellery. And too much lipstick. The girl in the polyester suit. (Alderson 275)

Georgia's judgement, regarding Fiona Clarke's appearance and her status as a member of an inappropriate tribe, shows the implicit prejudice evident in her attitude, and evinces the implicit class structure in Sydney's subcultures. While her view, to an extent, is tainted by jealousy and a comparison between the stranger and herself, it also suggests her assumption that Fiona is *not good enough*.

Such superficial value judgements are later repeated, when Georgia tells Antony that 'the girl in the polyester suit' is 'knobbing' Rory Stewart. Antony responds with immediate disgust: "WHAT? You must be joking. She's appalling! He's a *Stewart*—one of the most eligible men in the whole country. Why is he rooting a little strumpet like that? I bet she'll get pregnant and trap him" (303, emphasis in original). Antony's judgement and censure is palpable, but despite acknowledging him as a "terrible snob", the fact that he is a gay man means that his words are framed not necessarily as acceptable, but at the very least accepted (303). While this judgement firstly supports Zoe's previous assertions of Sydney's strata, it also feeds stereotypes that women must compete with one another for particular men. There are women who are 'worthy' and others who are not, and particular women—perhaps, those that are not as wealthy as the men with whom they have sex or adequately attractive to be worthy of their potential partner's wealth—must be interested in these men only for particular reasons, and need to 'trap' them in order to keep them. Interpreting Fiona, the 'strumpet', as the type of women who will get pregnant (as apparently the only active member in such an arrangement) to "trap" Rory places her in opposition to Georgia. Georgia

is not a strumpet; she does not need to trap any man, and Rory can obviously fall in love with her without her needing to rely on lipstick and excessive jewellery.

Jasper, in contrast to Rory, is definitively *not* Mr Right. His construction—with his drug use, his flightiness, his unemployment—means that he is clearly not viable husband material, in that he does not conform to idealised masculinity in terms of his capacity to care and provide. Georgia does not fall in love with him, although his romantic gestures and his clear affection should position him as a likely candidate. In contrast to other potential love interests such as Nick Pollock and Billy Ryan, Jasper is never really a candidate, but offers a positive alternative to romantic relationships—at least for Georgia. *Pants on Fire* offers a deviation from generic devices here, in that Georgia is shown to have treated Jasper badly, rather than vice versa, and there is an acknowledgement of relationships in which women play stereotypically masculine roles. Georgia, for instance, is oblivious to Jasper's feelings and that his behaviour may indicate that his expectations of their relationship differ from her own, as evident in the following passage:

'I don't know what makes you think you're so morally superior, Miss Manners,' he said in a calm, measured voice. 'You've been bad-mouthing my mate Nick Pollock all over town for not calling you after you screwed him once, and you haven't returned my last five phone calls after fucking me senseless for the past two months. Men have feelings too you know, Georgia. Put that in your magazine.' ... I was upset by his nastiness, but I wasn't heartbroken. He never meant anything to me anyway, I told myself. (295-96)

Georgia, however, realises the implications of what Jasper is saying, and that she, ironically, has treated Jasper in the same way that Nick Pollock treated her. She reflects on Jasper's criticism:

I realised with a sudden jolt that while he'd been leaving flowers on my doorstep and cooking me meals with only pink ingredients, I'd been

gadding around town, telling everyone I didn't have a boyfriend and
that Jasper O'Connor was just my source of anonymous sex. (296)

Georgia's shock at her realisation that she has hurt Jasper acts as a reminder that chick lit novels rarely critique the female protagonists' actions, but instead focus on the foibles and failures of the male characters. Modleski argues that it is this aspect of chick lit—the undertone of dissatisfaction with men's behaviour and “great emphasis ... often placed on the fact that there is no such person as Mr. Right” (xxiv) —that “makes many of these novels of interest to feminism” (xxv). Despite this dissatisfaction, however, there is no requirement or impetus for the ‘wrong’ man to improve.

While the acknowledgement of men's faults, and falling for the ‘wrong’ man, are certainly tropes evident within chick lit novels (and I agree that such an acknowledgement is useful in creating an atmosphere that questions assumptions regarding heteronormative sexual relationships and patriarchal constructions of ‘romantic love’), the chick lit novel does not actively encourage an alternative. Most novels in the genre offer a ‘good’ man, who, in contrast to the ‘wrong’ man, is viewed as the end goal which, once attained, guarantees happiness. While a happy ending in a novel should not automatically discount it as trite, and a reliance on generic conventions is what defines a genre, chick lit's failure to deviate from its formula, or expand within its parameters, means that its ability to offer feminist alternatives are limited. In the final scene of *Pants on Fire*, set at the airport as Georgia is leaving Sydney, Rory declares, “I'm coming to London to be with you” (Alderson 379). This encompasses the traditional dénouement of chick lit: there is an implied Happily Ever After, because, clearly, Rory is perfect for Georgia. This ending ensures the satisfaction of both the reader and Georgia; for our protagonist the end is in obtaining her man.

In the stories by Adams and Treasure, and the novel by Alderson, post-feminism can be understood to limit and control the way that chick lit can engage with portrayals of women's gender roles and sexuality. An author does not need to engage overtly with feminist politics in order to write a pro-feminist text, yet chick lit clearly engages with aspects of post-

feminism which are far removed from feminist ideology. Ultimately, the genre does not offer positive or constructive portrayals of women. Chick lit espouses post-feminist ideals, and this new perspective on feminism is detrimental to how women both construct and understand assumptions regarding femininity and its relationship to women. Post-feminist texts promote both sexist and heterosexist ideals of women's sexuality and stereotypical gender norms, and thus, the problem with chick lit is not its popularity or dubious literary quality, but that the genre unequivocally promotes a particular kind of lifestyle for women far removed from the values of second- and third-wave feminisms and intersectionality.

"Inside, I am screaming": *The Mint Lawn* by Gillian Mears

The Mint Lawn, by Mears, demonstrates an uncritical adherence to gendered norms and exemplifies some of the implications of conforming to quintessential heteronormative expectations. The novel recounts protagonist Clementine's feelings of remorse and suffocation—especially with regard to her sexual identity, and examines the importance of her miscarriage, which meant, despite her life-changing pregnancy, she was not a mother. The construct of femininity in this text simultaneously controls and liberates Clementine. The novel shifts between Clementine's youth—with her sisters Alexandra and Sky, and parents Ventry and Cairo²²—to adulthood, when at the age of twenty-four, Clementine has been unhappily married for seven years, to Hugh, her childhood music teacher to whom she fell pregnant. The chapters that encompass Clementine's youth are written from a third-person

²² Clementine's parents are referred to by their first names throughout the novel. Cairo insists on this once her daughters have reached an age that she thinks is too old to refer to their parents by their roles rather than their names: "Clementine calls out for her mother, using her real name because Cairo has said they are too old to be calling her Mummy. It still feels strange in their mouths and often Cairo doesn't appear to hear them" (69). Despite Cairo's attempts to negotiate a more mature relationship, even in adulthood Clementine fails to see her mother with an adult sensibility.

perspective, as opposed to the first-person narration of adulthood, drawing attention to Clementine's past by talking about the protagonist with an added degree of separation; this mode is employed in order to explain the 'present'. The narrative past, though narrated in the third-person, can still, however, be considered the voice of Clementine. The consistency of characterisation suggests that the novel's representation of Clementine's childhood reflects the memories of contemporary adult Clementine.

Fineflour, the town in which Clementine has always lived, is a version of Grafton in New South Wales—Mears's hometown.²³ The small town is limiting and Clementine feels increasingly restricted by memories. Memories of her mother, Cairo, and her childhood affect Clementine substantially as she tries to come to terms with her childhood home, 'Come to Good', being sold to become a McDonald's fast food restaurant. Fineflour itself represents Clementine's inability to move forward; her marriage to her childhood music teacher and close friendship with a former secondary school peer suggests that her adulthood does not differ substantially from her childhood. Similarly, the dynamics between her and her sisters, as well as her predominantly absent father Ventry, echo her childhood, and suggest stagnancy in her development. Clementine's ambivalent grief towards Cairo's death manifests as an inability to move past her mother's flaws. She seems to hold onto negative aspects of her mother, and her focus on these act as a kind of justification for her own mistakes. Her infidelity, Clementine reasons, means she takes after her mother—"I turn [Thomas] round, thinking *something illicit, infidelity*, remembering Cairo's" (Mears 7, emphasis in original)—minimising her culpability for her actions and justifying her own behaviour with little analysis or consideration of its consequences: "The tattiness of my reassurances alarms me ... Now I know I'm being like Cairo. My mother was just like this" (3).

²³ References to the Jacaranda Festival reinforce this connection between Fineflour and Grafton.

In the chapters of the novel that represent Clementine's childhood, her modulated idolisation of her mother is evident in a range of scenes where she tries to replicate her, particularly with regard to performances of femininity and sexuality. Throughout the novel bodies are described meticulously, particularly in terms of gendered difference. Women's bodies are compared to other women's, men's to men's. An important element of the text is that there is no evidence of the shame or judgement that was evident in the representations of women's bodies in the novels and stories described earlier in this chapter, nor is there the focus on beauty. Rather, bodies are described in detail but are not objectified, not *object*-ified; blood, milk, vaginal secretions are incorporated into the narrative as natural, if not marvellous: for example, "First menstrual blood after [Thomas has] gone is very weak, very sad. My blood is pale pink, like an ill-looking sunset" (185). There is also no competition or comparison of women's bodies in terms of worth; Clementine's breasts are compared to Cairo's and her sisters', for instance, but there is never a value judgement regarding particular ideals. There is a focus on femininity, but this femininity differs substantially from the ideals or norms espoused by the chick lit texts discussed previously.

Heather Neilson asserts, "In Mears' writing, there is a preoccupation with bodiliness and sensory information" (103). While Neilson focuses predominantly on Mears's short story collection *Fineflour*, her observations about her writing are equally applicable to *The Mint Lawn*. Neilson surmises, "that there are more allusions to bodily fluids, wastes, discharges per page in Mears' fiction than in any other fictional *oeuvre* in mainstream Australian literature" and that we are "continually reminded that bodies leak and shed; that the integrity of bodily boundaries is always fragile" (104). Neilson draws on Kristeva's definition of the abject to discuss Mears's construction of bodies. She argues that by observing, as simultaneous readers and voyeurs, the other's body, we destabilise the distinctions between subject and object; readers observe the 'defilement' of the other's body through Mears's "writing of abjection" in her representations of women (Neilson 104-05; Kristeva, *Horror* 46). I consider Mears to have substantially represented the subjectivity of feminine bodies

through their construction, perhaps *because* of their representation as acceptable bodies, rather than objectionable; her representation of that which is abject is nonetheless normalised.

Clementine's emulation of Cairo suggests she is modelling her performance of femininity and sex; Clementine, for instance, secretly watches her mother masturbate in their lounge room and replicates her mother's actions after Cairo leaves, trying to discover or experience Cairo's feelings. Cairo is represented as unattainable throughout the novel, and the way in which she is represented seems to be from a measured distance—Cairo is “quite absent from other people's sorrow, even that of her own three daughters” (Mears 3). She is accessible through observation rather than interaction. Moreover, Cairo's femininity is not necessarily tied into stereotypical maternal qualities or motherhood; rather, motherhood is constructed as almost a burden, one that has limited her potential. Ventry, older than Cairo in the way Hugh is older than Clementine, can be understood as accepting Cairo's feminine deviance—evident in swingers' parties and her affair with the neighbour—as a corollary to her remaining in their marriage. The perceived restrictions of marriage—which, for Clementine and Hugh seem to encompass monogamy and obedience—and motherhood, which, for Cairo require ongoing sacrifice, are seen to enforce limitations of subjectivity and desire. Subverting the understood conventional constructions of femininity in the novel offers respite from their limitations.

Clementine's marriage to Hugh is entered into solely because of her accidental pregnancy. This means that these feminine roles of wife and expectant mother are both undertaken not out of agency or choice, but because of a sense of obligation; they are framed as a consequence of her actions. Her miscarriage means that the marriage is pointless, and both her grief at the loss of her child and the seeming needlessness of their relationship influences her change in attitude towards the previously revered Hugh. Both the pregnancy and the marriage that force Clementine prematurely into adult femininity are inextricable from her ambivalent grief over Cairo's death. When remembering her wedding to Hugh, she

acknowledges that the day was marred by her grief: “On the other wall is a framed wedding photograph. ... I was not smiling, because I was thinking with love and hate of my dead mother” (41). This love and hate seems to comprise the extent of her memories of the day, disrupting stereotypical expectations of feminine responses to weddings and marriage. Her feelings towards her mother are implicated in her performance of feminine roles. She invokes her grief in her reflections on her pregnancy and her affair with Thomas:

I fell without trying ... Aged seventeen and sad in the belief that I would have a sad baby because my mother had died. But the baby died too. I would now have a son or a daughter aged seven. Whether nor not this would have made any different to the way I am falling now—into lust, into lust—I don’t really know. (119)

The sadness and loss she feels towards her mother is connected to her views on her own lost motherhood. Clementine, here, also links her assumptions about motherhood to her feelings of uncontrollable limerence towards Thomas: had she been a mother, and had she not been so grieved, Clementine’s relationship with Thomas may not consist of the same urgency, preoccupation and desire.

Her affair with Thomas, although it takes up little space within the text, lasts seven months and is the impetus for Clementine’s confidence to express her feelings towards Hugh. Thomas, although he leaves Clementine to return to his lover Claude, represents an ideal masculinity for Clementine, as well as pleasure and desirability. There is little detail of the particular events of their affair; it is predominantly referred to later, in past tense, as descriptions of events that have already occurred. In narrative-time, for instance, it is not clear that seven months have passed, but this is referred to throughout the novel; Thomas is described by Hugh as “the Seven-Month Fucker” (191). Thomas is not from Fineflour, and thus represents something new, external, something that allows Clementine to change. Her affect shifts substantially between her immature infatuation with Hugh to apathy, and then to infatuation with Thomas that represents a more ‘mature’, controlled, empowered sexuality.

Clementine deliberately attempts to seduce Thomas, and actively pursues him despite, or perhaps because of, her marriage (5-6). Thomas's reading of her as naïve contrasts with how Clementine views her own behaviour: with Thomas, she considers her actions to be active, deliberate and shrewd—a result of desire and agency, rather than the passivity that epitomises her relationship with Hugh.

Clementine and Hugh's relationship exists in a context of disparity and manipulation because of the morally problematic circumstances in which it began. Her early relationship with Hugh, or Mr Eastern, constitutes statutory rape because of his role and their age difference, although this is not discussed explicitly. Clementine, too, is not constructed as a victim, and her father is shown to have been accepting of her sexuality despite his dislike of Hugh. The power dynamic that exists between them—Hugh as an adult, Clementine as an ingénue—is therefore important. Hugh is presented throughout the novel as reprehensible, and their relationship is marked by Clementine's unhappiness. For Clementine, Hugh once represented an escape from her relationship with her mother and her grief after Cairo's death, fuelling her adolescent infatuation. However, as she ages, she becomes increasingly frustrated by him, and bothered by superficial idiosyncrasies; it is these foibles, however, that mask his understated control and manipulation of Clementine.

The dynamic that underpins their relationship means that Hugh treats Clementine like a child; in turn, Clementine reads Hugh as a much older man. In an outburst to Thomas about her dissatisfaction with Hugh are particular qualities that draw attention to his age. Clementine's petulance in response to his demands for love highlights her disdain and dissatisfaction with their marriage, and positions Hugh as clingy, demanding and insecure. Clementine's explanation of why she does not love him is not about particular character traits, but foibles that typify their differences:

'What's wrong with Hugh?'

'It's his approach to life. He's a tree killer. It's what he worries about. He won't let me whistle because he sees how wrinkled my mouth

will one day be. He calls me Baby Doll like we're living in 1950. When I ask him to come dancing he says he dances like a spastic ox. Oxtail soup is his favourite meal and I have to prepare it. ... He subscribes to *Majesty* magazine and when he goes to the newsagent's says, "Has the wife's magazine come in yet?" He thinks we were fated to marry because in the year of our births, 1954 and 1963, there were royal tours to Australia.' (31)

Clementine's complaints are superficial, but potent, and her disdain pervades all of her interactions with her husband. However, acknowledging the superficiality of her complaints, she feels guilty and cannot leave him because he is not a bad man, and does not treat her *badly*. When Thomas asks Clementine why she "didn't leave years ago", she acknowledges that Hugh's role, in previous years, was one of protection and comfort: "He made me feel safe. And I hated myself. I honestly used to think I could go through life with him strapped to my back. The Hugh shield" (31). While Hugh originally represented security and protection from the instability of her home life in her youth, her interpretation of these qualities alters as she matures and changes to the point where she views him as manipulative and domineering. Although he is only nine years older than Clementine, he is constructed as socially inept and an old man who is stuck in his ways.

It is not until later in the novel that it is made clear that the first time they had sex, Clementine's consent was ambiguous:

Hugh is a worse shape than when he first frightened me with his nakedness. I'd lain as if tied then, too, in duck-decorated swimmers. *Lift up your bum*, he'd said, as if it were an instruction to tilt my flute a little higher. *Uh-uh, uh-uh*. When I'd tried to put my knees together. (291, emphasis in original)

That Clementine was not allowed to ‘put her knees together’ indicates a lack of sexual consent and the coercion associated with the act.²⁴ This scene suggests an ingrained power dynamic that facilitates Hugh’s rape of Clementine in her adulthood. In a scene that is presented neither dramatically or violently Hugh ties Clementine to the bed and rapes her while she is drunk. The abject nature of this attempt to wield the power that Hugh assumes he has lost is clear throughout the scene and draws attention to the flawed way in which he views their relationship. Hugh’s gauche assault is an attempt to assert his masculinity and exert it in the only way that seems possible to him. Because she denies him sex, Hugh’s frustration manifests in an attempt to reclaim what he views as rightfully his—that is, Clementine’s body—but her lack of desire and her disgust towards him means that the sex he forces on her only reiterates his pathetic nature.

The understatement of the scene reiterates the problematic power dynamic of their relationship. It is not dramatic; Clementine narrates, “When he begins to tie me up I almost laugh and if I were sober could have easily resisted. He goes about it in an absurd way, trussing my wrists in a mess of granny knots” (291). Hugh attempts, seemingly, to create an erotic scenario, and its absurdity and ‘granny knots’ suggest farce, but Clementine’s earlier explicit avowal that she will never have sex with him again is what makes the scene significant in that Hugh is performing these acts, absurd or otherwise, without consent. Clementine is represented as feeling a combination of abhorrence, resentment and pity towards him—“I think how it has always been me who is too big, not his penis too small” (292)—but with this there is also an evident underlying power imbalance that culminates in trepidation: “the nature of our lovemaking, mine and Hugh’s, had always been something not

²⁴ The way in which the statutory rape is constructed in *The Mint Lawn* is echoed in Maguire’s *Taming the Beast*, discussed later in this thesis in Chapters Two and Three. Both Clementine’s and Sarah’s sexual relationships with their teachers, Mr Eastern and Mr Carr respectively, reflect the deliberate grooming and manipulation of events to ensure the girls’ compliance—as well as each containing the visual imagery of “little ducks” on swimsuits and underwear to reiterate the youth and naivety of the protagonists engaging in sex acts with their older male teachers.

pleasant. Something endured. Hugh on top of me at dawn while I feigned sleep. Fright. Some sense of fright" (292). While this observation is one of the first to show that the relationship is indeed abusive, and their troubles are not simply Clementine's dissatisfaction with her husband, this fright is also what allows Clementine the strength to leave. She is able to acknowledge the problematic dynamic within their relationship only when she is empowered enough to leave him. Hugh, however, is incapable of accepting that he has wronged her, and is presented as pathetic and abject against Clementine's strength:

Hugh stops me. He drops his trousers and cradles his dick. 'You bit the rim last night.'

'I can't remember that. I'm not coming back. You know that, don't you? I was going to leave before you were home but I thought you deserved to be told.' ...

'You loved it.' He is still defending his actions of last night. 'You came about ten times.'

'I could have you arrested.'

'Don't be silly. Of course you're not leaving.' (293)

While Hugh is represented as completely unable to accept the abhorrence of the act he has perpetrated, Clementine's construction, here, is that of empowerment. She is condescending yet gracious, and despite the imbalance evident throughout her relationship, she is finally able to overcome Hugh, her past, and Fineflour by leaving.

Throughout the novel, then, Clementine's replication of her mother's femininity ultimately leaves her disempowered and unable to move forward, to grow up. What gives her the capacity to make the final decision to leave is Hugh's damage to her photographs; thus, Hugh can be understood to have severed Clementine's relationship with the past, and she is, whilst angry and hurt, able to acknowledge that she needs to move forward and leave. The conventional roles associated with adult femininity are those that limited Clementine, and by rejecting these norms, she has the potential for freedom: "I remember and laugh. I dive

through a big wave and think how this is the opposite of being tied up. *How everything seems possible*' (298, emphasis in original).

The Mint Lawn simultaneously presents a reiteration of gendered norms and a challenge of them; marriage and motherhood are acknowledged as the idealised available options for women, but the limitations of these as an end in themselves are explored throughout the text. Clementine and Cairo are represented as trapped because of the choices they made in their younger years. While both seek ways to escape the perceived limitations, and Clementine succeeds, to an extent, Mears does not offer a positive construction of femininity, but rather one that encompasses struggle, apathy and dissatisfaction that come from attempting to live up to idealised social stereotypes.

"The feminine principle triumphant": *Camille's Bread* by Amanda Lohrey

Lohrey's novel, *Camille's Bread*, suggests a necessary connection between the performance of femininity and womanhood, masculinity and manhood, and the difficulties associated with the perceived requirements of particular gendered roles, through the power dynamics and constant negotiations between Marita, Camille and Stephen. Marita and Stephen's respective struggles for meaning and a sense of order are sites of contest throughout the novel and are constructed as inherently tied to essentialist concepts of femininity and masculinity. Marita's desire to create and reclaim feminine roles in a feminised home informs her decision to take leave from her job and stay home with her daughter, Camille, for a year. Her need for stability, cleanliness and comfort is overwhelming, and she feels she must ensure the nurturing of both her daughter and herself through domesticity. Stephen, too, is attempting to reimagine himself in terms of his gender; he aims to restrain the violence associated with his 'uncontrolled' masculinity, and he seeks a life of order and freedom from obligation. His interest in martial arts, shiatsu massage and macrobiotics are, for Stephen, ways of organising and controlling his mind and his body, yet

these are also expressed as attempts to control those around him—particularly Marita and Camille.

The novel is divided into “parts”, rather than chapters, each of which centres on different elements of characterisation. The parts “HIM” and “HER” are written from first-person perspectives of Stephen and Marita; the rest of the novel is narrated from a third-person perspective, but focuses on particular relationships such as “MOTHER” or “THE FATHER”.²⁵ These different narrative forms allow for a shift in perspectives on particular situations, as well as elucidating the motivations and power dynamics of the characters individually and within relationships. Stephen and Marita’s relationship forefronts expectations of gendered roles, which are explored throughout the text. While ultimately the novel constructs essentialist, stereotypically gendered characters, these norms are critiqued from within, and there is an explicit consideration of gendered roles and norms. Margaret Henderson states that the novel contrasts “feminine flexibility and masculine rigidity” (84), and Robert Dixon and Philippa Kelly contend that the different parts of the novel from different gendered perspectives:

break down the single, specular point of view and allow readers a spectrum of identifications. The first section, ‘Him’, allows for competing ironies: the point of view could be either a woman’s or a man’s. The section ‘Her’ allows the female protagonist to be seen from a point of view which is indeed markedly different. Thus the novel signals

²⁵ Note the definite article in “The Father”—motherhood is treated as a more natural and generic role throughout. Here, ‘The Father’ refers to Adrian, Camille’s father, as well as the relationship that former nun Estelle, a secondary character, shares with her biological father and with God. The ‘defeat’ of the Father that Marita and Estelle discuss refers not only to Estelle’s performance of Mass due to exasperation with her parish priest, but also that she “had abandoned her womanly courtesy, and spoken directly from the force of her will” (Lohrey 199). Marita thus concludes that “The important thing was this: they had defeated him. He was irrelevant. Him. The old man. The Father” (201).

to its readers (female or male) the idea of ‘oscillation’ between subject and object, masculine and feminine. (55)

The novel draws “on romance conventions” (Dixon and Kelly 49), and Cran argues that the novel reworks these generic conventions “in political and postmodern terms” (38). For Cran, these “ironic gestures and reworkings underscore a more serious, political, purpose” (38). “Stephen and Marita are inversions of ‘masculine intelligence’ and ‘feminine sensibility’”, she argues: Stephen “is a rewriting of the bland suitor of domestic fiction and the demon lover of romance” who is “hooked on food and the body”, while Marita is a reconsideration of “the conventionally passive and desexed heroine” (Cran 38). The gendered constructions and revisions are an integral element of the narrative, arguably its central focus.

The novel is predominantly set within the home, which thus becomes a site of contestation over expressions of femininity and masculinity. Cran observes that:

a flock of signifiers from the personal realm of life—home, food, furniture, sex, reading, cooking, dancing, music, massage, meditation, television, children, the list goes on—are brought into play as sites of struggle between the protagonists, and as sites for the construction and reinvention of their subjectivities. (Cran 38)

Henderson, too, writes that Lohrey identifies themes of “the mother, the daughter, the kitchen, and food” in order to interrogate dichotomous constructions of gender, but also “to validate a nurturing femininity that she sees as under threat, repressed, or at least rearranged by the pressures of women’s occupancy of both public and private spaces” (80). The domestic sphere is therefore the location in which women “negotiate” patriarchy (80). Lohrey’s constructions of Stephen and Adrian amount to a commentary on “hegemonic masculinity and its association with the public sphere of work and instrumental rationality” (80). Henderson argues that Marita’s reclamation of particular feminine roles means that the novel acknowledges “the changes wrought by the modern Australian women’s movement, feminism’s importance to a truly radical politics of transformation, and the important

insights made possible by the feminist maxim, ‘the personal is political’” (79). The novel indeed asserts the importance of the ‘personal’ in terms of power dynamics, and Marita offers a strong representation of femininity throughout the novel. I argue that Marita represents a particular feminine ideal that simultaneously challenges and endorses feminine stereotypes, but the extent to which this can be considered ‘transformational’ is equivocal.

The femininity associated with Marita’s construction is simultaneously normative and transgressive. Delys Bird argues that the novel does not construct a “wholly independent, self-actualising female body”, and that its representations of “relationships among women, bodily sustenance, and female desire remain complicated and often contradictory” (99). However, she continues, it ultimately offers a politicised critique of these facets of femininity, and the way in which they intersect: “The simplified, power denying equations that make women’s body an object ... are opened up to question and the possibility, if not the reality, of transformation” (Bird 99). The problematisation of Marita’s role as nurturer—reclaimed by Marita and constantly challenged by Stephen—means that the norms are questioned and contested. Lohrey includes normative representations of masculinity and femininity and associated roles, but these gendered constructions are not presented as innate or essentialist, but rather are active choices undertaken by the characters; Marita, for example, explicitly *chooses* to undertake stereotypically feminine roles, by foregoing work—and, initially, her sexual desires—in order to embrace maternalism and domesticity. For Bird, throughout *Camille’s Bread* the links between femininity and corporeality and stereotyped roles are emphasised and questioned. I agree with this to an extent: Marita herself idealises feminine roles, and thus while these are interrogated, they are still endorsed; baking cakes, for example, works as a metaphor for feminine nurturing and also protection. Marita is self-conscious in her appropriation of these stereotypical roles, and yet their construction as a kind of salvation for both her and her daughter demonstrates their apparent advantage.

In spite of the evident stereotypical and normative idealisation of domesticity, Marita is not portrayed as a stereotypical mother or a stereotypical single woman. She is, for

instance, older than Stephen, which subverts relationship norms of subservient younger women; there are also frequent reminders that Marita's hair is short, dark and spiky, and that "she isn't pretty" (Lohrey 109)—characteristics atypical of constructions of stereotypically 'desirable' women—but she still exudes sexual appeal. Stephen is attracted to Marita because "she is not at all like his mother, or his sister; that she is completely foreign to him; that he cannot *explain* her" (85, emphasis in original), positioning her, again, as different to *normal* representations of women, unique, but still necessarily *feminine*.

Throughout the novel, there is an element of misogyny evident in Stephen's reading of femininity. Stephen assumes women's disempowerment or weakness because of emotionality, or, as he describes, a kind of "female hysteria" (178). Stephen's view invites us to reflect on Grosz's consideration of "the possibility of women's strategic occupation of hysteria as a form of resistance to the demands and requirements of heterosexual monogamy and the social and sexual role culturally assigned to women" (*Volatile* 157-58). What Stephen defines as hysteria is, in fact, a source of strength, endurance and defiance for Marita, but one that he is unable to access or understand:

This episode makes no sense to him. There is something here, a subtext, that baffles him. ... At times like this he feels that he is invisible, that as a man he understands nothing, that this female hysteria is some secret mystery. It seems to gush from nowhere and to be about nothing he can recognise; another language, like hieroglyphics, and he feels the thick, viscous cling of it, a dull drag, as if he is back in his mother's house.

(Lohrey 178)

The connections to his mother's house reiterate the notion of inherent femininity—a necessary *difference* from his masculinity that means he has trouble understanding Marita. His interpretation of femininity is always one of tempered disdain, and he considers it a weakness in the women in his life: Marita, his sister, and his mother. The suggestion of misogyny in Stephen's characterisation, evident in the above passage, persists throughout the

novel. In keeping with his inability to understand her, Stephen attempts to impose his “explicitly masculine preoccupation” with betterment on Marita, in terms of his attitude, ideals and rituals (Dixon and Kelly 56).

Marita’s femininity is not the only cause of dissonance between the couple; Stephen’s masculinity is also a source of discord. Stephen’s sudden appearance in Marita and Camille’s lives, and his—unintentional—moving into their house violates the feminine space that Marita favours. His “brooding” presence is disruptive, because she “is not accustomed to a man in the house” (Lohrey 87). She interprets the overwhelming energy to be invariably masculine—neither an energy specific to Stephen, nor simply a reaction to another presence in her house, but an essential element of all men: “The male scent, the male hormone. For that is what it is, that heavy charge” (87). Marita accepts his imposition into her space with unease, interpreting it as a form of masculine dominance; for example, “He raises his eyebrows and purses his lips in a kind of mock disappointment: he likes her to retire with him. Like most men of her experience he has the unconscious expectation that she will adopt his routine” (92). Stephen’s response to Marita’s flexibility, towards himself and her daughter, is one of ambivalence: “he is both impressed and appalled by what he thinks of as this very feminine form of acquiescence in the intolerable” (86-87). Although Stephen enters Marita’s world—her bed, her kitchen—he wields power within it; it is Marita’s home, yet Stephen assumes control, demonstrating a masculine usurping of feminine space. His presence in her home is more an infiltration than an amalgamation, and he imposes his expectations on Marita and Camille. Marita, while not necessarily comfortable with this, acquiesces, as though she has little choice: “As usual, she tells herself, it is the woman who conciliates” (209). She considers his engulfing energy to be partially her fault, because her desire for him and her desire to be unrestrained are what allowed him to invade her space:

She’d forgotten how invasive men are, how *there* they are, even when they’re out. She had let him into her bed too suddenly, overwhelmed by desire, eager to feel the hot rush of it once again and to let go, yes, that’s

it, to just let go, and stop being in control for once, to stop being *responsible*. And now he wants to take over, to re-order the house in his own image. (97)

Marita displays a kind of shame about her sexual desire 'overwhelming' her domestic aspirations, and she internalises Stephen's transgressions. Stephen's presence, his "homeless, motherless quest ... for a new 'self'" has ultimately disrupted Marita's quest "for a better relationship with her daughter, and for time to attend to her home" (Dixon and Kelly 56).

Marita's role as 'mother' is the main motivator for her actions and is an essential and defining feature of her characterisation; it is not just that she performs a particular role, but that being a mother is a defining aspect of her identity. Camille is Marita's priority, and her aim is to create a nurturing, positive, ordered environment for her daughter. This desire is evident in Marita's reminiscing about her unhappiness the previous year:

she has remembered something about that time, about how chaotic it was, as if everything were grubby and fraying about the edges and how she'd woken up one morning and hated the dusty mats and the unwashed curtains and the grime around the laundry basin and she had wanted time, time to pander to her nest, to prettify her hearth, to make it shine and glow so that she and Camille could shine and glow within it, instead of occupying it like harassed vagrants[.] (Lohrey 210)

Whilst to 'prettify her hearth' is a belittling summation of this feminisation of space, as though an un-pretty home is what distinguishes vagrancy, the passage clearly attests to Marita's connection of domestic work to the ideal maintenance of her role as mother. However, that she considers this to be pandering suggests an implicit shame at such a desire. The passage is reminiscent of Nancy Chodorow's discussion of women's work—that of "maintenance and reproduction", "repetition and routine continuity"—where their repetitious roles in the home "involve continuous connection to and concern about children and attunement to adult masculine needs, both of which require connection to, rather than

separateness from, others” (Chodorow 179; Modleski 91). A necessary connection between Marita and her daughter is reiterated, and Marita’s desire to indulge in the domestic, to ensure that she and Camille can ‘shine and glow’, suggests her need for continuity and routine to create a particular kind of feminine environment. This is at once comforting and disconcerting. Marita seemingly feels guilty if she neglects her expected feminine roles, but also views her need for domestic harmony with a kind of derision. Equally, that she has this epiphany towards the end of an unsatisfactory relationship reiterates a sense of discord between performing her role as lover and performing the acts she considers necessary for her role as mother.

There are a number of constructions of motherhood evident in the novel, evident predominantly in the characterisation of Marita, but also Marita’s mother, Ros, and Stephen’s mother. Stephen claims to hate “motherly women” (Lohrey 17), with the implication of feminine control being completely objectionable to him. Of his own mother, he perceives, “Like all mothers she has a control problem” and concludes “Mother: border guard of the body” (32). Stephen’s assumption that mothers, and motherly women, are emotionally and physically controlling suggests he thinks this trait is unacceptable in women—and his view that being controlling is a ‘problem’ is ironic considering his own predilection to control those around him. Marita’s relationship with her own mother is also ambivalent, and she seems to use Ros in order to feel simultaneously better and worse about her life. She feels that they should have some kind of shared feminine affinity—for instance, when watching the women’s marathon on television during the Olympics, Marita thinks, “this might turn into a good moment, a moment when Mother and I bathe in warm fellow-feeling and share a pride in our own sex” (47). However, throughout the novel Marita and Ros are instead positioned as oppositional, even enemies, frequently in contest over Camille.

In contrast, Marita embraces and almost revels in the impenetrability of her relationship with Camille, particularly because Camille’s father has always been estranged, and they have thus always been “Just the two of them ... the feminine principle triumphant,

ecstatic, cut loose in its own dream" (2). Despite its strength, Marita fears the possibility that her relationship with Camille can be damaged or diminished, especially as a result of a sexual relationship:

Each time she lets a man into her bed she is afraid of impairing that connexion with her child, of dimming, even for a day, their blood rapport. But this is a foolish hysterical morbidity. After all, Camille is hers and hers alone: there is no father, and no interloper should be so foolish as to think he could become one. (116)

This is not to suggest that Marita's sexuality is constructed as an impediment, but rather that she is adamant a role as lover will not affect her sacrosanct role as mother. While Marita is concerned that sharing her love between Camille and a man may, in fact, lessen the love felt for her daughter, it also suggests an unwillingness to share Camille's love with anyone else. Marita's concern regarding her relationship with her daughter is undeniably about ensuring Camille's well-being, but it is also about maintaining Camille's unwavering and unquestionable love for her mother. That Camille is fatherless is a point of pride for Marita, and the absence of masculine influence in Camille's life is not represented as a lack. However, despite the fraught relationship between Stephen and her daughter, their later burgeoning connection is something that Marita embraces: "To see Camille's arms around his broad neck had given Marita a stab of pleasure she had not known before" (209). Stephen is, at times, resentful and fearful of the connection between Marita and Camille and his inability to breach it. Marita chooses her daughter over Stephen, which is difficult for him to endure. His insecurity about the mother and daughter's relationship seems to stem not only from a kind of envy for their connection that is impenetrable, but also from a fear of exclusion and abandonment: "together they ran away from him, windblown and laughing; disengaged, elusive, beyond his grasp. He felt for a moment that they might disappear and already, in that moment, he felt stranded" (80).

In line with constructions of gender and domesticity, the relationship between eating, food preparation and gender is also important in the text. Stephen is obsessive and controlled in terms of the food that he consumes; macrobiotics endorses mindfulness in the eating process, and Stephen attempts to impose these rules on Marita and Camille. However, Marita cooks and eats out of pleasure, comfort and reward, and the food she cooks is associated with sweetness and warmth. The focus on food differs substantially for each character, and is indicative of particular traits for each character—even Camille, whose insistence on eating white bread and chocolates indicates her rejection of Stephen and her manipulation of her mother to test her allegiance. Despite its connotations with femininity for Marita, food is also associated with Stephen's assertions of masculinity, through power and control over Marita and Camille's consumption of food. As such, the kitchen is no longer a feminised space. Bird argues that in the novel, "food and eating are used to interrogate the politics and practices of femininity and masculinity" (96).

Stephen and Marita meet in a cooking class, towards which Stephen is derisive. Marita appreciates the class, in which Jo, the cooking instructor, explicitly states that mothers "are more spiritually advanced than fathers" and this is why they are responsible for feeding their families—according to Jo, only the most spiritually advanced are allowed to cook: "Women are responsible for nurturing, that is their fate. However they may choose to organise it, or delegate it, is their business, but if they refuse that responsibility entirely they destroy a part of their spiritual self" (Lohrey 57). This essentialist and totalising construction of women as nurturers, here, fits with Marita's understanding of her role. Stephen, in contrast, does not abide such assertions, and his masculinist biases affect his interpretation of Jo's comments. He condescendingly takes over meal preparation from Marita, reminding her that "the preparation of food is performed by only the most spiritually advanced" (111) and thus overlooking that Jo explicitly stated that the spiritually advanced were women, not men—regardless of how 'advanced' they considered themselves. Through his actions, and reinterpretation of an assertion that preferences women, he simultaneously

suggests his judgement and denigration of Marita's role, his own arrogance, and elements of ingrained sexism. This reflects his earlier assumption that "when Camille has accepted him here, he'll take over in the kitchen and then the energy in the house will begin to change for the better. He will bring calm. He is confident of this" (75). Stephen's attitude, here, is in direct contrast to the proposition put forward by Jo, and implies his judgement of Marita's home life—despite her attempts to create a calm and comforting environment. However, such control over the environment, over their energy, is not as simple as he imagines, and it is Marita's femininity that eludes his control: "it's as if she already has what he's working towards. ... It's the source of that particular poise of hers, the other side of hysteria; a sliding, a letting go. A quality he finds both seductive and alarming" (83). Stephen is frightened that perhaps Marita has already achieved the "freedom" and "otherworldliness" (83) to which he aspires through her feminine impression on their environment.

Two seemingly innocuous but loaded events take place in the kitchen in the middle of the night: Marita baking chocolate cake and Stephen sharpening his knives. Both of these events replicate Stephen and Marita's respective nightmares and are thus interpreted as threatening. Stephen awakens from a dream about chocolate cake: "he can almost *smell* it" (148, emphasis in original). In fact, he *can*, as Marita is baking downstairs. Cake, for Stephen, is symbolic of a lack of control, of excess, and it induces fear and anxiety, but for Marita cake is associated with the maternal and the feminine. During her baking, —an act of pleasure, comfort, and resistance—Marita encounters a cockroach, and her negative experience with the cockroach seems to act as a metaphor for the threat of masculinity because it reflects her aforementioned observations of the intrusiveness of masculinity in the domestic realm:

No matter what she does she is never rid of them and now she accepts that they will always be there; big, brutish, ugly and omnipresent. ... As she glances down at it, the beetle rouses itself from its torpor and with a sudden start, scurries away into a crevice between the cupboards.

When she is certain that it has gone, she picks up a clean tea towel and folds it around the cake. (149)

The protection of the cake shows her capacity to ensure that she and Camille are safe, protected, despite ongoing threats; she is able to protect herself and Camille from perceived threats, and thus she is succeeding in her role of mother.

During the other representation of a frightening dream in the novel, Marita wakes in the night to find Stephen sharpening knives and a cleaver in the kitchen, a sight which frightens her because Stephen's threatening stance mirrors a recurring childhood nightmare. She leaves the kitchen in distress, but Stephen follows Marita back to the bedroom where they have sex. For Marita, though, the sex is performed out of fear. She is unsteady and panicked, and the sight of Stephen in the kitchen has affected her, but she is unwilling to accept her own apprehensions: "In the past she has been too wary of men. Fear can be disabling. Fear will isolate her. She must take him as a gift. She must embrace the animal whole. You cannot have the cook without the knife" (102). This passage suggests that Marita assumes there is an inherent violence in men, which she must learn to accept. She later explains her fearful reaction to Stephen, and he reacts with relief:

he recognises now the fever of desire and revulsion, of need and fear that made her gestures last night so dizzyingly contradictory and confusing. And he's grateful for her confidences; she could just as easily have freaked out and turned away from him, and he'd have been left alone, stranded. Again. (103)

Stephen is not upset about the fearful reaction he evoked in Marita, and he was willing to have sex with her despite observing her ambivalent 'fever'. This gratitude for Marita's openness at explaining her response and for not leaving him does not mean that she will not feel that way again, and it does not change how Marita felt. Instead, it suggests that Stephen is relieved that she has accepted her fearful response to him and thus has acknowledged his ongoing and underlying threat.

Camille's father, Adrian, is presented in direct contrast to Stephen. Where Stephen's fear of life and its potentiality has made him want to flee the family environment, Adrian's fear of death has made him want to connect with his daughter. Adrian, large and imposing and "a ruling-class male, embodies that masculine principle that Stephen is trying to escape" (Henderson 83); he is a man who embodies wealth, bonhomie, and power. Adrian is a caricature of masculinity in its hegemonic simplicity: in "The Father", the style of the narrative changes to shorter observations and dreams, lacking detail and depth, in keeping with Adrian's representation. Adrian embraces the idea of Camille as his daughter months before attempting to meet her, and she presents a kind of hope of redemption for Adrian, as though she will give his life renewed meaning. Adrian envisions himself as the kind of dad whose time with his child is spent having fun: "She'll come over for weekends, whatever, and they'll go off and have fun. Wonderland, the zoo, that sort of thing" (154). He idealises their future relationship and his role in Camille's life, romanticising their genetic connection and his ability to be able to rid her of any negative qualities inherited from her maternal line:

He hopes she isn't thickset like him: perfect for a boy but no good on a girl, but then again, have you noticed how thickset people often have a lot of commonsense? Unlike the child's mother and grandmother, both as thin as reeds and hopelessly neurotic. What if she takes after them? Never mind, he'll jolly her out of it. ... His own father had always made time for him, kept the weekends free when he came home from boarding school. And when, finally, *he* becomes a father to his daughter, he'll be the same. (Lohrey 154-55, emphasis in original)

That his own father was present on weekends reinforces that part-time, weekend relationships are feasible and beneficial, and their 'jolly' times together will encompass the (minimal) relationship he desires. Adrian acknowledges that although he has a daughter he has not yet become a father. He dreams of the kind of father he will be; the role is one distinct from his understanding of himself. It is this distinction between parenthood and selfhood

that ensures his role as parent is presented as substantially different from that of Marita as mother; to be a mother is an integral part of her identity as opposed to a role she performs.

Stephen, dissimilarly to Adrian, has no desire to engage in 'fun' with Camille, and instead seems to want to mould her, shape her into a person like himself. Such a role seems to be undertaken more out of frustration and necessity than a genuine desire to connect with the young girl or to play the role of 'father'. His undertaking of a masculine position of authority, however, means that Stephen unconsciously adopts behaviours modelled by his father. His anger is often directed towards Camille, and Marita acknowledges Stephen's animosity towards Camille's petulance, observing "some small moment of danger" (105):

And she is right. Something has taken him by surprise, a sudden thump in the chest, something from a long way off, some warp in the heart, and he wants to fling his right arm out and send the whole table, his pretty food, smashing to the floor; send it flying in a demonstration of his power. He wants to hear that familiar sound, the loud smack of the plates as they crack against the tiles. He's heard that sound before. His father. ... —and before he can banish that thought from his head he has brought his right hand down on the table, hard, in a sudden slap, and the dishes rattle and Camille's bowl goes spinning off the edge and smashes onto the floor. (105-06)

His behaviour, and his inability to control it, seems to stem from an expectation of a father's role—that of discipline, anger, violent aggression—to an equivalent degree that Adrian holds assumptions about the role of a fun-time-father.

Stephen's violent tendencies are always removed, in some way; he does not physically hurt Marita or Camille, but the threat of violence is suggested in a number of interactions. Marita notices, for instance, "the momentary stare in his eyes that told her something, something she'd always sensed in him" (209), in that he has the potential to cause harm. He is represented, though, as unaware of the extent to which he is a threat to Marita,

and is unable to interpret the boundaries between her desire and her fear. This is evident when after a fight he impedes her exit:

As she turns to leave the room he puts his arms around her, quickly, from behind, and locks her against his chest, pressing his mouth against her hair, drawing her into him, feeling, once again, the electric hum of resistance, that current of prickly desire. And she gasps, in a way that makes him think, again, that she might be frightened of him. No, not this; surely not! He hadn't behaved that badly. Had he? And he holds her there, in the dark little room; imprisoned and still, locked in an uncertain truce. Outside the sirens wail, a 747 drones beneath a low cloud and down the hallway the TV blares: *If you shoot that dog, Ricky, then I swear to God I'll never forgive you.* (110-11)

The uncertainty is only his, and thus it hardly seems a truce; Marita is locked, literally unable to move, and thus concession is impossible. Words such as 'resistance', 'locked', and 'imprisoned', as well as the emergency siren and the content on the television add to the sense of danger implicit in the scene. This kind of threat to Marita is inherent in Stephen's characterisation, and tied into an understanding of masculinity that Stephen is wary of, and attempting to overcome, though his inability to understand his own threatening power brings into question whether it is surmountable.²⁶

Camille's Bread offers various representations of gendered stereotypes, but simultaneously critiques these throughout the narrative. As Cran states, *Camille's Bread* focuses on "relatively contemporary crises in subjectivity, challenging those cultural

²⁶ Stephen's personal history is discussed very little, except in terms of his desire to overcome it, and his willingness to separate himself from his past is the motivation for his need to change his life through Eastern healing. His time in prison is revealed towards the end of the novel, and while it is made clear that the ten months spent in Pentridge prison was not for rape or murder—crimes that would undoubtedly ensure readers would have no sympathy for Stephen—the length of time suggests violence as an element of his offence.

discourses of reason and emotion, intellect and corporeality that confine women *and* men to positions of silence and abjection”, and problematises attempts to “neatly [corral] those crises or discourses within either the public or private spheres” (Cran 38). It employs conventional constructions of femininity—in Marita’s thriving in domesticity and maternity, “triumphant” (Lohrey 2)—and masculinity— in Adrian’s hegemonic absence and Stephen’s violence; however, its reliance on these aspects is not without an inherent questioning of the constrictive aspects of such a reliance. Importantly, the novel discusses gender with awareness, and simultaneously uses and critiques these constructions in order to address particular power dynamics within the domestic sphere.

“Help you there, mate?”: *How a Moth Becomes a Boat* by Josephine Rowe

Your smile, he says, it’s like a boat. And you smile again because nobody has ever said that—that your smile is like a boat although when you were young your parents said things like, Darling don’t make waves, but perhaps they were only worried that your smile might capsise [sic] and all your happiness drown. Perhaps they always thought you knew—how could you not know?—what your smile was like but you didn’t and you’re asking him now, Is it seaworthy? Yes. How many does it hold, then? A dozen. Easily. How many uneasily? That’s a ridiculous question. Well is it of wood or is it of tin? And he shakes his head and says, Love, it’s of skin and he trails his fingers like lazy oars across your face[.] (67)

Rowe’s 2009 short story collection, *How a Moth Becomes a Boat*, comprises nineteen flash fiction stories, each no more than six pages and with a four-letter title. Some of the stories focus on parent-child relationships, where others describe sexual dalliances or the endings of romantic relationships. My analysis focuses predominantly on stories that use the

second-person narrative mode, and where nameless secondary characters are referred to only by the pronouns 'he' and 'she'; most of Rowe's characters in the collection are nameless because, as she states in an interview with Angela Meyer, "nameless characters are easier to relate to" ("Josephine"). Because of this second-person narrative mode, the gender of the protagonist is ambiguous—a deliberate undertaking by Rowe (Meyer, "Josephine"). While second-person narration can work to obscure boundaries between the author and reader, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, in Rowe's stories the mode works specifically to avoid constricting readings of the protagonist by avoiding a demarcated characterisation. As evident in the above passage, from the story "Boat"—indicative of Rowe's mode of characterisation throughout the collection—it is possible to read Rowe's protagonists solely through their provided character traits. Because the reader is at no point told the protagonist's gender, one does not hold pre-conceived assumptions of traits based on gendered stereotypes and archetypes; the reader does not need more information than what they are given in order for characters to be intelligible. We are not reliant on gendered norms to be able to understand the story, or the characters' dynamics within. The gender of the protagonists is ultimately irrelevant to the meaning of the stories. Rowe's stories work to destabilise Abraham's conception of the 'heterosexual plot' (3), described in the introduction to this chapter, in that it does not assume a heteronormativity that is subsumed into the wider narrative. While the very short form of Rowe's work means that the lack of gendered pronouns can be implemented in a way that is not intrusive or discordant, the ease with which one can read the genderless protagonists shows the potentiality for longer literary experiments of this kind.

Rowe forms full, multidimensional characters—within the confines of the very short form—based on traits and narrative without the designation of masculinity or femininity, and this ambiguity does not detract from the impact of the stories. The protagonists, however, *can* be read as gendered, through particular 'hints' of vernacular and actions that may suggest, unintentionally or otherwise, masculinity or femininity. In the above passage,

for example, while 'you' may be masculine, the way that the parents implore the protagonist not to 'make waves' demonstrates an assumption that the protagonist *should* yield, should behave—traits regularly associated with girls rather than boys. The way in which gender works in Rowe's stories emphasises that the value of fictional gender lies only in the assumptions that come with it. The narrative itself does not alter if we read the protagonist as a woman or a man, but its implications in terms of heteronormative expectations and assumptions of power may differ. "Boat", as well as "Stay" and "Wall", can be read in a number of ways—gendering the protagonist as a man, or as a woman, or as without a specific normative gender—to different effect, but I argue that each reading ultimately disrupts heteronormative expectations because of the deliberate and powerful ambiguity of the protagonists' characterisation.

The stories can disrupt heteronormative expectations because attributing a particular gender to a character will indicate non-heterosexuality. The genders of secondary characters are defined by gendered pronouns, and thereby can alter the way in which their relationship with the protagonists is read. The following passage from "Stay" exemplifies some of the potential ambiguity in reading gender and sexuality:

It is understood that a second key will not be cut, just as it is understood that you will not be staying long enough for it to matter. But three weeks now, most of February, and you're wearing his clothes, smoking his cigarettes, sharing his bed and his razors. (Rowe 11-12)

Whilst sharing beds and cigarettes is a genderless act, the clothes and razors are less so. Both clothing and razors are not limited in use to either gender, but the statement has different connotations depending on assumptions of gender. If one assumes that the protagonist is a man because of 'his' vernacular and behaviour, then the relationship is not heterosexual, and the reader may question stereotypes regarding queer men in terms of the constructions of masculinity of the lover. If the reader expects that, because the lover of the protagonist is a man, the protagonist is a woman, then particular behaviour or traits may disrupt gendered

expectations of femininity because of the kinds of language used, as well as the assumption—shown in the previous textual analyses in this chapter—that women seek long-term monogamous relationships. There are certain phrases, such as “hot as hell” (12), and statements of actions where the protagonist, “Kick[s] at pieces of broken mirror and glass” (12) which differ from Rowe’s vernacular when discussing women (or feminine) protagonists. If one reads the collection as a whole, rather than the story as an individual piece, the connotations change and one may read masculinity into the characterisation.

Rowe’s potentially gendered imagery is also evident in the following passage:

You’ll listen to the telephones ringing out over the loudspeakers of the factories and Joe’s Storage from across the highway and, grinding your first cigarette into his stainless steel sink, you will not understand why the sound of the freight trains breaks your fucking heart. (12)

The hardness and violence that are manifest in the imagery of “grinding” cigarette butts into a “stainless steel sink” suggest masculinity. However, the story is set in a mining town in Far North Queensland, and the lover is a miner who punches a hole in the wall after having a tough day. This setting locates the story within a harsh environment, and Rowe’s use of language could be understood to echo this setting. Likewise, that the attendant in the service station “will ask, Help you there, mate? And you’ll buy cigarettes or condoms or a chocolate bar” (13) can also reflect the setting and vernacular of that particular part of Australia, where ‘mates’ are genderless—but ‘mate’ may be interpreted to suggest the protagonist’s masculinity rather than femininity. Either reading acknowledges the intimacy of the relationship, so to read without gendered expectations shows the dynamic of the relationship without needing it to fit within expectations of gender or an assumption of hetero- or homosexuality.

In contrast to the allusions to the masculinity of the genderless protagonist of “Stay”, the main character of “Wall”—unnamed, and referred to only as “the artist” in the earlier story, “Hole” (20)²⁷—connotes femininity through particular affects, actions and observations. For instance, when interrupted from working on a painting by a male neighbour to discuss the sale of their shared building, the following interaction takes place and sets up a gendered dynamic:

You were working, he says, dabbing with his little finger at a grey smudge of gouache on my wrist.

It’s okay, I say, drawing my wrist back. (29)

That he touches the protagonist suggests a feeling of comfort and confidence regarding his role in the relationship, although the story makes clear that the two are not friends. The withdrawing of the wrist indicates discomfort. This particular dynamic stereotypically suggests that between a man and a woman, because the ‘gentle’ manner—the ‘dabbing’—with which the man touches the protagonist reflects a kind of gendered power dynamic that does not fit with normative, non-sexual same-sex interactions. Similarly, the protagonist ‘drawing my wrist back’ suggests discomfort at his touch, but the subsequent elements of the interaction are polite and completely without hostility. The wrist, likewise, has a different connotation to, say, a shoulder; touching a shoulder is less invasive and presumptuous than touching another on the wrist. All of these rely on stereotypical assumptions of heteronormativity, and the ambiguity allows for a reading in which the protagonist is male—or, of course, without a gender at all.

In a similar way to “Stay”, however, the assumption of a gendered protagonist potentially disrupts expectations regarding sexuality. The protagonist’s sexual relationship with the neighbour’s female partner does not preclude a particular gender for the

²⁷ While a majority of the collection are individual, discrete stories, “Hole”, “Coat” and “Wall” are interrelated and originally published as one complete story, “Red Japanese Maple” (79).

protagonist, and the following interaction can be interpreted as being spoken by a man or woman:

You know, I said. I'd like to paint you sometime.

And she laughed. And she knew.

I'm not much to look at naked, she said. I've got all these scars.

It's okay, I told her. You don't have to.

I don't want you to say that I don't have to. She was staring hard into her empty glass. I want you to say that it doesn't matter. About the scars.

Oh. No, it doesn't. It doesn't matter. (33)

The phrase 'and she knew' seems to refer to the protagonist's sexual attraction to her, but has different meanings in terms of 'knowing' if what she 'knows' refers to the queerness of the painter, or simply the protagonist's attraction. The statement which immediately follows, "She tasted like lemons and smoke and sweet liquor" (33), suggests femininity of both the protagonist and her lover predominantly because of the word 'sweet', but also because of the citrus: if the reader considers the rest of Rowe's collection, one finds that in "Rain", for example, the woman smells like "peroxide and fresh limes and coffee grounds", whereas the man smells like "spray paint and cigarettes" (50)—as does the protagonist in "Stay" who purchases cigarettes from the service station. The other stories in the collection can aid in shaping a gendered reading in the story through Rowe's use of imagery.

Different objects, too, take on gendered connotations. In "Tape", for instance, the male protagonist has "a heavy glass tumbler in his hand" in which he is drinking scotch: "Not the good scotch—he wants to feel it this time, wants to fight it down. Wants it to burn away this other feeling, slinking in like a thief through a first floor window" (55). Masculinity, in this story, is located in the feelings of heaviness and burning. Glass, too, features in "Love", but its role differs between father and daughter; for the father teaching his daughter to make weapons—"something like a shiv" (1)—from whiskey bottles, the glass signifies danger and

protection from future evils. In his daughter's hand, the bottle is less violent: "the smooth neck of the Jameson's bottle in her small hand, the cool glass warming with the heat of her palm, ... she will remember the sound of breaking glass, and she will understand this as love" (3). The sensations and connotations of the glass bottle differ in their interpretations. Thus, Rowe frames the same object as having a different meaning and purpose, depending on its reading by the character. While that reading can be understood as a gendered one, more importantly it exemplifies the fluidity of characters and imagery, and the potentiality to dislocate gender within fiction.

Rowe's stories are of interest because of their ambiguity, and thus their potentiality. Her characters are not restricted by gender, and can be read as complete and unique simply because of their traits. While it is possible to read the characters as gendered because of our understanding of normative stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, as well as because of patterns in her style of writing, Rowe's characters are not confined by these gendered stereotypes. Characters' traits show that traits, in themselves, are not specifically gendered, but rather are fluid and open, and are intelligible outside a normative gendered framework.

The texts discussed in this chapter invite an analysis of the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed, either because of their unquestioning conformity to stereotypical gendered norms in terms of behaviour and affect, or because of the ways in which they incorporate these normative gender roles into characterisation. Regardless, they ultimately bring into question the extent to which the heteronormative ideals can be attained or maintained. Each offers a different example of the ways in which assumptions of gender affect our reading of the texts.

This chapter has argued that assumptions of gender and sexuality are limiting to subjects, and to conclude, Jack Halberstam's consideration of alternative constructions offers a convenient segue into ensuing discussions of deviance:

What if we gendered people according to their behaviour? What if gender shifted over the course of a lifetime—what if someone began life

as a boy but became a boygirl and then a boy/man? What if some males are ladies, some ladies are butch, some butches are women, some women are gay, some gays are feminine, some femmes are straight, and some straight people don't know what the hell is going on? ...

In a more serious vein, what if sexual orientation could also be read as less fixed, less determined, more negotiated and fluid? What if we actually stopped and recognized the multiple ways in which men and women, boys and girls, exceed and fall short of the definitions that give those categories heft and longevity? And why should we do all this? Because despite all reasonable predictions, we live in a world that still controls girls and girl sexualities within a rigid system of blocks, taboos and prohibitions. And we still expect boys to punish each other into 'normal' forms of masculinity and then compete and agitate for female attention in ways that make women into killjoys, moral arbiters, and passive bystanders at the prom, still waiting to be asked to dance. (8-9)

CHAPTER TWO – DEVIANCE

EXHILARATION AND CONSTRICTION, GRATIFICATION AND APPREHENSION

This chapter will examine the ways in which characters deviate from the accepted gendered norms and sexual stereotypes outlined in the previous chapter. It will also entail discussions regarding deviations from bodily norms, through such practices as tattooing, as well as corporeal deviance evident in physical disfigurement. While vastly different, all of these concepts play into the idea that there is a particular norm, and to deviate from it indicates that the individual is failing to comply with the accepted and expected. Deviance, in terms of constructions of gender, can still be understood in terms of social norms regarding femininity and masculinity. There are times, however, when representations of deviance allow those hegemonic constructions to be 'troubled', offering alternative spaces where these norms are brought into question.

For the purpose of this thesis, I am defining 'deviance' broadly to encapsulate performances of gender, constructions of corporeality and expressions of sexuality that do not conform to the norms, stereotypes and expectations discussed in Chapter One. Deviance is manifest in representations of affect and behaviour. I have chosen this term because of its connotations with abnormality, thus positioning deviance as a violation of the gendered and sexual norms examined in the first chapter. The ways in which characters are constructed as deviant, or deviating from the above norms, differ substantially between texts, but these differences are important to address so as to show the extent to which norms of masculinity and femininity are ingrained in, and govern, our understanding of gender. The term is particularly applicable to fictional representations of characters because the social norms are easier to escape, and therefore the extent to which representations challenge or reflect particular norms can be understood as disrupting or confirming expectations and offering viable alternatives within a realist framework. I will be drawing on theorists such as Butler,

Sedgwick, Rubin, and Deleuze and Guattari as well as Grosz to aid the analysis of the literary texts discussed in this chapter.

Deviance, and the extent to which it is censured, is associated with the 'moral panics' that occur within society regarding particular behaviour—particularly sexual behaviour. In *Sex, Politics and Society*, Jeffrey Weeks describes cultural reactions to sex as a "moral panic" and relocates those that deviate from acceptable sexual practice as "folk devils" (14; Rubin 161). Through practices that are not procreative heterosexual intercourse that occur within the confines of marriage, deviants are to blame for the corruption of the moral fabric of society, "menaces to health and safety, women and children, national security, the family, or civilization itself" (Rubin 163). Rubin argues, "Moral panics rarely alleviate any real problem, because they are aimed at chimeras and signifiers. They draw on the pre-existing discursive structure which invents victims in order to justify treating 'vices' as crimes" (163). Certain "innocuous" behaviours "such as homosexuality, prostitution, obscenity, or recreational drug use" (163) threaten the norms that maintain normative patriarchal power structures by empowering the 'folk devils' that exist outside constrictive hetero-norms.

While such norms are becoming less prescriptive, as discussed in Chapter One, they are still evident, if not dominant, in cultural productions. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) outlines the predominantly accepted criteria for the diagnoses of psychiatric disorders. Until 1974, the DSM defined homosexuality and paraphilias as mental illnesses and this contributed to the connection between sexuality and sexual preferences with deviance. Dollimore states that, historically, deviance marks "the point of entry into civilization for the unnatural, the aberrant, and the abhorrent" (*Dissidence* 239). Sexual transgressions act as a symptom of the *overall* deviance of the subject: "the paradoxical dynamics of perversion in its pre-sexological senses enable an account of dissidence within sexuality which is not—hopefully can never again be—confined *to* sexuality" (33); therefore, Dollimore argues, it was not merely a person's sexuality that is deviant, but rather the complete subject. Foucault observes that there are four figures who were the focus of

society's "preoccupation with sex": "four privileged objects of knowledge, which were also targets and anchorage points for the ventures of knowledge: the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple"—who have sex but not to reproduce because of social and fiscal limitations; therefore those who use birth control or who engage in alternative, non-reproductive forms of sex—"and the perverse adult" (105). Focusing on these figures of preoccupation contributed to our understanding of sexuality: in attempts to regulate, limit and control it, sexuality is produced. Each of these figures of sexuality that needs to be controlled—these figures of deviance—are evident in the texts analysed in this chapter.

Sexuality is understood in terms of regulated norms, as discussed in Chapter One. For Foucault, norms are regulated by power structures that then work to reinforce those norms: "The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as a model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy" (3). This "single locus" (3) of normal sexuality that Foucault identifies necessitated the restriction of sex, and this restriction positioned sex as sacred, proper, inaccessible. Invisibility was a necessary element of its legitimacy, and therefore sex needed to exist only within well-regulated conditions, such as in monogamous marriages and only in private. Anything outside of this construct was inappropriate and abnormal: "Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation" (4). The legitimacy of the heteronormative couple is therefore reiterated by the repetition of the model, its restriction and its privacy, which each work to sanction the reproductive couple as normal and as the ideal, and to repress alternative forms of sex. Foucault explains that this "repression" is by its very nature substantially different to "prohibition" (4), because "repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (4). Repression works to censor and condemn simultaneously.

The concept of punishment, too, is linked with that of deviance. Commonly associated with criminality or pathology, deviance indicates that something is wrong, immoral, and outside of norms that are acceptable in society. Punishment in terms of sexual deviance historically existed in the form of imprisonment or psychiatric treatment in more 'extreme' forms; deviating from expectations of gendered behaviour could also lead to pathologisation, such as through diagnoses of hysteria for women. Punishment is considered necessary when actions pose a threat to others or to oneself, and thus the regulation of sex and gender was imposed through both legal and social punishment. The attitudes of a society work to regulate deviance; for example, as Sedgwick argues, homophobia is "a mechanism for regulating the behavior of the many by the specific oppression of a few" (*Between* 88). Foucault, too, holds that the power relations that regulate, control and restrict sexuality rely on the concept of prohibition and punishment, and that the threat of punishment regulates behaviour by suppressing it (84): "Where sex and pleasure are concerned, power can 'do' nothing but say no to them" and it "overlooks elements, introduces discontinuities, separates what is joined, and marks off boundaries" (83). Power works to restrict sex, and therefore the discourses that exist to control sex invariably work to formulate sexuality as we understand it.

In contemporary Australia, punishment of deviance exists through shame and the concept of deserving victims. In literary constructions, for instance, characters that behave in ways that lie outside expected norms are usually linked to some kind of negative action or event. In *Praise*, for instance, Cynthia, whose sexuality is portrayed as insatiable, suffers from severe eczema exacerbated by the skin contact of sex. Similarly, Marie, in *Indelible Ink*, is diagnosed with stomach cancer, which she interprets as a direct consequence of her alcohol abuse. In *The Architect*, Jules feels his burns from a motorcycle accident are retribution for failing to save his children from napalm bombs years earlier, and outsiders consider Sarah's rape and brutal beatings in *Taming the Beast* as unavoidable side-effects, if not deserved effects, of her promiscuity.

Rubin's "Thinking Sex", though published in 1984, remains apt when discussing social attitudes towards sexuality. While particular assumptions have dated—X-rated book shops, for instance, are not concerning in 2015—the argument of the article shows that little has changed in the past thirty years; perhaps more worryingly, it indicates that despite some positive changes, perspectives on sexuality have reverted to be more conservative. Rubin observes, for example, that "In the last few years, there have been countless local confrontations over gay rights, sex education, abortion rights, adult bookstores, and public school curricula. It is unlikely that the anti-sex backlash is over, or that it has even peaked" (Rubin 148). Similar 'confrontations' occur in contemporary Australia. For example, Kevin Donnelly, who in 2004 penned a book advocating that sex education in schools only be taught by heterosexual school teachers, was selected by the Minister for Education to review the national school curriculum for Australia in 2014; gay marriage is still something that cannot be endorsed by our Prime Minister; the usage of RU486, or 'abortion pills', remains topical in many countries; and fears regarding 'adult bookstores' have been replaced by concerns regarding the prevalence and accessibility of internet pornography. These moral panics seem to support Rubin's contention that "Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force" (Rubin 150).

Rubin argues that "the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions" is "so pervasive in Western culture" that it is "rarely questioned" (149). While queer and poststructuralist theorists of the 1990s brought such assumptions to the fore, there remain assumptions that sex, like gender, is natural, biological, unquestionable; however, as Rubin points out, "sexuality is constituted in society and history, not biologically ordained. This does not mean the biological capacities are not prerequisites for human sexuality. It does mean that human sexuality is not comprehensible in purely biological terms" (Rubin 149). Drawing on Foucault, her article argues that sexual desire is not a "natural libido" and does not exist outside of its historical and social context (149). Rubin contends that "Disputes over sexual behaviour often become the vehicles for

displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity” (143), and I maintain that the focus on sex, its effects, and its morality, immorality or amorality displaces larger concerns regarding the ingrained patriarchal structures that dictate behaviour. Most important, I argue, is Rubin’s assertion that the most valuable element of sex, and that which should be the focus of any moral judgement, is consent and respect: “the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide” (Rubin 153). It is these elements that are valued in this thesis.

Pons discusses the ways in which representations of sex in Australian literature reflect the values held in society. He states that in some fiction that represents sexually deviant acts, the act itself is attributed to the character, but its representation is given a different kind of value because of its “publicizing” in the text (39); through its very representation it is given a kind of cultural capital. He argues that the idea of perversity often creates a pleasurable value associated with taboo sex:

The practices that society frowns upon are often labelled perversions. There is something both exhilarating and constrictive about them—the exhilaration of being at once different and true to one’s nature, and the constriction that comes from the risk of being found out and of paying the price for one’s transgressions. (Pons 6)

Pons asserts, “Transgression is indeed a relative thing, and depends on the existence of norms to be ignored, laughed at or otherwise flouted” (43). Thus, that which may have been considered transgressive a century, or even decades ago—such as extramarital sex, homosexuality, or even modifying the body through tattooing—is less so today because of the evolving social norms. However, “Traditional values remain strong enough to preserve the transgressive character of many common sexual practices” such as gay, lesbian and queer sex, depending on the context (43). For instance, sexual relationships between same-sex partners are less censured when they figure as monogamous relationships that reflect

heteronormative expectations of relationships. In order to transgress, that which is deviant must be continuously renegotiated. Taboos regarding sexual behaviour remain, and those which seem most pervasive are those which involve sex between adults and ‘children’ (or those considered too young to be able to consent to sex acts)—discussed in this chapter in Maguire’s *Taming the Beast*—or between people and animals, represented in Kneen’s “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife”. Transgression adds value or fetish to sex, Pons continues, because transgressive sex indicates that we are “renouncing the humanistic idea that we are (or can be, at any rate) present to ourselves, in full control of our actions, rational creatures made free by the control we exercise over our instinctual drives” (Pons 47). What is significant here are the elements of choice, power, freedom and control. Moreover, the deviation from social norms allows for a kind of subjectivity that extends beyond the replication of expected gendered performance and opens up a range of potentialities.

This thesis discusses the representations of gendered bodies, and analysing representations of corporeal ‘deviance’ allows for an interrogation of concepts of normality and other-ness. Deviance, for gendered bodies, differs in line with expectations of femininity and masculinity. That a woman’s physical appearance is regulated is evidence of minimised deviance, but deviance also applies to the body’s physical construction. Grosz has argued that women’s bodies are frequently assumed to be more base than men’s because they are considered less controllable, and the patriarchal order dictates the cultural expectations of control. Abjection, in terms of deviance, is also more often related to women’s bodies than men’s, because of the extent to which feminine bodies are uncontrollable; penetrable, open, leaking, and that which must be infiltrated, women’s bodies are those which produce life but remind us of mortality. The difficulty, when discussing bodies at this stage of theoretical development, is the disjuncture between the French feminists of *écriture féminine*, such as Kristeva, and poststructuralist and queer theorists like Butler. As discussed in the introduction, Butler, for example, challenges the very notions of gender and gendered embodiment on which Kristeva relies in her discussions of femininity and women’s bodies.

However, I argue that although these theoretical positions are of utmost importance in bringing into question our acceptance of particular gendered assumptions and qualities as 'natural', embodiment is necessary to discussions of femininity because so much of the performative aspects of gender are related to the assumptions of control that are imposed on women's bodies. Women's bodies are denigrated and regulated in a way that men's bodies are not, and this is necessary to address in discussions of deviance and corporeality.

In terms of writing, the ways in which bodies are depicted relies on cultural expectations. While in this thesis there is no need for bodies to be anything more than theoretical, the cultural implications of particular bodies connote certain affects and archetypes. Strength and potency suggest idealised masculinity, whereas beauty and softness—in conjunction with slenderness—are qualities idealised in feminine bodies. Women's bodies, when represented by both male and female authors, tend not to deviate substantially from the idealised formula discussed in Chapter One, and deviations are those that subvert stereotypically feminine ideals regarding affect, behaviour and, more frequently, sexuality. The ways in which men's bodies are represented, however, differs substantially, as they are less commonly constructed as objects.

Bode asserts that in Australian fiction "men's bodies are rarely depicted and explored in any particular or extensive way" ("Looking" 185). Bode applies Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze'²⁸ to her analysis of the portrayal of men's bodies in fiction written by Australian women, including *The Architect* by Watkinson and argues that these constructions of masculinity by women subvert dominant discourses of objectification (186). Subverting objectification, however, can simply act to reaffirm "another common narrative

²⁸ Mulvey's theory of the way women are represented as objects of desire to be looked at through an active heterosexual male gaze for his enjoyment originally pertained to film. However, her assertion that "film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which control images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (202), can also apply to the medium of literature.

trope, in which anxiety is created around male vulnerability and powerlessness (couched in terms of feminization), only (or perhaps in order) for that anxiety to be reassuringly alleviated (through remasculinization)" (193). Bode argues that the idea of a 'masculinity crisis' can be reinforced by men's objectification, because it equals disempowerment: "it is a distinctive feature of the current 'crisis' that white men are portrayed as having been deliberately targeted, attacked, and disadvantaged" ("Unexpected" 445). The subversion, then, can reinforce "conservative and reassuring" tropes of masculinity ("Looking" 193).

In order for the gaze to be reversed, objectification must maintain a power dynamic that does not involve 'remasculinisation' through particular 'redemptory' tropes of masculine bodies. Bode proposes, "contemporary Australian women writers are tending to use the images and vocabulary of male damage to challenge rather than reinforce white male power and privilege, and to offer new perspectives of male corporeality, subjectivity and desirability" ("Unexpected" 456-57). This tendency suggests that positioning male characters both as sexual objects and with damaged bodies challenges the hegemonic constructions of masculinity evident in much Australian fiction. Bode states:

the terms being forged for men's bodies in recent Australian women's fiction are recognisable by or intelligible to a wide range of readers: what can be imagined and discussed regarding masculinities and male corporeality, as well as male desirability and female desire, is expanding. (457)

Representations of embodied men in fiction by women, then, can challenge expectations of masculine bodies. Though violent, damage to men's bodies forces readers to reinterpret their construction. Their sexual objectification through the eyes of women subverts particular discourses of sexual(ised) gendered power dynamics.

Anna Kiernan addresses the difficulties of subverting normative literary tropes with regard to gendered dynamics and sexuality. She identifies the difficulty of examining representations of sex acts that are deliberately provocative and frame female protagonists

as passive and objectified, but she also argues that “adopting the stereotypically masculine approach to sex ... doesn’t signify liberation; rather it seems to suggest a resigned view toward revising feminist sexual politics” (215). Because of an adherence to dichotomous gender stereotypes, Kiernan observes that options to subvert stereotypical gender norms are limited—particularly for the representation of women and sexual desire—and that attempts to subvert femininity simply demonstrate the adoption of its reversal: that is, masculinity. This reflects Ariel Levy’s observations regarding women’s acceptance and performance of a kind of sexual identity that is stereotypically appealing to men—by embracing ‘raunch’—in order to “prove her mettle” (96):

it is something that has traditionally appealed exclusively to men and actively offended women, so producing [raunch] or participating in it is a way both to flaunt your coolness and to mark yourself as different, tougher, looser, funnier, a new sort of loophole woman who is ‘not like other women’, who is instead ‘like a man’. (96)

While subverting dichotomous expectations does offer an escape from gendered prescriptions regarding sexuality, the positioning of sexual behaviour and traits as dichotomous remains problematic. The writer is either “complicit in the subjugation of women” or “complicit with the neoconservatism that seems to seek to control sexuality as a necessary means of reinforcing traditional power structures”, and both of these options “disallow a free play of sexual signifiers” (Kiernan 215). I argue that the assumption of dichotomous gendered traits is problematic, and the linking of particular traits to gender perpetuates norms; however, the ‘reversal’ of these norms that Kiernan describes is equally challenging because it so heavily relies on normative expectations. The subversion of expectations with regard to gendered sexual behaviour is evident in a number of texts discussed in this chapter, particularly *Taming the Beast* by Maguire, and *Praise* by McGahan.

McGahan's Vogel-winning novel *Praise* is frequently considered to mark the beginning of the 'grunge' fiction genre in Australia.²⁹ After its publication, a spate of texts were published that were seen to share similarities in content and tone with *Praise*, and these texts came to be viewed collectively as a kind of 'tradition' (Syson 21). In the early 1990s, the apparent genre was marketed as embracing deviance through youth culture. Grunge literature was associated with young Australians and was a manifestation of the cultural and political environment evident at the time. It was born of an era of dissatisfaction, apparent in the increasingly visible conservatism with regard to race and gender, and widespread anomie³⁰ associated with high youth unemployment (M. Davis vii, 47, 51). Texts that are considered as part of the genre are addressed in more detail throughout this thesis: *Praise*, *Loaded*, and *The River Ophelia* in this chapter, *Steam Pigs* in Chapter Three, and *Suck My Toes* and *Eat Me* in Chapter Four.³¹

The definition of grunge literature as a genre is mutable at best, in that the similarities between the texts are limited and arbitrary. Fiction that fell into the grunge category in Australia was published between 1992 and 1996, and these texts were generally written in a raw and blunt style, predominantly focusing on the physical experiences of

²⁹ The Australian/Vogel Literary Award is an award for unpublished manuscripts written by Australian writers under thirty-five. That this 'grunge' text was judged as having literary merit is important, because literary worth is a frequently overlooked aspect of grunge texts (K. Brooks 87; Leishman 95).

³⁰ Grunge texts reflect Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie, the breakdown of the relationship between an individual or social group and the wider social norms. As Dominick LaCapra explains, anomie refers to "the social and cultural—perhaps what one might call the existential—position of people possessed of (and frequently by) symbolism but devoid of substantively limiting norms and meaningful paradigms that give a viably coherent order to experience" (LaCapra 10).

³¹ This thesis examines a number of texts commonly associated with Australian grunge literature. These are representative of 'grunge', and appropriately demonstrate the similarities and limitations of descriptions of these texts, but do not encompass the entire genre. Similar texts are evident in other countries, however; there are associations between Australian grunge fiction and the Dirty Realism movement in the US, and texts that would fit into the generic conventions ascribed to grunge could also include texts such as *Trainspotting* (1993) by Irvine Welsh. The title also suggests a link with the grunge music scene; the term 'grunge' was originally used in Australia to describe bands such as The Beasts of Bourbon, The Scientists and King Snake Roost prior to the Seattle bands more commonly associated with the grunge music movement, such as Mudhoney, Soundgarden and Nirvana (True 2001).

young adults in their twenties—written by authors of a similar age—living in the inner-cities, occasionally venturing into suburbia.³² The protagonists are generally un- or underemployed, and belong to a kind of impoverished middle-class, defined by excessive consumption with limited means. Sex and the use of alcohol and drugs are key features, and the manner in which characters interact with and between these physical experiences allow the value systems of the protagonists to be examined. Grunge fiction can be viewed as indiscriminate in its portrayal of sexuality; deviance is hardly considered deviant, as there appears to be recognition that individual sexuality does not necessarily fit assumptions of normality. ‘Normal’ sexuality is rarely constructed except in a negative or judgemental way; protagonists are usually portrayed as ‘subcultural’ or social fringe-dwellers. Their experiences are described clearly and explicitly, and little explanation for deviant behaviours is offered.

Grunge texts were written by young, ‘Generation X’ writers, and consequently these texts became a collection shown to represent young people in Australia. Mark Davis argues that Generation X was consistently defined in opposition to the Baby Boomers, and consequently literature that was seen to represent youth culture was denigrated and deliberately set apart from mainstream Australian literature. The way in which grunge literature purported to represent the experiences of young people was portrayed as counter-cultural, rather than indicative of the wider social concerns which were a reality in the lives of Australian youth. As Davis states, “It seemed a shock ... that some of the themes in this fiction drew ... on a current Australian urban reality for many younger people finding ways to live with high suicide rates, high unemployment rates, reduced access to education and high rates of infection with HIV/AIDS” (M. Davis 14).

³² For example, *Loaded* is divided into four parts—East, North, South, West—and includes either forays into or analyses of suburbs located in different areas of Melbourne, such as Richmond, Brunswick, St Kilda and Sunshine.

Paul Dawson argues that grunge was more a marketing exercise to appeal to, and be associated with, 'Generation X', rather than a credible literary movement (Dawson 119). He also argues that the manner in which the authors engage with their society is important for its representation of youth culture:

Grunge has little literary status, but the assumption that it represents 'youth culture' gives it substantial sociological importance. Grunge appears to offer tangible cultural evidence of the economic relations, value system and lifestyles of a group defined by age. (Dawson 123)

A sudden incursion of texts marketed as 'grunge lit' drew the rudimentary similarities between the style and content of the texts to the forefront of discussion. Michelle Griffin states that the repetition of the texts' blatant discussions made the seemingly shared aspects of grunge, such as sex, ennui, "[s]hareflattening[, d]rugs[, f]irst relationships[, f]irst person[, f]amilial alienation[, u]rban tribalism" appear mundane rather than remarkable (Griffin 16). Consequently, although what was being said in grunge novels may have had important literary and cultural value, the genre was so over-marketed that each text published during this period that dealt with the lifestyle of Generation X came to be viewed as 'yet another grunge novel'. The perceived formulaic repetition of the texts can be understood to have influenced the genre's transience, as well as the creation and allocation of the texts into the specific generic label of 'grunge literature', rather than the individual texts being absorbed into 'mainstream' Australian literature. The labelling of the texts as a genre, it can be argued, is not necessarily because of the degree of sameness amongst the texts, but instead to separate these texts from literary fiction for a pejorative purpose. As argued by Dawson, grunge has been set up by media and publishing companies to represent the "voice of a generation" (Dawson 125), limiting the way in which these texts are read as separate texts: 'grunge' texts are thus packaged as a whole, and read as a kind of manifesto for Generation X.

Ian Syson similarly argues that the creation of 'grunge' was a marketing ploy aimed towards Generation X, appealing to the stereotypical concerns of this seemingly untapped

market. Syson contends that grunge literature does not offer anything substantially different from any other Australian literature and that the manufacturing of the label was about promotion rather than classification. In contrast, Kirsty Leishman avers that grunge literature offers an important social commentary (97-98), in that grunge offers a different version of the traditional Australian narrative as outlined by Graeme Turner in *National Fictions*. Because of the age and lifestyle of the characters, they utilise varying philosophical perspectives in order to understand, if not overcome, their place within their environment. Leishman states:

Grunge is not even a realist fiction, but rather a 'hyperrealist' and philosophical one which sought to acknowledge, through the writing of alternative narratives, the existence of unequal social relations in Australia, rather than to perpetuate a tradition which cannot address the implications of discrepancies in social opportunities. ... Grunge representations offer 'new ways of thinking about the nation'. (101)

Indeed, the dismissal of grunge as mere 'Gen-X' genre fiction is detrimental to appreciating its worth and potential impact and additionally overlooks writing that promotes sub- or counter-cultural experiences. This dismissal exemplifies Davis's claim of generational bias, in that the genre of grunge is considered frivolous and is unable to be considered as a collection of possibly valuable texts within the Australian literary canon (M. Davis 132).

However, similarities between these texts are identified by Karen Brooks in her reading of them as abject narratives. According to Brooks, grunge may be associated with the abject (91-93), in that these texts identify with base aspects of humanity that "disturb the concept of the 'pure' body" (91), such as menstrual blood, semen and excrement. This attempt to be 'gritty' draws upon the abject, and consequently "disturbs identity, system, order... [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, *Powers* 4; K. Brooks 91). In contrast to Brooks's argument that abject bodies in grunge fiction are depicted in an attempt to alienate the reader, Vivienne Muller argues that the abject bodies of Cynthia and

Gordon in *Praise* can be interpreted instead as a revolt against socio-cultural norms (152-53). In this respect, “nihilism in grunge is read as a sort of refusal of the hegemony of the dominant capitalist ethic” (Muller 152). These abject bodies and deviant behaviours can thus be read, in some ways, as a rejection of accepted cultural norms by the repeated disturbance of normative expectations; while there is still an adherence in these texts to particular gendered norms, the characters do challenge expectations about gendered performance and sex acts. Pons observes that “Much of the dispirited sex one finds in so-called ‘grunge’ fiction has to do with the characters’ sense that, for whatever reason—psychological, social, political—they are not in control of their lives”; hence, they use sex as a form of comfort, but overall it leads to “further alienation” (5). The focus on sex, whilst not unique to these texts, is representative of wider cultural concerns.

Jean-François Vernay’s psychoanalytic approach contends that the “deviationist practices” and “sexual perversions” (“Sex” 147) in grunge fiction are used to exemplify “dysfunctions at the core of our sex-conscious civilisation” (153). These disturbances and contempt for conventionality can be seen throughout grunge fiction and are perhaps the overarching common features of these texts. For example, Vernay argues that the sex in *Loaded* largely takes place in “marginal territories”, such as toilet blocks and an abandoned factory (150), underlining the taboo nature of the sex in which Ari engages. These marginal territories are also apparent in *The River Ophelia*, perhaps emphasising anomie and the desire for instant gratification, which are common features in many grunge texts. However, as argued by Paul Salzman, “there isn’t anything new as such about the depiction of the transgressive body in fiction” (Gelder and Salzman 205); the inclusion of nonconforming sexual practice is certainly not unique to grunge fiction and is therefore a debatable criterion for generic similarities.

Grunge literature offers an account of marginalised characters’ attempts to overcome disempowerment through non-traditional means. For example, rather than attempting to gain and maintain employment in order to break their indigent lifestyles, both Gordon (from

McGahan's *Praise*) and Ari (from *Loaded* by Tsiolkas) do not seek employment but rather a kind of freedom found by merely *existing*, without the need to define oneself in terms of a demarcated sexuality, career, ethnicity, family or other classification. The characters are empowered by their refusal to engage with society in any expected way, and this validates their nihilistic propensities. This element of 'grunge lit' represents a kind of dissatisfaction with socially expected norms and highlights the opportunity to exist outside these expectations.³³ The characters are intemperate in a manner that is neither refined nor particularly decadent; rather, they engage in pleasures that are available only to a kind of under-class or subculture: pleasures that come from being impecunious and underprivileged, yet indifferent.³⁴

The genre's primary concerns with sex and the performance of gender remain relevant in contemporary discussions of feminism. The incorporation of issues associated with feminism into these novels, such as contraception, abortion and sexual freedom, does not necessarily indicate pro-feminist perspectives. The following passages exemplify the allegedly feminist perspectives throughout *The River Ophelia*. Justine declares to Ophelia:

I just feel so sorry for myself, seven abortions and I'm not even thirty yet... And all because I won't take the fucken pill. And why won't I take the fucking pill? Because there's something about the fucking pill that makes me really mad. I mean, domestic animals take hormones, athletes, women. I don't know, call me a feminist or something but no

³³ Tsiolkas's engagement with socialist theories is evident throughout the texts. There is a serious concern with class which is apparent throughout *Loaded* and seems to influence Ari's perspectives on employment and family. See "A Sin That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Class and Sexuality in Christos Tsiolkas's *Loaded* and Anna Kokkinos's *Head On*" by Ivan Cañadas for an analysis of the socialism in *Loaded*.

³⁴ For example, despite enduring unemployment, having a life-expectancy of only forty due to debilitating asthma exacerbated by smoking, and having no foreseeable income, Gordon expresses reluctance about accepting a job offer and spends his last few dollars on cigarettes (McGahan 278-79); irresponsibility, risk-taking and nihilism are inherently tied into this anomic hedonism.

matter how many abortions I have I'm never going to put up with the fucking pill. (Ettler, *River* 117)

These assertions are problematic for a range of reasons. The limited discussion of contraception does not fit with Ettler's purported feminist intentions, particularly because contraception is viewed solely as an issue for women and one that is disempowering. As discussed below, in the novel condoms are not presented as a viable contraceptive method. Also, abortions are viewed as preferable to using contraception, in addition to which Justine states she feels sorry for herself—as though she is the victim of pregnancy and unable to accept her accountability for both the pregnancies and the abortions. As such, Justine's 'call me a feminist' statement seems very ironic. In the next paragraph, Justine again detaches herself from her responsibilities regarding her sexual health:

I keep expecting the man to take care, to care more about me than about his pleasure. I keep dreaming of the man who's just so understanding and responsible that he absolutely won't come near me without ten feet of protection, but I haven't met him yet. (117)

These perspectives seemingly reject accountability and autonomy for one's own body and one's own sexuality, but also suggest that despite the aggressive sexuality evident in her characterisation, Justine esteems 'his pleasure' more than her own, in that she is not demanding or requiring 'ten feet of protection' despite the clear (and repeated) repercussions for failing to do so.

Similar sentiments about control, accountability and agency towards sexual health are also evident in *Loaded* and *Praise*. The following passage, as stated by Ophelia, exemplifies a repeated perspective taken on condoms throughout the three books:

I find it incredible that Australian men won't wear condoms... You mention wearing a condom and the STDs and they start talking about how unlikely it is for them to catch anything, and how they don't care if they're exposed to anything anyway because it's so unlikely for them to

get anything in the first place. It's like, to them their dicks are immune, they're not the most sensitive parts of their bodies but the toughest, they think of their dicks as indestructible. (335-36)

In McGahan's *Praise*, however, this perception of indestructibility is evident in Cynthia, rather than her male partner. She refuses to use condoms during sex—despite Gordon's willingness, which is in direct contrast to Ophelia's statement about Australian men above—regardless of the severity of her genital warts and the possibility she has cancer, which positions the importance of her own sexual pleasure over Gordon's pleasure as well as her own sexual health:

I don't think you should get yourself tested. ... They'll just tell you to start fucking with condoms. If I'm going to die I'm not gonna have my last few fucks with condoms. Wait till I'm gone. Wait till I'm dead. ... I refuse to fuck rubber! (McGahan 186)

Cynthia's indignation exemplifies an active decision to choose immediate sexual pleasure over the potentially harmful and painful consequences of such pleasure, demonstrating an emphasis on instant gratification over responsibility. Cynthia's perspective on abortion, however, differs from Justine's, in that pregnancy appears to be recognised as something other than a negative consequence of sex; furthermore, she takes 'the pill' as a means of contraception. The pill, however, is depicted negatively—along with her smoking, illicit drug use, over-use of cortisone, and promiscuity—as an additional harmful aspect of her reckless lifestyle (McGahan 186, 187); Cynthia's decision to take the pill rather than use condoms further exemplifies her irresponsibility with regard to her sexual health. Upon examining Cynthia's genitalia, Gordon considers the possibility that Cynthia's promiscuity may mean she has diseases, but decides to "Forget it, I told myself. In went my tongue" (123). Ari, too, occasionally uses condoms whilst having anal sex but overlooks them during oral sex: "I think; is he clean? I stop thinking" (Tsiolkas 106).

That such limited and ultimately dangerous perspectives are asserted by people who engage with multiple sex partners is incommensurate with queer and feminist perspectives of responsibility for one's own sexual health (Schofield 128). Whether the unsafe circumstances in which the sex acts are taking place are supposed to add to the danger or 'edginess' of these encounters, or whether such carelessness is related to the sense of immediacy of the sexual desire portrayed within these texts is unclear. The irresponsibility regarding the possible outcomes of such sexual activity demonstrates the extent to which physicality and sexual gratification surpass emotional and logical concerns with possible detrimental consequences.

The depictions of sex in grunge fiction offer an opportunity to analyse the extent to which these representations engage with hegemonic and heteronormative sexualities. Despite the transgressions from stereotypical portrayals evident in *Praise, Loaded* and *The River Ophelia*, and despite deliberate attempts to break taboos associated with particular sex acts, these texts still rely heavily on normative assumptions of femininity and masculinity. There are similar motifs that recur: the texts address sexuality as an important aspect of identity, and the extent to which desire influences relationships with others. Control over this desire, in discussions of agency, libido and power, is critiqued and predominantly valorised throughout the texts.

While grunge fiction can be read as a collective nihilistic manifesto of the youth of the 1990s, these texts have individual merit for the positions they address in discussions of gendered identity and sexuality. The blatant discussions of sex and sexuality allow for analyses of the dynamics, expectations, and stereotypes, which frame sexual interactions and the extent to which these reflect contemporaneous feminist and queer ideologies.

“Sex was the thing that would kill us”: *Praise* by Andrew McGahan

McGahan's *Praise* is set in Brisbane in the early 1990s. It follows protagonist Gordon's experiences with unemployment, alcoholism, and sexual relationships throughout the narrative. The nihilistic and dogged voice of Gordon exemplifies the frustrations of his relative poverty (albeit self-imposed) and the feelings of powerlessness associated with most aspects of his life. In Paul Salzman's summary, "*Praise* covers all the grunge bases: drugs, vomit, shit, rough sex, a youth culture that embraces a certain chic poverty, and a barely suppressed misogyny (possibly as an ironic reflection on the characters)" (Gelder and Salzman 204). The novel defies typical social conventions and valorises anhedonia.

While sex and sexuality are primary themes in *Praise*, the protagonist Gordon's interest in sexual activity is, ironically, minimal, and the text is concerned more with his lack of prowess than in presenting the typical and arrogant masculine sexuality evident in other grunge fiction. The descriptions of sexual activity may be as detailed, but because of the protagonist's detached perspective, the way in which sex is discussed differs greatly from the erotic escapades evident in other examples. *Praise* is not erotica; the physical experiences of sex are not always desirable for either party and rarely portrayed in a manner that sustains the idea of sex as pleasurable. The portrayal of sexuality in its least romantic form allows discussion about sex as behaviour distinct from love, pleasure or desire and is alternatively associated with guilt, obligation and apathy.

The sex in *Praise* presents a reversal, or subversion, of stereotypical gender roles in sex, in that Gordon is predominantly passive and overwhelmed by Cynthia's insatiable sexual desire. Despite the rejection of stereotypical gender roles, which has potentially positive possibilities for critiquing norms and expectations of sexual identity, there are significant problems inherent in this portrayal—predominantly concerning the representation of women's sexuality through the characterisation of Cynthia. *Praise* is narrated by Gordon, so Cynthia's sexual desire is read through him; her insatiability is portrayed as a negative aspect of her character because of its effect on him. Her highly sexualised nature is a burden for him,

and she is unable to be viewed as distinct from her sexual behaviour. I argue that her sexuality is her dominant, if not her only, attribute. Moreover, her sexuality is portrayed as an ordeal for Gordon, in that his lack of desire prompts both subjective feelings of inadequacy and the charge of neglecting her as a person. He describes a need to develop an emotional and intellectual connection in order to desire someone, and yet this is not evident in his relationship with Cynthia. Their intimacy did not develop prior to, or independently of, sex: the focus of their relationship was always on the consumption of alcohol, drugs and sex, and, consequently, Gordon's emotional engagement with Cynthia is minimal.

There are continual juxtapositions of the voraciousness of Cynthia and Gordon's deficiency, and these differences are interpreted by him as inherently tied to masculinity—or lack of—in his sexual behaviour:

Why wasn't I a man? Why was I worried about sincerity? Why couldn't I throw her down on the bed and be brutal?

My body was the problem. My prick had no guts. It couldn't take over my brain like pricks were supposed to. ... It was too small, that was the problem... Women's bodies were the problem. They did nothing for me, they were just flesh. (McGahan 19)

His lack of physical attraction to Cynthia, as an example of women more generally, is clear, and his need for some kind of deeper connection, or 'sincerity', is never realised. It is thus not only Gordon's lack of ability, but also his lack of desire that makes the non-standard portrayal of masculine sexuality significant. Gordon's ineptitude may be darkly comical in its portrayal—"Desire was directly proportional to size! You needed something big to wave around, to inspire nausea and confidence. I had no chance" (19)—but its significance lies in the way in which this portrayal of masculinity defies normative constructions of sexual behaviour. He is not capable, or overpowering, or aggressive, and although this does not necessarily help him achieve satisfaction in any aspect of his life, an alternative to sexual rapaciousness written from a masculine perspective shows the distress such expectations

cause in an un-stereotypical character. Cynthia's characterisation, too, counters gendered expectations of feminine sexual appetite through her seemingly insatiable libido; however, her hypersexuality and consequent characterisation as a nymphomaniac is ultimately shown to be disempowering for both her and Gordon. Gordon's feelings of deficiency are increased by Cynthia's avidity, in that his presence, specifically, appears virtually unnecessary for her to be sexually satisfied. Her ability to orgasm during sex is distinct from any emotional relationship with her sexual partner and, indeed, almost distinct from the sex act itself (44). Cynthia's detachment is deliberate and clear: "'One thing you should know,' she said, 'when I come, I have to do it alone. Don't try to talk to me when I'm coming, don't try to touch me or do anything to me. Just leave me alone'" (20). Her sexual desire is predominantly physical, sensory, and independent of feelings of love or emotional connection, and therefore set in contrast with Gordon's professed need for emotional intimacy.

Cynthia's sexual demands are frequently portrayed as attacks on Gordon because of their overpowering nature, evident in her apologetic acknowledgement, "I'm sorry ... that was almost rape" (20). Both Cynthia and Gordon acknowledge her sexual dominance, and her *almost* violent potency is constructed in a way that is ultimately disempowering; her sexually liberated behaviour is a significant aspect of her characterisation, and its negative depiction maintains an unfavourable connection between women and strong sexual desire. Likewise, because of this one-dimensional portrayal of Cynthia, the extent to which she can be read sympathetically is limited. Despite, for example, her diagnosis with cervical cancer and the abortion of her and Gordon's baby—distressing events which a reader might expect to alter a character's sexual behaviour—Cynthia's sexual desire does not diminish; she does not 'learn from her mistakes' or 'overcome her weaknesses' in the stereotypical way. Her insatiability is thus shown as detrimental to her emotional and physical health and also the way in which she is read as a character. Even Cynthia's terrible eczema can be read as a strange kind of punishment for her lifestyle; her skin reacts badly to sex because of the frequent touching, physically breaking in response to her sexual behaviour—the failure of

her skin to contain her abject nature is an iteration of punishment for her deviance. Her inability to recognise this and alter her 'deviant' ways suggests she is responsible for, if not deserving of, the damaging consequences of her sexual behaviour, thus positioning these events as punishment for the unconventionally feminine life she leads.

The base nature of Cynthia's sexuality is contrasted with the subjective sexual ethics shown to influence Gordon's sexual behaviour. For example, Cynthia's way of dealing with the cramps that occur after her abortion is to request Gordon to engage in anal sex with her as a distraction, despite his apprehension. Gordon is thus shown to have sex with Cynthia in order to take away her pain—benevolently rather than for his own satisfaction—and Cynthia is positioned as willing to engage in non-normative sexual behaviours to distract herself from the negative consequences of previous sexual voracity (158-59). Likewise, Cynthia's primary concern in response to her diagnosis with cervical cancer is to agonise over its potential effect on her sex life. Gordon, in contrast, is shown to feel more immediately concerned for her physical health and life, as well as her reproductive capacity: "Fuck, maybe she did have cancer. They'd rip out her cervix. They'd tear out her ovaries. She'd never be able to have kids. And we just got rid of one. She might even be *dying*' (187). Despite the violent and drastic imagery, his concerns exemplify the seriousness of the situation in a way that diminishes the immediacy and superficial corporeality of Cynthia's response.

Gordon's concern for Cynthia's ability to have children can be read as revealing further latent positions though his use of pronouns: while Gordon states, 'she'd never be able to have kids'—indicating that the problem will be Cynthia's—his next assertion, 'we'd just got rid of one', indicates ownership of his role in the decision despite Cynthia's reservations. Gordon's perspectives on becoming a father are clear, and offered to Cynthia as an indirect ultimatum:

'I don't think I'd be any use to you with a kid.'

'Would you leave me if I had the baby?'

'I'm not sure. I'd try not to, but in the long run, I couldn't say.

Look at my life, Cynthia. Where would a child fit in?'

She was silent for a while.

Then she said, 'So I have to choose between you and the baby?'

'I don't know. Do *you* want it?'

'In some ways, yes I do.'

Silence...

'If I have to choose,' she said, 'I'll take you.' (137-38)

Her abortion, then, is not based on her desires—she states that the abortion is not something that she wants to do, but something that she *must* (155)—but a decision she makes fundamentally based on Gordon's perspectives. Her later capitulation upon the ending of the relationship is a further indication of this: "I wish I'd had the baby,' she said. 'The only reason I didn't was because I didn't want to lose you, and now I'm losing you anyway and I've got nothing to remember you by'" (217). However, the reference to a baby as something to remember someone by indicates that Cynthia's mindset in response to her pregnancy was not based on her desire to be a mother, but instead on the connection that it would consolidate between her and Gordon. This suggests a further deviation from accepted hegemonic feminine aspirations, in that her aspirations for motherhood were 'impure' and not based purely on an innate maternal desire.

While Cynthia is viewed as abrasive—or perhaps self-indulgent, egocentric and emotionally manipulative—she insists on her love for Gordon throughout, despite her violence, infidelity—albeit accepted—and frequent condescension. In contrast to her love is his ambivalence towards her, which is equally apparent: "I lay there. I didn't move to comfort her. I couldn't. I was evil. I was lying when I said I didn't love her. I did. She was the only person I loved, whatever love meant. But something was hugely wrong with me. I wanted her to go away" (197). Both Gordon's and Cynthia's sexual desire reflects their expressed attitude towards love; Cynthia is incessant and demanding, while Gordon is equivocal and detached,

using sex to assuage Cynthia. When Gordon decides that he can no longer continue having sex with Cynthia, she cannot understand why he cannot divorce his sexual behaviours from his emotions:

She said, 'Why all this sudden concern about sex? You said it never did much for you anyway. You said it didn't matter. And now you say it's not good enough?'

'I was wrong. It does matter. It's not right if there's no feeling there.'

'I don't care if there's no feeling. You can just fuck me, can't you?'

It doesn't take much, for chrissake. I'm easy to please.' (178)

Gordon's lack of sexual interest in Cynthia is portrayed in stark contrast to his desire for Rachel, for whom he has had a long-standing yearning based on what he understands to be a deep emotional connection. Gordon purchases an economy packet of condoms in anticipation of (apparently frequent) sex with Rachel (252). However, Rachel does not return his affections; their one-sided relationship later reflects that of Gordon and Cynthia, but with Gordon in the position of the unwanted and yet eager pursuer. His unrelenting behaviour towards Rachel—his persistence despite her asserted lack of interest, engaging in oral sex despite her unwillingness, despite her explicit refusal—begins to reflect that of Cynthia towards him:

This was all I was, a mouth and a tongue. A slave. Whether she wanted it or not. *I* was the slave to *her* cunt. It was all wrong. This wasn't the way to her soul, anyone could see that. ... I didn't care. I could live without her soul. All I wanted was this. (254, emphasis in original)

The statement, 'whether she wanted it or not', shows Gordon's willingness to overlook Rachel's desire or pleasure or even consent to satiate his own longing. Gordon, consequently, maintains relationships with unbalanced sexual dynamics in which he views himself as a slave responsible for his partner's pleasure (but not for her soul). It is Gordon's own attitude

towards this role that changes; his aggravation about his feelings of responsibility for Cynthia transforms into an overzealous desire to please Rachel: "I wasn't there for sex or love. I was there for adoration. Self-abasement. The impulses were all diseased, rooted in darkness" (253). The one-sided nature of the sexual desire in Gordon's relationships is reflected in the sex-acts themselves, and neither is successful.

Despite *Praise's* potential to offer a critique of stereotypical constructions of sexuality, both Gordon and Cynthia—whilst, to some extent, subverting these stereotypes—suffer because of their incompatible levels of sexual desire, incidentally supporting an argument for the ineffectiveness of sexualities that lie outside stereotypical discourse. The construction of their sexualities acts as a critique for their inadequate performances of gender, as their failure to conform to normative constructions is what leads to their dissatisfaction.

"It's not that I can't decide; I don't like definitions": *Loaded* by Christos Tsiolkas

In Tsiolkas's novel *Loaded*, Ari's characterisation as a young gay man is intertwined with his ethnicity, and these aspects of Ari's identity necessitate discussions of intersectionality and a questioning of the ways that cultural identity influences sexuality and gendered experience. *Loaded* takes place over a period of twenty-four hours and relates the sexual encounters and—occasionally interrelated—existential crises experienced by Ari during this time. Drugs, alcohol, sex and culture inform Ari about what he does and does not want for himself, framing his expectations of his gendered role. Because he does not work or study, and because he is not in a heterosexual relationship, Ari does not easily fit into his

family's and peers' (and ultimately, society's³⁵) conception of how a man should live. His aversion to convention seems to drive his desire for sex and drugs as an attempt to avoid the dullness of lifestyles led by those around him. He only values the physical pleasures associated with drugs and sex and appears to maintain this lifestyle quite easily. He describes himself as lacking control of his sexual desire, considering himself "ruled by [his] cock" (149), as well as his substance use: sex and drugs are the only things he 'does', the only things he enjoys, and thus the only things by which he characterises himself. This version of masculinity differs substantially from *Praise's* Gordon, who considers himself a failure as a man because of his lack of desire for sex; Gordon idealises the stereotype of masculinity that Ari embodies.

Both Ari's sexuality and his experience of Greek culture are important aspects of his characterisation. Ben Authers asserts that "Ari is himself unable to reconceive of his own subjectivity apart from a paradigmatically Greek-Australian identity that ties sexuality to an aggressively hetero-normative masculinity" (134), and Pons states, "[Ari] must reconcile, in his mind and in his body, three different and seemingly incompatible paradigms: the ethnic paradigm of Greekness; the gender paradigm of masculinity, and the sexual paradigm of queerness" (212). Sexuality is an integral part of his characterisation, and his own understanding of deviance affects the way he interprets other elements of his identity. Sedgwick asserts that "homophobia directed against both males and females is not arbitrary or generous, but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations" (*Between* 3-4) and this intersectionality influences Ari's view of himself and his role in his world.

³⁵ Gary Dowsett states of hegemonic masculinity: "[Employment] is just one example to suggest that in simpler times, simpler measures were used to gauge one's masculinity: a job, a wife, a family, a house, a body that functioned, and maybe certain defining skills" (Dowsett 27-28).

Ari is apprehensive about discussing his 'deviant' sexuality with his parents, arguably because of his parents' inability to accept a romantic relationship that lies outside heteronormative relationships—those that are, in Gary Dowsett's words, "consensual, adult, married, monogamous, reproductive and penetrative" (25)—rather than this being an explicit comment on his homosexuality. Ari's brother Peter is in a de facto relationship with Janet and their unmarried state also dissatisfies their mother. This suggests that any deviation from sanctioned relationships will be met with censure; as Pons states, "Greekness, for Ari, is basically a matter of sexual culture, of gender roles" (Pons 217). Ari and his siblings all conceal their sexual identities from their parents, and it is difficult to gauge to what extent Ari's 'coming out' to his Greek family is tied to the secrecy in which he and his siblings engage. His siblings know about his sexuality and are unconcerned, but he avoids conferring with his parents. His motive is self-preservation: he is ostensibly protecting himself from the prejudices of his parents and the wider community. While members of his generation are accepting of queer sexualities, an assumption of prejudice from older adults is maintained. George, with whom Ari thinks he "may be in love" (Tsiolkas 151), argues that telling the truth once will allow Ari to be free from the need to censor his life further. Ari explains his views to George:

You have to lie, maybe not all the time, and maybe there are some things you can't lie about but most things aren't worth the effort. I'll lie about where I'm going, I'll lie about who I'm with, I'll lie about what I've been doing if I think it will save an argument, save some time. ... Truth they use against you ... you never tell a wog anything important about yourself. The truth is yours, it doesn't belong to no one else. (129)

Intersectionality, here, means that Ari's experience as a young queer man differs from George's experience because of the cultural influence on expectations of masculinity and sexuality. Ari assumes that it is more difficult for him to be open, more essential for him to lie to his Greek parents, than it is for George with his 'Australian' parents. His conversation with

George counters that which he has later with Serena, who is Croatian and queer, about lying to one's parents. Serena insists that secrecy is necessary to "protect" their respective parents, because of the implications it will have in their wider community: "you don't tell them about your life because you know what that will do to them" (141). Ari disagrees with Serena's assessment of his omission, however; the 'rules' about their sexuality differ not only because of the cultural expectations, but also because of gender. Ari's avoidance saves him from having to defend himself, and his actions, against the beliefs of his family and wider social influences, while Serena's perspectives on disclosure or concealment of sexuality are based on the idea of protecting her parents. Ari rejects the concept of community, but for Serena the idea of shared connection, shared experience, is part of how she views her identity (142-43). Serena wants "a wog to love" because "she's tired of Aussie dykes, dykes who can't converse, can't express emotion, can't be affectionate" (141); for Serena the kind of relationship she desires is formed by particular cultural expectations of identity.

The chapter "Fast Forward" offers a snapshot of Ari's development in thinking, especially in terms of his sexuality, and shows the impact of specific events on his worldview. The way in which his parents interact seems to inform his ideas about heterosexual relationships—specifically, marriage—and the other key moments that Ari describes, such as sex education classes at school, his "first fuck with a girl" and sneaking into the movies to see *Caligula* (147-48), invariably shape his perception of his role in life. This chapter describes his early childhood sexual experiences, such as masturbating while observing his parents having sex:

Peeking through a half-open door. Watching my mother and father go for it, slamming hard into each other. Or rather my father slamming hard into my mother. Her arse high in the air. My hands on my dick.
(147)

The patriarchal power dynamics of this scene—evident in Ari's amendment of 'slamming into each other' to his father 'slamming' into his mother—is reflected in many of Ari's sexual

experiences depicted throughout the text, in which dominance is apparent in one sexual partner's power over the other. His family thus unwittingly plays a part in the shaping of Ari's sexual expectations through this voyeurism, which exemplifies taboo links with sexual pleasure, as well as framing his deviation from cultural expectations of sexuality. This pleasure is also shown to be linked to an assertion of apparent childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by his uncle:

Fast forward to an old man, a drunk putting his hands between my legs.
I enjoy it. Some cousin's party, some uncle. Play. Not some uncle, it's my
father's brother. He has a name. *Theo* Yianni. (147, emphasis in
original)

'I enjoy it' indicates the primacy of his enjoyment in his recall of this memory. Upon closer inspection (as indicated by the shift from 'Fast forward' to 'Play') Ari acknowledges the drunk man is not just 'some uncle', but a man related closely by blood, exposing the incestuous nature of the incident. The comment 'He has a name' can be read to indicate that this detail is the most difficult to remember: the clearest detail of this memory is the pleasure of the event, the haziest is the perpetrator. While its minimal emphasis suggests Ari's willingness to overlook it, its inclusion in this chapter indicates its influence on Ari's sexual identity.

The depictions of sexual abuse in *Loaded* are presented flippantly and can be read as an acceptance of the frequency, and thus the perceived normalcy, of such events; however, this abuse is also integral to the formation of Ari's sexuality. Further aspects of familial sexual violence are evident in Johnny's family and are similarly curtailed. Johnny tells Ari that he has been raped repeatedly by his father, although he "didn't go into details, he just wanted someone to tell" (99). Despite Johnny's need simply to articulate his experiences, his abuse becomes a subject of gossip—just as Ari is afraid his own sexuality will be. Johnny's assault is discussed in the novel by Serena and Maria, and their conversation ties ethnicity to expectations of entrenched homophobia (and sexual abuse), further exemplifying the

intersectionality of sexual and cultural identity. Their discussion, which presumes that Greek or Croatian fathers would rape their gay sons as punishment for their deviant sexualities, is jarring in that Johnny's rape is portrayed as devastating but not unexpected, and makes the assault part of a wider stereotypical narrative (117).

The reactions of both parents and peers to the idea of homosexuality are located within presumed paradigms that Ari deliberately wants to subvert; this is evident in his desire to announce that, "A few times Johnny enjoyed the sex with his old man" (118). Here, Ari's reading of events works to disrupt expectations of how one should react to abuse, and his deviation from the accepted script forces the taboo nature of the event to be considered, regardless of its abject nature. It is more difficult to disregard Ari's assertions of sexual enjoyment when that which causes indignation and concern is brought to the fore of the discussion. Johnny's devastating admission of his rape to his friend is also superseded by Ari's declaration: "That night I went home to bed and masturbated thinking of my best friend's father fucking my best friend" (99). This statement further exemplifies the taboo sexual experiences that are part of Ari's sexual identity; it can also be read as challenging this taboo through its articulation. By describing difficult content in blunt yet 'honest' terms, it destabilises the secrecy and power that abuse can hold.

Johnny's queerness is flagrant: he is less concerned than Ari about the perceptions of the Greek community towards his queerness, and his later transvestism/transgenderism can also be read as an attack on the physical and sexual violence perpetrated by his father. Johnny's alter-ego, Toula, a deliberate invocation of his dead mother, seems to allow Johnny an outlet for dealing with the loss of his mother, as well as an opportunity for revenge on his father:

His father grabbed the bottle he was drinking from and rushed towards his son. Yianni, he screamed, you go out like that you slut, and I promise you, Yianni, I'll fucking kill you. Johnny didn't flinch, didn't make a sound as the bottle smashed on the wall next to him. I'm not Yianni, he

told his father, slowly, deliberately. Toula is back. He spat at his father.

Toula is back from the grave, papa. (100)

Although Ari is accepting of Johnny's sexuality, he is unable to accept Toula as an authentic expression of Johnny's identity, rather than simply Johnny in a dress. Ari prefers to unite Johnny and Toula as a united entity:

Fuck off Johnny, I yell, and walk into the crowd.

– It's Toula, he yells after me. It's Toula, sugar. Johnny's not here tonight. ... Fuck you, Johnny, I mutter under my breath, I'm no girl. I murmur the words softly so the men around me won't hear.

Johnny is Johnny to me, he can be Toula to everybody else. (97)

Ari's refusal to acknowledge Toula suggests that he is incapable of conceding the importance of Toula in Johnny's identification. He seems to interpret Toula as exasperating, as he does the other trans*-women at the nightclub;³⁶ Ari refers to Crystal as "he" and is irritated by her performance (95-96). His reaction to Toula can be read as frustration in response to a perceived lack of authenticity. Ari judges negatively that which he perceives to be disingenuous and he strives for authenticity. However, the individualism patent in his quest to be authentic also affects his capacity to be honest with those around him, because he cannot accept restrictions in terms of how he views himself. This is reiterated through Ari's unwillingness to define himself in any particular terms and his preferring to maintain an ambiguous and indefinite identity; for a substantial proportion of the novel, he is ambivalent about his sexuality, despite his avowed desire for men. Toula, in contrast, represents an explicit identification with particular aspects of gendered identity and sexuality that lie outside of hegemonic heteronormative discourse.

³⁶ "Trans*" is an accepted umbrella term used to encompass transgendered, transsexual, transvestite and other non-cisgendered people.

Dressing as Toula permits aspects of Johnny's identity that are not commensurate with stereotypes of masculinity to be expressed, offering a kind of protection and confidence through his creation of another identity. Toula is a separate entity from Johnny, and she can articulate different perspectives: "Johnny has Toula. His dresses and skirts are also his battle fatigues. He can't remain silent. Silence would kill Johnny" (146). That Johnny has Toula as a means of expression allows Johnny to oppose his father—as exemplified above—in a way that is not evidently available to him when Johnny is *not* Toula; Toula is Johnny's attempt not to be "gutless" and to "upset the status quo" (100). Johnny's lack of silence, his openness and visibility as a queer man, shows that he has accepted both his sexuality and his role in "the real world" in a way that Ari cannot (146). Butler asserts that drag disrupts how we read normative gendered identity. This disruption allows for subjectivity that exists outside of restrictive heteronormative confines. Because the performance of gender defies what is assumed to be prescribed by the body, it forces a reconsideration of the coherence between that performance and understood sex or gender. Butler declares:

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance ... *In imitating gender drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.* (*Gender* 137, emphasis in original)

Toula, then, offers Johnny a means of expression through a gendered performance outside of heteronormative expectations that challenges limited constructions of gender. She allows for the refusal of hegemonic and dichotomous traits that act as essential signifiers, and Toula is thus the manifestation of that which challenges masculine norms.

In contrast with the overt defiance of Toula's deliberately provocative performances, and despite his endorsement of hegemonic masculinity, Ari's queerness can be read as

deviant in the same way that his unemployment and refusal to go to university can. Ari has deliberately rejected the stereotypical path a Greek man should take, and consequently educes confusion, annoyance, and feelings of disgrace in those around him who feel they are affected by the lifestyle choices he makes—or, rather, refuses to make. This exemplifies the anomie associated with grunge texts. Ari's actions are predominantly based on physical pleasure, and the consequences of his actions are rarely examined, except in brief flashes such as, "Mum and Dad are going to kill me," (Tsiolkas 138) or wondering if his anonymous sexual partners are "clean" (106). His thoughts about the potential consequences of his behaviour do not, however, affect or alter his actions, and Ari remains fundamentally hedonistic.

There are nonetheless passages in the text that indicate less physical and more emotional concerns for Ari, such as the discovery of an emotional link to sexual pleasure. His feelings towards George, for example—that he "may be in love" with him—make him want to tell his sister "I think I'm going to be a faggot for the rest of my life" (151). Here, 'I think' can be read as indicating both certainty and uncertainty, but considering Ari's active avoidance of defining himself in any terms, this is a significant revelation; being a 'faggot' is something with which Ari at least *thinks* he can identify, and this identification is tied to his potential love for George. Ari's question, "Am I?", in response to Serena stating he is gay (141), also exemplifies his apprehension about identifying with a particular label and his ambivalence about what this identification could mean. He reacts with frustration, stating, "words such as faggot, wog, gay, Greek, Australian, Croat are just excuses. Just stories, they mean shit" (141); labels restrict his understanding of self and their signification is ultimately meaningless to his identity. Various passages in *Loaded* are similarly concerned with Ari's distaste for labels and the specific ways in which words can be used to limit a person. Ari discusses the different connotations of terms that are applied to him:

Faggot I don't mind. I like the word. I like queer, I like the Greek word *pousti*. I hate the word gay. Hate the word homosexual. I like the word

wog, can't stand dago, ethnic or Greek-Australian. You're either Greek or Australian, you have to make a choice. Me, I'm neither. It's not that I can't decide; I don't like definitions. (114-15)

The choices that one *has* to make about the words one uses to describe oneself is considered, by Ari, to define, to demarcate, one's identity. Pons argues, "the fact that Ari likes some names and dislikes others testifies to his ambiguity. He is afraid of appearing effeminate, a faggot, that is, and so he acts the macho man" (215); Pons thus links, as Ari does, masculinity with sexuality—although Ari does not link the term 'faggot' with being effeminate, as Pons suggests. Authers observes that in the novel, "language is essential to self-understanding, and all of its multiple interpretations have an influence on the subject" (141). The particular terms thereby have more nuanced connotations in an Australian context that relate not only to gender, but also class and ethnicity. While Ari rejects the terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' because of they evoke a version of masculinity with which he does not identify, they are also more middle-class. 'Queer', in contrast, is a reclaimed term (Brontsema 4), and 'faggot' and '*pousti*' are slang that are not necessarily considered derogatory when used within the queer community, in contrast to their use as pejorative terms from without (Spiers 301; Holas); the terms therefore necessitate a consideration of how they are used. The word 'faggot', for instance, has very different connotations when Ari is applying it to himself than it does when it is used as an insult by a heterosexual woman (115), where its power shifts because it is a pejorative slur. Equally, 'wog' is a reappropriated word in Melbourne (Tsolidis and Pollard 441), whereas 'dago' is still associated with racism, and 'ethnic' and 'Greek-Australian' are imposed terms that connote difference. As shown earlier with Toula, Ari himself uses the terms to deride and classify those around him; "standard Greek wife" (67), "normal wogs" (75), "a gay man always reveals himself as a faggot" (92) are descriptions used to reduce those around him to particular stereotypes throughout the novel. The loaded terms have different implications depending on whether they are subjectively embraced or imposed on others. Ari uses his preferred terms with aggression, because "the words have guts" (Tsiolkas

115); they are a mark of identity and reclaimed otherness. Through an acceptance and rejection of terminology, Ari asserts the kind of identity with which he is willing to identify.

Loaded offers evidence of the influence of intersectionality—particularly of ethnicity and sexuality—on one’s gendered identity. These aspects, however, are not without issue; they show Ari’s limited judgements, but, importantly, they also show the complexity associated with specifically identifying and thereby limiting oneself in terms of defined categories. Through rejecting a kind of overarching identity that is definable and thereby limited, Ari’s subjectivity is acknowledged as a mutable performance, rather than a fixed constant. The novel’s representations of queer sexualities and normative gender roles disrupted by subversions of stereotypical traits allows for a consideration of a multiplicity of gendered and sexual identities.

“Pretty little darling”: *The River Ophelia* by Justine Ettler

The River Ophelia by Justine Ettler incorporates references to literary texts such as the Marquis de Sade’s characters Justine and Juliette, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as well as writers Georges Bataille and Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch, in her narrative of protagonist Justine’s experiences of sex and violence. This “lineage of texts” that Ettler utilises are texts that focus on power and desire (Ettler, “Intervening” 63). She explicitly states that although hers is not a social realist novel, there is indeed “reality inside the book”, but it is a reality that is “*only* possible in books” (62, emphasis in original); Ettler deliberately emphasises the constructed nature of *The River Ophelia* (64). Her explicit recognition of the text’s fictionality, and her decision to focus on sex and violence because they are “at the heart of defining our culture” (63), make the novel particularly relevant to my research. However, I argue that in spite of her attempts to interrogate the themes of sex and violence from the perspective of a woman, her novel fails to be the “feminist intervention” (62) that she

attempted to write. While Ettler engages with social issues of gender, she does not challenge the patriarchal order or promote alternative constructions of femininity.

The style of the novel deliberately mimics *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, and Ettler also draws on Kathy Acker's 1986 reinterpretation of Don Quixote, *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream* (62). The characters in *The River Ophelia* are based on their literary eponyms— Ophelia and Hamlet, Sade and Justine—but they can be read more accurately as caricatures than feminist re-imaginings of their eponymic counterparts. The characterisation of Ettler's Justine is drawn from the Marquis de Sade's *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue*. Justine is beautiful, and the object of frequent violent desire. While Ettler's Justine does not attempt to encapsulate virtue through abstinence, as de Sade's protagonist does—rather, she attempts the opposite—there are distinct similarities between Justine in *The River Ophelia* and her namesake; most importantly, Justine is always a victim. In her feminist analyses and interpretation of de Sade's writing, *Sadeian Women*,³⁷ Angela Carter asserts:

Justine marks the start of a kind of self-regarding female masochism, a woman with no place in the world, no status, the core of whose resistance has been eaten away by self-pity.

Justine's place in the aetiology of the female condition in the twentieth century is assured; she is the personification of the pornography of that condition. (57)

Ettler's Justine is constructed as an assertive sexual agent, suggesting an attempt to subvert the submissiveness outlined by Carter, however her masochistic role is reiterated throughout her relationships. Despite embracing her sexuality, she is shown to lack control over her own

³⁷ Carter suggests there may be such a thing as 'moral pornography', which would "use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. ... Such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture" (19-20). A moral pornographer would critique the power dynamics between men and women, rather than reaffirming the patriarchal power over "female acquiescence" (20), and interrogate the fears towards women's sexuality that underpins misogynistic constructions.

desires by submitting to Sade and is a frequent victim of violence and related depravity. While they may be considered to extend Carter's wider project—that of investigating 'moral pornography, which criticised evident inequities between men and women in representations of sex, and how this restricts women's freedom—such a critical and nuanced construction of Justine is obscured by her debasement.

Shifting between first- and third-person perspectives, Justine falls in love with Sade, and their relationship is marked by violent sexual encounters. Justine's obsession with Sade develops quickly, and the emotional and physical pain she inflicts on herself in response to her strong feelings for him permeates much of the text. It is not only Justine who repeatedly succumbs to Sade's apparent allure: most of the female characters lack control over their desires, especially in response to Sade. Despite his violent attacks on Justine,³⁸ her outrage towards him is later sublimated by the prospect of having sex with him; she forgives him immediately when he is sexually available. The intersection of violence and sex between Justine and Sade is evident throughout the novel. While there is consensually violent sado-masochism evident in the sex that they enjoy, sex is also shown to negate the violence Sade and Justine inflict upon each other. Justine engages in a further vicious fight with Sade after telling him she is pregnant, during which both Justine and Sade attack each other: "[She] punched him smack in the middle of his nose. He hit her back, his fist collecting square with her jaw and she fell to the floor. Too winded to sob she lay absolutely still while blood trickled down her chin" (Ettler, *River* 152). Ophelia cleans the blood from Justine's face, ignores Justine's apparent distress, and "[hands] Justine over to Sade" (152); he then leads Justine to the bar, and they begin to have sex almost immediately—on the bar in the nightclub—before they are asked by the 'Door' to leave (153-154). This intersection between

³⁸ For example: "He threw me against the wall. It was very dark, I couldn't really see his face, I didn't really want to know. I considered asking him not to hurt me because I was pregnant but I couldn't be bothered. I just wanted it to be over so I could go home. He hit me across the face and then beat my head against the wall. It sounded like my skull was cracking." (Ettler, *River* 108-09)

violence and sex brings into question Justine's agency in such scenarios: Sade's attempts to apologise or placate are contemptible—"I just want you to know that the way I acted didn't always reflect my feelings for you. Sometimes I was angry with you and did things I regretted but it didn't mean I didn't love you" (138-39)—and Justine's willingness to engage sexually with Sade, in a public place and despite her nausea and pain, suggests that Justine lacks agency when it comes to Sade. Her rage, hurt, and any sense of social decorum are negated by sex with him. Therefore, not only is the sex in the novel markedly disconcerting because of its recurrent association with violence and revulsion, but it also offsets, or compensates for, the violence and damage to Justine for which Sade is responsible.

The inability to control one's actions or emotions also manifests in Justine's violent outbursts towards herself in response to the way in which Sade treats her. Her obsession with Sade appears to develop out of sexual pleasure alone. There is no clear development of 'love', *per se*, yet Justine recurrently declares her love for Sade and laments his lack of reciprocity. Justine is greatly distressed by Sade's behaviour, and this is apparent in the ways in which she interprets rejection, frequently represented through episodes of self-abuse in response to perceived dismissals from Sade. For instance, Justine's self-directed physical violence in reaction to Sade's hanging up the phone abruptly appears dramatic and disproportionate: "I pulled at my hair, tearing out whole handfuls and screamed into the dark room. I fell down on the bed. Then I sat up on my knees and hit my head against the wall" (27).³⁹ Her extreme outbursts are provoked only by Sade, and although he is undeniably violent towards Justine, the damage of her self-inflicted injuries is comparable to those inflicted by him. The constant pain that Justine experiences (brought about by drugs and alcohol, pregnancy, as well as violence, and evident in her frequent nausea and vertigo) is

³⁹ That Justine hates the slamming of both doors and telephones is later shown to stem from repressed memories of a violent attack on her mother that she witnessed as a child. This means that her behaviour is not, in fact, disproportionate considering her past trauma, but its representation in the novel offers little to suggest that her actions are more than masochism.

thus shown to be a consequence of her own behaviour, regardless of whether it is self-inflicted or perpetrated by Sade. Justine is thus constructed as culpable for her corporeal experiences.

Most relationships between men and women portrayed in the novel involve sex acts of some kind. The focus on sex throughout *The River Ophelia* is complex, and not necessarily based on pleasure or desire. For example, Justine has sex with Hamlet on the stairs outside the nightclub, not because she feels any overpowering desire for him, but rather as a seeming act of retaliation against Sade for his attention towards one of her friends. Justine attempts to use her body as a weapon, as though she is capable of hurting Sade through sex acts with others; this response, however, appears disproportionate and ineffective. Instead, her behaviour exemplifies the extent to which her engagement with sex is based on wanting to possess Sade, rather than her own desire. While Justine is frequently described as being overcome with desire, her inability to tell whether or not she is in pain, and whether or not she wants Hamlet to stop “fucking” her illustrates that her desire or arousal is an irrelevant feature in many sex acts (159). Her confusion about desire, and the seeming requirement for women—as it is not only Justine who engages in unwanted sex in this novel—to be interminably compliant, if not eager, is also evident in the masturbation scenes which occur in most chapters, seemingly to highlight Justine’s insatiability. Likewise, during an evening out in a nightclub after Sade brutally assaults her, he masturbates her and two of her friends sequentially, to which each woman responds with ecstasy and no trace of indignation (143-45). The repetition of these incidents negates the potentially subversive or empowering value of including female autoeroticism by insinuating a lack of control over sexual desire and therefore sexual powerlessness.

The female characters compete for the same men throughout the novel. This competition appears to be predominantly concerned with feeling desirable and is unrelated to love or any other emotional interest; this is not necessarily narcissistic, but about self-worth being directly proportionate to one’s desirability: “She was seized by a minor anxiety

attack. *There were too many attractive young women at this nightclub*" (123, emphasis in original). Fidelity, monogamy and loyalty are not moral qualities that Justine upholds, but ones she feels strongly about when their neglect affects her negatively: for example, although Justine despises Juliette and Simone for sleeping with Sade and lying about it, she has no qualms about attempting to seduce Hamlet, the partner of her close friend Ophelia. She does not find him at all attractive, but this is irrelevant; she wants Hamlet to desire her in the same way he desires Simone and Ophelia. Justine has sex with three other men throughout the course of the novel, all the while maintaining her distress about Sade's infidelity. Her double standard regarding her own infidelity indicates that her need for sexual pleasure is distinct from love, and more frequently associated with jealousy and triumph.

Despite Ettler's purported feminist intervention, female characters appear to be trivialised and constricted by their bodies, especially in their interactions with male characters. Justine's and Ophelia's sexual behaviours are haphazard and reactive and tied into violence. Similarly, while Hamlet's extended apology to Ophelia for his use of the epithet "pretty little darling" acknowledges the phrase to be condescending and marginalising to women, it is interspersed with his performance of unsolicited oral sex on her, in front of Justine (210-11). This scene is absurd in that while Hamlet admits that his statements are "sexist and diminutive" (210), both Ophelia and Justine are in disempowered positions: Ophelia's body is objectified and she begins to cry during Hamlet's apparent attempts to remedy his error, while Justine is uncomfortable and miserable but unable to leave the room. While, in theory, his apology is an acknowledgement of the ways in which patronizing language has broader effects, the extended scene makes this pseudo-feminist apology appear anti-rhetorical, especially because it develops into Hamlet imploring Ophelia to "please suck my cock" (212). Accordingly, his apology for anti-feminist language does not, in any way, show a recognition of the reasons that Ophelia does not wish to be called a 'pretty little darling', but instead transforms Ophelia into the trivialised character which the phrasing implies, as she is simultaneously objectified and diminished. Hamlet's statement, "look what

you've done to me" (212), however, attributes his arousal to Ophelia's mere presence. She is inactive, but nevertheless constructed as accountable for his sexual response. Her power therefore lies only in her impassive ability to arouse men. While Hamlet's acknowledgment of his condescending faux pas and his uncontrollable weakness in response to Ophelia's presence may be read as feminist (indeed, from a post-feminist perspective), such a reading is easily contested: Ophelia is portrayed passively and her desires, both sexual and ideological, are largely ignored.

The repugnant way in which Ophelia is portrayed whilst she is trying to clarify her fear and dissatisfaction with life is disquieting for a number of reasons: Ophelia does not appear to wield any power over her own body, which has been passively involved in apparently undesired sexual activity. She does not react to being covered by Hamlet's semen, and his infantilising attempt to clean her after his ejaculation on her face appears almost equally violating (214). Ophelia, in response to Hamlet's performance, leaves, as though this is the only reaction possible. The dynamic between Hamlet and Ophelia in this relationship is ultimately patriarchal: not only does her passivity negate any potential influence she may have over Hamlet, but, rather than acknowledging her lack of power, he holds her responsible for his inability to control himself around her. Similarly, the voyeuristic component of this scene—which takes place with Justine in the room, largely ignored⁴⁰—is sexually subversive in an ostensibly liberated manner, but because Justine is shown to be *obliged* to stay in the room, the 'liberation' of such subversion is limited.

While Vernay argues that the prevalence of women performing oral sex on men throughout *The River Ophelia* emphasises that women are "made to choke under male supremacy, gagged by phallic power, unable to express themselves" ("Sex" 147), it appears that the women within the novel are usually compliant, if not the instigators, of such

⁴⁰ The room in which the scene takes place is described as having glass floors; below, Ophelia's young children and Hamlet's teenage son are playing "Naked Dictionary" (220).

'gagging'. There is therefore a distinction between sexual activity and the women's desire or arousal; Justine, for example, wants to have sex with Hamlet, Bataille and Sade in response to perceived competition with other women or as revenge, which is about maintaining a particular kind of power, one that is reliant on her being considered the most desirable sexual object. Her love for Sade is indeed stronger when she knows he is having sex with someone else. It is ostensibly acceptable to be gagged by phallic power if one can maintain some semblance of sexual desirability. The women in this text—despite attempting to seduce many men—still seem to consider their value to be reliant on masculine sexual desire, of which they are passive recipients; this is particularly evident in the frequently violent and abject manner with which women are treated throughout the text.

Positive constructions of women's sexuality, and sexual bodies, are largely missing from the novel. The 'cunt' is portrayed as an absence within women that needs to be filled (by anything—penises, pens, bottles), further demonstrating that which can be read as a feminine *lack*: "*There's a vast emptiness between my legs. Big enough to fit the whole world inside*" (Ettler, *River* 146, emphasis in original). Desire, then, is portrayed as a physical absence, distinct from Justine's mental processes, rather than something productive and powerful.⁴¹ These aspects of the novel demonstrate that while the women are shown to be sexually uninhibited, the way in which they engage in sexual behaviour is problematic. As argued by Salzman:

Of course, grunge fiction isn't intended to have the kind of now-old-fashioned moral purpose of a 'feminist approach', but Ettler's novel does not use grunge against the stereotypes of women it relies on. It is the men, even the indecisive ones, who dominate, while women are

⁴¹ This counters Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome, which describes the interrelationship of the body and mind in the experience of desire (in Cranny-Francis, *Body* 17; Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 25). This concept is discussed further in Chapter Four.

constantly weeping, bleeding, and describing their cunts (Ettler's favourite word: as in 'It was all her cunt's fault') almost entirely in relation to them. (Gelder and Salzman 206)

The novel does not exemplify a liberated sexuality for women, because the female characters are repeatedly objectified by the male characters. Being sexually active and enjoying sex does not mean Justine, Ophelia and company are in any way engaged with feminist ideals; the ways in which the women are constructed to view their own bodies, their sexuality and their relation to men are frequently negative. Subverting expectations of femininity does not equal feminism.

The River Ophelia, despite its purported attempts at a feminist reinterpretation of a misogynistic novel, offers little by way of alternatives to normative gendered constructions. While it offers subversive sexual representations, these exist within restrictive gendered power dynamics, and the characters within the novel do little to challenge the patriarchal order. The deviance of the novel is in the characters' behaviour, but this deviance offers no empowering alternatives and simply reiterates negative and dangerous assumptions of women and sex. The novel offers abject and infantilised female characters without agency or power.

"Men with daughters knew how to painlessly undress a girl": *Taming the Beast* by Emily Maguire (Part One)

Sarah came, as she usually did, because she knew how her body worked, how to position herself, how to tense and relax, clench and release, how to keep a man from coming until she was done with him. Mr Carr—another man who had learnt from his daughters how to undress a girl without messing up her hair—had taught her all those things, and she was grateful for this every day of her life. But he also

taught her that an orgasm was nothing; it was a sneeze or a good cry. So although she sought out sex like the drug it was, and although she came and came and came and came, what she always hoped for was the other thing: the merging into one, the making of the beast with two backs. Every man, every time, she waited for that moment of transcendence[.] (Maguire, *Taming* 61-62)

While *Taming the Beast* will be discussed in detail the following chapter, it is also pertinent to address it here. The violence of the novel intersects with the protagonist's construction as sexually deviant. *Taming the Beast* is a third-person narrative that focuses predominantly on Sarah. The novel is divided into four parts: the first centres on Sarah as a precocious fourteen-year-old high-school girl who develops a sexual relationship with her teacher; the second concentrates on Sarah at twenty-two, studying, working as a waitress, and trying to deal with her past and recreate it simultaneously; the third describes her reunion with Daniel Carr; and the fourth outlines her realisations of the problematic nature of the relationship. The trauma of her 'sexual awakening' with her English teacher, Mr Carr,⁴² interestingly, stems not from Sarah's interpretation of their relationship as exploitative or sexually abusive, but instead she is traumatised because the relationship *ended* and he left her. Sarah's promiscuity as a teenager and as an adult is represented as a direct response to Daniel's departure, filling the loss that she feels but also attempting to recreate the feelings of subjection and love that she felt with him. She finds herself jealous of young women she observes who gaze adoringly at older men, because she has not been able to recreate that sensation (Maguire, *Taming* 73-74). She has sex variously and indiscriminately, because she

⁴² Daniel Carr is frequently referred to as Mr Carr when he is characterised as Sarah's teacher, and Daniel later in the novel. I maintain this distinction in my analyses of the novel, but use Daniel Carr when my statement refers to his general characterisation.

feels that *any* man might be the one capable of inflaming in her such desire, able to recreate with her 'the beast with two backs' (62), reasoning that "This man had as much chance as any other of being the man who would split her soul wide open" (64). Sarah reasons that to discriminate superficially, to choose not to have sex with someone simply because he does not appeal to her, may mean she remains alone and unfulfilled.

The construction and representation of Sarah's sexuality is complex, in that Sarah at no point in the novel views herself as a *victim* of abuse at the hands of Mr Carr. While the reader may interpret Sarah's sexual behaviour as an adult as an attempt to negotiate the abuse she suffered as a fourteen-year-old, Sarah does not interpret herself this way. Thus, the reader must negotiate an abusive relationship in which the apparent victim is not one; to impose a victim-status on Sarah would be to ignore or to diminish her own sexual desire and power. An ethical stance, then, is to analyse Daniel's violence, deviance and abuse in terms that are distinct from Sarah's experience, and this critique is the focus of the discussion in Chapter Three. Where Sarah occasionally understands Daniel's words and actions to be abusive, she considers herself to possess an equivalent sexual deviance.

The novel addresses some of the same issues as *The Mint Lawn* with regard to legally problematic relationships between teacher and underage student. What must be addressed, then, is the problematic nature of automatically allocating a relationship as deviant because of legality. While, as will be discussed, the relationship is deviant and problematic in a number of ways because of its very nature, regardless of its origins, it is impossible to read the text distinctly from the automatic abhorrence to statutory rape that exists in Australian culture. The relationship between an underage girl and her older male teacher relies on the assumption of a necessary power imbalance because of not only his age, but position of

authority.⁴³ However, what the novel also brings into question is the sexuality of fourteen-year-old Sarah. The extent to which her sexuality is almost *attributed* to Mr Carr suggests that it is not something within Sarah, but rather something imposed on her. While such a construct is interrogated in the novel, it is a deliberately provocative inclusion. Rubin claims that there is a tendency to deny the sexuality of young people because it is believed that sex is harmful for them, and that this view is evident in the strict policing of sex for adolescents as well as the moral panic over the necessity to protect children (144, 146). Rubin argues that age of consent laws are problematic because they “make no distinction between the most brutal rape and the most gentle romance” and they disallow young people under that prescribed age “access to ‘adult’ sexuality” (158). Rubin’s assertions are reinforced in the case of Sarah, who maintains that her sexuality is irrefutably equivalent to that of her adult lover. However, these views are also problematised, as the mistreatment of Sarah ultimately suggests the flaws inherent in the relationship, and the effects of the power differential, despite her inability to see such problems.

While Maguire brings into question the idea of consent in unequal relationships that espouse love—or “transcendence” (Maguire, *Taming* 62)⁴⁴—as their motivator, as Rubin

⁴³Age of consent laws differ between states and territories in Australia. The legal age of consent is either sixteen or seventeen; Queensland also dictates the age of eighteen to consent to anal sex. Of interest is that, in some states, if the defendant is aged within a certain number of years from the underage party—ranging from less than two to less than five years older than the child—the act is defensible (Australian Institute of Family Studies).

⁴⁴ In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir identifies ‘transcendence’ as a masculine phenomenon, that is active, productive, subjective, and affecting the external world. In contrast, women are associated to the realm of ‘immanence’: passive, internal, and in opposition to the external realm. This is not to say that these differences are innate, but because, de Beauvoir argues, gendered difference is a product of women’s oppression:

The advantage man enjoys, which makes itself felt from his childhood, is that his vocation as a human being in no way runs counter to his destiny as a male. Through the identification of phallus and transcendence, it turns out that his social and spiritual successes endow him with a virile prestige. He is not divided. Whereas it is required of woman that in order to realize her femininity she must make herself object and prey, which is to say that she must renounce her claims as sovereign subject. It is this conflict that especially marks the situation of the emancipated

points out, “cross-generational encounters are still viewed as unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence” (Rubin 153). Despite her outrage, it is difficult to imagine a relationship between a youth and a person in a position of authority that can exist without a problematic disparity in power, culminating in the reading of deviance of the sex that takes place within the relationship. This deviance is externally imposed automatically, and, in Australia, it is legally impossible to state that the relationship was equal and just. It is also deliberate and manipulative, and jarring, because statements such as, “Men with daughters knew how to painlessly undress a girl” (Maguire, *Taming* 61), reiterate the discordant dynamics at play within the text. The novel at once draws attention to, and attempts to occlude, the abusive nature of the relationship. This moral ambiguity is similarly evident in the following passage: “Sarah tried to remember which underpants she had put on that morning. She hoped it was not the pair with little ducks. If Mr Carr saw little ducks on her underwear he would think she was a child, and then he would stop” (9). That she owns the underwear, and that in the morning before the event occurred she was possibly a child who would wear little duck underwear, is evident in the passage. However, it is also patently clear that she is actively happy about Mr Carr’s behaviour. As such, she is not a victim, but she is also not in a position of power.

An element of deviance represented of *Taming the Beast* lies in its characterisation of a victim who refuses to read herself as a victim. Sarah, the protagonist, does not consider herself the innocent victim of an illicit relationship, but rather as an active, agential participant in a relationship between star-crossed lovers with an unfortunate age gap. Despite this representation of the relationship, it is important to discuss it in terms of

woman. She refuses to confine herself to her role as female, because she will not accept mutilation; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex. (691)
Sarah’s ‘transcendence’, then, is perhaps symbolic of her attempts to reject being merely ‘prey’ and to assert herself as an active and agential woman.

deviance, because it forces readers to question the assumptions of taboo that we bring to our readings. Sarah feels empowered by Mr Carr's response to her, and, because she has no power in other aspects of her life, she embraces the relationship. However, she fails to recognise that her power is limited, and the decisions, all the decisions, about her seduction and indeed her sexual experiences overall are made by Mr Carr:

His hot, damp hand settled on her bare knee. Sarah noticed, all at once, that his forehead was shiny and the blinds were lowered and the door was closed and her heart was racing. She didn't move or speak. ... Mr Carr leant forward in his chair and moved his hand to Sarah's shoulder, then let it slide until it rested on one of her never before touched, brand new breasts. She felt like she might cry, but she also felt a sick kind of excitement. (8-9)

This passage sets up the initial sexual interaction as deliberate and planned on Mr Carr's behalf, as Sarah notes the blinds and the door. She is not explicitly frightened, but both the acknowledgment that she might cry, and the description of feeling 'sick' in reference to excitement suggests that this is not entirely a positive moment. The reference to 'brand new breasts' reiterates her youth and inexperience, and therefore the power imbalance and taboo inherent in this encounter.

Her relationship with Mr Carr, however, is ultimately shown to have precipitated Sarah's sexual awakening, and influenced her sexual identity. Sarah's own sexual behaviour is considered deviant, similarly constructed to that of *Praise's* Cynthia, because she values her own sexual pleasure and her actions are judged by those around her—particularly the men with whom she is in sexual relationships. That her active sexuality—her 'promiscuity'—is deviant is confounding, but in line with the expectation that heterosexual women remain passive recipients of sex, as opposed to agential sexual beings with desires that are of equal importance to that of their sexual partners. Sarah understands her relationship with Mr Carr

not as abusive or deviant, but rather as one which allowed her to openly express and embrace her sexuality. As she tells Daniel after they reconnect in her adulthood,

‘I was worried that there was something wrong with me. That normal girls didn’t get so wet their lovers laughed to touch them. I worried that you found me sluttish or disgusting, because I was always so hungry for you, for sex. But when I asked you whether it was wrong of me, you quoted John Wilmot and –’

‘For did you love your pleasure less, you were no match for me.’

‘Yes. And those words were such a gift to me. To know that my desire was not something monstrous, that anyone who thought I shouldn’t want so much and so often, was not worthy of me.’ (152-53)

Sarah thus interprets their relationship as something revolutionary and reassuring—even normalising. Daniel, however, bitterly replies, “I didn’t realise at the time that your desire was non-specific. I assumed that the voracious appetite I so admired was for me only” (153). This shows the possessiveness of Sarah’s sexuality and sexualisation itself; he enjoys her fervour, but is displeased that it is not only for him. The tone of his assessment of her ‘voracious appetite’ works to demean her sexuality to the same extent as the other men in her life.

Daniel’s aggravation at her pleasure with other men, however, is juxtaposed with the assumption of other men that because Sarah enjoys sex, she must be willing to have sex with them. Her friend’s boyfriend Mike, for example, trusts that Sarah will have sex with him, as though she is obliged to do so because she enjoys sex and has a ‘reputation’. Her reaction to his blithe request, “Be a sport, heh?” (76), is one of resentment towards his sense of entitlement and his misreading of her sexuality:

Later that night, in bed alone, Sarah considered Mike’s proposition. Not so much what he had said, but the way he had said it. Like he was certain she wouldn’t say no. Like she was a sure thing. Like she was

breaking some law by not fucking him. It was an attitude she was used to, but which still got on her nerves. People didn't understand the difference between being easy in the sense of fucking anyone who asked, and being easy in the sense of not making a bloke wait six months before deciding to fuck him. Sarah was easy in the second sense and resented people thinking otherwise. Her version of easy meant not wasting time playing games; the other version meant being a desperate sad case who lay down and waited to be used by whoever was passing by. (76)

Sarah thus adopts feminist opinions regarding her own sexual practice, and her expectations of men towards her. She resents expectations of intimacy simply because she has had sex with a man—"I'm sick of the way men claim ownership of me just because they've had an orgasm in my body" (115)—and is angered by expectations that she will engage in sex acts simply because she is propositioned. While she is judgemental of women whose attitudes to sex do not match her own—women who are either more or less 'easy' than she—Sarah's sense of subjective corporeality means that she values sexual pleasure and its role in her life and is happy to seek sex in order to attain pleasure.

Sarah continues, however, to seek 'the one', which suggests a particular romantic spin: "after seven years of determined fucking she was beginning to lose her faith. Sweating and gasping beside her was another man who had been tried and enjoyed but who, in the end, had failed to be anything but a good fuck" (62). Her sexual voraciousness is tied to a quest for love, and as such, sex has a particular objective. For Sarah, then, there still remains a normative and conservative justification for her sexually deviant behaviour. *Taming the Beast* is of interest for its views of female sexuality. Its uncompromising stance, that Sarah's sexuality is not aberrant or deviant because of her libido, is important, and it allows for a progressive reading of sexuality. However, because of the ties to abuse, the ways in which we read her sexuality are disrupted. The positive construction of empowered sexuality is

problematised by the history of the protagonist, and therefore, despite its subversion of feminine sexuality, Sarah's sexuality is represented as deviant.

"Did you see Mum's ankles?": *Indelible Ink* by Fiona McGregor

McGregor's *Indelible Ink* centres on Marie King, a fifty-nine year old woman with three adult children who is coping with the consequences of her recent divorce, which has left her without an income and with mounting debt. The novel demonstrates the role of social and class expectations on subjectivity and objectification of a subject, and how the physical inscription of tattooing shift the ways in which the protagonist's body is read in terms of those expectations by those around her. The narrative itself shifts focus between Marie and her three children—Clark, Blanche and Leon—addressing their individual lives, as well as their interpretations of their mother. To cope with the financial hardship to which she is unaccustomed, Marie must sell her \$6 million home in Sydney's affluent North Shore, which is distressing mostly because its established garden—almost a character in itself—is her refuge and solace. She is increasingly excluded from her former milieu post-divorce, and her pathological dependence on alcohol increases in line with her depression and feelings of isolation. A drunken decision to get a tattoo as a commemorative mark of her freedom leads to an addiction that supplants her alcoholism. As her tattoos increase in number, the mien of her family and former peers towards her alters dramatically, as though her entire construction has changed because of these marks on her skin. Her altered appearance denotes her as different, closing her off from particular experiences and opening up alternatives. In addition, her diagnosis with stomach cancer means her bodily subversions also manifest themselves in illness, further changing her body, her understanding of her body and her understanding of self.

There are important elements that must be highlighted here: first, the protagonist is a post-menopausal woman. That there is a strong, older female protagonist in recent

Australian fiction is valuable within itself, but that Marie is represented as engaging in various sex acts, as well as culturally deviant practices such as tattooing and the consumption of various illicit substances, is significant because of its subversion of particular expectations. Such practices in a young male protagonist, for instance, would be unremarkable, but Marie subverts expectations of gender, age and class. The novel is set in Mosman and Redfern. The difference between the two Sydney suburbs allows for an implicit discussion of class, and the practices that occur in one suburb have different implications and effects than in the other. Although tattooing, for example, is not considered particularly subversive by contemporary standards—evidence of what David Bell calls the “proliferation and ‘mainstreaming’ of modification” (169) that leads to the symbolic reclaiming of one’s body through a sense of ownership (170)—for the purpose of this novel, the setting affects the cultural capital and transgressive status of tattoos. Despite the popularity and cultural acceptance of tattoos in contemporary Australian society, Marie’s affluent peer group from Mosman is a demographic to whom such practices remain deviant, while in Redfern Marie is accepted and non-deviant.

Her tattoos, correspondingly, allow access to other parts of Sydney, in terms of suburbs and subcultural locales such as tattoo parlours and queer dance parties, but, in turn, they exclude her from the conventions of her more affluent suburb. Where her initial exclusion was the result of the divorce and subsequent change in her financial situation, her tattoos educe a purposeful and empowered marginalisation. Her chosen body modifications offer her an opportunity to distinguish herself visibly from the society about which her opinions have become increasingly scathing. Her new friendships with her tattooist, Rhys, and her queer, tattooed posse, offer her insight into that which was lacking in her previous relationships. Mosman and Redfern thus act as metaphors for particular ideologies of conservatism and deviance, and the representation of Marie as simultaneously within and outside both suburbs adds to a particular cultural reading of her affect.

The novel addresses affect through its interaction with the embodied self and, I argue, the expression of affect through deliberate manipulation of one’s physicality allows one to

claim, or reclaim, a semblance of power as a subject. Through her deliberate manipulation of her corporeality, the consequent changes in her affect enable Marie to move towards an ideal self. Her tattoos represent a movement away from the hegemonic expectations to which she previously adhered, and accordingly she takes charge of her corporeality and the construction of her own identity. Because Marie's actions transgress the limitations of the polite society she inhabits, the changes in her appearance, as well as her new friendships, offer her a sense of autonomy and identity, as though the tattoos have revealed aspects of *self*. According to Marie, "the needles hadn't so much inserted ink as stripped the veneer from an underlying design" (McGregor, *Indelible* 34). For Deleuze, there is no differentiation between the 'natural' and 'artificial' in terms of bodily affects ("Ethology" 59), and thus for Marie, the modifications to her skin are incorporated *into* her affect. They are not external, but part of her as a whole, ultimately influencing not only her interpretation of her affective self, but also those around her.

Grosz proposes that the way in which we present ourselves attempts to prescribe the way in which our body is read by others:

The metaphor of the *textualised body* affirms the body as a page or material on which messages may be inscribed. The analogy between bodies and texts is a close one: tools of body engraving—social, surgical, epistemic or disciplinary—mark bodies in culturally specific ways; writing instruments—the pen, stylus, or laser beam—inscribe the blank page of the body. The 'messages' or 'texts' produced by such procedures construct bodies as networks of social signification, meaningful and functional 'subjects' within assemblages composed with other subjects.

(Grosz, "Inscriptions" 62-63, emphasis in original)

There are certain bodily inscriptions which are accepted, or even expected, with regard to women's bodies; the alteration of appearance through clothing, make-up, and hair removal, as well as bodily modification through dieting, exercise and cosmetic surgery, are elements of

the discourse surrounding the appearance of femininity. Susan Benson refers to such alterations as 'body work', and "whether normalising, transgressive or pathological" all body work shares "a kind of corporeal absolutism: that it is through the body and in the body that personal identity is to be forged and selfhood sustained" (Benson 236). She later explains that in spite of the "growing acceptability of tattooing and body piercing, they "continue to be defined by many of those involved as oppositional practices" (242). The rhetoric around these practices asserts not only that "to engage in such practices is to place oneself 'outside society'", but "that these practices *in themselves* transgress or negate something central about the kind of person demanded by 'society'" (242, emphasis in original). One's sense of self is tied to one's understanding of the body, and, as a corollary, one's place in society. Despite its growing prevalence and acceptance, there remains an element of rebellion, deliberate transgression, because of the pain, permanence and visibility of the practice, and because it displays a deliberate modification—a subversion, an othering—of the 'norms' of one's skin. Considering Marie, for instance, "She had never liked her skin: she lived inside it like a captive. Imported, unsuitable, over-reactive, it kept no secrets. ... Yet now, finally, here was a mark she had chosen. She had planted her own flag in her own country" (McGregor, *Indelible* 21). The 'flag' indicates ownership and power, as though she has escaped from the restrictive imposed captivity of her former self by inscribing marks of her choosing.

Bell argues, "At the start of the twenty-first century, we are caught between two contradictory impulses, or forms of 'norm transgressing body work'" (168); these impulses are demonstrated either through attempting to transgress the body's limitations, or as a "nostalgic re-embodiment which stages the modified body as an expressive and sensuous medium of communication and reflexivity" (Bell 168). Both impulses are evident in *Indelible Ink*: for Marie, the tattoos allow for a form of expression that constitutes a reclamation of self, but later, upon learning of her illness, they allow her to produce the body she wants, to wield some control over that which is no longer controllable. Tattooing can also act as exhibiting the end of something, or a way of reclaiming the body after trauma (Benson 249). The

permanent inscription that is Marie's first tattoo marks the beginning of her emancipation. Marie comes to be seen within a particular framework that ties her corporeality to her *self*. The tattoos allow her access to self-awareness that was previously inaccessible and a reading of herself as someone unique and special:

She stripped and showered. It was a new person in the mirrors of her ensuite. Someone vibrant, expressive and particular. Someone radiating humour and life. She walked around her bedroom naked, exulting in her shouting, shrinking, wrinkling body. Fuck you, she thought. Fuck. You.

(McGregor, *Indelible* 207)

The social inscriptions that confine bodies elucidate ways to resist the social through corporeality; corporeal changes influence how bodies can exist in society, in terms of maintaining particular norms as well as offering alternatives. Particular readings of the bodily text ultimately affect the interpretation of its worth. Social and cultural systems make particular bodies valuable and diminish others, and this influences Marie's interpretation of herself as invisible, which, in turn, motivates her decision to mark herself as a kind of affirmation of her existence, both through the visible alterations and the pain associated with her tattoos. This textualisation of the body is particularly apt when discussing literary representations of corporeality. Because authors deliberately construct their characters' bodies, a culture's social narrative can be understood to influence that written construction. The perpetuation of stereotypically gendered constructions shows the influence of hegemonic cultural influences. The extent to which the written body reflects social norms is an important facet of the text, because a lack of adherence to cultural norms ultimately cannot affect a *fictional character*. Fiction thereby offers a space to represent potential alternatives and to subvert social norms of bodily inscriptions, as well as to explore the affective capacities of dissident constructions. *Indelible Ink's* Marie offers an example of this. Where Marie initially subscribes to a particular identity, influenced by the social milieu she inhabited, she forms a different identity through undertaking subversive forms of body work.

The value of tattooing both in terms of a reclamation of the body and as a rejection of hegemony is strongly tied to its deliberate undertaking. This choice of permanent and purposeful deviance influences the reading of tattoos, and can account for the disgust that can be associated with such readings. Despite the increasing popularity of tattooing, there is still an association with marginalisation that “constitutes a deviant practice on the bodies of individuals” (Fisher 97); tattooing remains taboo—especially in Marie’s cultural context—because of its links with subculture, the underworld and atavism. Marie thus displaces her socially inscribed body by marking herself as socially other; tattooing alters her inscription, and therefore alters how she is read. The indelible corporeality of the tattooed images marks her as distinct, different and discrete. Grosz draws on cultural theorist Alphonso Lingis to describe the disdain felt towards tattoos; he argues that we respond to tattoos with offence and alarm because “the exhibition of subjectivity on the body’s surface is, at least from a certain class and cultural perspective, ‘puerile’” (Grosz, *Volatile* 138). This reaction of repugnance is evident in Marie’s best friend Susan; David, her first sexual partner after her divorce; and her doctors, whose “eyes like cockroaches [scuttle] over the fresco of tattoos” (McGregor, *Indelible* 260). A conversation between Marie and Susan identifies the differences between their reading of the tattoos, and the simultaneous objectification and subjectification of Marie:

‘I-don’t-like-tattoos!’ Susan’s hand struck the [steering] wheel
with each word. ‘You can never get rid of them, and people change.’

‘Exactly.’

‘They last forever, Marie.’

‘Not as long as oil paintings.’

‘How can you compare them with *art*?’ Susan scoffed.

‘Just shut up about it will you!’

‘I’m just stating my opinion! Why do you take it so personally?’

‘Because it *is* personal! That’s the whole point! The tattoos are *me*’ (171, emphasis in original)

Those with strongly negative reactions to her altered body are associated with the suburb of Mosman, showing how Mosman implies constraint, as well as illustrating almost farcical superficiality. For example, upon hearing about Marie’s diagnosis with terminal cancer, Susan exclaims: “I’m sorry, Marie. I’m so sorry. First the sale of the house. Now this!” (277).

Comparing a house sale to her friend’s life-threatening illness presents Susan as a caricature of the upper-middle class, and her ill-considered comment elucidates the underlying priorities of her cultural concerns. David simultaneously fetishises and repudiates Marie’s body; she becomes just a body to him—an object simultaneously sexualised and dehumanised—after he knows she is tattooed.

The interpretation of Marie’s body differs for her children, but ingrained expectations of Marie’s role as mother means they have difficulty adjusting to her altered corporeality. As she lifts her shirt slightly to reveal the flames tattooed on her stomach to her children, Clark, her eldest son, likens Marie’s pride in the tattoo to that of childish abjection; he understands her actions to be flaunting her transgressions, which he considers inappropriate and outside of accepted norms:

What a stupid woman. She was acting like a teenager. She honestly thought it was funny. That sly look she got when lifting her shirt, like a little girl proud of pooing in her pants. The way she tried to draw Leon in, god, the way she *flirted* with him. Maybe he was in on it. The tattoo looked like an open wound. The fact of its permanence appalled Clark. But, hey, it was her body, like he was going to lose sleep over it? Really.
(81, emphasis in original)

In Clark’s outraged reading of her, Marie changes from ‘woman’ to ‘teenager’ to ‘little girl’; his interpretation of Marie’s body as abject is infantilising and thereby disempowering. His fear of the tattoos’ permanence, and the suggestion that her stomach looks like an open wound

similarly reflects the disgust outlined by Lingis above in response to the deviant nature of the bodily modifications. Marie's other children also react to her body negatively. Blanche feels ashamed and is uncomfortable telling her husband about her mother's new additions; and despite Clark's derision directed at his mother's 'flirting' with his younger brother, Leon—himself tattooed and his mother's averred favourite—is angry that Marie has encroached on a subcultural space that he feels is his and that she tries to force a connection between him and herself because of their shared practice. Marie is not welcome in Leon's understanding of tattooed bodies; equally, tattoos are unwelcome in Clark's and Blanche's interpretation of their mother.

Marie, in turn, reacts to her children's disapproval with a kind of teenage rebellion, before realising that their reactions show their unwillingness to interpret Marie in the way she views herself.

She left Clark sulking over the washing-up and tramped down to the bottom of the garden with the compost. God, he was such a little prig. It only made her want to lift her shirt higher and dance on the table, just to scandalise him. He was like the nuns at school, or her parents. ... She had a schoolgirl urge to hurt him even more, then a schoolgirl guilt for her cruelty; then all she was left with was the bitter aftertaste of their disconnection. ... Sometimes, when she looked back at her past, all Marie could see was childhood followed by marriage with nothing in between. So starved of adventure, so habituated to authority that she sought it in her sons. (81-82)

Her reaction to her children as authority figures shows that she considers them to have an equivalent effect on her capacity for autonomy as the nuns at school or her parents. Marie's interpretation of 'nothing in between' her childhood and parenthood—her marriage to their father was a reaction to her pregnancy with Clark—reinforces her feelings of freedom post-divorce in that she is autonomous and no longer answering to perceived authorities or

hegemonic culture. She changes her body to rebel against the restrictions imposed on her, asserting an individual corporeality distinct from her society and distinguishing her *self* from her past.

Marie's relationship with Brian, a fellow chemotherapy patient, differs from her relationships with others because it is formed entirely after her bodily transformation. He only knows Marie with her altered body, and this is, perhaps, the reason for their friendship. Marie's tattoos mark her as available to Brian, and she is interested in him because of his tattooed body, in a way that she would not have been previously due to the limitations of her readings of others. He loves her tattoos, and thus there is a suggestion that his reading of her is different, special, from those who judge the changes in her corporeality. There is also the only relationship that seems, in a way, free of contract. It occurs for its own sake, unlike those with her old friends, children, or even her tattooist. The 'romance' with Brian also differs from Marie's other sexual relationships: with Ross, she married young because of perceived necessity, and remained in the relationship for various levels of convenience, and her affair with Jonesy eventuated as a reaction—revenge—to Ross and Susan's affair (93). Marie's brief affair with David lies somewhere in between: he is attractive because his views are at odds with the rest of the suburb, yet he treats her as a novelty object as opposed to a person, especially after discovering her tattoos.

The deviance associated with Marie's corporeality is not only because of her tattoos, but is also associated with her alcoholism, cancer and death. Marie's tattoos supplant her alcoholism. Moreover, Rhys's refusal to tattoo Marie after she had been drinking forces Marie to choose between alcohol and tattoos, which can be seen to contribute to the extent to which she is addicted to, and feels empowered by, the tattooing process, also allowing her to come to terms with hurt and rejection, and influencing her understanding of self. Whilst drunk, her expressions of anger with her friends or her ex-husband, naked performances in her lounge room in which the police intervene, or vomiting in an expensive furniture shop all denote her behaviour as deviant because they are within the public realm; she is uncontrolled and exists

outside the confines of the strict social order. While her alcoholism is also read as a symptom of her melancholia and dissatisfaction, and a less constructive method of escapism, it is also later shown to have masked the symptoms of her stomach cancer: Marie drank to hide the pain of indigestion that came with her hangovers, but in doing so failed to acknowledge that they were more sinister. Similarly, whilst the comments on her weight loss are meant, and interpreted, as compliments (because weight loss for Australian women is the ideal), its later association with cancer turns the approved physical changes of her body into something pathological. Marie initially interprets her stomach cancer as punishment for her deviant behaviour, as though her body is merely a consequence of her actions, echoing, Baudrillard's facetious observation that, "If you don't make your bodily devotions, if you sin by omission, you will be punished. Everything that ails you comes from being culpably irresponsible towards yourself (your own salvation)" (278):

Marie didn't want to talk to anyone for fear they would blame her. She hadn't looked after herself, she had drunk too much and eaten badly, she had held sadness and anger in her stomach all these years until they turned against her. She hadn't gone to the doctor early enough, she had ignored her symptoms. She only had herself to blame. ... Every sickness was a curse, every dying a punishment. And every death a murder, or suicide. (McGregor, *Indelible* 272)

She becomes ashamed by, and angry with, her body for its sickness; its concurrent demise is not in keeping with the reclamation that she has begun to undertake, and therefore her new understanding of herself is compromised. Both her cancer and her alcoholism change her affect, and her affective capacity. Some of her sadness because of her illness is a direct response to her feeling of reclamation thwarted by previous imprudence: "She felt remiss, as though she had hung her most precious pictures on a soiled wall" (388). Her sickness, ultimately, is as much an aspect of Marie's corporeal deviance as her tattoos, yet her sickness

is accepted by others because Marie is passive *victim* to cancer, whereas her deliberate and active tattooing is unacceptable.

In this novel, Marie's decision to commit suicide by overdosing on her pain medication therefore is not read as Marie giving in, but instead as an active decision to reclaim her corporeality. The portrayal of her suicide is not overwrought, but outlines the deliberate collection of her medication over time. The descriptions of her physical sensations as she is dying replicate earlier descriptions of her physical experiences before and whilst being tattooed. Her suicide reinforces the relationship with her body developed over the course of the novel: she is no longer constrained by external authority, but is an active and autonomous subject in terms of her corporeality. This is not a moral argument, nor a romanticisation of suicide; its impassive representation is pragmatic and descriptive, in keeping with Marie's characterisation. Moreover, because her suicide is not the end of the novel—the novel shifts focus to Marie's children again and ends before they learn that she has died—there is no sadness or sentimentality associated with this scene. Her death is not a tragedy, but a decision that Marie makes and an opportunity for her to transgress the restrictions imposed on her sick body in keeping with the reclamation she has undertaken throughout the novel.

Marie marks her body acts as a kind of affirmation of her existence, both through the visible alterations and the pain associated with her tattoos. Marie's decision to be tattooed actively ties her corporeality to her understanding of *self*. For her, the tattoos allow access to self-awareness that was inaccessible previously. Not only do the tattoos offer reclamation of subjectivity, but also allow for the rejection or acceptance of particular cultures. The exultation that comes with her new affective capacity and the pleasure that comes with this mean that Marie's corporeality has a reciprocal affective relationship with her interpretations of herself and her society. *Indelible Ink* critiques social expectations of feminine roles and offers an example of the positive effects—and affects—associated with corporeality that subverts the expectations of social inscription; “body modification

spectacularizes corporeality” (Bell 170), and this spectacle permits Marie a reclamation of that which is *hers*. The transformation of Marie’s body ultimately allows her to transgress conventional readings of her identity and, thus, transgress externally imposed limitations on her expression of self, enabling her access to different affective responses; the modulation of her corporeal experience necessarily changes her affect. The subversion of particular expectations creates a powerful and empowered corporeality in the characterisation of Marie, and her strength as she reclaims the contested site of her body shows an alternative to common constructions of femininity in contemporary Australian fiction.

“Let me be whole”: *The Architect* by Jillian Watkinson

The Architect by Watkinson focuses on Jules Van Erp, an artist and architect; Jules is involved in a motorcycle accident that results in substantive petrol burns and the amputation of his arm. The novel addresses consequent reading of Jules by the people that he interacts with on a day-to-day basis, including Donna, his nurse; Peter and Chloe, his friends/romantic interests/colleagues; Jan, Jules’s love interest, and her two sons Marc and Clint—who, coincidentally, were the first people to find Jules after his accident. Each character interprets Jules differently, and yet all focus on his body, his emotions and his ‘aura’. The novel is narrated by different characters, including Jules, which allows each character’s perspective to be explored. The narrative is also divided into parts and interludes, each of which describes Jules’s recovery and experiences. It also outlines his physical and emotional pain, and his feelings of loss associated with the trauma. Jules’s motivations, emotions and sexuality are shrouded in ambiguity to those around him, and his characterisation as beautiful and mysterious—epitomising the clichéd tall, dark and handsome man—means that his disfigurement is difficult to accept; it disrupts expectations of masculine ‘beauty’.

His body is an essential part of this characterisation, and thus his scarred skin, amputated right arm and impaired left, is read as tragic, perhaps more so than if he were not

so beautiful. Part of his attraction, it seems, lies in the ambiguity associated with his reading. He is not European, not Asian, not Australian; he is large and masculine and yet still feminine. Bode contends that because Jules fits into this ambiguity and because he performs 'whiteness' so well, he brings "the performativity of whiteness to the fore" ("Unexpected" 447):

it is because Jules is able to assume the invisible position of the white male so perfectly that he experiences the visibility that comes with amputation as a profound shock. Thus, the success of his whiteness becomes (merely) the premise on which the crisis of the novel, his emasculation, turns. (447)

His attractiveness and his power associated with the privilege of whiteness add to the extent of his feelings of disempowerment. Had his body been previously read as 'other', the effect of his objectification and visibility through his disfigurement would not have been so substantial.

The novel relies on relationships between men and the idea of homosociality. Sedgwick's construct of homosociality as on a continuum with homosexuality is particularly evident in the novel, as there is a frequent ambiguity and fluidity in the kinds of desire represented between men. The novel endorses the importance of male homosociality throughout—homosocial desire, as Sedgwick describes, is the "affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotionally charged, that shapes an important relationship" (*Between* 2). The relationship between Jules and Peter clearly demonstrates the continuum of homosocial desire with homosexual desire, as Peter's sexual desire for Jules alters their individual interpretations of their relationship, as will be discussed later.

It is Marc, however, who most clearly evidences the value of homosocial relationships because of his ability to help 'heal' Jules. Moreover, the special psychic capacities that Marc and Clint—his lover Jan's children—have also destabilise the narrative's focus on

embodiment. That they were present at the time of Jules's accident is enough to connect the siblings with Jules, but their ability to 'feel' his pain and know his tortured experience in some ways detracts from the physicality of the text. Because their extrasensory capacities help to heal Jules—and because such power belongs to two young men—Jules is 'remasculinised', to an extent, by men. He does not have to verbalise his pain, or feel his own emotions alone, but these elements are taken on and experienced by other men, supporting a homosocial reading of the text, where, as Bode argues, "only men can connect with and appreciate the difficulties other men face" (448-49). Marc, paralysed after a horse-riding accident in his childhood and thus othered by his own physical limitations—although these limitations are couched within white, heterosexual privilege—especially helps Jules to heal. That Marc understands Jules in a way that other characters cannot bolsters their connection, and "situates the male body as a site of authenticity" (Bode, "Unexpected" 448). The novel affirms men can overcome crisis and heal by connecting with one another (448).

Jules is represented as an object of sexual desire throughout the narrative. His sexuality is ambiguous, as is the extent of his attraction to others. His othered body does not necessarily diminish his sexual attractiveness to others, yet the way in which he is read is altered. It seems as though Jules is attainable in a way that he would not have been had he been 'whole', because his altered body and his pain make him an object to be looked at, to be pitied, rather than a subject who wielded power through his embodied privilege. Jules is at once desirable yet abject because he is beautiful, but his body acts a reminder of mortality and vulnerability. Lennard Davis states that this "element of repulsion and fear associated with fragmentation and disability may in fact come from the very act of repressing the primal fragmentariness of the body" (175), and thus it is our incapacity to accept the whole body as grotesque and not necessarily a unified whole that creates an aversion to dismemberment. The joins of skin grafts and his amputated arm cause a disjuncture in the reading of his otherwise beautiful construction, and it is this juxtaposition of desirability and the abject that

seems to be at the heart of the problematic nature of the other characters' objectification of him.

While Jules may appear more attainable because of his disempowerment, he is, in fact, less *accessible*. He is not entirely without power, and he uses the marginalised position of others to his advantage. Chloe, a sculptor who is visually impaired, is in love with Jules. Jules deliberately manipulates his interactions with her to ensure she has no knowledge of his disfigurement, thereby using her blindness to feel himself 'whole' again. As Bode argues, he thus "not only appropriates Chloe's subjugated position and presents his treatment of her as an unintentional response to his own pain, he centralises his own suffering while marginalising hers" ("Unexpected" 447). Jules also manipulates Peter, Chloe's non-monogamous partner. Peter makes no secret of his attraction to Jules, but Jules's ambiguous sexuality means Peter is unable to read whether Jules is attracted to him—or attracted to men at all. He neither rebuffs nor encourages Peter and he maintains power in their relationship by manipulating his position as an unattainable object of Peter's desire. Despite Jules's being othered through his disfigurement, his position of privilege is still evident in his loaded relationships with Peter and Chloe.

Jules is presented predominantly as cold, beautiful and sexualised, but it is his characterisation as a father that allows him subjectivity as a protagonist, rather than reiterating him as an object. While the reader can see that he cares for and loves his daughter, Lily, and is capable of the emotionality that is hidden in other aspects of his characterisation, this is at odds with how his role as father is presented in the rest of the novel. He is predominantly estranged from his children, despite his awareness that this absence is painful to them, and he is thus presented as a 'bad' father. A number of his children have died, and this is shown as a simultaneous justification for and perpetuation of his melancholy, impenetrability and inability to 'love'. Moreover, he explicitly refuses to adopt a father-figure role for Marc and Clint, which shows his discomfort at the responsibility associated with such a task; fatherhood does not conform to Jules's characterisation of himself.

His role as father is inherently tied to imagery of burning. The 'breath of the dragon' haunts Jules throughout the narrative, and is the name given by the people of his village in Vietnam to the napalm fire that burned their homes (Watkinson 258); Jules arrived twenty-four hours too late to do anything to help. Jules's son Che Lai was badly hurt in the fire, and his disfiguring burns and his pain were unknowable, uninterpretable to Jules until his own, far later, experience. There is, at times, an element of appropriation in the comparisons made between the suffering of Che Lai—and the other children—and that which is felt by Jules, and it seems problematic to suggest there are similarities between the experiences of war and a motorcycle accident—yet such comparisons are evident throughout the novel. There is incommensurability between a motorcycle accident and war, despite the shared physical pain. The descriptions of pain and the comparisons between experiences act to link the events. Despite this, I argue that real links cannot be made. As Elaine Scarry asserts, pain can only exist to the person who is experiencing it; another, even if they know of the pain, cannot grasp it: "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (324), and it is impossible to explain our own pain or understand another's. The unspeakability of pain links with Jules's silence. As Donna, his nurse, observes, after Jules is covered in a full body cast: "I wonder if it was worth the fight for life during those first weeks. I don't know what he thinks. I hardly ever know what he thinks" (Watkinson 116). The reader, too, is rarely privy to Jules's perspectives. While there are descriptions of his physical pain and corporeal experiences, his viewpoints are limited. An overwhelming theme of guilt runs throughout his narratives, and Jules interprets his burns to be, to some extent, a kind of punishment or penance for his failure as a father.

Much of Jules's characterisation relies on stereotypical constructions of masculinity: how a man should respond to ordeals and how a masculine body should be. He simultaneously works within a construct of masculinity—evident in his character traits—and against it, because of his damaged body. His character traits are stereotypically masculine, as he is calm, rational, assertive, dominant and aloof; he also has trouble processing his

emotions. He copes with trauma by escaping, by denial: the narrative is punctuated by his leaving on various occasions with minimal explanation, or actively withdrawing from particular relationships; he also deliberately ignores or hides from particular affects and sensations. Donna observes, "Nobody loses an arm without putting up some self-protecting barriers for the sake of sanity. The body is the canvas, a lifetime of preparing, and his canvas has been ripped" (26). Jules creates barriers between himself and other people, but these barriers are also internal, meaning Jules does not deal with the reality of his injuries.

After his accident, he has trouble identifying with a corporeality that he does not recognise, as though his damaged body has shifted his understanding of himself. Jules deliberately modifies the appearance of his reflection to maintain his preferred reading of his body: "The disfiguring sickens me. I have never grown accustomed to the altered body; I never will" (217). In this statement, the explicit rejection of ownership is clear: it is 'the' altered body, not 'my' body. This removal of subjectivity, while protective, means Jules interprets his limitations as an attack, or something externally imposed on him, and he cannot exist comfortably within the new parameters or confines of his body. He does not touch himself or look at himself, and he fails to care for his wounds.

There are times when his fear of his own body is palpable:

I swallow horror. For so long this reconstruction has been in the planning and now that it comes I am filled with terror. I look up at my hand suspended beyond use and that other fist in my stomach brings panic and nausea. ... Now I will retreat from the chore of feeling. This is the way I choose to cope. (111)

Jules deliberately shuts down his emotions in order not to feel pain or distress. He is panicked by thoughts of his own debilitation, and there is a disconnect between Jules's understanding of his self and his body. He is unable to acknowledge that his damaged body is *his*, and maintains a distancing in his interpretation of his own body in order to cope; for example, he is at times unable to look at his reflection (31). However, this disjuncture

sustains a sense of denial and means that he cannot unify his body with his sense of self. He elects not to touch his scars, as though to touch his skin, for his hand to be active in interpreting his transformed body would create a unification of his self with which he cannot cope. As Jules explains in his discussion with Marc:

‘Touch still brings pain and fear.’

‘Even your own touch?’

‘I do not know.’

He takes my wrist and lifts my powerless hand, guiding my fingers to the opposite shoulder, that travesty. I want to plead with him not to do this, beg him to stop. But I have no voice. The terror in me has taken it. ...

‘If you’ve never felt your body, Jules, how can you own it?’

‘I do not wish to have ownership.’

‘But it’s the only body you’ve got.’

‘In the mirror, when the scars are covered, I can know my body.’

(217)

In this scene, the complete lack of power he has over his body not only exemplifies his physical incapacitation but also acts as a metaphor for his emotional stagnancy; Jules is unable to move because of his fear of the unknown, and shows the lack of control that he has over his body in the world. Jules has ‘no voice’ when it comes to speaking about his own body; he is unable to express his fear in relation to his corporeality, and thus there is an unspeakable disconnect between his internality and his understanding of his externality. His fear is not of physical pain, but rather a fear of the incomprehensible, ineffable changes that have taken place since the accident. His body is unknowable, unspeakable, deniable. That he is physically unable to stop Marc from forcing him to touch his own body also indicates a complete powerlessness, and both the touching and the touched skin are equally passive, aligning with Jules’s experience of the related yet disparate ‘pain and fear’. There is invariably

an association between fear and pain; it is reasonable to fear pain, yet the fear, for Jules, is not necessarily tied to the pain response but is more indicative of his inability to accept his damaged body.

Jules's body is described as an abject object throughout the text. Visceral responses are evoked by the trauma of the burns, as the reader invariably associates his damaged corporeality with pain. Jules uses the shock of his appearance as a weapon against others, but is also unable to accept his physicality as his own, exemplifying a rejection of his abject flesh. Despite his eagerness to see Jules's body, Peter reacts to Jules baring his skin with horror and anger:

The backs of his thighs are also patchworked, all the way to his knees.

They glisten and I walk over to see this more closely.

'Jesus.' Sheets of clear adhesive cover wide bands of raw, wet flesh.

'Skin keeps well in the fridge,' he says. 'This was done yesterday. Some they will use for the plastic surgery, some will go to the skin bank to be cultured for later.'

'Damn you, Jules! Goddamn you.' (92)

Skin, here, becomes something separate and distinct from the body; it is no longer a cohesive substance but pieced, separate, a wrapping that can be added and removed rather than the element of one's body responsible for the protection of our internality or our abject parts. Skin itself becomes, for Jules, the body's opening, a wound, not that which seals. The 'glistening' of Jules's thighs at once suggests both beauty and disgust, since skin only 'glistens' with fluids that are evidence of our internality. References to 'raw, wet flesh' kept 'in the fridge' equally suggests the objectification of that which is generally considered essential, a part of the corporeal. His corporeality is medicalised and objectified, and as such, his body becomes distinct from his "soul" (92). In response to Peter's shock, Jules angrily questions, "when I have stripped away the polite, middle-class, public image of your beautiful van Erp, is

the flesh too life-like?" (92), and I argue that this is ironic, in that his flesh has contrarily been read by Peter as not life-like at all, but instead indicative of an experience that cannot be understood.

The interpretation of Jules's body as lying outside of intelligible norms is also evident in Donna's observation of Jules's body:

In the shower he stands with his forehead bowed against the wall while I undo the Velcro seams of the undershirt and carefully soak it from the crusts on his arm. He's lost a heap of weight; the wings of his hipbones are hard under his skin; his ribs and the knobs of his spine push against the patchwork of the scars. The wound on his leg weeps mud and blood across the white tiles. (161)

There is a clear juxtaposition between the white tiles and his body, from which his insides are escaping. Mud and blood mingle, combining his internality with external filth. His thinness is as problematic as his scars, and all suggest that Jules's body is *wrong*, a substantial deviation from what it should be. All of this constructs his body as abject. Whilst clothed, he is an object of attraction, but as a patient for Donna and artist's model for Peter his body becomes something foreign, simultaneously crude and unnatural.

The Architect presents alternative constructions of masculinity with regard to men's bodies that enable a consideration of the ways in which we interpret norms of masculinity. The novel's representation of male characters that lie outside conventional representations of masculinity challenges hegemonic constructions; each of the male characters in the novel are not limited by binarised assumptions of gendered traits, and are attributed with qualities that are not necessarily linked to masculinity. The relationships between the characters are invariably altered in response to the subversion of those gendered norms, however, and this offers important alternatives to hegemonic power dynamics. While the novel is not without its limitations—psychic powers and repetitions of extreme beauty at times detract from the narrative—Jules's characterisation offers an alternative to normative constructions of

masculinity, and while this constitutes an othering of the protagonist, it allows for a consideration of a male character that lies outside of hegemonic confines.

The gendered deviance, both corporeal and sexual, discussed in this chapter allows for a consideration of the ways in which assumptions of normality, with regard to gendered characterisations, frame the ways in which we read. Characterisations that challenge our expectations of gender can bring into question the norms on which we rely, and their strengths and values—if any. In contrast, constructions of ostensible deviance that do little to challenge those norms, as is the case of *Praise* and *The River Ophelia*, show the extent to which norms are ingrained in our cultural values; deviant constructions of sex often maintain a reliance on normative dynamics and dichotomies of gender. Throughout this chapter, I have argued that provocative constructions of sexuality do not necessarily interrogate constructions of gender, but these can give insight into the particular assumptions that underpin the ways in which we read sexual behaviour. Moreover, expectations of behaviour and affect are frequently limited by stereotypical and archetypical assumptions of dichotomous gendered traits, and characters who do not conform to these disrupt readers' expectations.

CHAPTER THREE – VIOLENCE

PUSH IT DOWN

Violence against women is an ongoing issue in Australia. Recent public statements, such as that by former Police Commissioner Ken Lay, which called for reform in the way that police respond to family violence, have begun to draw attention to the tendency to keep violence hidden—or, worse, to ignore it completely. The tolerance of violence, Lay argues, invariably lies in “the misogyny and disrespect some men display towards women—these attitudes hang over our community like a dark shadow”. Despite there being a substantial movement critical of violence against women—at least, politically⁴⁵—misogynistic attitudes regarding women’s culpability as victims of violence, sexual or otherwise, are clearly evident culturally. For instance, research conducted by VicHealth in 2013, gauging attitudes towards violence against women, has indicated that one in five Australians consider women who have been raped to be at least partly responsible for the assault if the victim was drunk—a proportion that has increased since their previous measure in 2009. ‘Victim-blaming’ and ‘slut-shaming’ are terms which attempt to describe and criticise the continuing trend of blaming women for violence against them, and these trends are evident in pervasive social attitudes towards gendered sexual violence, particularly in media and cultural productions such as television and literature. There are alternatives, of course: social media, popular blogs such as *Mamamia*, the blogs of more academic sources, such as *Overland*, and other online sources of information such as Fairfax Media’s *Daily Life* allow for constructive and interactive discussions regarding women and violence from a predominantly feminist

⁴⁵ The evidence for this is, at times, contradictory and ambivalent: while, for instance, the Victorian State government launched a Royal Commission into Family Violence on 22 February 2015, the Federal Government has cut substantial funding to crisis shelters for women in 2014, which invariably limits the opportunities for women to leave violent relationships.

perspective. Yet in traditional forms of media and cultural productions—media that, indeed, continue to have considerable influence on framing cultural norms, and have the opportunity and scope to subvert or critique the status quo—there is still a propensity to rely on the trope that women are, in some way, deserving victims.

The way that violence is represented in fiction both relies on and subverts stereotypical constructions of femininity and masculinity. Overwhelmingly, there is a reliance on the assumptions that women are weaker, passive, while men are dominant and aggressive, and more likely to express anger through violence. To an extent, this expectation legitimises masculine violence by linking traits that facilitate violence with hegemonic stereotypes of masculinity. Expectations that men will be violent reinforce violence as a masculine trait. When a woman is the perpetrator of violence, however, she is portrayed as archetypal ‘ice queen’: ‘bitchy’, vindictive, impenetrable, unattainable and uncontrollable. Such a construction is evident in the popular 2012 American novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, as well as *The Pillow Fight*, discussed in this thesis. This characterisation is dichotomously opposed to the softness and maternity usually associated with conventional representations of femininity, as interrogated in Chapter One. This chapter examines both male and female perpetrators of violence. The extent to which the characters conform to stereotypical gender roles or archetypes will be considered in the ensuing discussion.

This chapter addresses the ways in which violence, including sexual violence, is represented in recent Australian novels. It focuses on the novels *Steam Pigs* by Lucashenko, *The Pillow Fight* by Condon, Maguire’s *Taming the Beast* and *Rohypnol* by Hutchinson. Each of these texts implies that the female characters, to varying extents, are responsible for violence inflicted on them. The chapter also addresses the trope that women who are capable of violence fit into particular stereotypes or have particular archetypal traits and qualities. I examine representations of violence that are explicit and implicit and address the

representations of violent behaviour as deliberate, reactionary or ‘incidental’. I also discuss issues of inherent blame, culpability, accountability, and the notion of ‘asking for it’,⁴⁶ as well as constructions of violence as apparent punishment of the victims; punishment, I argue, necessitates an uneven power dynamic, and differs substantially from representations that position violence as an attack. Throughout this chapter, I assess the extent to which contemporary cultural attitudes towards gendered violence are challenged or accepted within the novels, and question whether these novels are complicit in supporting detrimental attitudes towards female victims of violence or, instead, contribute to challenging them.

The intersection of sex and violence will come into question for most of the discussions of texts included in this chapter. This is not to suggest that gendered violence does not exist outside of sexual relationships, or that rape is, in any way, related to sex or sexuality. However, it is important to address the inherent relationship between sexual violence and gendered power. Rape is a particular kind of violence represented in these texts. Rape is definitively not sex; rape is a non-consensual violent act that is about violation and power. The representation of rape, however, differs from that of non-sexual violence. In *Steam Pigs*, for example, Sue interprets Roger’s rape of her as a completely different kind of violence from his physical bashing of her, and it is rape that is ‘the final straw’, that which Sue cannot tolerate. Sue feels a different kind of degradation, but the framing of rape in this way, to some extent, discounts the impact of physical violence. In contrast, *Rohypnol* positions rape as a minor offence, and it is the bashing of rape victims that is constructed as most

⁴⁶ “Asking for it” is a term frequently used to justify assaults on women. The concept that women are inviting rape or other assaults through particular behaviour or wearing certain clothing works to shift the onus from perpetrators to victims. Recently, women have used this tendency to frame culpability in this way to emphasise social inequities. For example, comedian Adrienne Truscott’s comedy show entitled *Asking For It*, which she has toured since 2013, discusses the problematic rhetoric surrounding women’s rapes; social media trends, such as “Project Not Asking For It”, have also brought to light some of the ironies associated with the phrase.

abject. This suggests an evident hierarchy of violence in the texts, which I will discuss in more detail in the analyses that follow.

The construction of intimate partner violence and rape in these novels relies on an understanding of conventional gender roles, in that there is an assumed link between violence and masculinity, and weakness and femininity. This chapter also examines gendered power dynamics in characters' relationships and the ways these contribute to the acceptance of violence as a norm: while violence, indeed, can be considered deviant,⁴⁷ its association with masculinity—where violence is accepted as an outpouring of masculine emotion or an expression of 'testosterone'—remains evident in Australian culture.⁴⁸ While violence towards women is not endorsed, there is an evident link between masculinity and violence that is reinforced and normalised. Entrenched misogyny and sexist attitudes towards women allow for an environment where the objectification of women justifies treating them as if they are worth *less*, if not worthless.

Tom Meagher, in his article "The Danger of the Monster Myth"⁴⁹ addresses the importance of acknowledging that the men who commit abhorrent violent acts against women are *not* 'monsters'. He argues that the tendency to dismiss "violent men as psychotic or sociopathic aberrations" means that we avoid "the more terrifying concept that violent men are socialised by the ingrained sexism and entrenched masculinity that permeates

⁴⁷ In this study, I maintain a clear distinction between consensual acts that deliberately inflict pain and violence.

⁴⁸ A number of texts have been published that explore the links between masculinity and violence, and the ways in which violence is used as a marker of masculinity. For examples of these extended studies, see Sandra Eggers' report, *Violence and Masculinity: A Commentary* (1993), *Masculinities* by R.W. Connell (1995, 2005), *Masculinity, Violence and Culture* (2000) by Suzanne E. Hatty, *Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence* (1991, 2002) by Myriam Miedzian, *Ways of Being Male* (2002) edited by John Stephens, and *Abuse and Oppression: Debates and Challenges* (2008) edited by Barbara Fawcett and Fran Waugh.

⁴⁹ Tom Meagher wrote this essay for White Ribbon Day. His wife, Jill Meagher, was raped and murdered in Melbourne on 22 September 2012. Her murder affected Melbourne deeply, and sparked a resurgence in discussions regarding violence against women, both in terms of its prevalence, and the problematic assumptions that women need to take more care to avoid violent attacks. Tom Meagher's article criticises much of the rhetoric surrounding her attack.

everything from our daily interactions all the way up to our highest institutions". The tragedy of Jill Meagher's murder, however, perpetuates the myth that men who are violent and who commit sexual assaults are indeed 'monsters'—"violent strangers who stalk their victims and strike at the opportune moment" (Meagher). Meagher argues that the myth detracts from the reality that the "silent majority" of men who commit assaults are the "friends, acquaintances, husbands, lovers, brothers and fathers" of their women victims. The myth adds to the assumption that women can avoid dangerous situations, such as walking home alone—an assumption that places the onus on women to take care of themselves—rather than taking into consideration that it is, in fact, at home where women are most at risk.⁵⁰ Throughout this chapter, I discuss the construction of perpetrators of violence as archetypal monsters—particularly in *Rohypnol*, but also evident in *Taming the Beast*—but, in turn, interrogate representations of the particular social norms that establish environments in which violence is allowed to occur and, as a corollary, how it is framed, minimised, accepted and/or ignored.

Ilsa Evans also discusses constructions of masculine violence and its associated myths. Discussions about, and awareness of, gendered violence, argues Evans, are impeded by the ongoing and accepted "myths" and "falsehoods regarding domestic violence":

These myths range from downplaying the violence and emphasising its 'private' nature, to transferring the blame and, therefore, the responsibility for change, from the perpetrator to the victim. These social myths disguise the realities of domestic violence, create misleading stereotypes and reduce societal obligation to end it. (Evans 148)

⁵⁰ See the amusingly ironic yet pointed article by Clementine Ford, "Your Vagina is Not A Car". Ford discusses the frequently touted cliché, "If you leave your keys in your car, don't be surprised if someone steals it" in reference to women's need to control their behaviour/dress if they do not wish to be victims of violence—as if, as she states, "sexual assault is merely the inconvenient by-product of Forgetful Girl Brain and not one of the most traumatic violations a person can experience".

Evans finds that there is a marked difference in media reportage of domestic violence depending on the gender of the perpetrator—for instance, in reporting domestic homicide, the word ‘murder’ was only used in cases of female perpetrators and male victims (150). She observes that there is “a tendency for the press coverage to provide male perpetrators with explanation, justification, and mitigation for their deeds” (150). Evans states that the press disseminates the “mythical stereotype” of women inviting violence by including references to conflicts that occurred prior to her abuse, which “foregrounds *his* state of mind and mitigates the abuse by conjuring up images of the stereotypical ‘nagging wife’ who simply caused her partner to lose control” (154-55, emphasis in original).⁵¹ The link between gender and violence, as predominantly constructed by the media and thus consumed by society at large, frames violence as masculine, and women victims as ultimately deserving. While public outrage is, on occasion, evident—such as in response to the devastating experiences of Rosie Batty, and her support as a spokesperson for family violence⁵²— at the time of writing, such norms remain pervasive. These norms are also evident in the texts discussed in this chapter, and while these are, to an extent, interrogated, their inclusion in the novels reflects this dominant discourse surrounding gendered violence.

The link between masculinity and violence is clear, if not stressed, in the texts discussed in this chapter. In *Steam Pigs*, Roger uses violence to assert his masculine power over Sue, and Jamie and Daniel Carr hold Sarah responsible for their violence towards her throughout *Taming the Beast*. In *Rohypnol*, the deliberate rapes that the boys commit seem

⁵¹ This is evident recently in the tragic case of Mayang Prasetyo’s murder at the hands of her boyfriend, in which early news reports on 7 October 2014, such as the *Herald Sun*’s entitled “Killed and Cooked Trans Woman was High-Class Sex Worker” explicitly remove the culpability of her murderer from the focus of the story, instead framing the events as novelty as opposed to abhorrent violence of a woman killed by her husband.

⁵² Rosie Batty is a survivor of family violence and an activist against family violence. Her son, Luke, was killed by her ex-husband Greg Anderson in February 2014. Batty received the Australian of the Year award in 2015 in recognition of her activism, and her story instigated the Royal Commission into Family Violence in the state of Victoria.

to act as reclamation of power over their victims. Luke, in *The Pillow Fight*, considers his victimhood as a challenge to his masculinity and often worries about looking foolish or overpowered by Charlotte, suggesting (and notwithstanding his horrible victimhood at the hands of his wife) his discomfort at others acknowledging the unsterotypical power imbalance in their relationship. It will be argued that in these texts, as in Australian society, as Ken Lay claims, the “tolerance of male aggression” directly contributes to “why some Australian men have an inability to deal with conflict, be it with a mate, a wife, a child or a parent, without reverting to violence.”

I also discuss the relationship between violence and women in this chapter. From female perpetrators of violence, to victims of domestic violence who feel unable to leave, those who cannot recognise the danger of their relationship, to those who are blamed for being victims of violence—these attitudes towards women’s roles in response to violence are exemplified in the texts I analyse. I will also address normative constructions of femininity, and how these constructs tie into expectations of gendered behaviour and *responsibility* for violence—either as victim or as perpetrator. The physical experiences and corporeality of women will be addressed as a corollary, in that stereotypes of femininity include expectations of how women should act in response to particular scenarios.

Post-feminism manifests in notions of romance and relationships, and a kind of neo-traditionalism, as I explained in Chapter One. Elements of post-feminism are evident in discussions of violence, in that neo-liberalism and conservatism affect the choices available for women with regard to their behaviour and sexuality. The women who are ‘punished’ in the focus texts are frequently represented as deviant, as discussed in Chapter Two. This usually manifests in constructions of sexual deviance—usually in the form of perceived promiscuity—or as defiance against traditional gender roles. The female victims in *Rohypnol*, for example, exemplify both post-feminist ideas of sexuality and constructions of sexual deviance. They are characterised as overtly sexual and therefore able to be exploited by the young, high-school-aged male rapists who are the focus of the text. This is evident when the

beautiful and desired Susannah Lockhardt describes her sexual forays for the boys at a party: “Susannah touches her tits when she talks about having girls go down on her. Her eyes blink slowly, and she talks about fucking three guys at one time, how they cheered each other on” (74). In response, Thorley and Troy—members of the “Rape Squad”—read Susannah as, in Thorley’s terms, “a dirty bitch”; this, for them, means automatic and implied consent to do whatever they want to her—regardless of her *actual consent*. The main female character, Aleesa, is aware of the boys’ drugging and raping their school peers, and her acceptance of it shows her apathy and reading of the victims as deserving violent treatment; a lack of non-consent, in this novel, equals consent. In *Taming the Beast*, Sarah is read by other characters—predominantly women, but also by her (male) best friend Jamie—as inciting the lack of respect evident in her treatment by men and the violence wielded against her: by actively pursuing sex with a number of people, she is constructed as deserving maltreatment. Conversely, in *Steam Pigs*, Sue’s actions are twisted by Roger; he reinterprets her words, actions and desires to read her as a ‘slut’, and assumes that she has been adulterous, in order to *make her* deserving of his anger and violence. During his violent outbursts, he sees his actions as a means of punishment and method of controlling her apparently licentious behaviour—behaviour as un-inflammatory as visiting a friend in another town, or wanting to attend university.

There is an evident connection between violence and punishment in these novels; a number of violent scenes are framed in a way that suggests that the perpetrator of violence is attempting to punish the victim for perceived wrongdoing. As such, there is a link being violence and anger, and this anger is, for the perpetrator, justifiable because it is incited. Expressing one’s emotions, such as anger, through physical violence, and thus inflicting those emotions on someone else, forces one’s victim to *feel*, physically, a *consequence* of the perpetrator’s emotions: one’s anger or frustration, for example, is imposed on another’s body. This imposing of self onto another subject ties into the ambiguous corporeal space defined by Grosz; one can be, simultaneously, a subject and an object:

Between feeling (the dimension of subjectivity) and being felt (the dimension of objectuality) is a gulf spanned by the indeterminate and reversible phenomenon of the being touched of the touching, the crossing over of what is touching to what is touched, the ambiguity which entails that each hand is in the (potentially reversible) position of both subject and object. (*Volatile* 100)

The *touched* individual is necessarily a subject implicated in the *touching*. In terms of violence, being a victim of another's violence compels a subjective reaction, although that subject may be being touched as an object. While there can be mutual and reciprocal touching without dominance, the force of violence necessitates a power imbalance that denies the other as an agent or subject, positioning them as an object on whom one's affect can be imposed. The imposition into another's space through force insinuates a sense of entitlement to another's body. This kind of power differential suggests the objectification of the victim, and it necessitates the victim's subordination. Violent forms of touch are not reciprocal, but are a deliberate infliction of one's corporeality on another. I argue that violent touch is *imposed* on the victim, and the victim's experience of that violent touch disrupts their experience as a subject.

The power of objectification is, in the novels discussed in this chapter, predominantly linked to patriarchal assumptions of entitlement. The genders of the characters in these novels thus affect the way that violence is experienced. The characters are represented in terms of their physical responses as either victim or perpetrator become a substantial element of their characterisation, and so they are defined, to some extent, through their corporeality. The marks of violence on the body are also important to consider. Victims' bodies are frequently constructed abjectly because of their disfigurement; they are viewed as objects, and their subjectivity is denied. For instance, the admired beauty of both Sarah (from *Taming the Beast*) and Sue (from *Steam Pigs*) is contrasted with their bruised bodies that serve to inspire simultaneous pity and disgust. Characters attempt to conceal the effects of

the violence: in *Steam Pigs* and *The Pillow Fight*, for example, Sue and Luke both alter their behaviour, make excuses for their violent partners, and use make-up to cover bruises to try to hide their injuries. No one is required to act or react if there is no *evident* need to do so. The visual marks represented in these novels also affect the how the victims read their own bodies: Sue is finally persuaded to leave Roger because of the sight of the damage caused to her body. In contrast, Sarah laments the fading of her bruises, as for her they are evidence of Daniel's love: his need to punish her shows that he cares about her. Concealment of the effects of violence exists metaphorically in *Rohypnol*: the very nature of the tranquilising drug used to incapacitate the women who are raped occludes the violence that occurs, and the victims cannot access the true nature of the crimes. The violence thus oscillates between abject visibility and deliberate invisibility, exemplifying how the bodies of victims of violence lie outside accepted norms because they have experienced that which is unintelligible.

"She attempted to strike him, out of the darkness": *The Pillow Fight* by Matthew Condon

The Pillow Fight, by Condon, tells of the relationship between Luke and Charlotte through present-tense narrative and a series of flashbacks, and it alternates between the characters as the focus of the narration. Luke and Charlotte meet whilst both are in relationships with other people, and their whirlwind romance quickly leads to their marriage. On their wedding night, Charlotte punches Luke for the first time, and thus begins a cycle of violence that disrupts normative expectations of intimate partner violence. The novel addresses the perspectives of both Luke—the victim of violence and the protagonist—and Charlotte, the perpetrator and antagonist. The ways in which femininity and masculinity are constructed in this chapter in accordance with limited stereotypical and archetypal paradigms is a key aspect of the narrative. The reversal of typical constructions of intimate partner violence allows for an examination of expectations of gender in terms of victimhood and enactment. The way that women and men in the novel are constructed as essentially

homogeneous is of interest; for instance, Charlotte, her mother and her friends—the ‘bad women’, ice queens, vixens, bitches—are constructed in opposition to women such as Luke’s mother and his ex-girlfriend, Rebecca—the kind, caring, nurturing, ‘motherly’ types.

Feminine archetypes are certainly at play in this text, as it is intimated that only particular kinds of women—bad women—are capable of committing intimate partner violence.

The structure of the novel shifts in narrative focus between Luke and Charlotte, and these shifts show the ways in which Luke and Charlotte each interpret the changes in their relationship, as well as how they justify, rather than simply observe, the violence that becomes an integral part of it. This structure allows further insights into both characters’ perspectives, and means that the reader comes to interpret the characters with understanding of their role in the relationship. Through the shift in narrative focus, the reader gains insight into Charlotte’s affect. Condon describes her justifications for her attacks on Luke, her anger and feelings of uncontrollability. These, however, are always constructed as ludicrous and vindictive, and they thereby tie into aspects of her characterisation, limiting the extent that the novel can be read as an exploration into an unexpected perpetrator’s motivations. Luke’s victimhood is evident in his fear, and Charlotte’s two-dimensional aggression ensures that the reader is aware of who is at fault, even if Charlotte and Luke are unable to see it. There is no opportunity to read Charlotte as anything other than antagonistic, and her motivations are always sinister. While, of course, it is reasonable to assume that the culpable party is characterised as such, what is problematic in Condon’s novel is that, despite representing intimate partner violence that occurs outside of normative expectations—because the perpetrator is a woman—in actuality, this is not explored in any depth. The violence is ultimately attributed to a particular shallow archetype of femininity, and Condon fails to interrogate the dynamics that facilitate the violence, regardless of the gender of its perpetrator and victim.

Charlotte’s self-assurance and aloofness are at odds with her lack of control over her emotions and responses. Rebecca, Luke’s ex-girlfriend, is represented as the antithesis of

Charlotte: her stereotypical femininity, in her kindness, her nurturing and talkativeness, is juxtaposed with Charlotte's characterisation as mysterious, sexual and physical. Charlotte is not a nice woman, but in her Luke observes a kind of energy and sexuality shown as distinctly feminine and yet powerful. She is an archetypical bitch, characterised as manipulative, controlling, treacherous, a "malevolent female who usurps her role from the masculine domain" (Aguiar 7). "The bitch", Sarah Aguiar continues, "is often a dispossessed individual whose struggles for selfhood and agency necessitate drastic measures" and she "often refuses to accede to the demands of a patriarchal society; she develops a strength that assists her in overcoming victimhood" (11). Charlotte indeed refuses to comply with the patriarchal order, but that which helps her overcome her perceived victimhood turns her husband into a victim—her victim. While Aguiar ultimately argues that a feminist reclamation of the bitch archetype allows for the acceptance of vital characteristics that transgress normative expectations of femininity, for Charlotte, the archetypical qualities construct her as deviant because they manifest in behaviour that is unacceptable, regardless of gender. However, her shallow characterisation relies on her showing qualities that are most detested in women; thus, her positioning as a bitch reiterates the extent to which these characteristics in a woman are dangerous, and are to be both feared and suppressed. The way in which Charlotte's power, drawn from her traits and her sexuality, is associated with her violence is evident throughout the novel.

Luke, in contrast, is characterised as 'a good guy'; he is not violent, but smart. Smitten with Charlotte, does what he can to please her and certainly aims not to upset or hurt her. Luke is immediately typified by his "need to please everybody, to make everyone happy, to be everybody's friend" (Condon 10). Upon considering his options to leave Charlotte just a few hours after their wedding—"Twelve months in the planning, thousands of dollars spent, an entire week just organising the seating arrangements for the reception. How could he walk away?" (10)—his sense of responsibility, duty and obligation means that he interprets his options as limited, if not non-existent, and this for him is paralysing:

He didn't like trouble and went to extreme lengths to avoid it. He wanted the world to think well of him. It was this quality, this curse, that left him inert. He had become, in [Charlotte's] sphere, incapable of making a decision for himself. He could only give the illusion of decision. (10)

Luke is evidently aware of his masculinity, or the perceived threat to it, in this particular scenario; while Charlotte's dominance and violence are commonly associated with masculinity, his acquiescence resembles feminine traits. He is also acutely aware of the judgements of others, and he is interminably eager to please. Luke is thus characterised as more passive than active in his relationships with others; he is the recipient of actions, and when he acts, it is to please or propitiate others. The above descriptions of him as 'inert' and of his indecisiveness are characteristics that were already elements of his personality, not learned responses to the inflicted violence. These elements mean that he stays in the relationship for longer than he knows he should, because it is easier for him not to move, not to hurt anyone, and to be hurt, than it is for him to leave Charlotte. These qualities do not reflect hegemonic constructions of masculinity. Moreover, Charlotte uses his purported failings against him; his demasculinisation is an element of her abuse, evident, for instance, in the angry tirade in response to him going to Perth for a weekend: "You're such a fucking *biggg mannn*, aren't you. Hmm? Faggot. I'm talking to you. You're going to get a nice little fuck while you're away, hmm? What'll it be, a boy or a girl? ... Listen to little dick" (195). Her efforts to insult his sexuality and masculinity contribute to his inability to leave, or to speak of the abuse to others, because he is embarrassed that he is not 'man' enough to control his wife or withstand the abuse. Victims of domestic violence are presumed, in this novel, to be necessarily feminine, which affects Luke's characterisation substantially, whilst also maintaining particular assumptions about stereotypical sex roles; Luke's shame as a victim of violence is tied to his insecurity about his masculinity.

The novel, however, is not an interrogation of ineffective masculinity. Dale, Charlotte's ex-lover, is portrayed as substantially different to Luke because he does meet normative and hegemonic ideals of masculinity; however, he is also a victim of Charlotte's violence. This suggests that Charlotte's victims may vary—it is demonstrably not because of an inherent fault that they are the victims of violence and they are not culpable for their own victimhood: violence is a consistent element of her relationships. The problem lies with Charlotte—not her victims, who cannot be responsible for her actions. This is a point of difference between this text and those discussed later in this chapter; for women victims, their victimhood is linked, in some way, with culpability. Similarly, the stereotype of the perpetrator perpetuated in this novel is associated with anger, control, perfectionism and an inability to deal with past grief or trauma: a resistant, reactive personality associated with entrenched behaviour. Charlotte's violence, then, is shown to be an intrinsic quality of herself, rather than a response to her victims. This differs from the way in which the male perpetrators of violence are represented in the following analyses, which outline the flaws of their victims, and do little to explore the problematic affects and behaviours of the perpetrators; the onus of violence in the other novels addressed in this chapter is on the female victims. This demonstrates the tendency for representations of women and violence, to suggest, problematically, that women are consistently responsible for violent acts, regardless of whether their role is perpetrator or victim.

The concept of 'vulnerability' is a key facet of Charlotte's characterisation. She is most uncomfortable when she feels vulnerable or exposed—when the elements of herself that she cannot protect are evident to others. Early in their relationship, the dynamics between power and vulnerability are urgent concerns for her. For example, because Luke is an expert on molluscs, Charlotte feels the need to eat a plate of escargot before their first date (29). The scene exemplifies her simultaneous control and manipulation; it is an absolute requirement for Charlotte that she has authority, and for her, eating the animal that Luke studies will attain this—it is a kind of predation by proxy. Her inability to match his knowledge through

her physical experience, however, leaves her feeling vulnerable and confused. Luke's arrival at the table startles her out of her reverie, and this leads to her anger:

As he took his seat opposite her she was distracted by the blue smock [of the chef] gliding back and forth in the background, and it became, for her, the intrusive blue, a focus for her anger at feeling vulnerable. She suddenly noticed the stains of the tablecloth and they, too, seemed a bold sign, even a map, of her loss of control. She was not used to this and experienced a bitterness in herself that was not unlike the aftertaste of the snails. (31)

Her emotional response to perceived threat, real or imaginary, is usually anger. Charlotte is unable to relax until she feels she has regained control of the situation that, for her, entails forcing him into a position of vulnerability to maintain "the balance that she preferred" (32). Her need for another person to be uneasy in order for her to feel powerful parallels her violence; she must always be dominant and in command of events, and she manipulates situations to ensure that other parties submit. Her exploitation of people and situations is deliberate, and she can only relax once she feels that she is able to control her surroundings. This also manifests itself as compulsions regarding perfectionism; superficial perfection ostensibly allows for a semblance of order. Charlotte's consumption of the snails leaves her uncomfortable because of their characteristic association with dirt and mess; "the dirt in the ridges of the shells, the antennae, the silver trail, revolted her" (40). She focuses on Luke's imperfect teeth rather than listening to him speaking, and she finds it difficult to move past "the mess she had made of the snails, and the stains on the tablecloth" (40). Her attempt to 'consume' Luke thereby grates on her need for everything "to be clean and organised. It was the only way she saw the world operating, and she was incredulous at those who didn't comply" with her sense of order (40). Her preoccupation, perfectionism and superficiality indicate her expectations that everything should—or rather, *will*—conform to her standards. Her obsessive nature is implicitly presented as pathological and exemplifies Charlotte's attempts to maintain complete control over herself and her life—including the people within

it—and also shows that her expectations lie outside of achievable norms. In Charlotte’s mind Luke fails because of his deficiencies, and not irrationality on her part. She believes that his flaws, his mistakes, make him deserving of punishment: “Don’t you understand? Luke? Don’t you realise nobody, and I mean *nobody*, would fucking put up with you for five minutes except me? Haven’t you realised that yet?” (259). Her emotional manipulation contributes to the disempowerment that makes it difficult for him to leave.

When Charlotte is not in a position of power, she is represented as childlike; she is only emotionally ingenuous when she is not dominant. Incoherence and confusion are marked in a passage, late in the novel, that shows Charlotte’s internality in reaction to her violence, in a scene after she has broken Luke’s nose. The description is without an explicit narrative, but shows the surreality of her experience and refers obliquely to traumatising childhood experiences of family violence:

At the moment of contact she saw wooden chairs disintegrating against walls and red wine bleeding down patterned wallpaper and children, children, white with fright and scurrying for shelter beneath beds and in the dark corners of old wardrobes, and deep, birdlike cries down a corridor, and she felt the air of a room shift around her at the slamming of doors and heard the tear of clothing and the fall of bottles and the rattle of cutlery in a drawer and the distant wail of a siren and felt pain in her little girl’s arm as she was dragged across damp grass and could see the blurred and dull faces of people she knew peering through windows and across fences and smelt the rich leather of car upholstery and heard the screaming recede until there was nothing but movement, but the watery rush of tyres on bitumen and the feeling of cold leather through her nightdress covered in tiny blue flowers, and the comets of streetlights streaking across glass. (261)

Most of the descriptions of violence throughout the novel are from Luke's perspective as the victim, and thus this passage differs dramatically from other representations in the novel. Charlotte, here, becomes abject, child-like in this evocation of trauma; such characterisation is at odds with her usual energy, and, while highlighting the lack of control she is shown to experience, also seems to disempower her. When men are shown to be out of control through their violence it is because of some kind of outpouring of uncontrollable masculinity, as will be explored in *Rohypnol* and *Steam Pigs*, but Charlotte is represented as a *child*. This suggests that violence is inherently incompatible with femininity, and it is a flawed, damaged and puerile woman—regardless of her irresistible sexuality—who is capable of violence. This means that there can be no opportunity for equality in Charlotte and Luke's relationship: either Charlotte is dominant and destructive or she is 'vulnerable'. There is no middle-ground or equal footing: only dichotomies.

Charlotte's sexuality is an integral part of her characterisation. However, she is not represented as overtly libidinous or deliberately alluring; rather her sexuality is represented as something inherent with which she manipulates and controls men, and which "had taken her years to learn how to use" (131): "She was the sort of woman who—she knew—gave off a sexual vibration, a frequency. It pulsed from her, and drew the flirting of men and the bitterness of women" (131). The statement, 'she knew', here, is important; Charlotte is aware of the power that she wields through her sexuality, and 'learning how to use it' indicates her deliberate manipulation of other people through her sexual allure. This 'sexiness' is echoed in Luke's reading of her, in which he acknowledges and admires the "energy, a contagious ripple of electricity, that she gave off" and the influence she has on those around her (184). Luke's description of the "accidental superiority" (152) that she exudes shows that she indeed wields a kind of power over other people.

Charlotte enjoys the power that sex brings her. She needs another body in order to feel purified and empowered, as though she can *possess* another through sex:

The discovery of a new body, [Luke's] body, had not delivered her from the mundanity of sex. It had not suddenly presented itself differently, like the terrain of a new country, nor had it reignited anything that had lain dormant within her. What it did, though, was open a door to the power of her, within her, and it gusted through her with colossal force, removing debris and sandblasting old surfaces and purifying the neglected and stagnant channelways of her being. (130-31)

Charlotte feels empowered after sex with Luke. Her lack of sentimentality towards her lovers is also patent. She actively acknowledges her calculated decision to end her relationship with Dale and replace him with Luke, and her ability to end things austere is “something she prided herself on—this ability to shut one door, completely, immediately, and move forward. Sentimentality did not burden her” (171). Her lack of emotion and capacity for cold conclusions, in conjunction with her manipulative sexiness, support her reading as an archetypical ‘bitch’. She “exudes carnality, sensuality, and intrinsic wisdom in the sense that she manipulates an intimate knowledge of a man to use against him to further her own desires” (Aguiar 34), and “chews men up and leaves them bereft of their manhood” (50). Charlotte manipulates men to get what she wants and forces them to fit into the roles she envisions for them.

Her manipulation of people and events extends to her interpretations of the world: she is unable to extricate her reality from her actual experience. Her internality is expressed physically through violence, but her interpretation of events is not grounded in actuality. How she interprets actions is mediated by her worldview, and this view leads to her violence:

They observed something in the world, or heard something on televisions, or Charlotte read something in the newspaper—infidelity, lying, mistresses—and it suddenly became their experience. She felt, within her, the immediate horror or betrayal, and he, Luke, as a male, became its perpetrator. (166)

For Charlotte, Luke becomes all men, and she, all women: “she knew he was the only man, and yet he was all men through her life, and her mother’s life and the lives of other women” (153). This totalisation of her experience gestures towards an acknowledgment of injustices that occur, or towards an assumption that, as a woman, Charlotte *must be* treated badly by Luke. When she threatens Luke with a weapon and the neighbours call the police (189), Charlotte, despite her instigation and excessively violent reaction, interprets the police’s presence to be to support her, and the police assume that is their role. That Charlotte would be the victim of domestic violence, rather than perpetrator, is in line with stereotypical constructions. The police officers’ misunderstanding adds to Charlotte’s feelings of righteousness, and this is shown to fuel her ironic interpretation of the scenario: “He should never have done that to me. The police were right in getting him out of the flat. Maybe he’d learnt his lesson” (203).

Charlotte’s perception of events is represented as absurd; her inability to comprehend her own violence and culpability suggests her pathological thoughts regarding her own actions. She is not apologetic after this violent episode, but rather considers Luke responsible. She eliminates all responsibility from herself without having to admit culpability, but still maintains a semblance of agency; this reflects the general trope of ‘victim blaming’ that occurs in circumstances of gendered violence, but with a reversal of stereotypical genders. Ironically, she instigates the fight because she thinks Luke wants her to act as “a good little wifey” (194); it is her anger and offence at the idea that Luke wants her to fit into a mould of idealised femininity that sets off her violent outburst. While this is the only time in which Luke retaliates violently, he is represented as not responsible for the violence; even when “the knuckles of his right hand clipped her solidly on the jaw”, it is represented as an accident (197). Luke only responds to Charlotte with violence when he feels under more threat than usual, and his response to his own violence is one of fear, more than anger or regret, predominantly because “he knew, now, that he had entered the circle of violence with her. That they were entangled inside of it, together. Always” (199). Although

punching Charlotte's jaw is the only instance described in the novel of Luke engaging in violence (197), the concept of a 'circle' suggests impending repetition.

In a similar vein, upon Luke's disclosure to the psychologist that Charlotte is violent, Charlotte responds that she hits him because it stops the fighting. She is unable to provide any other reasoning, claiming defensively, "my girlfriends do it, other women I know do it, I guarantee nine out of ten women do it. I don't see the big deal" (252). Not being able to 'see the big deal' shows the extent to which she has normalised her behaviour, and she justifies her own actions through the assumption that it is commonplace. The psychologist challenges her beliefs, and in response, she "shut off at that moment. They would make no progress from here. ... Another appointment was made for the following week but Charlotte knew, even as the counsellor wrote their names in a diary, that they would not be coming back to this room" (252-53). She interprets the counsellor's advice as chiding a child, and is unwilling, if not incapable, of accepting anything that challenges her behaviour or interpretation of her experiences.

Because the novel is narrated in the third person but gives access to both characters' perspectives, the reader is aware of the 'truth' of the narrative, which invariably preferences Luke's interpretation, because he is not presented as unstable and pathological. Charlotte is, therefore, the antagonist, not only because of her violence but also because of her inability to see her flaws and mistakes. Her narcissism and undeniable culpability means she is, invariably, someone with whom readers are unable to sympathise. However, Luke acknowledges that Charlotte's (mis)interpretation of her violence demonstrates that her understanding of events is not merely an attempt to detach herself from blame. Instead, she genuinely considers herself to be justified in her anger and responses: "It was this dual view of things that confused him. He could not understand how two people could see the same event so differently. How could a shared life be interpreted with such separateness?" (206). Luke later acknowledges that both he and Charlotte are completely oblivious to each other's perceptions of events, "that what Charlotte was telling the counsellor—the story of their lives

from her point of view—was something completely unknown to him” (241), and that their relationship depends on the constant negotiation of events and emotions. Violence is so ingrained in their relationship that their interactions towards each other are formulated around it, and their actions and interpretations are impossible to extricate from the potential that violence will ensue (241); Luke “wondered if he hadn’t begun to enjoy it” (196), and this insight exemplifies the inherently problematic nature of their relationship. He has become so used to the violence that he interprets it as normal, expected and accepted.

Luke usually attempts to placate his angered wife, although his irritation at her irrationality sometimes leads him to provoke her further:

‘So what are you going to do,’ he said smartly, ‘hit me again?’

And she attempted to strike him, out of the darkness. He brought his arm up quickly and blocked her bunched fist. Before he understood what had happened she put her arms around him, sobbing. She caught the overpowering scent of eucalyptus rising off him.

‘I’m sorry, Luke, I’m so sorry, please, I’m sorry, darling, it won’t happen again, I’m sorry.’ (119)

Her response echoes common patterns of domestic violence, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator. Switching between Luke’s and Charlotte’s perspective in this paragraph—‘before *he* understood what was happening... *She* caught the overpowering scent...’—highlights that the experience belongs to both of them, and that both the violence and the response are out of Luke’s control. Luke, ironically, must comfort Charlotte in her distress, and yet he is the victim of her anger and violence in this scenario. There are a few occasions when she acknowledges her responsibility, and these moments of vulnerability seem at odds with the rest of her cold and controlled demeanour. Despite her inability to state her shame and regret explicitly, upon realising the effect of her violence, she still, to an extent, blames Luke; while she states that he does not understand, and that, ultimately, he does not live up to her expectations, she still concedes that she is out of control:

'I don't know what's wrong with me... You don't understand. I'm sorry. I expect too much... I always have, since I was little. It's something... something I can't... I... It takes over me,' she said. 'I hate it. I hate it. But I can't... stop it... I—' (163)

These incomplete statements are the closest that Charlotte comes to acknowledging her dangerous use of violence and her unattainable expectations. That she is unable to articulate her distress towards her violence—in contrast to the physical expressiveness during her violent attacks—shows that her inability to express vulnerability is both verbal and physical; perhaps there is no language to express her vulnerability and fear, and her violence is a form of unspeakable expression.

Despite the reversal of gendered expectations with regard to domestic violence, normative stereotypes of gender roles are promulgated throughout the novel. While there are a number of elements that Luke shares with other victims of domestic violence, his feelings of emasculation make his status as victim difficult for him to negotiate. Such stereotypes reflect assumptions of how a man *should* respond to violence, and these assumptions are dictated by particular expectations of masculinity that make it hard to interpret a man not as a victim of violence, but as a victim at the hands of a woman. Vernay's interpretation of the novel, for instance, can be understood as evidence of such difficulty. His reading that Luke and Charlotte's relationship is "almost sadomasochistic" (150) differs substantially from my own. He states, "Every snag is a pretext to stir up the antagonism that gives structure to the couple's intimacy. Throughout the story, Luke takes the impulsive violent blows dealt out to him by his lady-love" (Vernay, *Great* 150). Luke's victimhood is thereby minimised by Vernay, as he simply 'takes' blows that are responses to 'snags', and, in turn, the active violence of Charlotte—the condescendingly-labelled 'lady-love'; instead, violence seems like a reciprocal element of their relationship. Where my reading proposes that the novel constructs Charlotte as a threat to Luke's masculinity, Vernay minimises the unequal power dynamic, suggesting his unwillingness to accept Luke's disempowerment.

Luke is embarrassed because of his victimhood; his attempts to cover wounds with make-up cause him to feel uncomfortable, and he is unable to talk about his experiences with other men. He opens up to his father under the pretence that his experiences as a victim of violence are actually those of a friend. His father's reaction is one of the only episodes in the text where he is acknowledged explicitly as a victim of violence, not as a man being hurt by a woman. Upon asking what he should do, Luke's father responds:

'It's not that hard to work out.'

'How do you mean?'

'You've got to put yourself in the shoes of a woman who gets hit.

Say a woman keeps getting hit. What would you expect her to do?'

'Well, leave.'

'There you go,' his father said, ... 'People are people. You don't get treated properly and you've tried to work it out and it keeps happening, then you've got to leave. Pretty open-and-shut I'd say.'

(Condon 224-25)

This acknowledgement, by Luke's father, of the equivalent difficulty yet problematic nature of domestic violence is one of the only parts of the novel that explicitly addresses that gender should not affect experiences of domestic violence. However, his father's perspective, that "You can keep a fight going just by doing nothing. By letting it go. Sometimes that's just as bad as if you're doing the hitting. That way it's going to happen again, over and over. Comes a time when you have to do something" (225), indicates that by failing to leave, the victim is contributing to violence, and this assumption thus seems to apply to all violent relationships. The idea that anyone can simply 'leave' ignores that the ingrained power dynamics and patterns that facilitate violence are the same dynamics that makes it difficult to leave a violent relationship; as Luke counters, "It's not as easy as that" (225). The final passage, for instance, shows Luke having made the decision to leave, but also shows that inertia makes such actions impossible: "he suddenly felt heavy, unable to move from the edge of the

welcome mat, and his heart pumped, and the bags were filled with river stones, and the long monotonous wail of the [waiting taxi's] horn echoed through him" (264). Luke's heaviness, embodying his inability to leave, acknowledges that there is more to his experience of violence than physical pain. The emotional toll is more evident than the physical one, and it appears tied to shame rather than anger.

The Pillow Fight explores a subversion of particular stereotypes associated with intimate partner violence, yet relies heavily on stereotyped gender roles. By doing so, the novel explicitly interrogates the assumption that blame and responsibility lie in the hands of the victim, rather than the perpetrator. However, its construction of violence does little to question or challenge the circumstances under which violence occurs. Rather, it presents limited and shallow stereotypes of women that associate particular traits with that of a 'dangerous' woman; these traits lie outside of normative femininity, although still within a feminine archetype. Charlotte's violence exists within a recognisable characterisation of femininity, and Luke's disempowerment exists within an understanding of masculinity. Thus, while Condon highlights the problem with hegemonic ideals of masculinity, his limited reading of femininity detracts from his representation of an important social issue.

"Ya slap on another layer of steel": *Steam Pigs* by Melissa Lucashenko

Lucashenko's discussion of domestic violence in *Steam Pigs* is a deliberate attempt to explore an issue that is under-represented, particularly for Indigenous women; hence, my analysis of the novel focuses specially on Sue's experience of intimate partner violence.

Lucashenko, in an article written with Odette Best in 1995, argued that the failure to acknowledge "the 'norm' of violence" in Indigenous Australian communities is what allows it "to continue, unseen and unheard" (19). They state that "violence in the Aboriginal family is not traditionally-sanctioned behaviour" and that we can attribute its prevalence to "invasion, 'dispersal' and dispossession" (20):

The bashing of Aboriginal women in our communities today, is, we believe, a direct result of the breakdown of Aboriginal Law, and its replacement by white norms of sexist behaviour in communities already made dysfunctional by colonisation. ... Along with the gun, the rabbit and the pox, Europeans brought to Aboriginal Australia the scourge of sexist violence, and it is killing our women. (20)

Lucashenko and Best identify racism, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, and “the general lack of hope characteristic of our lives” as contributing factors to gendered violence, along with the influence of “white society which glorifies violence and tells our men that this is what confirms them in their manhood” (20). Hegemonic masculinity in Australia is linked to an acceptance of violence, and this contributes to an environment in which violence is accepted as a norm. Lucashenko and Best state that “The idiom for women bashing is ‘Blackfella loving’ which is explained as ‘He’s jealous and bashes me, that’s how I know he loves me’” (21), and this logic underpins Sue’s experience of violence in Lucashenko’s novel *Steam Pigs*, published two years after her article. Sue’s partner, Roger, is frequently jealous and threatened, and his violent actions towards Sue are framed as a part of their relationship.

Steam Pigs is set in Logan City, Queensland, and focuses on the experiences of Sue, a seventeen-year-old Murri woman, and her attempts to negotiate her family, her partner, and her burgeoning adulthood. She leaves Townsville because of a fraught relationship with her family and friends after an abortion, but also because of implied sexual abuse she was suffering at the hands of her uncle. While suburbia offers a change, it is also framed as restrictive and closed, and escape, for Sue, lies in drinking—consuming alcohol “till she spewed” (Lucashenko 6)—and karate, the discipline of which allows her a site of safety and control. Intimate partner violence was also evident in *Camille’s Bread*, discussed in Chapter One, and it manifests through a similar strategy in *Steam Pigs*; both texts employ martial arts as a conduit for controlling violence. As Henderson points out, Sue’s and Roger’s martial arts

exemplify their physical struggles for survival in difficult situations (Henderson 74).

Lucashenko explicitly states that attempting to overcome one's past is the reason that Sue and Roger engage in martial arts in the first place:

And for all their talk of Eastern philosophy and mental discipline, that's what they're all there for, every one of them, avenging their father's beatings, their mother's sarcasms, building ladders into new worlds where they're the biggest, the strongest, the least vulnerable, where nothing can ever get them again, ever, ever. (Lucashenko 3-4)

Here, martial arts work as an outlet for feelings of insecurity and anger, and a mode of protection. In both *Steam Pigs* and *Camille's Bread*, the practice of martial arts is a means to negotiate uncontrollable violence through discipline, through controlling the body and the effects of violence. Corporeality and control, here, are tantamount, but in these two texts the underlying threat or insinuation of violence is evident despite attempts to supplant violent tendencies with the disciplines of martial arts; karate and chi kung as martial arts both are still inherently threatening practices involving control of the body. In these texts, the disciplines ultimately fail to transform the men's violent tendencies. Moreover, both Roger and Stephen seem to extend their need to control their own bodies to the bodies of Sue and Marita; the men control their partners' actions. In *Steam Pigs*, Roger punishes Sue with violence for her perceived transgressions.

Lucashenko initially constructs Sue as acquiescent: "Calm observation became Sue's game, and an acceptance that this was how life was" (7), and while Sue learns to fight against seemingly imposed limitations, she remains disillusioned by the ongoing injustice of a world where "You won or you lost, you punched or you bled" (8). Her reprieve lies in her new friends, Kerry and Rachel, her 'angels of mercy' (198), who offer new ways to consider her world; they ensure Sue is 'introduced' to the feminists in Brisbane and kept away from the mob who use drugs. Rachel and Kerry's house constitutes a women's-only safe space, in which Sue feels safe. Femininity is associated with non-violence, comfort and understanding.

The idea of ‘no men’ means that non-violence is ensured in their home. There is, however, an infantilising element to their treatment of Sue, which is concerning in that it suggests the women know what is best for ‘the young girl’—as she is frequently referred to—rather than her being empowered through making the positive decisions about her own life. The social workers set Sue up with housing, encourage her down particular paths that they think are most beneficial—such as attending university and moving suburbs—and she begins to dress like Rachel. Considering her youth, this is not an unrealistic portrayal of mentor or social worker roles, but it also reinforces a particular power dynamic that seems to echo relationships throughout Sue’s life. Despite this, their association with feminism is what gives Sue the power to acknowledge the gravity of the situation, and to make the decision to leave.

Sites of feminist politics are resistant spaces in the novel. As Henderson states, Kerry appropriates “a powerful symbol of working-class masculinity” by riding a motorcycle, and, she continues, the “classes on women’s body image, conflict resolution, and self-esteem [that Kerry runs] are a source of feminist consciousness-raising” (77). She argues that Kerry offers Sue a “remapping of Brisbane” through acknowledgement of Murri history as well as “the notion of ‘women’s space” (Henderson 77). The concept is new to Sue, and her reaction (ironically) exemplifies the value of a safe women’s space: “Sue is a bit stunned by the idea of women telling men they weren’t allowed to go somewhere ... Most of the men she’d grown up with would give you a flogging for less” (Lucashenko 63). Kerry and Rachel’s feminist intervention offers Sue an alternative way to interpret her environment, allowing her to see sites of resistance and empowerment rather than limitation and control.

Steam Pigs differs from *The Pillow Fight* in its representation of intimate partner violence, in that violence is not described as it occurs but is instead interpreted after the fact. Sue is shown to be hurt, but the reader is not actually privy to present-tense representations of violence; rather, the violent episodes are remembered later. The way in which Sue discloses Roger’s violence and her experiences of being attacked are subtle and cautious, almost conspiratorial, as though she must first gauge a reaction before allowing her own

reading to be offered. This is reflected in the revelations of violence within the novel. The descriptions after the fact suggest that the violence *itself* is less pertinent than Sue's acknowledgment of it, and the way that it influences her affect, behaviour, and decisions. Presenting violence as remembered, rather than describing it at the time, allows for its meaning to be interpreted separately from its physicality. Violence is simply an aspect of her relationship, and it is not until it becomes too much to bear and she is able to interpret it differently that it is discussed in more detail.

The novel's textual nature reflects these layers of separation, and Pons, in his discussion of the difficulties of representing sex and violence for Indigenous Australian writers, states that fiction provides "an appropriate avenue to address such difficult issues" (332):

Because of the ambiguous and shifting relationships it entertains with reality, literature can explore areas that might be rather too painful to visit using a different vehicle or blunter instrument. Just as humour can allow the speaker to say hurtful things without inflicting too much hurt, literature, because it is not the thing itself, enjoys a kind of diplomatic immunity. (Pons 332)

The difficulty of discussing intimate partner and domestic violence is mediated by the fictional nature of the text. Thus, the space between representation and 'the thing itself' allows for discussions of pain and trauma, but also for alternatives and possibility.

The ways that men in the text are characterised reflect Lucashenko's perspective on the normalised correlation between masculinity and violence. Roger is obviously violent, but there is little hope for Sue's brother Dave and his children either. Sue's eldest brother, whom she has never met, her absent father and her abusive uncle also suggest that there are few positive male influences available for Sue and her nephews. Throughout the novel, men are absent, neglectful or violent. Lucashenko's construction of the violent man, or the man who

lets violence happen, is, however, at odds with her construction of women who are interminably tough:

Ya slap on another layer of steel, if ya don't wanta lose, if ya can stand it a bit longer. Laugh a bit louder, drink a bit more, shift houses for the tenth time in a year. Push it down, down, down, girls, whatever you do don't let yourself feel. Toughen up, shut up or fuck up, those're the options when you're living in Logan City, when you're young or black or poor. (Lucashenko 244)

Losing, here, refers to losing one's life. There are limited options but to 'harden up' and tolerate that which is the apparent status quo within Logan City. That young women are inherent victims, albeit tough victims, thereby positions them in opposition to the violent male perpetrators.

The perpetration of violence through the novel is always associated with masculinity, and there is also the insinuation that *all men* in Sue's community are violent. The construction of violence in intimate partner relationships and in families in *Steam Pigs* must be discussed in terms of the cultural context that underpins the novel, and Lucashenko suggests endemic violence within particular communities, and that violent acts are irrefutably associated with masculinity. Sue thinks about the series of injustices that are inherent in her understanding and experiences of the world as an Indigenous woman:

The Murri Protest singer gets death threats from the boys in blue.

(Doesn't worry)

Every black girl raped by the time she leaves home.

(Doesn't worry)

Sixty two deaths in custody since the Royal Commission.

(Doesn't worry)

Mum watches both her sons flogged for nothing every night,

(Doesn't worry)

Stealing to eat at seven years old.

(Doesn't worry)

It's a first world country, don't ya know? (Lucashenko 245)

These observations exemplify the kinds of violent experiences that Sue considers common for those in her community. That these are stated to occur in Australia, a 'first world country', seems to be at odds with Sue's perception of what life is like for non-Indigenous Australians. Sue acknowledges institutionalised prejudice, such as in the case of the protest singer and the deaths in custody,⁵³ but also indicates personally political injustices. Her statements such as 'Every black girl raped' and the children being 'flogged for nothing' acknowledge the prevalence of domestic violence perpetrated by men. Her rejoinders, 'doesn't worry', reiterate Lucashenko and Best's assertion that the atrocities in Indigenous Australian communities are ignored or overlooked in Australia (19). Their observations are also evident within the novel, citing particular statistics in the form of discussions with Kerry, the social worker: "she remembered, for the first time since Kerry'd said it weeks ago, about how many women got killed, not just bashed, but killed, in domestic violence. One a week in Queensland, and a black homicide rate ten times that of the whites" (200). Sue's totalising view of its prevalence, however, seems to accept that violence is normal and commonplace, rather than aberrant, exceptional and unacceptable. Her view contributes to the association between masculinity and violence. While the issue of violence within Indigenous communities is necessary to address to ensure its visibility, to assume that there is an overarching and definitive way that men behave is detrimental, and discounts the potential for change and alternatives to hegemonic constructions of masculinity.

⁵³ In 1987, a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established to investigate the disproportionate number of deaths of Indigenous Australian in custody and allegations that these were because of police brutality.

The violence Sue experiences is difficult for her to articulate: shame and embarrassment, a desire to protect Roger, expectation and normalisation, and the ineffability of the pain and trauma mean that her experiences are hard for her to express. This is evident when she tries to explain her situation with Roger to her older brother:

‘But I need somewhere to stay, Dave, can’t I come for just a week or two? Look, he...’ the girl pausing wondering what to say about the orgy of violence and screamed abuse she’d somehow survived, ‘...hit me last night, I look like something the cat dragged in.’ Sue is begging, can’t believe her brother’s refusing her what she needs so badly. (195)

Sue is unable to describe to her brother the extent of her damage, and while this does not excuse Dave’s response, her assertion that Roger ‘hit her’ minimises the extent of the damage. While Dave’s reaction may have differed had he seen Sue and the seriousness of her injuries—observing the result of violence is a different kind of understanding than responding to assertions of violence—his failure to help his sister suggests an acceptance of violence as a relationship norm. Dave blames Sue for Roger’s violence, both because she did not leave him sooner and because her behaviour apparently provokes a violent response. His first response to Sue’s admission is to ask, “what’d ya do?” (195), as though violence is a justifiable response to particular wrongdoings. Dave’s response is reminiscent of contemporary standards within the wider community. He is assuming that violent behaviour can be stopped by changes in the victim’s behaviour, and fails to recognise that Roger is, in fact, the only person responsible for the violence because he is the active perpetrator.

Dave interprets his sister’s request for his help as weakness on Sue’s part, and as her involving other people in her relationship; he is unable to see that she needs him in order to escape. His response is the opposite of what Sue needs, and reiterates that the onus is hers:

Oh, Sue, isn’t it time ya stood on yer own two feet? You can’t come running to me (ha! that’s a joke, the girl thought, heart sinking) every time you have a blue with Rog about something—what happens when

ya get married, eh? You need to sit down and sort it out with him. You know you've always had a big mouth, and now you've met someone who isn't prepared to put up with it. And it's not as if I haven't told ya before you should leave him if you can't stand it, why dya always wait until it's too late, whaddidItellya last time, eh?— (195-96)

There is, thus, an acknowledgement that Roger is violent, and that his actions are not acceptable, but the blame still lies with Sue: if she 'can't stand it', if she is unwilling to be beaten, it is still her fault for not having left previously, when Dave told her to leave. There are a number of layers of responsibility that are entrenched in his reaction, and while he is not unconcerned, there is little acknowledgement that Sue is a victim; instead, she is treated as though she should have not only expected, but accepted Roger's actions.

Despite the view of her brother, Sue's reactions in response to Roger are considered and rational, showing, despite the pain and distress, her capacity to take care of herself and ensure her own safety:

I'll just pretend I've gone to work, he probably doesn't realise how smashed up I am and that I couldn't go in a fit, yeah, I'll leave a note saying I've gone to work and I'll be back at five, that gives me time to get organised. Fucked if I know where I can stay though... her mind turned to Rachel and Kerry who'd come to the rescue in previous crises—ah, of course, those refuges they talk about! (196)

The patterns of violence mean that Sue knows how Roger responds after his violent acts, but also that it is in her best interest to hide both her injuries and her plans to leave from him. That Sue assumes Roger "probably doesn't realise" her state indicates that she is aware that Roger is out of control when he is violent. It also, however, suggests that he is not concerned about the effects of his violence on Sue, has little regard for her well-being, and does not take responsibility for the pain inflicted on her. Sue's awareness of refuges, too, reiterates her awareness that hers is not an isolated experience.

Sue's physical appearance is also a focus of her characterisation. Descriptions of her body and her pain mediate or replace actual accounts of violence, ensuring that the narrative keeps its focus on Sue's reflections; we, as readers, access violence through Sue's experience and thus acknowledge its subjectivity and corporeality. Despite her pain and the fact that she has already made the decision to leave Roger, the sight of her body acts as evidence of the seriousness of Roger's attack. While she is waiting for Rachel to pick her up, she is shocked by the sight of her own form:

Sue caught an unwanted sight of herself in one of the dresser mirrors in the back of the shop away from the public's eye. Long brown hair streaming down past her shoulders did nothing to take away from her swollen eyes—both blackened—and left cheek puffed out like she had an egg in her mouth. Lucky she'd blocked most of the kicks he'd first aimed at her head as she fell, or she'd be cactus. From the feel of em her breasts'd both be black with bruising, did he have to -? (Push that thought away). (199)

Sue's pain and her reasoning do not have the same resonance for her as catching sight of her body; the experience of the pain is complemented by her physical appearance. That Sue has beautiful features, such as her hair, and saying that such a feature was not enough to detract from her damaged appearance is strange; how could long hair ever cancel out or detract from bruises? The imagery of 'long hair streaming' down her back is stereotypically feminine and beautiful, so such hair should normally be a focus of ideal femininity; because it is not the focus of attention means that her damaged corporeality has detracted from her feminine beauty, therefore showing the seriousness of the damage. If the damage could be disguised it would be easier to ignore her experience of violence. Visual evidence means that pain is inherent in the body's reading by others, and, though abject, cannot be ignored.

The allusion to Sue's rape (199, 201), while not explicitly addressed, is still clear, and also shown to be in contrast to the non-sexual violence that is almost normalised or accepted

by Sue's standards. Roger hears a message on the answering machine for Sue, with an innocent message from her friend Steve, and he loses control. Sue remembers Roger's taunts and insults before he beats and rapes her:

(Yer fucken uptown nigger slut, think I wouldn't find out what went on up there? Well, yer too clever for yer own fucken good, ain't ya? Talking about fightin bloody dogs and shit when all the time ya were sluttin around town with some bloke makin a fool outa me! And ya think ya going to uni ya got another thing coming, let me tell ya, ya can stay home like a woman should steada parading around the fucken town looking for stray cock, ya got a lot to learn bout being a woman I tellya. I'll show you whose fucken prick belongs -) Slam the doors down right there on that one. One problem at a time'll do, thankya very much. (201, emphasis in original)

Sue is able to 'shut off' at a certain point to ensure she does not think about the rape, but the implications are clear for the reader. In Roger's eyes, Sue's education and intelligence are automatically associated with independence and autonomy, and he connects these traits with her gender and sexuality. Moreover, Roger's racial slurs against Sue also indicate his fraught relationship with their ethnicity. Although Roger is an activist for Indigenous rights, his use of the term 'nigger', a predominantly American racial slur, seems to come from a place that emphasises inequality between him and Sue. It is used as a derogatory term that discriminates against Sue as other, not only because of her gender but because he reads her as holding herself *above* the role that Roger thinks a Murri woman should maintain.

The statement 'one problem at a time' frames Sue's rape as something that she knows she will have to deal with later, but also something distinct from the verbal and physical violence that also occurred in Roger's final attack. Sue interprets the rape as though the physical violence is within the realms of acceptability and is not enough to encourage her to leave, but that sexual violence is crossing a line that Sue cannot forgive. This is not to suggest

that rape *should* be acceptable, but its construction as in some way *worse* than the physical violence wreaked on Sue brings into question how she views violence. There is an evident hierarchy of violence. Sue views physical violence as normalised, but sexual violence is aberrant, and unacceptable; this hierarchy of unbearable violence is also apparent in that sexual abuse impelled Sue to leave Townsville. There is also evident shame in Sue's reading of rape. She can speak to Kerry and Rachel about the physical violence without shame—rather, it is framed as embarrassment— but not about the rape. While the sexual violence is still positioned as a punishment by Roger for what he interpreted as Sue's sexual indiscretion, the trauma associated with the rape is more substantial, for Sue, than the other violence.⁵⁴

Ultimately, Sue is able to acknowledge her situation and move away from the normalised violence through the support and knowledge that comes with her feminist associations. Sue's new feminist interpretations of her experiences mean that she is able to interpret her relationship and the roles available to her in alternative ways; her destiny is not limited by her gender and her ethnicity. The form of the novel ensures that readers must always acknowledge violence existing within a particular context, rather than it being its own distinct experience. This acknowledgement reinforces the ways that violence can be

⁵⁴ Although not inflicted, suicide is also represented as a form of violence that is a threat to Sue. Rachel asks Sue whether she considers committing suicide when she knows there is a gun available, to which Sue responds: "Oh... I dunno. Doesn't everyone? I mean, everyone must have times when they feel like blowin their head off, surely. I never will but. ... I just get pissdrunk instead, till I'm too rotten to do anything, couldn't lift a gun let alone fire it" (Lucashenko 218). This discussion of suicidal ideation, viewed to be normal by Sue—"Doesn't everyone?"—is shocking for Rachel, who "tried not to let her feelings of horror show" (218). It indicates the differences in the perceived value of life, and the acceptance of particular pain in life as normalised or tolerable. Sue's need to get drunk to the point of paralysis in order to avoid suicidal thoughts similarly presents a kind of escape in order to avoid feeling emotional pain, but it is also a protective mechanism—the damage caused by drinking is preferable to the alternative. This construction of suicide differs substantially from its discussions and representation in *Indelible Ink*, in that for Sue, suicide is about escaping from the trauma of her life, rather than an equivalent euthanasia as it is presented for Marie King. The violence associated with suiciding by gunshot as opposed to Marie's deliberate and planned overdose on morphine suppositories juxtaposes the reasoning behind the desire to end one's life; Sue's is about hatred and pain, whereas Marie's decision to end her life is associated with her terminal cancer.

interpreted as a problematic, destructive, yet normal part of a relationship. Thus, in *Steam Pigs* Lucashenko offers not only a discussion of the “‘norm’ of violence” that was “unseen and unheard” (Lucashenko and Best 19), but represents an alternative reading and interrogation of these norms.

“You take her down, stomp on her face, leave her bleeding on the concrete”: *Rohypnol* by Andrew Hutchinson

The novel *Rohypnol*, by Hutchinson, won the Victorian Premier’s Award for best unpublished manuscript in 2007, and Hutchinson was mentored by Tsiolkas in the development of the novel. In an interview with Meyer, Hutchinson asserted that his novel was written as an attempt to explore the reasons that people commit the deliberate crimes of drugging and raping women, such as those represented in the text (“Rohypnol”), but my analysis has found little evidence of such an exploration. Instead, the novel reads as a deliberately provocative text that represents the misogyny inherent in the capacity to rape women in an explicitly calculated way. The misogynistic context is not challenged, and the novel reads like a justification for the violence that occurs. The violence of *Rohypnol* can be seen as a representation of the world of date-rape and drink-spiking, yet, problematically, it perpetuates the social stereotypes that young women who claim they have been raped are lying; that women who say they do not consent are lying; that women invite sexual assault. The novel does little to challenge the rape culture in which Hutchinson writes. The violence is nauseating and the reader is not encouraged to feel any affinity for the protagonist. While some kind of penitence and redemption would be disingenuous, the novel’s only purpose appears to be to shock the reader. Moralistic letters from the public to newspapers—such as “They do not deserve any mercy or leniency for the acts they have committed. No slap on the wrist. No second chances. They must be severely punished. *J. Smith, Traralgon*” (Hutchinson 212)—are interspersed between descriptions of the arrests, interrogations and convictions

of the other members of the rape squad, acting as a kind of juxtaposition for the detached descriptions of the crimes throughout the rest of the text in a seeming attempt to assuage the amorality otherwise evident (206-20). While this device does offer some relief from the overwhelming violence, through expressions of shock and disgust that may echo that of the reader, it is confined to one chapter, and it appears farcical amid the complete lack of regret evident in the perpetrators. The text focuses on descriptions of violence rather than presenting any kind of deeper analysis of the roots of the violence.⁵⁵

In terms of characterisation, the male characters who make up the ‘Rape Squad’—as they are referred by their secondary school cohort—do not differ from one another substantially, nor are they particularly developed. They work within two-dimensional markers of difference apart from superficial details: Harris is the rich one, Troy is the one that takes steroids, Uncle is the fatherly figure, Thorley is the boss, and the unnamed narrator is cold, apathetic, amoral; they are each archetypal, sociopathic ‘bad guys’. This novel and its relationship with violence and gender counters Bode’s assertion that men’s bodies in depictions of violence reflect their growing ‘victimisation’ through the purported demasculinisation of men in Australian culture (Bode, “Unexpected” 444). *Rohypnol* perpetuates myths of ‘deserving victims’, and offers evidence for hegemonic hypermasculinity that culminates in an unwarranted sense of entitlement. The young men are constructed as pathological; the novel describes their administration of the date rape

⁵⁵ Despite the devastating content of the novel that makes it sound implausible, it tragically reflects, deliberately or otherwise, the “teenage kings of Werribee”, from Melbourne’s south-western suburbs, who gang raped and defiled a girl, filming the assault and releasing it on DVD in 2006. Similarly, late in 2013, an organised teen sex ring from New Zealand, calling themselves the ‘Roast Busters’, raped girls, many underage, and left reviews of their exploits on a dedicated Facebook page. The investigation into the Roast Busters was dropped in October 2014, and no charges were laid. For further analyses of these cases, see Ford’s “New Zealand teen sex ring ‘Roast Busters’ name and shame victims”, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’s “Teenage Kings and ‘heroic’ rapists”, and Ian Steward and Kelly Dennett’s “Roast busters: horrific New Zealand Gang rape case leads to zero charges”.

drugs with precision and without any latent judgment, reflecting the complete loathing with which the perpetrators seem to experience their world.

There are a number of chapters, distinct from the primary narrative and distinguished by the use of italicised font, that are diatribes espousing the values of the 'New Punk': a flawed philosophy by which the protagonist and the other members of the Rape Squad live. These descriptions of the New Punk are written as a journal for the protagonist's legally assigned psychologist, and act as a kind of justification for the attitudes and violence advocated by the group. The descriptive tirades about the New Punk are hyperbolic and morally abhorrent:

The New Punk is about equality. If someone fucks with you, you need to fuck with them. It's about revenge. About never forgetting. Forgiveness can come when the playing field is levelled. If someone burns you, you take it back to them. But harder. If someone steals your lunch, you steal his wallet. If someone breaks your pencil, you break his fingers. If someone fucks your girlfriend, you fuck his mother. You wait outside his house with a razor blade in your fist. You take her down, stomp on her face, leave her bleeding on the concrete. (Hutchinson 28, emphasis in original)

This manifesto of toughness is clearly not espousing 'equality'. Retaliating 'but harder' is, by definition, *unequal*. While the young men use such rhetoric to justify their lifestyle, their reasoning is flawed, and while logic and reason are, undoubtedly, not the intention of the inclusion of this passage, as a literary device the protagonist's philosophical basis adds to the abhorrence of his actions. The manifestos throughout the novel show that women are to be viewed as equivalent possessions, apparently, to wallets and pencils; attacks against women are justified because such attacks are viewed as metaphorical violence against the *men* associated with them, who are deemed to have wronged the perpetrators. If a woman rejects one of the Rape Squad, this is also justification for her rape and degradation.

The Squad also use rape as an attack on one another. Being *forced* to rape women against their will is used, ironically, as punishment for breaking the rules and is arguably a form of sexual violence itself, although the victim—that is, the Rape Squad member being punished—is far less worthy of sympathy and understanding since the circumstances under which the rape takes place are abhorrent. For example, Thorley forces Harris to rape the drugged girl he, Thorley, brought home after Harris touches her; Harris touched Thorley's possession, and Thorley's method of punishment and humiliation is essentially the same form of attack that is perpetrated against their female victims (65-68). Raping 'the blonde' is thus positioned as a punishment for Harris, who has committed the perceived wrong.

Rape is punishment for a wide range of perceived transgressions, including overt sexual desire, or wealth and privilege:

The New Punk is not about spoilt fucking rich kids always getting everything they want, having it handed to them. Spoilt little rich girls planning their fucking white-wedding life from the time they can understand fairy tales. They have everything. They can have anything, anytime. Except now. Now they're on your time. You make the fucking rules.

You just take them.

Fuck them.

Dump them. (101, emphasis in original)

In the New Punk, rape is retribution for privilege. There is irony in that those who are perpetrating the rapes are generally equivalently privileged. The protagonist's earlier assessment of the 'rich kids' as "spoilt all their lives, fucking whingeing, bitching, crying and buying drugs and cars and getting fucked up" (44) applies as much to the Rape Squad—with their luxury apartments in Melbourne's CBD bought by their parents, excessive drug taking, and misdirected ennui—as it does to their victims. To 'take them, fuck them, dump them' is a perceived attack on the privileged youths existing without struggle. Ironically, the method of

rape that the Rape Squad use explicitly avoids 'struggle'; incapacitating their victims by drugging them with benzodiazepine means their crimes are not difficult for them to perpetrate. Also, the very effects of the drug means that their victims do not necessarily know about the degradation that has taken place, and are therefore unaware of their apparent punishment. The 'fucking rules' made by the Rape Squad do not explain why the 'spoilt little rich girls' actually deserve to be punished, other than their apparent bourgeois privilege, and their vulnerability at the hands of the Rape Squad serves to undermine their privilege at the hands of young men who ultimately wield more power than the women.

The way that their female victims are constructed is with minimal sympathy. While the narrative is written from a first person perspective, and thus its assessment must take into account the limited views of the protagonist, the ways in which the female characters are represented are, ultimately, as objects. The fraught gendered dynamics offer no redemption and no capacity to recognise the blamelessness of the female victims of the crimes. Pons argues that, in Australian writing, there is a common tendency to construct masculinity and sex as a diabolical combination where men *must* mistreat women: "The man's satisfaction is predicated on the woman's humiliation; she has to be turned into a helpless victim, and thereby confirm his sense of superiority, before his enjoyment is complete" (99). This is certainly evident in *Rohypnol*, as the objectified women are necessarily turned into victims through their drugging and rape. The ways in which the women, especially the high-school-aged girls, are constructed suggests that consensual sex would be possible in a number of scenarios, but the aim of the boys—the aspects that bring them satisfaction and enjoyment—is not sex, but the violation and debasement of rape.

The women given autonomy, such as Aleesa, are still constructed as reprehensible: the adult women are considered by the Squad to be pathetic, and the younger high-school-aged women are dichotomously constructed as either weak or manipulative. The other unnamed women are presented as shallow, one-dimensional; their characterisation is

predominantly dependent on their appearance, which acts as signifier for their perceived worth:

‘Which one would you do?’ Uncle asks, surveying the line of girls, all perfectly placed hair and too much make-up.

‘I’d go the redhead in that group,’ I say, pointing but trying not to be obvious about it.

‘Yeah, redhead chicks are fucking hot,’ Uncle nods without looking at me. ‘She’s good. She’d have a good pussy too. We’ll come back here.’ (Hutchinson 58)

Women are usually referred to only by the colour of their hair—‘the blonde’, ‘the redhead’—as though this is the most relevant defining feature. For the Squad, hair colour simultaneously summarises women’s appearance and personalities in a way that maintains their construction as objects. A physical feature of minor importance is enough to encapsulate their identities—and, ostensibly, enough to draw conclusions about the quality of their genitalia. The notion that ‘she’d have a good pussy’—offering no explanation as to what that may be, and how it may differ from a bad one—and that such a detail is evident from the colour of her hair adds a further level of both absurdity and vulgarity to the objectification of the women based on superficial elements of their appearance. Where Aleesa is a named character because she is a significant character in her own right and *not* merely an object, the naming of other girls and women in the text is *part of* their objectification, because it marks them as significant: Mrs Arthur, the teacher’s wife and April Bollen are signified by their naming. The others are minimally acknowledged by their physical descriptions or their behaviour, but this is not enough to consider them as actual subjects in their own right. They are possessions, or goals to achieve. The violence that they have been subjected to is ostensibly punishment for their existence and is far removed from any acknowledgment of their equivalence as subjects.

The ways in which the boys, particularly the protagonist, view women are reiterated throughout the text to ensure that the reader is aware of the consciousness of the crimes and their purpose. Upon visiting his grandmother, sick and unconscious, in the hospital, the protagonist draws comparisons between his incapacitated Nan and his victims: “I’m thinking: *This is what the girls are like. This is how they are when we take them. Unconscious. Unaware of what’s happening*” (103, emphasis in original). The protagonist recognises the complete incapacity of the girls they rape. The term ‘take’, here, acknowledges that they young men are acquiring something that is not theirs, and of which they have no permission to access; it explicitly acknowledges the lack of consent but without referring to the criminality of their acts. The women, through their drugging, become objects that are *able to be taken*, rather than subjects with agency. ‘Take’ dehumanises and degrades the women about which he is speaking.

There is an insinuation throughout the novel that the young women are expected to be in control of their bodies, their sexuality and their victimisation through the construction of a seemingly complicit passivity. Aleesa asserts that she and the girls she knows are aware of the Rape Squad—“She holds her glass up to my face. ‘You gonna drug me?’” (72)—but “Some girls don’t really care” (72) about the rapes, or their potential to be raped. As Aleesa leaves a party with the protagonist with the intention of having sex, they discuss her and her peers’ knowledge of the Squad’s crimes further:

‘What do you want to do with me?’ she asks.

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing? You mean I’m not good enough for you?’ Aleesa feigns offence.

I slide my hand up her leg, beneath her dress, feel the lace edges of her underwear.

‘What did you mean before?’ I ask her, my mouth close to her neck. ‘When you said that some girls don’t really care.’

'Everyone knows you boys. Everyone knows what you guys do.'

Aleesa grips the hair on the back of my head. 'Some just don't care.

Some like the drama of it. Some take it as a compliment, in a weird kind of way,' Aleesa laughs.

'But not you?'

'I can take care of myself.' (79)

Aleesa's assertion effectively proposes that by not abiding by particular precautions in order not to be raped, by not actively avoiding parties or particular men, or by feeling as though they simply *should not* be victims—through these failures to take care of themselves—the girls can be in some way responsible for rape. This is disconcerting not only because it is objectionable that such a statement could be made by any person, but also because it is Aleesa's understanding—thereby the understanding of a potential target, rather than a perpetrator—of the situation, and because other descriptions of parties, for instance, present her view as accurate. Aleesa's view of culpability is more troubling than if it was a member of the Squad, because the attitude towards women within the text is not limited to the 'damaged' young men, but extends to the ways in which women view themselves, or other women.

Aleesa is characterised as manipulative, dominant, and both sexually assertive and sexually desirable—quite similarly to Charlotte in *The Pillow Fight*. She wants the protagonist to want her, but wants him to know that anything they engage in is consensual because she is strong and capable, and has actively sought sex. Aleesa, accordingly, is empowered. To an extent, it is her assertiveness and embracing of her sexuality that positions her as different from those who are viewed as potential victims. She considers herself to be in the position of power, and distances herself from the victims of rape through her absolute assertions of consent. Despite this, Aleesa's views of victimhood change later in the novel upon news of her friend April Bollen's murder. She explains everything she knows

about the Rape Squad to the police, and in her description, she acknowledges the boys as active and deliberate perpetrators:

Aleesa tell him about Rohypnol, about a rich kid named Thorley and his four friends. How they regularly go out at night looking for targets, girls to drug and take home. 'Rape squad' is what Aleesa calls it. She tells Craig Bollen [April's father] about the parties at Thorley's house, the science teacher at school. Aleesa says everyone knows about it. Their rape squad. (194)

Despite the shift in her views, Aleesa devastatingly "tells Bollen how one of them even raped her one time" (194). Her lies about being raped, despite her previous assertions of agency, in light of her earlier comments about the girls who 'don't care' about the Rape Squad, indicates that she, now, "likes the drama" (79). This is excessively problematic because girls inviting rape and making up stories of rape are stereotypes prevalent in 'rape culture' and ensuing attitudes that exist around the acceptability of rape within society.

Part of the purpose of the Rape Squad appears to be an assertion of power and entitlement. There is an explicit acknowledgement of the power dynamics at play within the novel:

'Remember you are in control here.'

'These little girls, they know nothing.'

'Be natural.'

This is how Thorley explained it to all of us. And we were
fucking good at it. (62)

What is 'natural' in such a scenario is not evident: that 'natural' is, however, a possible way to behave when drugging the women is indicative of their perversity. Moreover, while Thorley assumes the 'little girls' are unaware of what the men are doing, this is countered by Aleesa's aforementioned assertion that "everyone knows" (79); the girls are willing accomplices, and this equally is as problematic as the assumption that they are passive victims. The notion that

the boys possess 'control' is at odds with the complete lack of control that they induce in their victims. That they must be in control in order to rape women who have no control shows the deliberation of their crimes, positioning it differently to stereotypical violent rapes that are the crimes of out-of-control monsters—those archetypes of bad men which cannot apply to the novel's young, privileged, known perpetrators. The perceived power of the rapists lies in this semblance of control. When a girl is shown to have control, unexpectedly, during her rape—as is the case with April—Troy loses control of the situation and bashes her to death; their 'control' is evidently tenuous. April's mutilation reflects Lavinia's in *Titus Andronicus*; the removal of April's hands and teeth after her rape and murder is an attempt to make her unidentifiable (216), or, as with Lavinia, to ensure that her body is unable to 'talk'. The perpetrators thus try to control April's body, even in death.

The method with which the Rape Squad attacks the girls is, ironically, about disempowering them *unknowingly*; it is not about decisions, or exerting physical force, but by secretly drugging women's drinks to make them manipulable. It is an extreme form of manipulation through drugging, and the Rape Squad *like* that the women can still respond with pleasure, as though it gives them a justification for their sexual assaults, but they then feel entitled to mock the women for their physical responses that mark them as 'sluts'. Using rape as a plot device serves as a means of exploitation that does little to explore the prevalence of violence but rather suggests there is no alternative. The rape of women in *Rohypnol* serves only to further the stories of male characters, rather than in any way addressing the women who are victims. It is impossible not to read it in terms of the 'rape culture' in which it fits, evident in the apologist perspectives of the male perpetrator, and the assumption that women are invariably in some way responsible for sexual violence. The novel, then, does not interrogate the crimes it represents, and thus its purpose seems to offer a questioning of the motivations of the perpetrators but with no resolution.

“She inspires violence. She turns decent men into animals”: *Taming the Beast* by Emily Maguire (Part Two)

This chapter focuses on the violence of *Taming the Beast*, extending the analysis in Chapter Two. Because the focus of my discussion is violence, here, the focus of my reading differs from that of the previous chapter, as the basis of the discussion is the problematic construction of Sarah’s relationships, as opposed to her characterisation. The way in which her relationships are presented necessitates a consideration of the abuse and violence that occurs, perpetrated by both Daniel Carr and Jamie. The link between sex and violence in the novel is undeniable and at times overt. As Miller argues, a sexually explicit text will often use “violent and sometimes abusive encounters in its efforts to proclaim a ‘liberatory’ agenda, textually framing physical pain as a means through which to achieve sexual emancipation” (Miller 376). This view is applicable to *Taming the Beast*, as Sarah’s liberated sexuality is difficult to address without considering the implicit violence of most of her sexual encounters.

While the narrative focuses predominantly on Sarah, it also explores Jamie’s perspective. His interpretation of Sarah allows for an alternative reading of her as kind and fragile, a good friend whom he loves, as opposed to the characterisation of Sarah as hard and detached. Jamie is shown as a ‘good man’, the hero, the man with whom Sarah should be in love. He is represented as the one positive, reliable or even likeable, man in Sarah’s life. He is supportive and considerate, and he does not view her as a sex object or doll, as the other male characters do. Sarah, for Jamie, is simultaneously his best friend and the definitive object of his desire; this construction remains unchanged throughout the chronology of the novel. Sarah intrudes on Jamie’s relationship with his partner, Shelley, emotionally and sexually. Originally, Sarah’s attempts to seduce Jamie are presented as manipulation based on jealousy and possessiveness, but it is later framed as ‘authentic’ love. Jamie’s reading of Sarah is consistently one of veneration.

In spite of this positive construction, he is in sexual thrall to Sarah, and his desire for her essentially influences him to treat Shelley badly. He chooses Sarah over all others and shirks his wider responsibilities in order to satiate her needs and desires, sexual or otherwise. She manipulates him and only wants him when he is unavailable, yet they are genuinely close friends who care about each other. However, he, too, becomes violent, angry and cold in response to her behaviour and his expectations of their sexual relationship, and this change is ultimately understood to be caused by Sarah. She is, throughout the novel, present as culpable for the behaviour of men. This is evident in Jamie's assessment of her:

[Jamie] had still never hurt her, although he understood what drove men to do that. Sarah controlled men with her too-soft hair and her clever lips and her insatiable cunt. She made her men feel simultaneously grateful and exploited... When you had her in your arms you wanted to know that behind the armour of her technique, underneath the roar of her shameless mouth, she was in awe of you.

(Maguire, *Taming* 233)

Jamie 'understands' why men hurt Sarah, as though this is a logical reaction to Sarah's version of 'control'. It is not clear how the softness of her hair leads to control, but his view suggests that the corporeal and aesthetic elements of her sexual desirability along with the knowledge of her sexual experience mean that Sarah has the capacity to make men feel attractive and powerful—yet pathetic. Men's need for Sarah to be in 'awe' of them implies that pleasure is not the purpose of sex, but she is instead some kind of sexual challenge that must be conquered, a competition of sorts. The correlation between the need for awe and men wanting to hurt her may be read as an attempt to affect her—to pierce her armour. It is this combination of awe and pain that encompasses Sarah's apparent 'influence' on the men with whom she has sex, and her rousing them to behave in ways that they purportedly would not otherwise; as Shelley, Jamie's wife, believes, "She inspires violence. She turns decent men into animals" (189).

Despite Jamie's characterisation, he too is 'inspired'. After their many months apart, and after Sarah chooses Daniel over him, Jamie's sense of self, and his understanding of her, have been damaged to the extent that he is no longer capable of treating her well:

He pushed his hand between her thighs and moved her legs apart so he could touch her properly. She looked down at his hand and her face crumpled, but she kept talking and let Jamie stroke her through the daisy pants. He knew she would, because she always let men do whatever they wanted to her. (298)

'He knew she would' shows Jamie's acknowledgment that his actions were not wanted, but are something that Sarah will 'let' him do, ultimately at the cost of Sarah's humiliation. The 'daisy pants' mirror the 'little duck' underpants of fourteen-year-old Sarah, discussed in Chapter Two, and suggest that Sarah is again manipulable and passive. Jamie acknowledges that his actions are atrocious, but he also, in part, blames Sarah for his actions—as though it was her responsibility to ensure he would not take advantage of her, as though it was her fault that he felt guilty for his exploitation of her. Jamie being 'appalled' and considering the situation 'disgusting' effectively removes any agency from him, and reframes the situation to blame Sarah for having sex, not only with him but with 'so many men':

The knowledge that he could really hurt her had always made him determined not to, but now her vulnerability appalled him; it was disgusting that she would let him do this to her. And it was more revolting still, that she had allowed this to happen to her so many times with so many men. To just lie there and be penetrated like she was *nothing!* (302, emphasis in original)

It is, however, Jamie who treats Sarah 'like she was nothing'. Sarah is always a subject, and so it is Jamie's change in attitude that shifts Sarah from his beloved friend into the woman he blames for his emotional and sexual impotence. Despite his view of her culpability, he also reflects on her vulnerability; he acknowledges, "*he* was the arsehole, the abuser, the pitiless

man who could not see that she needed help and protection, not more fucking. The last thing his poor little Sarah needed was another dick, another careless intruder” (303, emphasis in original). The notion of Jamie as an intruder indicates his awareness of the sex as non-consensual, and instead as acquiescent. Sarah suddenly becomes ‘poor little Sarah’ in a way that she would not—*could* not—have been characterised earlier, because, despite all her trauma and deliberately destructive behaviours, her sexual choices were consistently portrayed as agential. When Jamie feels guilty, however, Sarah becomes pitiful.

His abuse of her damages Sarah in a way that she can hardly tolerate. Sarah reacts differently to abusive sex with Jamie from abusive sex with others, because she considered him the one person who loved her and cared about her. Comparing Jamie’s treatment of Sarah to her description of their first sexual experience together—when Jamie looked at Sarah with adoration that she had never experienced before—the reader sees that Jamie has become, through his coldness, preoccupation, and jealousy, aligned with all of the other men in Sarah’s life. “So many men and boys and faces and cocks and hands and lips and tongues” (306), yet despite all her experiences with many different men, it is Jamie who hurts Sarah the most, Jamie who made her “want to disappear because of how and why and where she’d been touched. Because of *who* she’d been touched by” (306). Sarah acknowledges her sexual history and its consequences but positions her final moments with Jamie as more detrimental than the other sex she has had. Being hurt by strangers or by people whom she knew did not love her is different to being used, sexually, by the one person she considered incapable of hurting her. He is the one that makes her feel abused.

Throughout the novel, Sarah makes a clear distinction between the sex she has and her rape, which she does not consider to be a sexual act; this is a significant and valuable aspect of the novel. Nonetheless, the representation of the sex that she does not want to have as *not* rape—while it is not un-consensual, it is certainly not consensual—designates rape as

violent and perpetrated by strangers, and discounts the possibility of rape as unwanted and aggressive but without an explicit statement of her noncompliance.⁵⁶ Sarah asserts her refusal and therefore the rape was legitimate, as opposed, in her eyes, to the sex she engages in that is not desired but not explicitly rejected. She clearly distinguishes the rape from all other sex, and its toll on her is clear. However, the extent to which other sexual encounters—for example, with an unknown bkie at a bar who forcibly holds her against a dumpster (213-14)—can or cannot be read as abusive is dependent only on explicit non-consent. The ‘grey area’ is not assessed.

The importance of consent is integral to considerations of Sarah’s early sexual encounters with Mr Carr. While she is only fourteen, and therefore legally unable to consent to sexual acts, her agency in terms of her sexual desire is mostly evident. There are episodes where her abuse is clear, and yet she does not interpret these occasions as abusive:

The one time she said no, that she had to get home, he looked at her with wet, wide eyes as though she had hit him. Then he slapped her, hard, and called her a tease and a time waster. He pushed her to her knees, unzipped his pants and with one hand on the back of her head and the other up against the locker room wall, he fucked her mouth until he came.

⁵⁶ Sarah explains her rape in graphic terms to Daniel Carr who, whilst being more understanding than her parents, still responds inappropriately—with anger at not being told the whole story, and with sexual arousal upon hearing of Sarah’s ordeal (199-201). When she was sixteen, Sarah was raped at Jamie’s brother’s party shortly after having sex with Jamie for the first time. Sarah states, “Under different circumstances I would’ve done them for sure. But I was worried that if Jamie came back and they were in the room, he would think I had invited them and would be upset. Jamie’s insecure about things like that” (199). There is thus a clear distinction, in Sarah’s mind, between consent and non-consent—although her decision is tied into not wanting to hurt Jamie, rather than her own desire. Her sexuality is still implicated in her rape, as though they are inseparable. Sarah’s family, too, view her attack in terms of her promiscuity: her mother is too “ashamed” to take her to the hospital, her father threatens to send her to boarding school and tells her “to stop being so melodramatic”, and her sister Kelly “said that it was impossible I had been raped because everybody knew that I didn’t say no to anyone” (202). This is the catalyst for Sarah leaving home and becoming estranged from her family.

She slumped against the cold tiles, eyes and scalp stinging, trying not to choke or vomit. He zipped up his trousers and nudged her with his foot. 'Well, off you go, Sarah. I know you're in a big hurry to get home. Run along, now.'

Sarah grabbed his legs and pulled herself to a standing position. She removed a checked handkerchief from his shirt pocket, unfolded it, raised it to her lips, spat out the sour stuff in her mouth, refolded the handkerchief and replaced it in his pocket.

'Disgusting,' she told him, because it was, but she couldn't sleep that night with wishing she had kept the handkerchief. (18)

'The one time she said no' is very different to stating 'the first time'; it means that she did not say no after this occurred also, and this brings into question her options to do so. If the only time that she denied Mr Carr was met with violence and non-consensual sex acts, her actual agency to make decisions in the relationship is limited; she knows that turning him down will result in violence. Similarly, his criticism of her as a 'tease and a time waster' because she could not engage in sexual activities 'one time' can be read to have shaped Sarah's opinions of women who withhold sex from men for various reasons. Her judgment of those women reflects Mr Carr's, and as such can be understood to have influenced her own decisions not to be one of those women. Sarah, however, does not react to this scenario, although she has been hurt by his actions, but rather chastises him and judges the actions as unacceptable. Her replacing of the soiled handkerchief into his pocket shows him that his actions are abject and objectionable, and suggests that he should feel shame. However, her desire to have kept the handkerchief can either be understood as desiring a kind of memento, or as wanting to take back her action that shames his behaviour. Either way is problematic; this scene ultimately denies Sarah agency, and detracts from the one actively empowered moment she has in replacing the debased handkerchief.

Daniel's abuse is not only physical:

He accused Sarah of purposely provoking him into the sort of risky behaviour which would get him fired. He called her manipulative and vicious, which made her cry. He told her she was ugly when she cried, and so she held her breath until she had control of herself. Feeling dizzy and ashamed, she pressed her ugly face into his chest and was weak with relief when he stroked her hair and told her he was sorry and that she was so beautiful he could hardly stand it. (26)

He controls and manipulates her by positioning her as responsible for his actions towards her. She is unable to recognise that he illogically blames her for his own behaviour—unlike later representations when she is an adult, and is aware of his unreasonable conclusions (177, 178)—and she internalises his blame, while he turns his anger towards slating her body. Manipulating teenage girls by criticising their appearance is hardly original and is more akin to bullying than mature adult behaviour. Holding her breath to stop crying to the point of dizziness reinforces Sarah's childishness, and both her 'shame' and 'relief' about Mr Carr's perception of her as ugly or beautiful show the fragility of her ego and self-concept.

Sarah's power within the relationship seems to come only from her ability to arouse Mr Carr. While she considers this to be enough, it does not actually leave her with much control, especially considering—as she discovers when she is older—that his seduction of her was not spontaneous but planned and deliberate. He is represented as predatory; he purposefully seduces one of his young students, and his awareness of her age is implicit in their relationship and his sexual desire for her:

'Oh, Sarah, I fear I'm going to wear your *quaint honour* into dust before your fifteenth birthday. Your poor little, oh, God, am I hurting you?'

'No,' she said, although he was.

'I am, aren't I?' He moved faster. 'Tell me, Sarah, please. I'm hurting you, yes?'

'Yes, it hurts. But I like it, Mr Carr, really.'

He groaned. He was finished. 'Oh, my little Sarah. You always know what to say.' (27, emphasis in original)

This scene exemplifies the importance of Sarah's pain for Daniel's sexual pleasure. Her affirmation of pain followed by the statement of 'I like it,' spurring his pleasure, epitomises and reinforces a number of patterns within their relationship; Sarah learns that her pain is sexually desirable, especially if she says she enjoys it. This can be read in a number of ways: Sarah genuinely enjoys the pain, which is unclear during this scene; she is conditioned to enjoy the pain because she enjoys the effect of Mr Carr's positive reinforcement; or she is abject, unable to express what she likes and what she wants, and completely without power. She becomes aware that he wants to hurt her, because otherwise, when he was aware of her pain, he would have ceased rather than 'moving faster'. His repugnancy in this scene is connected with his violence. Despite her own interpretation of their relationship, for Daniel Carr, Sarah is a victim. Later, in adulthood, Sarah shows she is aware of how Daniel views her:

Sarah had always known the things that Daniel had never been able to admit out loud. She knew them ever since he pushed himself onto and into her immature body. All the time he had been spewing out justifications and explanations and rationalisations, his true nature was pounding the hell out of her flesh. (281-82)

While Sarah does not consider herself a victim, and this she asserts categorically, it does not mean that behaviours inflicted on her by Daniel Carr are not predatory or abusive; his behaviour is undeniably violent and manipulative, regardless of Sarah's desire and justifications. Even if Sarah is not a victim, he is undeniably a perpetrator. The considered nature of Daniel's predation is evident in the following passage, where he explains his actions to Sarah:

If [your mother] hadn't been so distant and unloving, maybe you wouldn't have been such an easy fuck... [Y]es, in the end I took advantage of your vulnerability. But if it hadn't been me it would have

been someone else, and he more than likely would not have felt anything except opportunistic. (195)

This explicitly states that he was aware of Sarah's vulnerability and that her troubled relationship with her mother would have prevented her from exposing him. To say that her abuse was inevitable and that anyone else would probably have treated her badly seems to frame Sarah as responsible for the abuse *because* she was vulnerable. This justification for his abuse of Sarah as a teenager is equally applied to her as an adult, as though her construction cannot allow him to act without abusing her, as though she coerces him into treating her violently or degradingly. After Sarah implores Daniel to have sex with her, he scratches and bites her before slapping her across the face and shouting, "Dear God, Sarah! Why won't you let me do this right? Why won't you let me treat you with respect?" (177). Daniel's assumption that a person must 'let' another treat them with respect shows his inability to acknowledge responsibility for his own mistreatment of Sarah. He is unable to comprehend the irrationality of his perspectives and this exemplifies his instability.

The men in the novel refer frequently to Sarah's size; that she is 'little' and thin make her both feminine and childlike, regardless of her age. Her physicality is juxtaposed with her sexual voracity, but its representation supports her interpretation as fragile and vulnerable. While Sarah's characterisation offers little to support her apparently delicate nature, her reading by Jamie suggests otherwise, and her treatment by Daniel and her reaction to him encourage a reading of her as damaged. Corporeal damage, however, differs from her apparent emotional fragility, and the physical evidence of her violent sexual encounters is embraced by Sarah as evidence that she is loved. The view that violence is a mark of jealousy, and thus a confirmation of love, reflects those perspectives evident in *Steam Pigs*. Sarah reads her marked body as encompassing her emotional state: "With teeth and nails, with belts and buckles, with matches and glass, he had given her texture and colour. His darkness, the worst of who he was, was written all over her. She was pleased to be so marked" (275). Her admiration of how her thin, pale, hairless body is transformed into something textured turns

Sarah into artwork, and portrays, in her mind, the depth of both her love and how much she is loved. Similarly, as an adult, she remembers “her grief when the last bruise faded and her body was restored to its unloved state” (141). Sarah maintains the idea that bruising represents Daniel’s love for her, as though the marks are tangible expressions of something incorporeal. Sarah’s violence towards Daniel also does not concern her, and instead she feels that it is an action of both love and identity: “she was showing him, with teeth and claw, that they were the same. One” (282). Because she feels no remorse, only vindication, this shows that she values violence as an expression of emotion, and supports her lack of anger or distress towards Daniel as a victim of his violence.

She tries to hide the marks of the violence, not because of shame or out of an attempt to protect her partner, as occurs in *The Pillow Fight* and *Steam Pigs*, because she acknowledges that these are not read as symbols of love and connection by other people but of evidence of abuse. Sarah has considerable bruising on her legs from her first encounter as an adult with Daniel, which she tries to hide from Jamie, and then minimises their significance as “just love bites” (160). Jamie cannot accept this explanation, thinking, “Sarah had let someone bite her legs hard enough, and for long enough, to cause blanket bruising. What kind of sicko did that to a girl, with or without permission?” (160). His reaction to Sarah’s bruising shows that he holds Sarah responsible for her injuries to some extent by stating she had *let* someone hurt her, but also acknowledges the deviant violence inherent in perpetrating such an act. Sarah seems not to care about the bruising itself, but there is still some shame evident in her reaction, as she “looked at her hands” while she explained it to Jamie (160). Her shame, then, is rather in acknowledgement that Jamie’s knowledge of her injuries will hurt *him*, rather than that *she* was hurt. Thus, her victim status again is dubious, because while her response to Jamie fits into a particular trope of victims of domestic violence, it is not that she considers herself a victim, but rather that she is protective of Jamie. The notion of ‘permission’ in this context is also brought into question; while it is clear that Sarah sought sexual interactions with Daniel, the violent sexual injuries she received were

not what she sought, and the interaction was not explicitly consensual. Daniel does not have sex with Sarah, but bites her legs until she is crying uncontrollably.

Consenting to some sex acts does not imply consent to all, and Daniel's disgust with Sarah after the fact, and his blame for his not being able to control himself around her, elucidates the problematic dynamic that was evident during the early period of their relationship and is still manifest during Sarah's adulthood:

Daniel got out of the car, walked around to her side, opened the door, took her arm and pulled her out. Sarah clung to him, trying to kiss him but succeeding only in slobbering over his unmoving chin. He pushed her away, hard enough that she stumbled backwards four or five steps. By the time she had regained her balance he was sliding into his seat.

Then he drove away leaving Sarah shaking and bleeding in the middle of the road. Exactly how he'd left her all those years ago. (55)

The mirroring of the past shows that the dynamics have not shifted despite Sarah's adulthood; this simultaneously shows that the power imbalance and manipulation evident in their statutorily problematic past remain, but this also suggests that Sarah's age does not affect the relationship. The earlier scene from 'all those years ago' shows Mr Carr and Sarah's final day together before he leaves the town, and its associated violence is palpable:

At the end of the day, Sarah could hardly sit up. Mr Carr carried her to the shower and washed her. He cried a lot, but he didn't talk and neither did she. After all, what was there to talk about after the biting and tearing stopped and the screaming died down? He drove her to the bus stop in silence, and remained silent while she sobbed and dug her fingernails into his unyielding arm. Eventually, too exhausted to go on, Sarah got out of the car and he drove away. (43-44)

After performing violent sexual acts that weaken fourteen-year-old Sarah to the point of incapacity, leaving Sarah at a bus stop suggests Mr Carr feels a lack of responsibility for the

damage he has inflicted. He fails to accommodate Sarah's distress, despite his own being clear. That 'the screaming' is distinct from the 'biting and tearing' suggests that it was separate, not an immediate consequence of the inflicted pain but a response that 'dies down' rather than stops, and he ignores his role in her distress. The similarities between these scenes can be understood in contrasting ways. While it may mean that the abuse of her past shaped Sarah's future responses, the legality, maturity and sexual history that informs their relationship in her adulthood does not mean that she is able to respond differently. It can thus be argued that as a child, she is not more a victim than when she is an adult and legally able to consent.

The abuse, however, remains consistently presented as ambivalent. Sarah feels that she has control over herself and Daniel within the relationship, and denies that he has power over her:

'I wouldn't have let you do what you did last night if we'd hardly known each other.'

'Firstly, Sarah, you didn't *let* me do that; you didn't have a choice. ... And second,' Daniel stepped back from her, his hands remaining on her waist. 'Last night is the perfect example of why we can't go to bed. I have no self-control with you.' (169, emphasis in original)

Both Daniel and Sarah interpret their power differently. Daniel acknowledges that he is abusing Sarah because she 'didn't have a choice' in the acts that he perpetrated, but somehow Sarah is held responsible, in his eyes, for this assault, responsible for his losing control. Sarah, on the other hand, claims that the acts are consensual and therefore there is no issue with his lack of control, because she wants anything that he will do to her.

Daniel's violence, however, is not limited to sex, but is an expression of anger and punishment. When Sarah does not act in the way that Daniel asks her to, he reacts violently, and this is represented as a response to her transgression. He punches her because in the

week she was supposed to be 'purging' herself of lovers, she binges on drugs and sex. However, despite her pain and bruising, he also discounts her subjective experience and tells her that she is delusional, that she has "obviously taken something that heightens sensations" and that he "barely touched" her (219). He diminishes her physical experience, and he is condescending by linking her experience with her perceived transgressions. Daniel also punishes her for her desire that is not expressed in the way that he wants. He overpowers Sarah physically, verbally and emotionally, and in doing this does not allow her to express what she wants:

He told her that he liked it when she fought back and she tried to tell him that she wasn't playing, but he talked over the top of her. She said something that was sort of *stop* and nearly *please*, but come out sounding like a whimper. He slapped her face and told her to stop being a baby. He said *tell me what you want*. She couldn't speak. He slapped her again and said *you have to say it or I won't know*. He slapped her until she couldn't do anything but squeal and then, just to really shake her up, he got off her and sat on the side of the bed without touching her at all. (262, emphasis in original)

Sarah is completely disempowered and unable to voice anything, and Daniel cuts off completely as further punishment for her apparent wrongdoing. This scene cannot be read as anything other than abuse in which Sarah is without power and without control. There is no evident equality, and Sarah is in thrall to Daniel. Sarah, on occasion, acknowledges that Daniel is manipulative and ultimately unappealing, but her desire for him to love her outweighs her logical reading of their relationship, which counteracts the possibility for her to consider herself a victim of abuse:

He was old, pathetic, crumpled, mean. He'd been back in her life for three days, and was ordering her around already. He put conditions on her that were arbitrary and nonsensical. He was contradictory and

cruel. She wanted to hate him. She wanted to tell him to shove his rules and orders up his dirty old arse. No, she didn't. She wanted to do everything he said, twice as well as he told her to, then he would be delighted with her, and he would love her and touch her forever. (178)

She is, as always, aware of the abhorrence of their relationship, and the complete control he wields over her—and which she willingly accepts. Her statements of anger or sadness are counteracted with a statement of longing for acceptance or desire and this unwavering willingness to please him remains consistent, regardless of her age. Her relationship with him maintains the same uneven footing on which it was founded. Because she actively chooses to maintain the dynamic of the relationship and desires nothing more than him, reading Sarah as a victim is problematic and disempowering, and denies her sexual agency; despite this, it is impossible not to read Daniel Carr as abusive.

This chapter has outlined a myriad of ways in which violence is represented in fiction. I argue that representations of violence rely on normative assumptions of gender as reasoning and justification for both its perpetration and constructions of victimhood. Throughout the novels, the onus for victimhood tends to rely on the victim for failing to prevent attacks against him or her. While *The Pillow Fight* offers a more generous understanding for Luke, and *Steam Pigs* shows the unacceptability of such a view, both *Rohypnol* and *Taming the Beast* construct culpability through assertions that female victims 'let' assaults occur by failing to stop them, and their behaviour is maligned as inciting violence against them. Such views, though presented in fiction, are representative of wider cultural mores that emphasise a victim's culpability by failing to 'take care', and I argue that these perspectives contribute to a culture that facilitates the ongoing prevalence of violence.

CHAPTER FOUR – EROTICA

THE LUST-FILLED GAZE OF A STRANGER

‘Helen.’ Philippa suddenly looked anxious. ‘You’re up on these things. What’s the latest line on pornography among feminists? I’m a bit worried. Think they’ll take a dim view of the story?’

‘Oh, look, it’s not that clear, really,’ Helen answered. ‘Some feminists still maintain that all pornography is representational violence against women. But I think that kind of line can hardly apply to women’s erotica. Particularly when it involves a woman stuffing a Lebanese cucumber up a man’s arse. No, I thought the story was fabulous,’ she affirmed. ‘Really. I found it, uh—’ she raised her eyes to heaven and paused, as though interrogating God as to how She would put it—‘both erotic and empowering.’ (Jaivin 10)

The conversation between Philippa and Helen from Jaivin’s erotic novel *Eat Me* exemplifies the longstanding difficulties present in feminist dealings with pornography and erotica. One of the focuses of my discussion here is the combination of feminist perspectives of representations of sex in a selection of erotic fiction. Drawing on the three earlier chapters, this chapter examines the ways that constructions of normality and deviance are utilised in erotic texts, and to what effect. The power dynamics within relationships, discussed in Chapter Three, are also apparent in the texts discussed here, but the ways in which they are revealed in these erotic texts can be understood in terms of agency and desire, rather than control. This chapter addresses the extent to which the texts discussed in this chapter—namely *Eat Me* by Jaivin, *Suck My Toes* by McGregor (republished in 2013 as *Dirt*), Gemmell’s *The Bride Stripped Bare*, and the short stories in *Triptych* by Kneen—are representations of

sexualities that lie outside hegemonic heterosexual discourses. I argue that erotica that subscribes to normative constructions of gender and post-feminist ideals is more likely to offer conventional representations of women's sexual behaviour, yet because of their already 'deviant' nature, these texts are in the ideal position to offer significant interrogations of, and challenges and alternatives to, the normative constructions of gender and sexuality described in earlier chapters. This chapter will also refer to the corporeality of the women represented in these texts, and consider the extent to which they can be read as 'embodied' women—as much as literary figures can be—in conjunction with their gendered construction. The representation of physical experiences of women are obviously pertinent in terms of erotica, but the extent to which bodies, gender and subjectivity are interrelated in these texts is also important because it influences the reading of women's bodies as sexual or sexualised.

There is a kind of moral panic in Australia about sex—evident, for instance, in the framing of discussions about pornography, gay marriage and women's need to protect themselves from sexual predators by ensuring they wear modest clothing. The 'moral panic' is usually framed in terms of 'protection' from potentially harmful or offensive actions, events or material, but it can also be understood as an attempt to control particular practices.⁵⁷ This chapter will address how explicit portrayals of women's sexuality in fiction are frequently tempered by a reliance on conventional gender roles in an attempt to quell 'deviant' sexual practices that may result in alternative expressions of sexual and/or gendered experience.

Rubin asserts:

Popular culture is permeated with ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, unhealthy, depraved, and a menace to everything from small children to national security. Popular sexual ideology is a noxious stew

⁵⁷ An example of this moral panic with regard to sex is evident in Kneen's exclusion from a PhD program at an Australian university because of the content of the creative component of her thesis—later published as *Triptych* and discussed in this chapter (Kneen, "University" 263).

... [and the] mass media nourish these attitudes with relentless propaganda. (151)

Popular ideology associated with sex in contemporary Australian society, as discussed in Chapters One and Two, is simultaneously permissive and conservative; particular accepted sexual norms remain, as well as stigma and taboo associated with particular sex acts that counter these norms.

The erotica analysed in this chapter deviates from the form of linear narratives—although the narratives are still located within a realist context. I will assess the ways in which such deviations allow for the expression of ‘unconventional’ sexualities. Experimental writing allows women to subvert discourses of heteronormative sexual stereotypes whilst transgressing patriarchal assumptions that regulate traditional narratives. Mary Fallon’s *Working Hot* (1989) is frequently cited as a formative text in Australian writing for its representations of women’s sexuality; the ‘novel’ utilises forms such as poetry, plays and prose in its examination of sexuality and its influence by *écriture féminine* is clear in its experimentation.

Experiments in form are suited to erotica written by, and ostensibly for, women. These non-normative forms—whether through shorter, interlinked vignettes with multiple characters, as evident in *Suck My Toes* or *Triptych*, or the deliberate obfuscation of authorial voice, demonstrated in *Eat Me* and *The Bride Stripped Bare*—allow a different kind of engagement with erotica through inherent subversions of expectations. These experiments include deviations from generic erotica in which the primary focus is *always on sex*, rather than the narrative or characterisation, as well as offering deviations from particular gendered roles in sexual relationships. *The Bride Stripped Bare* takes the form of a diary-like manual. Its original publication by an anonymous author and preface from the Bride’s mother, who claimed she found the manuscript written by her missing daughter, appeal to our expectations of authenticity; thus, the novel attempts to influence readers in a different manner than a generic erotic novel, despite its fictionality. The metadiegetic narrative of *Eat*

Me means that the inner story, the novel-within-the-novel, informs the wider frame narrative and allows for the more explicitly experimental material to take place separately from the 'real world'. The discontinuous narrative of McGregor's collection allows for the incorporation of a number of different characters who are linked in some way, forming connections and a wider encompassing storyline. Like *Suck My Toes*, Kneen's intertwined novellas in *Triptych* allow characterisation to be developed further. More importantly, Kneen incorporates challenging sexual material into her texts, thereby questioning particular sexual taboos—and the issue of sexual taboo as a whole.

The forms of these texts allow for the incorporation of a number of sex scenes with different sexual partners. These representations of women's sexual pleasure and promiscuity transgress heteronormative expectations of sexual behaviour, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. The protagonists of these texts are represented as 'liberated' and in control of the scenarios in which they are represented, transgressing hegemonic expectations of women's sexualities. The exception is *The Bride Stripped Bare*, whose sexual forays enact a disjuncture between post-feminist expectations of sexual behaviour and traditional gender roles, by explicitly embracing conventional gender roles in unconventional sexual relationships, with minimal contestation.

These novels' deviations in narrative form and content are, additionally, what distinguish them from erotic genre fiction. This reflects the inherently subversive nature of women writing about women's sexual experiences as ostensibly literary fiction, as opposed to genre fiction or romance. In this chapter, I will assess the success of these experiments in terms of their representation of women, particularly with regard to sex and desire. I shall also examine the representation of protagonists' sexual partners, female and male, in order to examine the sexual agency of the characters, including the deference or engagement of female protagonists. This distinction between bodies as sexual or sexualised is important, because it relies on the distinction between agency and passivity. Bodies can indeed be read as both, but this can become problematic; it is important to distinguish where the

'sexualisation' of the character is occurring—in the protagonist's body being read as *sexual* or represented as *sexualised* to another character—and to ask whether sexualisation is a function of subjectivity or objectification.

In discussions of literary erotica, it is important to address the necessary links between the text and its intended incitement of desire. Sexual desire necessitates an association between the mind and body in which both are active; sexuality itself "moves and is moved by the body as acting perceiver" (Grosz, *Volatile* 109). As Grosz states, "sexuality may be the arena in which intentionality breaks down, no longer functions adequately, but where its breakdown is positively sought and relished with pleasure" (*Volatile* 110). Desire, for Grosz, is not associated with the attainment of a specific object or goal, but rather is valuable and actively pursued precisely for this lack of concreteness. Similarly, she states that desire is active, and can be "what produces, what connects, what makes machinic alliances" (165);⁵⁸ desire is not a lack, or yearning for something absent, but rather something productive in itself. Constructing desire as something productive allows for women's desire to be active and agential. This also supports the consideration of a subject's sexual fantasy as having equal significance to desire directed towards something or someone corporeal; desire need not be a corporeal experience. The texts discussed in this chapter focus on sexual desire, and there is little differentiation between desire that occurs as fantasy and that which involves corporeality of the subject and/or the other; that which is positioned as fantasy—

⁵⁸ Rosi Braidotti describes Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the machinic: "The 'machinic' in contemporary culture is a highly eroticised space which conveys a trans-sexual social imaginary that I consider dominant in advanced capitalism. In so far as contemporary intelligent machines blur the boundaries between self and others and thus displace fundamental axes of differentiation, they lend themselves to becoming symbols of transgression, also in terms of sexual and gendered identity" (Braidotti 7). 'Alliances', for Deleuze and Guattari, refer back to their concept of the rhizome: "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 25). Thus, for Grosz, desire disrupts and merges imposed margins between subject and object. As Cranny-Francis asserts, "To figure desire as a 'network' or 'rhizome' seems to be an unequivocally positive move ... in the potentials it offers for greater democracy, and for less easily regulated identities and social positionings" (*Body* 104).

through descriptions of dreams, consciously constructed imaginings, or written scenarios—is as valuable as corporeal experiences. This, as a corollary, reflects the experience of reading erotic texts.

Erotic texts are deliberately sexually provocative and generally aim to induce sexual excitement; thus, their readerly nature is as integral an element of the text as the writing itself. This chapter, however, will focus primarily on the content of the texts rather than their reception. The erotica examined in this chapter is written by women, and its intended audience is also women; some is clearly directed towards heterosexual cisgendered women, and some apparently toward queer women. However, while the expected gender or sexuality of the readers may influence the inclusion of particular sexual content, it is not safe to assume that the intended audience is, in fact, the actual audience, nor does this ensure that the audience finds particular sexual practices erotic. Thus, it can be problematic to assume that there would be a difference in how a text is received because of the assumed sexuality of the reader. Woman-written erotica can serve as reclamation of sexuality, asserting sexuality and difference from a patriarchal society. Sexual archetypes are changing, but it is easier to maintain the status quo. There is, however, opportunity to challenge this in erotica, and thus feminism becomes a relevant discourse from which to discuss erotic literature.

Examining depictions of sexuality and gender in fiction from a feminist perspective means negotiating the obstacles associated with the portrayal of women in terms of gender performativity, particularly expectations of femininity, as well as the portrayal of sex itself. This involves developing arguments that appraise particular portrayals of sex without adopting perspectives that appear to be pro-censorship or 'anti-sex'; anti-sex perspectives usually manifest in arguments against pornography, sex work, and other sexualised depictions of women, in that they are read as diminishing sexual freedom and agency. Anti-sex perspectives can be interpreted as denigration, through judgement and objectification, of those that participate in and those that take part in the products of the sex industry. Feminist perspectives about sexual violence automatically position feminism as having a particular

view of sex: one that aims to protect women *against sex*, which is largely the basis of ‘anti-sex’ allegations against feminism. There are important distinctions that need to be maintained when discussing representations of sex and the extent to which these can be considered in a positive or negative light, and these distinctions ultimately amount to power and consent, which are the concepts emphasised in the textual analyses of this chapter. It is difficult to critique a text as anti-feminist, or as portraying women’s sexuality in a manner that appears objectionable, when doing so can be seen to imply a specific judgment about the inclusion of a particular sex act, rather than the way in which that sex act has been represented. The analyses in this chapter focus predominantly on the constructions of gender within the representations of sex, rather than the sex acts themselves.

Dollimore argues that there is an inherent relationship between disgust and desire, in that it marks the difference of the other: “disgust is where the struggle between dissidence and dominance can become especially violent, and just because it reveals so much about ourselves and our culture. At the same time it suggests how little we really know about either” (*Sex* 47-48). He contends that sexual disgust is the “prime motor of censorship, and in a way which reveals its relationship to social control” (Dollimore, *Sex* 47). Echoing Dollimore’s sentiments, Faust employs Masters and Johnson’s notion of ‘visceral clutch’—the sexual panic in response to pornography. Faust frames the contentious nature of readings of pornography as, ultimately, subjective: “The difficulty is that human experience varies so much that a wide range of stimuli—much of it quite trivial and asexual—causes visceral clutch in different people” (*Women* 10).⁵⁹ Occasionally, this visceral clutch stems from an

⁵⁹ Despite the usefulness of the notion of visceral clutch in terms of individual reactions to pornography, Faust’s theories of pornography are ultimately limited. In her prediction for the future of pornography in her 1980 text, Faust states that the normalisation of pornography through increased prevalence “can only be beneficial” (*Women* 24); thirty-five years later, this seems an erroneous conclusion. Her overall assertion is that “Pornography has little intrinsic merit—its value is inflated only by scarcity” (20); however, based on contemporary interpretations, such a view is easily

ethical perspective aligned with feminist and queer theory. For example, the way that sex is portrayed in conjunction with violence in Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia*, as discussed in Chapter Two, promotes a particular sexuality, which, I argue, is at odds with agency, choice, and any kind of possible pro-feminist conclusion about the value of the portrayal. The issue is not the sex acts, but rather the way the women involved are presented as passive sexual objects, or as dependent on men for affirmation by means of sexual conquest, regardless of assertions of agency.

Similar to Faust's physical response to what one finds offensive is Kristeva's concept of abjection:

one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced.

Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. (Kristeva, *Powers* 1).

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva identifies three forms of abjection against which we develop particular aversions, and form social taboos: food, like "the skin on the surface of milk" (2); waste, such as blood, pus, sweat, faeces (3), that reminds us that it is part of *us* that is being expelled, forcing us to question, what *is us?*; and the sexual difference of the feminine body, where, "That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (70) because of its corporeal waste—namely menstrual blood—that distinguishes and separates it from the 'proper'—male—body. Grosz summarises that the

countered. Pervasiveness has normalised pornography, and its commonness has thereby made a perceived state of constant arousal appear less absurd.

“reaction to these abjects is visceral and physical”, expressed with “disgust”: “they demonstrate and produce bodily processes and zones ‘rational’ consciousness is unable to accept or deny. They represent a body in revolt, the body as a disavowed condition of consciousness” (*Sexual* 73-74). The corporeal acknowledgement of that which disturbs our understanding of the ways in which things should be shows our inability to accept imposed limits and to negotiate corporeal licentiousness in a culture where such things are expected to be harnessed. Thus, while Kristeva’s theoretical position is about the constitution and blurring of boundaries of the body, this physical response can be applied to a kind of social abjection, where that which causes such a response is considered dangerous, and is that “against which taboos, forms of social rejection, inoculation and marginalisation are erected” (Grosz, *Sexual* 78). Visceral clutch might be the sensation felt towards that which we consider abject.

Taboos regarding sex frame the way we interpret sexual content. It is difficult to address the positive aspects of the stories in Kneen’s *Triptych*, for instance, without acknowledging the challenging content. Reading sexual content of culturally and morally taboo relationships is ethically jarring, and to assess those representations without ingrained uneasiness is almost impossible. Taboos regarding particular sexual experience are ingrained in our culture. Rubin argues that these taboos are based on deterring “unfit forms of desire” towards “the wrong kinds of affinal partners” (151): these include relationships involving “consanguineous kin (incest), the same gender (homosexuality), or the wrong species (bestiality)” (151). Taboos regarding masturbation are less about ensuring that “proper kin” is the product of sexual experience than on the particular “qualities of erotic experience” (151). Rubin holds that the moral panic surrounding particular sex acts is a response to other cultural concerns or perceived threats and that various sex acts become the focus of scapegoating. There is sex that is ‘normal’ and acceptable, and anything that occurs outside of the normative sexual practices or “that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’” (152) and is subject to moral panic. Such ‘violations’ include sex which is “homosexual,

unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial”, such as masturbation, casual sex, or the use of porn, or more taboo sex, such as public or orgiastic sex, the use of “fetish objects [or] sex toys” or sex which crosses “generational lines” (152). Most of these non-normative sexual practices are incorporated into the texts discussed in this thesis. Engaging in non-normative sex is often constructed as deviant, and is frequently used as a statement to inform a particular reading of the characters, such as rebellion or transgression. The sex acts described by Rubin differ in how they are represented in the texts discussed in this chapter: some are constructed as rebellious in *The Bride Stripped Bare* and deliberately titillating in *Eat Me*, but are depoliticised, if not normalised, in *Suck My Toes* and *Triptych*.

One’s level of visceral clutch towards sex affects one’s definition of pornography. The extent to which sex acts can be considered pornographic, rather than erotic, or simply descriptions of sex, often depends on their context rather than the acts themselves. Feminist arguments against pornography in film are frequently associated with depictions of violence against women. Radical feminist critics of pornography, such as Robyn Morgan, argue, “pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice” (qtd. in Lumby 98). Ian Cook posits that much pornography “attempts to devalue women in text and images presented. The [websites] objectify women, relegate them to means for satisfying ‘normal’ (pathological) desire” (52). Through their very inclusion in the pornographic works, the women are objectified. Cook continues that despite the women’s apparent enthusiasm, acted or otherwise, “no matter how interested or willing these women are, they remain things to be used and left for the next object-commodity” (52). A large proportion of pornography is problematic because of the blatant objectification of those it represents and its ingrained power imbalances; however, these elements are not automatically comparable with the experience of sexual violence. Arguments for such parallels discount the agency of women who appear in pornography, regardless of the way they are represented, and ultimately

diminish the impact of sexual violence on women by comparing it to the potentially imprudent consumption of pornography.⁶⁰

Pornography in film sets up a particular system of normalcy. I disagree with anti-sex feminists, because consuming pornography is not sexual harassment, *per se*; optimistically, it is consumed agentially, and its interpretation is dependent on the individual's level of visceral clutch. Nonetheless, it normalises behaviour that could be considered abusive and/or misogynistic and/or offensive. As Dollimore argues, "a libertarian opposition to censorship has to recognize that in principle such things [literature, film and pornography] *may* harm, and not just in terms of a morality which one does not accept, but in terms of one's own" (*Sex xi*). These things are capable of being socially harmful. This is not to say that sexual activities that take place in pornography are abnormal or without value, but it certainly creates an expectation that particular behaviours (such as anal sex, or sex with multiple partners of any gender, or a state of constant arousal) are common and promotes particular images of embodiment for both men and women. The strongest arguments against pornography are not against the sex acts that it presents—the 'representational violence' that Helen mentions in the excerpted passage from *Eat Me*—or about the moral panic

⁶⁰ Given the ready availability and increasing cultural acceptance of pornography on the internet, its consumption is arguably no longer as difficult, risky or taboo as it was twenty years ago. As argued by Cook:

While Web porn is different from most other forms of pornography in that it uses multimedia, its importance derives from its ubiquity and the anonymity of its consumption, for the Web provides unparalleled access to an enormous amount of pornography while allowing consumers to access that pornography without opening themselves to the social condemnation that might attend being seen as consumers of pornography. Further, some commentators believe that Web porn has served to normalise pornography. (49)

Ease of access and the volume of porn available have changed the ways in which individuals consume porn and its prevalence alters its impact. The extent to which this is a valuable or negative trend depends on the kind of pornography consumed, and the way in which it is consumed. In *The Porn Report*, (2008) Alan McKee, Katherine Albury and Catharine Lumby found that "pornography depicts a range of social attitudes towards female sexuality. In some cases it celebrates sexual expression; in others it links sexuality with humiliation and violence" (183). As such, they argue for the need for education regarding sex and sexual identity to increase to correlate with the increase in accessibility of porn, and that an inclusive and ethical form of pornography can be beneficial to understanding sexuality.

towards its consumption, but rather they are arguments that centre on the potential for the exploitation of people, especially women, in its creation. These are arguments are not against the consumption of pornography itself but against the conditions in which pornography is produced and its potential to cause harm in its production.

Pornography and erotica in literature, however, are a step removed from filmic pornography, because the textual representation of sex and individuals adds another level of fictionality, which means that the behaviour and treatment of actual people—especially women—is no longer an ethical concern. Moreover, literature offers the opportunity to present sexual scenarios with no corporeal threat; text is thus a safe space. This is not to say that written pornography or erotica is unproblematic, because the endorsement of particular perspectives can still be seen as endorsing or limiting particular sexual behaviours or expressions. This will be discussed later in this chapter in terms of gendered stereotypes. I want to be clear that there is a distinction between arguing that pornography can be detrimental and being a ‘pro-censorship feminist’. Criticism of the content and reception of pornography does not necessarily promote the eradication of sexually explicit material; however, I am advocating awareness of the potentially problematic nature of the misogynistic imagery currently evident in a large proportion of pornographic material.

Similarly, filmic heteronormative pornography can be understood to undermine women’s sexuality through a kind of negation or subsuming of women’s desire and pleasure into their male partner’s. Because of the internality associated with female desire, there remains a dilemma with the visual representations of feminine arousal in filmic pornography. This problem is dealt with through sound, but also visuals that ultimately equate women’s pleasure with men’s.⁶¹ In literary erotica, this problem is offset by the very nature of text,

⁶¹ For instance, Grosz argues that the particularly common visual in filmic heterosexual pornography, the “ejaculation shot”, works as a presumption of the woman’s pleasure, not the man’s:

which can describe the pleasure and the physicality of sexual desire and experience in a manner that is removed from sensory representation. Pons argues that literary representations of sex that aim to be realistic ironically rely heavily on clichés in order to achieve that realism:

‘Naturalistic’ erotic writing (that is, porn) in fact defamiliarizes sex by pandering to prejudices, stereotypes and fantasies, thereby peddling a version of sex in which the explicit depiction of sex acts is at odds, in its will to realism, with the sexual ‘philosophy’ that underpins it. (73)

However, I would argue that there is more opportunity to defy these ‘prejudices’ and ‘stereotypes’ in literary representations because of their literary, rather than corporeal, nature. The opportunity to construct ‘realistic’ sexual representations of women can occur perhaps more readily and more accurately in writing.

In her article “Scandalous Women”, Miller states there is “an abiding anxiety that exists around literature that represents women and sexuality” and “a persistent link between controversy and narratives concerning female sexuality that suggests a deep-seated cultural anxiety about women and gendered behaviour” (368). Reactions to literary representations of women’s desire are framed “in terms of pornography, obscenity, and ideas about moral harm” (Miller 368). Miller argues that the perceived need to control both women and literature signifies “intra- and extra-textual efforts to restrain not only the unpredictability and power of female sexuality, but also the unruly energies of literature itself” (368). The

[P]ornography, at least in part, offers itself to the (male) spectator as a form of knowledge and conceptual/perceptual mastery of the enigmas of female sexuality but is in fact his own projection of sexual pleasure. The come shot is thus no longer an unmediated representation and demonstration of his pleasure (as one would expect); it becomes an index of his prowess to generate her pleasure. His sexual specificity is not the object of the gaze but remains a mirror or rather a displacement of her pleasure (or at least his fantasy of her pleasure). (*Volatile*, 199)

The tendency to conflate female pleasure with an image of male pleasure discounts and detracts from the acknowledgement of the woman’s sexuality as distinct and agential.

subversive potential of literature makes it an ideal form for representing sexuality and women's experiences of sex—normative or otherwise; thus, literature about women's sexuality can be simultaneously challenging and problematic, which makes it likely to be the source of negative attention.

The texts analysed in this chapter fit within the definition of the genre of 'posh porn'. This term refers to erotic fiction that is distinct from genre erotica, in that it is published for a general market; it has a narrative arc that is not solely about sex, despite sex being a driver of that narrative; and it tends to be considered to have literary merit (Brown). The goal of this genre is, ostensibly, authenticity, but, as Miller argues, if posh porn aims to represent women's actual sexual practices,

the difficulty ... is its ability to liberate female sexuality—which it claims to do—from the cultural framework in which it is produced. As a result of the propensity of 'posh porn' fictions to involve narratives of violence and exploitation alongside explorations of desire, the genre has come under scrutiny from readers conflicted about whether its representation of women offers sexual liberation. (376)

The content of posh porn resembles "the conventional structures of romance and 'chick lit' texts", in that women are "made 'real' only through their encounters with men," offering little by way of feminist alternatives; in these texts, the protagonists' sexualities are constrained by heteronormative and masculinist expectations (Miller 376). The erotica in this chapter indeed confronts the issue of female sexuality explicitly (pun intended) and aims to challenge ideas regarding women's sexuality, but this does not mean that these representations are positive or without challenges: there is still an evident promulgation of problematic dominant social norms in a number of these female-authored erotic texts. Much of the sexual scenarios rely on hegemonic and patriarchal forms of sexiness re-embraced as 'empowered' and 'liberated'. As Levy asserts, "The freedom to be sexually provocative or promiscuous is not enough freedom ... we are not even free in the sexual arena. We have simply adopted a

new norm, a new role to play: lusty, busty, exhibitionist” (200). Miller and Louise Kaplan attest that until “society itself transforms”, pornography and erotica can only replicate the social structures in which they are produced and cannot offer alternatives to the “gender stereotypes that support the fundamental structures of our social order” (Kaplan, as quoted in Miller 376). However, I argue that, while the overarching power evident in dominant social discourses is undeniable, film and literature—even in the form of pornography and erotica—are art forms that have regularly challenged dominant social and political discourses; as Kristeva argues, the arts act as space to express dissipation (*Power* 131-32). Constructions of sexuality, despite the apparent need for these to be socially controlled, should not be held to different standards, regardless of the pervasiveness of those discourses.

A mode of control evident in erotic fiction, with regard to sexuality and femininity, lies in the dichotomous constructions of weakness and power related to sexual innocence and its violation. The popularity and influence of *Fifty Shades of Grey* has meant that there is, again, a sexualising of virginity and innocence, as though it were possible for women to be a ‘blank slate’ upon whom sexuality was inscribed through sexual contact with men. The idea of innocence prior to particular sex acts is evident in various constructions of sexuality in these texts, particularly in *Triptych* and *The Bride Stripped Bare*. For instance, the protagonist of Gemmell’s novel changes substantially after her sexual awakening, and her insatiable sexual desire leads her to behave in ways that are far removed from her initial subdued and reticent characterisation; innocence is constructed as the pathway to sexual pleasure.

Innocence occasionally instigates a change in reading of sexual scenarios. In *Triptych*, Aaron expresses concern for Leda and Rachel as their apparent “naivety” has led them to show their faces on the website ChatRoulette, and he fears the girls’ potential for “exploitation” (Kneen 154). What exploitation may look like in this instance is unclear; Leda and Rachel voluntarily—and eagerly—elect to use the site in order to have sex, with one another and with Leda’s dog, in front of strangers. Therefore Aaron’s fear of “men who would

film them secretly and post the video for profit” (Kneen, *Triptych* 154), thus removing the power that the girls had over the situation, is the only feasible form of exploitation that would not devalue the sexual agency of the girls. It also would not be hypocritical for Aaron to fret about, as he uses their video images purely for his own sexual gratification: “How often would he get to see two girls cavorting with a dog?” (155). He finds their “brazenness”—their feminine deviance—erotic, but because they are *girls* and because they have failed to hide their faces, he worries and feels the need to protect them; they are a cause for concern, and they have failed to protect themselves as women should. However, by suggesting naivety as the reason for such a failure, and belittling their sexuality because of their age, their agency is disregarded. Aaron’s concern over their public sex acts can be understood to infantilise these female characters, regardless of their age; this is problematic not only because it fetishises sexual innocence, but also detracts from the validity of their agential sexuality. I am not suggesting that children engaging in consensual sex, or, more concerning, depicted in pornography, is unproblematic as long as it is entered into un-coerced. However, in this erotic story, where Kneen’s painstaking construction of a safe sexual world means such taboos cannot stand within this particular context, Aaron’s concern has a different effect.

This chapter, and this thesis, does not argue that writing about sex is automatically transgressive, or new, or even interesting. Rather, I am arguing that erotica directed towards women has the potential to create a fictional world in which sex practices are not relegated as deviant on the basis of non-conformity. As Levy argues,

If we are really going to be sexually liberated, we need to make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desire. We need to allow ourselves the freedom to figure out what we internally want from sex instead of mimicking whatever popular culture holds up to us as sexy. *That* would be sexual liberation. (Levy 200)

I argue that what is generally offered is a reiteration of norms, packaged in subversion. The following textual analyses will focus on manifestations of gendered embodiment and

sexuality, rather than focusing on the sexual practices that take place. I will also address the problematic ways in which femininity and masculinity are constructed in line with gendered stereotypes, especially in terms of sexual desire and desirability—even in writing that, if not explicitly erotica, is designed to be sexually provocative.

“She lowers the lipstick”: *Suck My Toes* by Fiona McGregor

Suck My Toes, a text regularly ascribed to the ‘grunge’ genre, can be classified as a discontinuous narrative. This term, coined by Frank Moorhouse in the late 1960s to describe his style of narrative, refers to interlinked short stories that can be read as a unified whole, resembling a novel; however, each story is complete in itself and maintains an individual conclusion (Anderson 26). The characters recur throughout the collection, and they are interrelated in a range of ways; families, friends, lovers, ex-lovers, and people who work in sandwich shops appear intermittently throughout McGregor’s stories and influence aspects of characters’ lives. Functioning similarly to the discontinuous narratives in Moorhouse’s collections, McGregor’s narrative style exemplifies the interlinked communities in which the (predominantly queer) characters live and shows the intricate ways in which relationships and events can influence occurrences for other characters. The stories analysed here, however, can be considered queer erotica. A number of stories within the collection do not focus on sex or titillation; the stories discussed in this chapter, however—“Suck My Toes”, “Three” and “Growth”—focus on sexuality and sex as key themes of their narration.

Suck My Toes has a clear recognition of ‘queerness’, as opposed to more prescriptive and rigid views of sexuality, and same-sex attraction is the focus of the narrative. There is also an evident engagement with the consequences of sex; the aftermaths of break-ups are included from a range of perspectives, and sexual health and risks associated with sex (such as HIV) for both women and men are also acknowledged. In the stories “Blood” and “Move”, the respective deaths of John(ny) and Joel from AIDS affect a number of characters who

appear in numerous other stories. Sexual play evident in *Suck My Toes* is absent in the other grunge texts examined in Chapter Two; the protagonists in *Praise, Loaded* and *The River Ophelia* seem to take sex—and, ultimately, orgasms—extremely seriously, and are aggressive in their attempts to procure gratification. In contrast, in McGregor's short stories, characters' pleasure is still central, but other influences on desire are also explored. Such alternative expressions of sexual pleasure are evident, for instance, in the BDSM story "Suck My Toes". McGregor portrays sexuality as individualistic, and not necessarily classifiable in terms of hetero- or homosexuality. Most of the stories within the collection contain queer characters, and yet their queerness is minimised; McGregor succeeds in transgressing heteronorms without necessitating deviance. McGregor, however, considers herself to embrace the 'perverse' through queerness, which involves being "placed on the edge of society" ("Writing" 14). This edge, according to McGregor, allows for a "head start in understanding more deeply the foibles and mysteries of human behaviour" (14). Indeed, McGregor's characters do not rely of the "uniformity" (14) of gendered constructions that occur in some non-queer characters.

McGregor attempts to universalise sex while individualising sexuality and to maintain that sex and sexuality are discrete categories, regardless of one's gender. At times, this is successful, but at others, it is problematic; this can be understood by Abraham's assertions of the difficulty of constructing lesbian plots within the conventions of heterosexual plots. Lesbianism "can only be represented as deviant" in a heterosexual plot, because such a plot necessarily constructs sexuality as correlated to gender, and heterosexual plots rely on gender difference: "Within the heterosexual plot, femininity and masculinity are ensured by heterosexuality, and ensure heterosexuality" (Abraham 3).

The political nature of *Suck My Toes* ironically seems to lie in its lack of politic statements and its consequent portrayal of sex 'for its own sake'. Where *Loaded*, as we saw in Chapter Two, seemingly reiterates Ari's sexuality as an integral part of his characterisation as a dissident, McGregor's stories do not represent the sexuality of the characters as dissident

because of the descriptions of the sex in which they engage. Rather, characterisation is achieved through McGregor's focus on the reasoning or emotional influences behind sexual behaviour: pleasure, pain, love, revenge, sadness, grief and/or joy. Queer sex and sexualities are not emphasised, *per se*, but rather portrayed simply as characters' sexuality; no 'abnormality' is evident in the depictions themselves. McGregor explains, "My themes are the age-old ones of sex and death, family and friendship, not lesbianism or any other sexuality" ("Lesbian" 34); McGregor focuses on sex, and sexuality is thus evident but it is not a narrative impetus, simply an aspect of her characters' lives. This representation, however, automatically minimises the influence of social and political prejudice and other such issues that are associated with non-heterosexuality. While this prejudice is minimised as a whole throughout the text, an acknowledgement of the heterosexism evident in much of society is apparent in some stories, such as "Growth", offering an exploration of the effects of heteronormative assumptions on the sexuality that people perform.

"Growth" examines the ways in which the dynamics of relationships can alter in response to outside pressures, rather than changes from within the relationships. It also exemplifies decisions that people make in order to be at ease with their sexuality. Sally is engaged to Glen—the setting of the novel is their engagement party—and is involved in a heterosexual relationship that, it is implied, is much easier for her, her family and her friends to accept than her ongoing romance with Teresa.⁶² While Teresa's and Sally's affair began during their high-school years and is therefore not a fleeting dalliance, it is, nevertheless, socially easier for Sally to be in a relationship with a man than with another woman. As Teresa acknowledges, "It was obvious to Teresa that her own neck, soft as cream, was much more kissable than Glen's. It was equally obvious why Sally chose to kiss Glen's on a more

⁶² Teresa, too, is in a long-term relationship with a woman called Jay, or J, or referred to by her stage name, Queenie—the dominatrix of "Suck My Toes", to be discussed later in this chapter. Their relationship is not the focus of this story, but is described in more detail from Jay's perspective in the story "Blood".

regular basis" (*Suck* 56). Although Sally seems happy to engage in sexual play with Teresa at her own engagement party and adamantly declares that she attempted to pursue a more serious relationship with Teresa, she maintains a lifestyle as a 'straight woman', with plans to marry Glen. She therefore assumes a kind of indecisive, indeterminate position, and the 'right' path for her is not clear or defined. Despite both Sally's and Teresa's infidelities against their respective partners, Sally's seems more derisory: the reader observes that her desire lies with Teresa—the story suggests that Sally was considering leaving Glen for Teresa and had written her a letter which she never received—and yet she is tied to Glen through what seems to be obligation. At no point is Glen represented as an ideal match for Sally. While this may be because the narrative follows Teresa, it can also be understood to suggest that Sally's choice is not the right one.

In McGregor's fiction, women's bodies are more frequently shown to be subjects of sensuality and desire than objects that must uphold a certain standard of beauty in order to elicit a desired response. The role of cosmetics in this story similarly differs from the stereotypically feminine: here Teresa uses cosmetics to spoil Sally's appearance and to 'leave her mark' on her:

Teresa's arm hooked around Sally's neck, the other hand wielding a lipstick over her yellow satin chest. Teresa's arm tightened and the carmine tip lowered. 'One move and your dress gets lipsticked.'

A high thin whine, half laughter, half fear, came from Sally's parted lips as Teresa lifted Sally's dress and slowly drew a thick line up her inner thigh, stopping at the top... It seemed to Teresa that she could actually feel the lipstick melting into Sally's flesh. (70-71)

The lipstick and powder that stains Sally's dress and skin is evidence of Teresa's interference, signifying their sexual play as well as the potentially damaging impact that Teresa's presence may have on Sally, her chosen paramour Glen and her social status. Teresa signifies a lifestyle for Sally, about which her ambivalence is palpable. Her alarm in response to Teresa's

mischievous games indicates that she is aware of the consequences that the discovery of their relationship will have, yet their dalliance has continued for many years, and Sally is frequently the instigator of their encounters. Sally is therefore positioned in an ambiguous manner, and can be read as submitting to heteronormative expectations of marriage, despite her love and desire for a woman. Whether or not she desires Glen is unclear; the focus is on her desire for Teresa, and because Teresa is positioned as her 'true love', the morality of her relationship with Glen and the extent to which her infidelity is problematic for their idea of marriage remain unquestioned.

"Suck My Toes" focuses on the experiences and appeal of bodies—here as a site of pleasure and pain in the setting of a BDSM party.⁶³ Fleur seeks the pleasure associated with bondage and sadomasochism at the party and hopes it will live up to her fantasies. The events that take place at the party, however, are not the erotic fantasies desired but rather juxtapose the quest for sexual pleasure with the more mundane aspects of life, such as cleaning the room in which the party is taking place: "Queenie elbows the butch aside, and accidentally drops the dildo. She goes on her knees and feels around the floor. 'Shit! Now it's covered in dust, you grot, didn't you vacuum?'" (121). The focus shifts from explicitly sexual frustrations to general ones, reinforcing the notion that sex is influenced by life events, rather than being distinct from them. The scene of bondage chains and fisting transforms into a comic scene about vacuuming and repetitive strain injury, and the desired eroticism of the party is interspersed with concerns over the ownership of beers in the fridge and dynamics of relationships amongst the secondary characters—to the point where the story becomes ludicrous rather than erotic.

⁶³ Sophie Cunningham notes that McGregor has been criticised for her depictions of lesbianism and sex, as though they are "confronted by the world about which McGregor writes" (112). She derisively recounts, a "reviewer claimed to be bored by all this writing about S&M and wanted more books about lesbians trying to pay off their mortgages" (112); her view, in contrast, is that McGregor's decision to portray that which is not the norm expands, rather than reinforces, people's understanding of the world (112).

The stories in McGregor's collection offer predominantly positive portrayals of queer sexuality and bodies, and yet some attempts to be explicit or to emphasise the 'queerness' of situations though controversy promote abject portrayals of women's bodies. For example, in the title story "Suck My Toes" the description of "afterbirth of lube and cunt juice" is deliberately provocative (122), simultaneously denigrating childbirth, women's bodies, and a particular sexual practice (fisting) in one phrase. Whilst drawing a comparison between the sexually abject scene and the abjection of motherhood, this scene reiterates that women's bodies can be transgressively sexual and not only reproductive. Equally, while Fleur's 'alternative' body is described attractively—"Fleur is voluptuous fat, sexy fat" (108)—and her 'fat' is promoted as appealing, such endorsements are limited; her body is juxtaposed with negative descriptions of 'the butch one' whose "stomach in the Safe Sex t-shirt looks loose as the hoummos [sic] she scoops up with a corn chip, lolling to her thighs when she leans forward, hanging slightly to one side when she leans back" (108). 'The butch one', then, is depicted as undesirable regardless of her size; 'sexy fat' evidently does not 'loll' or 'hang'. Desirability in McGregor's stories is tied into the construction of the women's bodies, and while there is no espoused ideal, there are certainly qualities that are presented as desirable; however, these differ with protagonists' preferences, and are not necessarily stereotypically attractive.

The story "Three" encompasses three smaller stories: "Scars", "Drowning" and "The Automatic Dial". "Scars" details the bodies of two lovers—the skin, hair, colours and shapes—and the movements of their bodies. McGregor describes aspects of bodies that may be considered ugly or disfigured, or a possible cause of discomfiture for women characters—such as scars, bruises, pimples, 'love handles', and how the protagonist's lover's "breasts fall to either side like liquid" when she lies on her back (127)—and shapes these bodies not as aberrant or ugly, but as normal. Such normalised 'irregularities' add to the experience of others' bodies, in a way that enhances their significance. In contrast to these depictions, the thin body of the protagonist's love rival in "The Automatic Dial" is described negatively: "I

hate to think. All those bones clanking in the night” (133). This image of bones—as opposed to the affirmations of the flesh of her lover—is hard, heavy and unappealing, rejecting stereotypical endorsements of thin women’s bodies as preferable. The bodies that are constructed negatively in McGregor’s stories, though, are those that belong to the antagonists of the stories—as though corporeality is inseparable from the protagonist’s reading of them. Equally, regardless of their constructions, *loved bodies*, the bodies of the beloved, are those that are desirable and desired. Desire, in these stories, is not reliant on stereotypical expectations of an attractive body, and value is given to the individual nature of another’s body; corporeality and desire are subjective, recalling Sedgwick’s first axiom: “*People are different from each other*” (*Epistemology* 22, emphasis in original). Indeed, this axiom is expressly manifest in McGregor’s stories.

“Drowning” demonstrates the ways in which one’s body can betray; it draws comparisons between the physical sensations of the early stages of drowning and the protagonist’s experience of love and sex in her relationship. McGregor sets up a direct comparison in this story between the protagonist swimming and a memory of having sex with her partner. The short paragraphs switch between present tense and past tense, and are interspersed throughout the story with minimal signalling towards the narrative shift. For example:

I kick to a summit and see the surfers between the beach and me. They disappear, reappear, beyond a hundred metres of heaving water.

I pushed her back against the bench top, lifted her, and she curled around me. Her sleek inner thighs like the flesh of almonds.

From the beach the surfers had seemed to be out very far, to the left. (129)

These shifts indicate the contemporaneity of her present experience and her remembering, her thinking, and thus force a direct juxtaposition between events. The statement, “I pulled her upright and held her while she swayed, saying, I can hardly stand, her wetness all over

me" (129) is contrasted with the protagonist's growing feeling of helplessness in the water, alone, and unable to swim; where she held her lover aloft, she is sinking.

Despite her ability to swim, she struggles against the water, and is left feeling alone after her near death experience of which her partner, safely on the shore, was unaware. Equally, despite her reservations, her body yields to sexual pleasure, leaving her in a position of ambiguity, of insecurity, when her partner's love is unconfirmed. Her feelings of isolation and her inability to control either situation are again juxtaposed, and the pleasure associated with sex draws a corporeal element into this lack of control:

I watched an upside-down view of the moonlit beach, hazed with sex,
the stove top a vague danger next to my flailing thing. *I'm drowning I'm
drowning I'm drowning.*

Gasping for air, I reach the surfers. I'm no longer swimming[.]

(130, emphasis in original)

Drowning means something overwhelming, something associated with panic and hopelessness, a lack of control, the absence of the basic elements you need to stay alive. Drowning means dying, not pleasure. However, there remains a cliché of drowning being a painless, peaceful way to die; such sentiments are evident in "The Question of Pain in Drowning" written by Roger Sherman Tracy, a medical doctor, in 1878 about the experience of drowning:

If death by drowning be inevitable, as in a shipwreck, the easiest way to die would be to suck water into the lungs by a powerful inspiration, as soon as one went beneath the surface. A person who had the courage to do this would probably become almost immediately unconscious, and never rise to the surface. As soon as the fluid filled his lungs, all feelings of chilliness and pain would cease, the indescribable semi-delirium that accompanies anæsthesia would come on, with ringing in the ears and delightful visions of color and light, while he would seem to himself to

be gently sinking to rest on the softest of beds and with the most
delightful of dreams. (Tracy)

The ambiguity of drowning, then, perhaps ties into the association of this experience with sex; such 'indescribable semi-delirium', if only one is brave enough to stop fighting.

The juxtaposition of corporeal experiences and trepidation of the protagonist's experience reflects Susan Bordo's assertion that there is an assumption that having control over one's body means having control over one's mind: "The body is the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control*. It overtakes, it overwhelms, it erupts and disrupts" (145, emphasis in original). The protagonist expresses fear that she has lost a part of herself to the relationship and a fear that the relationship will end. The relationship between control over emotions and one's body is reflected in the protagonist's reluctance to admit that she almost drowned, just as she expresses difficulty admitting her emotional vulnerability over her lover's other dalliances, mentioned in "The Automatic Dial", in her statement, "*You know I'm a strong swimmer*" (McGregor, *Suck* 132, emphasis in original). This minimises her terror and, ironically, highlights her vulnerability in both her physicality, and her unrequited love in their relationship; how her lover reads her, or how she wants her lover to read her, does not match the vulnerable reality.

McGregor's portrayals of queer women allow for alternative views of both women's sexuality and women's bodies. Scars and fat do not detract from the appeal of characters and McGregor portrays the sexual arousal of women in a clear and explicit way. The sexual descriptions do not offer conventionally attractive views of women or their anatomy, but women, and femininity, are generally represented in ways that allow for individual sexual experience without deference to particular stereotypes or moral perspectives. This recognition of individual experience acknowledges queer sexualities endorsed by third-wave feminism and queer theory. McGregor's protagonists do not desire a specific stereotype of anything in particular, regardless of gender and sexuality. They are individual, rather than

'standard issue'; each desires different things, and this acceptance of queerness and the subjectivity of sexuality is a valuable part of the erotic stories in *Suck My Toes*.

"So what was her problem?": *Eat Me* by Linda Jaivin

Jaivin's *Eat Me* is often designated as part of the grunge lit genre, as outlined in Chapter Two, due to the era in which it was published, Jaivin's age, and the explicit sexual content.⁶⁴ Marketed by its publisher as a 'comic-erotic cult classic', the novel outlines the sexual exploits of four friends. *Eat Me* is frivolous erotica, which Pons states is "hedonistic" but "full of fun" (48): he argues that while the erotic vignettes are not always light-hearted, Jaivin's protagonists predominantly "equate sex with having a good time, and they often take their pleasure in a sunny, uncomplicated way" (48). The novel endorses the 'fun' and humour of sex; however, I maintain that problematic constructions are not negated by a comedic tone. I focus on the relationship between sex and feminism within the text, as well as the particular dynamics between the protagonists themselves, as well as with their lovers.

The main character, Philippa, is an author writing an erotic novel. Most of Jaivin's novel is shown, eventually, to be Philippa's novel, and we are extradiegetically introduced to Philippa's friends on whom the characters in her novel are based.⁶⁵ The metadiegetic novel allows Philippa's friends to comment on their fictional counterparts' sexual dalliances, and offer their own alternative and, in their opinion, more erotic tales. They are critical of how 'tame' their respective characters are in the novel, and they respond by outlining their own ideal sexual fantasies to rival those written by their friend.

⁶⁴ Jaivin, however, rejects the grunge label outright, stating she prefer the novel to be describes as "comic erotica" and that the label 'grunge' "does appear to be an excuse for a wank—by the critics who embrace such terms" (qtd. in Leishman 14).

⁶⁵ Helen is really Ellen, Chantal is Camilla, Julia is Jody. Philippa's name remains the same in her novel and in 'reality' (or, throughout Jaivin's novel), disrupting her role as author and character.

The novel is interesting for its ‘amusing’ take on sex; there are terrible puns and clichés throughout, such as Julia’s Chinese lover’s penis “standing up to say *ni hao!*” (Jaivin 123), or the statement that something can come with “so much emotional Louis Vuitton”—read: baggage—that you cannot cope (144), which detract, deliberately and frivolously, from reading the novel as ‘serious’ erotica. Its attempts at comedy suggest that sex is not a serious matter, and certainly not a matter that should be a cause of shame or anxiety, and therefore the characters amuse each other with their experiences; the stories they tell one another are the basis of the storyline. They meet regularly to discuss their experiences and exploits:

‘Sex, sex, sex. Do you think we talk about sex too much?’

‘I don’t know. I mean, it’s not like we’re just bimbettes with nothing else on our minds,’ Julia countered. ‘We all work pretty hard and spend most of our time pondering serious things like, oh, you know, social issues, and aesthetics, and f-stops and there’s all your academic work, Helen, and...’

‘Fashion,’ Chantal contributed. ‘My mind is deeply engaged with the style issues of the day.’

‘I suppose,’ Helen nodded. She was well aware that she thought about sex even more than she spoke about it. ‘And, after all, we’re all planning to go to that Green rally next Sunday.’ (136-37)

Sex is therefore as important to the women as politics, feminism, the environment—and, of course, fashion; the ironic framing shows the lightness of its treatment, but also reiterates that sex is only as significant or trivial as it is constructed to be—for ‘bimbettes’ or for serious feminist academics. This ties into liberal sex-positive perspectives on sex, which endorse all consensual sexual experiences, and tie these into the free choice associated with post-feminist ideals (evident, too, in the consumerism advocated throughout).

The sexual feats in Philippa’s novel are not considered extraordinary by the women on whom the scenarios are based, implying that they regularly engage in sex acts with

strangers and/or in public places and/or with fresh produce. They normalise these practices in the course of discussing the 'liberation' and pleasure they attain from their adventures. Philippa's novel is published under the non-euphemistic pen name "Dick Pulse"; the use of a male pseudonym, especially one with such flagrant connotations, is indicative of the ways in which feminist concerns are treated throughout the text. Publishing under a man's name suggests that interpreting the text as written by a male author would give it legitimacy, or authenticity. While Helen expresses frustration about men writing women's erotica—"Was there nothing belonging to women that men were not capable of taking over?" (130-31)—Ellen, her 'real' feminist counterpart, does not believe the published text was authored by her friend (189, 191-92), reinforcing that the links between Helen/Ellen's feminism and her interpretation of sex are unstable.

Apart from their sexual adventures, the characters are merely two-dimensional representations of stereotypical 'women', not far removed from the generic secondary characters of chick lit novels, as this example demonstrates:

'Personally, I don't see any contradiction between being a feminist and a sentient human being, full of irrational and unpredictable desires and whims. But then again, maybe that's why I teach literature, not women's studies as such. ... And,' Ellen sounded a bit huffy now, 'I never, ever wear beige.' (192)

In fact, there are repeated descriptions of the women's appearances as well as their clothes—with a focus on important-name brands and fashion; this novel is consistent with stereotypical chick lit in its rampant consumerism and unquestioned 'feminine' foibles. For example, Helen is the feminist academic who is "trying to watch her weight—in a sensible, non-bulimic, non-anorexic kind of way, of course" (188). That this required clarification indicates the extent to which a bulimic or anorexic way of 'watching weight' would have been considered normal—but, in addressing this issue, the remark ignores the pathology associated with such behaviours and trivialises the extent to which eating disorders are

normalised within feminine discourses. Anorexia and bulimia are thus only silly dieting alternatives, a representation that diminishes their ongoing effect on corporeality and reinforces dieting as a normal, feminised activity. This minimisation of substantive concerns is also evident when Ellen, in her reading of her 'fictional' equivalent, appears more offended by the suggestion of her poor fashion sense than her friend's criticism of her wavering feminist perspectives.

Helen's, or Ellen's, feminist perspectives are repeatedly brought into question in response to the sexual encounters in which she engages through the angel/devil personae of 'Ms Analytical' and 'Longlegs', who represent Helen's internal debates. These personae can be read as reflecting the debates of feminism and post-feminism. Reflecting on an aggressively sexual encounter with a truckie who fixes her car, Helen analyses her own perspectives on the sex in which she engages:

Ms Analytical interrogated Helen mercilessly: What was she doing having that sort of blatantly submissive sex, and with a total stranger at that? What on earth had she been thinking of? He'd handled her so roughly. And she'd liked and encouraged it. But there was another voice in Helen's head. The chick with the short short skirt, long long legs and big attitude sitting on that desk, the one who'd piled up the cigarette butts in the ashtray and was swilling lemon Stolis. She pointed out to Ms Analytical that in fact Helen had taken the lead, and that they had just been playing at rough sex. It had been exciting and consensual and no one had got hurt. And it was safe—they'd used a condom. So what was her problem? Longlegs blew smoke in Analytical's face. (57-58)

This passage shows the questioning of engaging in 'rough' sex acts; Helen acknowledges the risk associated with quasi-violent sex with strangers from a conservative, conventional feminist perspective, admonishing herself because she was 'blatantly submissive' and liked it. This feminist perspective is juxtaposed with the 'empowered' 'chick', by stating that the

rough sex was 'playing', that she had not been hurt by it, and that it was 'safe'. This odd conjunction of terms is used as reassurance and justification, but the idea of overall safety, for which Longlegs is arguing, can only be conceptually applied after the event.

The feminist part of Helen, Ms Analytical, is critical of her decision to engage in reckless sexual activity with unknown truck drivers, and, later, with her more attractive students, perhaps representing feminism's stereotypical anti-sex, anti-pornography stance. Longlegs represents the post-feminist perspectives of liberation and freedom of choice (as well as attractiveness); she argues that only desire should decide Helen's sexual behaviour and that, regardless of the seemingly exploitative and disempowering sexual scenario, because of safety and consent, these are perfectly acceptable practices in which to engage. This difficulty or incongruity in Helen's beliefs shows the uncomfortable position that feminism occupies from post-feminist perspectives. Pons argues that "the pleasure derived from transgressive behaviour has to do, not with the behaviour itself, but with its very character, the flouting of conventions" and states that it is because this rough sex goes against Helen's feminist principles that it is pleasurable for her (50), suggesting that the erotic value lies in deviating from her beliefs. I argue, however, that the construction rather suggests, through the juxtaposition of Ms Analytical and Longlegs, that Helen's principles are too stringent, rather than their being what eroticises the sex.

Despite the incorporation of same-sex-attracted characters into the text, there is a decidedly heterosexist set of underlying values. Philippa identifies as a lesbian, yet there appears to be an underlying message that women need penetrative sex with men to be sexually satisfied, as evinced in this example:

'I don't see why you had to fuck boys in the novel yourself. You don't really fuck boys, do you?' Cara asked in an ominous tone of voice.

'Course not,' Philippa replied. 'It was a narrative convenience. You know, to create a little more tension.'

Cara's eyes drilled into her. 'You describe hetero sex as though you know it very well, however,' she sniffed.

'I'm a novelist,' objected Philippa. 'I read a lot and I've got a good imagination.' And, she thought to herself, there has been the odd boy on the side. Not that Cara's ever going to find out about that. (216)

Philippa's denial of heterosexual sex to her female partner indicates a disjuncture between her purported sexuality and the sex acts in which she engages. This disjuncture is also evident in an earlier erotic vignette, where Philippa appears to be having sex with a woman until 'her' wig is removed—and penis revealed (181-82). While this could be considered a measure to ensure a range of sexual scenarios are incorporated into the text, it minimises the value of Jaivin's inclusion of lesbian characters, reflecting Ann Ciasullo's contention that representations of lesbians in the 1990s are predominantly heterosexualised and their lesbian desire suppressed (578).

While sexual 'liberation' is evident in the explicit sex scenes that occur throughout the novel, the way in which these scenes are presented is frequently at odds with feminist portrayals. Instead, constructions of women draw predominantly on a Madonna/whore dichotomy and rely on problematic assumptions of submissive yet fervent sexuality; the characters are perpetually available and are not particularly discerning about the sexual activities in which they engage. Sexually liberated behaviour does not equal feminism; however, the endorsement of 'choice' and 'empowerment' as elements of the characters' sexualities shows the clear influence of post-feminist ideals throughout the erotic novel. An author does not need to engage overtly with feminist politics in order to write a pro-feminist text. The novel purports to engage with aspects of feminism and attempts to subvert sexual norms and it has the potential to create worlds in which sex is pleasurable and women are empowered without relying on gender stereotypes and normative sexual dynamics. *Eat Me*, however, does not offer positive or constructive portrayals of women. Instead, it displays both sexist and heterosexist ideals of women's sexuality and stereotypical gender roles

within sexual relationships, thus representing a particular kind of lifestyle for women that reflects aspects of post-feminist ideology.

“Man, house, child: such happiness is obscene”: *The Bride Stripped Bare* by Nikki Gemmell

The Bride Stripped Bare has been included in this thesis because, although it is not explicitly ‘Australian’, its relevance and recognition as a part of Australian literature is generally accepted due to Gemmell’s nationality and the particularly ‘Australian’ novel that she had written prior to *The Bride Stripped Bare*.⁶⁶ After the recent popularity of E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) and its sequels *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012) and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012), Gemmell released a further two novels—*With My Body* (2012) and *I Take You* (2013)—and created a bestselling trilogy of her own.

The Bride Stripped Bare is, I argue, more insidious than *Fifty Shades*. The lack of feminine integrity, evident in the construction of the protagonist, lies within a post-feminist discourse promoting a stereotypical representation of femininity whilst embracing female sexuality. As Gemmell states in an interview with Peter Babiek, published on her website, regarding whether the novel is a post-feminist text:

I was fascinated by the shortcomings of feminism. I consider myself a feminist and yet I still hanker, deeply, for the age-old stereotypes of mother, wife, nester—and that puts me in an odd position. I think a lot of the so-called unfashionable urges that *Bride* explores are deeply biological within many women, and feminism doesn’t give them much

⁶⁶ *Cleave* (1998), published in the United States as *Alice Springs*, focuses on the protagonist Snip’s long journey to Alice Springs to find her father.

credit. Nothing is black and white; we're all animals underneath and we have to listen to our bodies. Women, particularly older feminists, have to be more embracing of the choices some younger women are making.
(Babiek)

These 'age-old stereotypes', and the ways in which these are treated throughout the novel, are the focus of my discussion. My analysis does not 'value' Gemmell's endorsements, nor give credit to Gemmell's purported choices; rather, I critique the extent to which they can be considered choices when framed within the particular norms and stereotypes that underpin the novel. In keeping with Gemmell's interpretation of feminism, the novel incorporates elements from the historical treatise *Womans Worth: A Treatise Proveinge by Sundrie Reasons that Woemen doe Excell Men*, published anonymously in the seventeenth century and recovered in 2002. As Gemmell states, "*Bride* is also a response to another anonymous text, a mysterious sixteenth century document [sic] known as *WoEman's Worth* [sic]. Its tone is boldly sexual, its honesty shocking, and its authorship disputed" (Babiek). There is varied conjecture over the actual authorship of the text, but it is generally attributed to Rev. Dr William Page. The treatise purports to be an early feministic interpretation of particular Bible stories; Penny Wark reports that "Using biblical stories, the author goes on to prove that women are wiser than men, more valiant than men, and that women's badness is 'better than mans goodnes' [sic]" (Wark). Gemmell incorporates this into her novel; her protagonist is writing her own novel based on the historical text, and thus elements are woven throughout, often as precursors or supportive avowals of the protagonist's deviations from what she considers her quintessential role as 'wife' and woman.

The protagonist is represented as justified in experimenting with her sexuality outside her marriage because she is dissatisfied; however, she is still a wife, and this is a priority in her characterisation; she *is* the Bride who is stripped bare. The diary-instructional

manual narrative, and its initial publication as an anonymous text,⁶⁷ means that there are apparent elements of truth and applicability apparent. Women are supposed to be able to relate to the protagonist and likewise acknowledge their sexual discontent.

The text is narrated from the second-person perspective, which can be read as a deliberate attempt to draw connections with the reader and an attempt to make the attitudes and actions of the protagonist relatable. Such a reading also distances the protagonist from her actions by suggesting there is no fixed identity; Monika Fludernik states:

the protagonist's experience is narrated from her own perspective and the pronoun 'you' consistently refers to the protagonist. There is no traceable narrator's 'I' or narrative 'voice' (no evaluations, predictions, etc.), nor is there an intradiegetic (though extradiegetic) 'you' in the here and now of the act of narration: that is, a listener to whom the story is being told. ... [A]s soon as the protagonist becomes too specific a personality, becomes, that is, a fictional character, the quality of the

⁶⁷ Gemmell ostensibly published the text in an attempt to write, uncensored, about the secret fantasies of women. However, she had mentioned the forthcoming novel in interviews in the years before it was published, and someone from the publishing house is purported to have 'leaked' the true author even before the book was on the market. Therefore, although it is published anonymously, it was attributed to Gemmell from the start. It begins with a letter from the author's mother, claiming that the manuscript belonged to her unnamed missing daughter and that her daughter would have wanted the manuscript published; the mother of the protagonist searches for a publisher because "I feel, now, that I owe it to her to help if I can and find a publisher for her work. I believe it's what she wanted, very much" (Gemmell n.p.), in conjunction with the attempted anonymity of its publication, suggests an effort to create an air of mystery about the text, rather than Gemmell's desire to publish uninhibited. The publication of the novel anonymously begs discussion about authorship, and the desire to draw connections between author and content. The removal of an identifiable authority and the publication of the text in the second-person seemingly stem from a similar position, which distances the reader from a discernible source who is in control, and instead draws (welcome or unwelcome) connections between the reader and the speaker of the text. In interviews about the text and the final printed page of the book, regarding her decision to publish anonymously, Gemmell both asserts and distances herself from discussions of autobiography and authorship. At times, she claims that the desires and preferences of the protagonist are her own, but also maintains the fictionality of the text. For further discussion, see Babiek's "Interview with Nikki Gemmell" (2004), published on her website, and Bunbury's "The Author Stripped Bare" (2003).

presumed address to an extradiegetic reader in such texts evaporates.

(Fludernik, n.p., quotation marks added)

First-person perspective necessitates a link between the protagonist and the assumption of a kind of subjectivity; third-person, with its external narrator, draws attention to the distance between the reader and characters; but second-person narration offers no specific protagonist, suggesting a link between reader and protagonist (DelConte 204).

Quite clearly, we, as readers, do not read the protagonist *as ourselves*; second-person narration is not the omniscient narration of our lives. However, there remains a particular ethical issue with regard to second-person narration. The narrative aspects are problematic considering the novel's deliberately subversive content (notwithstanding its conservative ideals): if the reader does not identify with the behaviours that take place in the 'Lessons' throughout the text, then the second-person narrative is jarring and oppositional. Moreover, not to 'own' the actions of the protagonist, in the form of first- or third-person narration that specifies the actor or speaker, is to discount her agency and ownership of her character, which seems to be exalted throughout the narrative. Second-person can also suggest a kind of universal experience for the presumable female readers—reading the 'you' as second-person plural—in that the readers are being told what they think, how they act. The narrative can also be understood as simply writing to oneself, and the 'lessons', written in the present tense despite having been learnt, are the recounting of experience as in a diary. In turn, this would read as self-reassurance of both her behaviour and the construction of her own identity—particularly her identity as a *wife*.

The sexuality of the protagonist is inextricably tied to her understanding and performance of gender—specifically, to the kind of femininity that she seems to endorse in relation to her expectations of her role as wife and mother. It is therefore important to explore her construction as *gendered*, in order to understand how the sex acts in which she engages are simultaneously deviant and conservative. There are a number of elements, separate from the sex in the text, which position *The Bride Stripped Bare* as a post-feminist

text—one that espouses neo-conservative values through the traditional construction of the protagonist's femininity. As she states, her marriage is:

traditional, and how judgemental your mother is of that. ... She instilled in you that you should never rely on a man; you had to be financially independent, you mustn't succumb. But it's a relief, to be honest, this surrendering of the feminist wariness. It feels naughty and delicious and indulgent, like wearing a bit of fur. (Gemmell, *Bride* 46)

Notably, her role as 'wife', as she has fetishised it, comes to supersede other roles she previously held. She was encouraged to accept a generous redundancy package from the university where she worked after her marriage to Cole, because his income could support them both, and "he'd bulldozed your trepidation with his enthusiasm" (40). He deigns to pay her a monthly allowance, which, in turn means, "he now has licence to expect darned socks and home-made puddings, to comment a touch too often on your rounded stomach or occasional spots" (41). These acknowledgments of power differentials are hardly considered problematic, or worthy of questioning, and are intertwined with the protagonist's assertions of enjoying her new "indolence" (39). Similarly, Cole is shown in a position of deliberate control, which he maintains and enjoys:

He envelopes [sic] you in his arms with a great calm of ownership and laughs: he likes you vulnerable. And to teach you, to introduce you to new things. You didn't look closely at a penis until you were married, didn't know what a circumcised one looked like. ... Cole forced you to look, right at the start, he taught you to get close. He likes to direct your life, to guide it.

You let him think he is. (24-25)

Teaching and introducing new things is not necessarily an issue. However, the passage suggests not only that she is teaching him nothing (or, at least, that he would not want to be taught), but it also implies that he is shaping or grooming her; it also indicates that the 'new

things' that she needs to be taught are simply about sex. The words 'force' and 'direct' denote power and control. These are not challenged; the statement 'you let him think he is' hardly offers an alternative; pretending to follow the rules does not mean that you are challenging them in any way.

However, early in the narrative, she is not portrayed as unhappy, but rather appreciative of their dynamic. Their marriage and her role as Cole's wife is part of how she defines herself. Marriage itself is valorised throughout, so much so that there is minimal discussion of separation or divorce, even in the face of Cole's and the protagonist's retaliatory infidelities and implied dissatisfaction with their marital state, which encumber the repeatedly professed ideals associated with marriage.

The protagonist repeats statements such as "You've never loved anyone more in your life" (6) throughout the text, but there is minimal evidence of this 'love' throughout. Cole is characterised as priggish, judgmental and closed, and it is not immediately evident why the protagonist would love him, or whether he loves her as anything other than an object he possesses. His professed devotion is juxtaposed with a seeming lack of interest, desire and respect for his wife:

He sequesters himself by habit. At work, until late, or in front of the television, or in the bathroom. He can stay on the toilet for three-quarters of an hour or more, if you sit next to him on the couch he'll make his way to the armchair without even realising what he's doing, if you put your hand on his groin in bed he'll shrug it away. He sleeps with the curve of his back to you more often than not.

Yet even when he's away he needs you nearby: he's told you that you're his life. You love the ferocity of his need, to be wanted so much. (13)

Cole's appeal and the reasons for her attraction to him are not apparent, and her descriptions of her husband are generally unwittingly critical and characterise him as condescending and

controlling. The protagonist seems, more often than not, to be in love with the *idea* of being in love and being loved, and perhaps, more significantly, of being a wife, than she does with Cole himself. The value of the marriage lies in that it is a marriage; its cultural value—its external validity—is what makes their relationship valuable. Her marriage is an inherent part of her identity.

In Gemmell's novel, the protagonist's overwhelming desire to be a wife is connected with her preoccupation with parenthood and her stated need to become a mother, in that her heteronormative ideals dictate a connection between marriage and motherhood. This desire is reiterated throughout the novel, with assertions such as, "All women must want children eventually, you're sure, that furious need is deep in their bones, you don't quite believe any woman who says she doesn't" (38). The punctuation of this sentence is important, because it is the only indication that there is an acknowledgement of the essentialist nature of this comment. The lack of definitive sentences within the wider statement means that the sentiments are tumbling over each other and are less resolute than if, say, it was worded in complete declarative sentences as: "All women want children eventually, you're sure. That furious need is deep in their bones. You don't quite believe any woman who says she doesn't". Such phrasing would mean that it was more than conjecture, more than one woman's opinion, despite the assertion that "you're sure"; it appears the protagonist presumes it is encompassing, rather than asserting it authoritatively. As it stands, the protagonist is totalising her experience, and assuming that her desire is equalled in other women; this basic premise is reflected throughout the book. The essentialism inherent in these comments is disconcerting because of the present-tense second-person perspective in which the novel is written. That this is apparently a kind of manifesto encompassing the desires of women means that motherhood is a perceived end goal. Similarly, her assertion regarding their planning of children in the future leads the protagonist to muse, "Man, house, child: such happiness is obscene in one person, isn't it? There's such an audacity in the joy you now feel" (37). The notion of these conventional roles for both women and men being

'obscene' and 'audacious' is ironic considering the scenes that take place in other chapters—scenes such as that which espouses the merits of group sex would likely be considered more obscene, or at least more audacious, than aspiring to a quintessential lifestyle associated with heteronormative gender roles.

At the end of the novel, motherhood seems to take the place of the protagonist's sexual desire:

Goodness knows when you'll make love with Cole again, the want has shrivelled from your life as suddenly as it exploded forth and you don't know when, if ever, it'll be back. You feel no sadness, it's just a fact. At this point you cannot tolerate lust and nurturing at the same time. Your fantasies have completely gone. (370)

This statement, seemingly based on both the protagonist's new role as mother and the ending of her extra-marital relationship with Gabriel, effectively states that marriage and motherhood are the ends to which 'you' aspire, and those ends equate to happiness for women. The endorsement of motherhood as the ultimate end—the idealised addition to her role as wife—augments her view of herself, especially in relation to the childless women in her life. For example, her forthright, demanding and condescending best friend, Theo, who has an affair with Cole, is considered less threatening and less dominant from the vantage of maternity: "she can't touch you, can't wound you. You're living, now, a much larger life. ... Your son lies beside you; the warm, firm wedge of him, and she will never have that. Finally, finally, there's something you have that she will not" (365-66). While this is not to discount the value she derives from her new role, she conflates this love, the 'much larger life', with competition and superiority in a way that is less about 'the best revenge being living well' and more about having that which others covet.

There is a dynamic of power, control and ownership from the other main characters in the novel—Cole, Gabriel, and Theo—that the protagonist accepts with minimal contest. She gains pleasure from secretly subverting Cole's expectations of her, yet does little to

challenge these explicitly. It is unclear whether her infidelity is supposed to be some kind of reclamation of self or punishment of Cole, but it appears to have little to do with her sexual desire, despite her pleasure from the sexual encounters. The revelation that her friend Theo was in fact responsible for the anonymous letters that fuelled the protagonist's desires influences the extent to which she, the protagonist, can be read as acting solely on her lust for Gabriel in pursuing their relationship. Theo is ultimately a strong factor in the protagonist's decision to pursue Gabriel. This is because of her affair with Cole, for which the protagonist seeks recompense, and because Theo has fabricated a subject and object of desire for the protagonist through the anonymous love letters: a subject, in the protagonist herself, and the fictitious object whom the protagonist imagines is Gabriel. Theo, therefore, has an inherent sexual power; she has an "air of being constantly in heat" and looks as though she "enjoy[s] an abundance of everything, food, fresh air, sex, laughter, love" (9)—which, although presented as positive attributes, are not ideal in terms of feminine paragons, and ultimately suggest that she is hedonistic, with an animalistic promiscuity. In fact, Theo is defeminised throughout the book in a variety of ways: she is never satisfied with her 'abundance'—not even with her nice house that has a lot of candles (28). Furthermore, Theo is clever, and, as the protagonist states, "You were not meant to be clever, since being clever did not make you a good wife. If you excelled at anything it was seen as a mild perversion but Theo was stunningly oblivious to that" (33). Finally, Theo suffers from vaginismus, which means that she cannot engage in penetrative sex; this is represented as a kind of irony, but it also reinforces Theo's deviance from a feminine ideal, especially in comparison with the sexually active and fecund Bride. Her affair with Cole, especially, reinforces that she is a bad woman, a bad wife, and, importantly, not a mother.

The disconnect between the protagonist's outward appearance as a perfect wife and mother and her perception of herself as a sexually adventurous woman brings her pleasure. The need for coy secrecy regarding her sexual experience suggests for the protagonist that being a "good wife" and "a picture of domesticity in your pink skirt and cloche hat with a

pushchair before you and husband by your side" (373) is incompatible with her sexual exploits. Nonetheless, she continues, "in that moment you feel as strong and resilient as mercury but no one would ever guess. Your outside and insides do not match, and how you love that" (373). This incommensurability is a source of strength, as though the secrecy that exists regarding her internality gives power to the visible role she undertakes. This statement highlights the value she places on her sexual experiences and her outward semblance, and their secrecy, in a way, increases their worth. It means that she maintains control over an aspect of self and that her capacity for agency is available when necessary, despite its being deliberately hidden.

The protagonist's control over her own body and, in turn, her sexual desire, is a recurring theme. With Cole, she has minimal sexual desire and satisfaction, but she interprets this as a kind of safety in which the protagonist "can be, almost, yourself" (13): "Your body stays obedient around Cole, you're in control, you can relax. It's one of the reasons why you married him" (13). Cole also reacts to her body and sexuality with trepidation, and he seems to require her to maintain control. When she is pregnant, he refuses to have sex with her. While he states that this is because he does not want to harm the baby, it can also be read as a fear of her uncontrolled femininity; her pregnancy (after her 'sexual awakening') has increased her libido, and Cole is incapable of matching her desire. His response to her body is one of fear. In contrast, Gabriel responds to the protagonist's body with eagerness throughout the text, and his aims to please her, as well as satiating his own desire, seem to give her space to enjoy sexual experiences without the need for control:

Gabriel's not afraid of your sexuality. Your pleasure is giving him pleasure, it arouses him and he asks nothing physically of you in return: no one has taught him to do that, to expect. He's your first lover who's utterly selfless, there's no request to go down on him, it's purely unselfish, feminine sex. (210)

'Unselfish, feminine sex' suggests that there are insurmountable differences in the kinds of sexual ideals that men and women have in terms of their perceived obligation to one another. It is not immediately clear if the sex is 'unselfish' because it is 'feminine'—as though selfishness is necessarily linked with masculinity—or whether it is both unselfish and feminine; the ambiguity of the word 'feminine' could also refer simply to the sexual focus being only on the protagonist. That Gabriel is 'not afraid' of her sexuality is an interesting statement, in that this suggests that another man, such as her husband, must have been afraid. Cole's fear of her sexuality seems linked to an idea of control; it is as if evidence of her desire would not complement the bodily 'obedience'—or 'suppression'—she maintains around him. His selflessness means that she enjoys her sexual experiences with Gabriel more than those with her husband, whom she apparently loves so dearly. This moves away from post-feminist assertions of the ideal man, who is the perfect husband and lover. Her husband is not perfect, yet neither is the lover.

Immediately after making the decision to end the relationship with Gabriel because of his increasing emotional attachment and growing possessiveness, she asks an attractive young taxi driver to have sex with her, to bring some friends, and to meet her at a hotel (231-33). This scene is deliberately abject in its construction, but the protagonist embraces the despoliation as though it had "exhilarated and cleansed, refreshed" her (234); taking part in sexual behaviours that had been previously unconscionable allows her to interpret her sexuality in another way: "You are nothing but a vessel, a series of holes to be filled up. ... You are passive, compliant, it is exactly what you want. To erase Gabriel, to start afresh" (233). She acts out scenes that she had "devoured in the letters pages of the porn magazines" (233) and feels free—although she also states that she feels empty and is a recipient of sex; while her role is to receive, it is something requested, and thus her ambivalence reflects her abject machinic role as simultaneous subject and object. While she is objectified, it is a requested, sought objectification, and thus perhaps not as passive as she interprets; the agency of the people having sex with her is more questionable than her own. Engaging in rough and

reckless sex distinguishes her from the lover she is with both Gabriel and her husband. She leaves triumphantly without showering and suggests she has been cleansed by the experience, despite the marks of sex evident on and in her “Grubby and aching” body (234). Her abjection, in this scene, is not a cause for disgust; rather, she revels in that which reminds her of her baseness.

The conflation of sex and love is problematic for the protagonist, and her reaction—to enact her need for abjection and passive objectification—offers an alternative to the intimacy that has permeated her other sexual relationships. However, her feelings towards Gabriel change during her pregnancy to Cole, and she seeks Gabriel to satiate the vivid sexual fantasies that have taken over her dreams. Their reunion accords with her fantasies, but Gabriel’s passing comment about finding a young Chinese woman to have sex with next brings about, for the protagonist, a complete reinterpretation of their relationship. The protagonist finds it easy to imagine that she was an object of his desire only because she “wasn’t beautiful or arrogant or confident enough ... whom he’d never be afraid of, who, afterwards, could be easily wiped away” (334). She feels she was considered a temporary lover with whom Gabriel could ‘practise’; her bodily imperfections, such as her “too large” thighs, make her easier to be cast-off and abandoned, and she must not be his ultimate object of desire; “because men are more comfortable with imperfections and weakness, it’s less threatening, of course” (334). However, her assumption that Gabriel was ‘using’ her is juxtaposed with his apparent heartbreak, described by their mutual friend Martha, who claims Gabriel told her, “he’d been getting over this absolutely shattering break-up. It sounded like it was the love of his life or something” (362).

The affirmation that Gabriel, indeed, loved the protagonist, and her reaction to this revelation brings into question the ostensible aims of the ‘anonymous’ novel. Because the protagonist disappeared with the baby, it seems the reader should question if she has fled to be with Gabriel, as their relationship is constructed as ideal—and, in accordance with the post-feminist formulation of the text, the fated lovers should be together. Gabriel is presented

throughout the novel as the more attractive (physically and emotionally) romantic alternative for the protagonist, and thus the confirmation that the protagonist is truly 'the love of his life' would ensure, in conventional romance or chick lit narratives, the future of their relationship. If this is the case, it offers, although limited, a challenge to the quintessential values associated with her ideals of marriage and wife-ness; however, the incomplete and uncertain conclusion means that such possibilities are intangible. The dynamic between her and Gabriel, and its representation of a more fitting, equal, loving—perfect—relationship than that between her and Cole, reinforces that the erotic aspects of this novel are tempered by post-feminist and, at times, anti-feminist understandings of femininity and sexuality. Despite the novel purporting to be a fantasy to which *all women* can relate, the alternatives for gendered expression of sexuality outside conventional romantic constructions are limited.

"A new kind of love": *Triptych* by Krissy Kneen

Kneen's *Triptych* (2011) consists of three erotic stories, "Susanna", "The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife" and "Romulus and Remus", all of which subvert stereotypical sexual dynamics. Kneen's stories dabble in sex in public, urolagnia, bestiality and incest, but she presents these 'deviant' sex acts without evident judgement. While there is explicit acknowledgement of deviance in the text, through the positioning and discussions of sex acts and relationships in terms of social norms, Kneen's narration does not draw attention to these as deviant practices. Instead, she presents woman-led sexual dalliances that elicit pleasure for the protagonists without causing shame or regret. Each of the novellas is influenced by a Rubens painting: *Susanna and the Elders* (1607), *Leda and the Swan* (1601, 1602), and *Romulus and Remus* (1615-1616).

In the first story, Susanna, born to hearing-impaired parents and named after the painting, has a desire for silence and an interest in words, because sounds and speech are

often too overwhelming. Her preference for silence leads her to internet sex on ChatRoulette⁶⁸ and she voyeuristically stalks her favourite cybersex partner, who happens to live in her building—Aaron Fitzgerald, also the male protagonist in “Romulus and Remus”. In the book’s second story, Leda’s sexual relationship with her dog, Paul, who is her best friend, is eventually shared with Rachel, a friend from school, who not only encourages but also enjoys Leda’s sexual desire and activities. The bestiality that is shared between the women extends as they mature, and Leda and Rachel’s interest in animals leads to sexual encounters with a number of animals throughout the story. There is a crossover, via ChatRoulette, in which both Susanna and Aaron encounter Leda and Rachel, thereby forming links between the three stories. While “Susanna” and “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife” both require a suspension of disbelief and, to an extent, an acceptance of particular taboo acts, my analysis focuses predominantly on the third story in the collection as an example of transgressing norms and flouting taboos in erotic stories.

Katherine and Aaron Fitzgerald, from “Romulus and Remus”, have been in love for decades. They are also siblings. Their relationship is no longer as exciting as it once was, and they each search elsewhere to find sexual excitement; the sex acts that take place outside their relationship are eroticised because they do *not* take place with a sibling. These three stories are intertwined and included within the same collection, which makes the reader assume that Kneen has chosen the most difficult, the most taboo, the most deviant sexual encounters to include as her subject matter deliberately, in order to provoke the reader. The particular deviance of these erotic novellas lies not only in the deliberate representations of taboo sex, but also in the explicit subversion of acceptable social practices. There is a level of discomfort associated with reading erotica outside of the genre’s general purpose. When the content evokes inherent moral taboos that are rarely violated, the difficulty in reading the

⁶⁸ ChatRoulette is a social media platform that randomly connects members, usually strangers, via video link-up.

content amounts to more than feelings of discomfort: it is, instead, an automatic affront that engenders an experience of visceral clutch.

Kneen's novellas are marketed as erotica, and thus the content is guaranteed to be explicitly sexual, titillating texts that toy with deliberately provocative scenarios that may appeal to some readers and not others. Kneen's pro-sex outlook suggests that consent is everything and that sexual behaviour and desire are fluid, unique, and not necessarily immoral if no-one is hurt. This line of thought means that taboos associated with bestiality and incest are about abuse and manipulation, but once there is consent, and there is no evident power imbalance, the taboo is broken. We do not question, for instance, the ability for an octopus to consent, but the sex that occurs between Leda and the octopus is not represented as abusive or degrading for either party. Similarly, but perhaps more pertinently, an important and deliberate element of the relationship lies in the simple detail that, in "Romulus and Remus", Katherine is three years older than Aaron, and we are first privy first to the younger brother's lust for his sister. This means that the presumed power dynamics that would most likely to lead to their relationship being interpreted as sexual abuse within an incestuous sibling relationship—for example, if an older brother initiated a relationship with a younger sister, the reading of the power differential would be different—are, if not absent, at the very least subverted.

The idea of consent is explicitly reiterated throughout the story to reinforce the fact that both of the siblings actively pursue the relationship. There are lengthy descriptions regarding Katherine's virginity, which seem to be included to reiterate her sexual 'innocence', despite her more developed knowledge of the biology of their bodies. When showing one another their genitals for the first time, Aaron recalls Katherine's "slow decisive nod. Aaron could remember it even now, her first gesture of consent" (Kneen, *Triptych* 159). Aaron understands the necessity to wait for his sister's invitation, acknowledging the importance of her consent despite his younger age. Similarly, while "Aaron knew you shouldn't do these

things with your sister," (167) repeated assertions of his desire for her ensure that the representation of his consent is unquestionable:

He was inside her. Inside the body of his sister.

They stayed like that, a perfect fit, one inside the other like Babushka dolls. He knew in that moment that this was where he belonged. He wanted to stay here like this forever. He had found his home and there would never be another moment as perfect. (Kneen 169-70)

Their relationship as brother and sister is obviously the focus of the story, but it is not fetishised or pathologised; rather, that "Katherine and Aaron Fitzgerald had shared a surname since they were born" (162) is simply another detail of their relationship. The revelation that they are siblings is understated: their relationship as lovers has already been intimated before the statement 'his sister' appears. References to Katherine "helping *his* parents" (150, my emphasis) as children indicate the closeness and length of their relationship, but such details are revealed subtly and gradually. Their love, nonetheless, is represented as ordinary; it simultaneously works within a heteronormative framework whilst subverting it absolutely. For instance, the assertions that Aaron "had always loved her—from the moment he was born" (153) encompasses more than familial love; the relationship between them suggests a closeness that deviates from stereotypical constructions of sibling relationships as well as romantic ones.

'Now,' she said, 'no one can ever part us.'

'Blood brothers,' he said.

And she shook her head. 'You can't call me your brother anymore. I am a woman now. I am not your Remus, I am not even your sister now. You know, now I have become your wife.'

Aaron nodded[.] (170)

This “new kind of love” (171) is consistent throughout the story. The text offers a unique combination of romantic and filial love that is neither endorsed nor censured. These details draw attention to the taboo relationship, which readers are reminded of throughout the story, but these reminders are without implicit censure; Katherine and Aaron’s relationship does not differ substantially from what would be expected from a non-related couple who had been in a relationship for over twenty-five years.

While the relationship is not presented as deviant, the dynamic between Katherine and Aaron does, at times, differ from expected portrayals. While Katherine’s disclosure of her infidelity is not included in the story, there is a discussion towards the end of the novella that shows that Katherine has indeed told Aaron and that this reinforces the familial dynamic and acceptance of the different ‘rules’ which underpin their relationship:

‘I’m sorry I fucked Trent,’ she told him. ‘I promise I’ll never do it again.’

‘Don’t say never. Don’t say it. Just tell me if you feel like doing it with him again. Perhaps we could have him over for dinner sometime.

We never invite your friends.’ (212)

After having sex with Trent, a work colleague, in an alley, Katherine returns home with apprehension: “She had washed her face and gargled at a water fountain but still she wondered whether he would be able to smell another man’s semen on her breath. But the kiss was quick—brotherly” (189). They are able to shift roles between lover and sibling when necessary; despite the guilt at cheating on her partner, Katherine is able to feel comforted by her brother, who, in turn, reassures his sister not only of his acceptance but also of his unconditional love. The relationships exist simultaneously, and while they have different elements they are inseparable, which seems to suggest a unique value in this relationship; Kneen has thus constructed their dynamic as positive and almost faultless, which brings into question the reader’s abhorrence.

Along with the unique dynamic present in the text is an acknowledgement of the particular issues associated with their relationship. Their consanguineous relationship means that pregnancy is feared, and therefore the couple take contraceptive precautions. This seems to be discussed deliberately, and pre-empts readers' potential fear or panic regarding inbreeding: it is immediately assuaged. Katherine nonetheless fantasises about feeling Aaron ejaculate inside her, which they could not allow in reality: "In real life they were too cautious for him to linger inside her unprotected for more than a moment" (178). Equally, there is an eroticisation of the sex acts that take place with Trent because he is not related to her: "she was overwhelmed by the idea that this was not her brother" (195). Her relationship with Aaron is so normalised in her understanding of it that the strangeness of a new person is arousing. The particular excitement associated with Trent, the appeal of him at that particular time, was not the idea of sex with someone new, but with someone other: "His seed was not at all genetically similar to her egg and somehow even the idea of this otherness was enough to make her lose herself in her desire ..., desperate for the one thing she had never felt before" (195).

The lack of shared genetics and shared history makes Trent attractive: he could be anyone; there is no obligation to him, and he is not obliged to her but he wants her anyway:

Another man, not Aaron, finding her attractive in this way. There was no love, no memories of childhood tumbles, no fights over the washing-up. The sex with Aaron had been exciting, always, but it was infused with all the complications of a deep and unassailable love. This man was simple. He was no one to her[.] (183)

The excitement of a stranger is not unique to those frustrated within a long-term relationship, but the ways in which that stranger may be *strange* is exceptional here. The simplicity of sex with a stranger takes on extra weight because of Katherine's relationship to Aaron. The deviance of the public sex that she has with Trent, twice, is addressed by the increased excitement of the situation, but it is not the defining element for Katherine.

Conversely, the deviance of this encounter (and the relationship with her brother itself) does little to temper Katherine's feelings of hurt, shock and rejection upon discovering Aaron masturbating to pornography in secret. Her reaction is not presented ironically, but is of interest in terms of the levels of generally accepted sexual practices, as earlier outlined with reference to Rubin; the hierarchy of sexual deviance in "Romulus and Remus" reflects Katherine's subjective interpretation of events, rather than cultural expectations. Katherine's reaction to Aaron watching pornography does not draw attention to the relationship's deviance, only her dismay and feelings of undesirability. She tells Trent:

'My husband watches pornography on the internet while I am asleep,' she said. She had thought she might be ashamed to make this confession; it surprised her to find she wasn't.

'Is that why you just had sex with me?'

'I suppose it is. Is that terribly wrong?'

'Maybe.' He shrugged. 'I'm glad you did.' (200)

Trent's apparent lack of concern mitigates Katherine's feelings of shame, as does the conceptual reiteration that her own sexual practices are separate from Aaron's. To an extent, the alternatives and differences that these practices offer both Katherine and Aaron stem from similar feelings of complacency and diminishing sexual desire, and the acknowledgement of these practices allows their interest in one another to be reignited.

This is not to suggest that they are no longer sexually attracted to one another; Katherine masturbates to fantasies of Aaron, and "Aaron was surprised that even amid his online infidelity he became more excited by someone who looked like his lover" (157). However, both acknowledge that their interest has diminished, as has their capacity to incite fervour in their partner:

She had too light a touch, she tired too easily, losing the rhythm.

Sometimes he wondered if his attempts, infrequent now, to pleasure her with his mouth had lost their power for her too. The times when she

was on her knees before him he would have to concentrate to remember that he was not on his own. (159-60)

The sex acts between Aaron and Katherine that take place on ChatRoulette are eroticised for them because they are able to be honest about their relationship with one another with the safety of their viewers assuming they are lying. As Katherine tells Aaron, “‘They’re going to think we are lying anyway,’ she said with a little half smile. ‘They’ll think the sister-brother thing is just a tease. The fun will be pretending to lie by telling the truth’” (207). They thereby publicly acknowledge the deviance of their relationship, yet do not pathologise it, and while the difficulties associated with the dishonesty and shifting dynamics of their relationship are evident, these are not exemplified as particular because they are siblings, but simply as evidence of the normality of their lengthy sexual relationship. Eroticisation occurs through the public declaration of that which has long remained private; the explicit sexualisation of their familial relationship acts as an aphrodisiac for Aaron and Katherine:

‘Call me sister.’ And he did, the word so strange on his tongue after all these years, and yes, it was arousing to remember that this was a most unusual connection. ... He slipped himself inside her and it seemed suddenly to be a breaking of taboos, this coupling that had become so ordinary in their day-to-day lives became a kind of transgression through the lust-filled gaze of the stranger. (209)

The eroticism associated with the public nature of this sex is not in its exhibitionism, but rather in the truthfulness of their assertions. The ability to voice the uniqueness of their relationship is simultaneously empowering and arousing because of its taboo nature, redefining moral integrity from within the taboo.

While these are legally- and morally-challenging scenarios, they are presented gently and lovingly, and the supported and consensual relationships within the text bring into question the problematic nature of these relationships. Indeed, they remain jarring, and yet the generally accepted problematic aspects of an incestuous relationship such as this are

deliberately obfuscated. Thus, the reader is forced to consider these sexual arrangements from a perspective that deviates from the standard moral perspective, and one's reaction is dependent on the extent to which one can separate the behaviour in the text from cultural norms.

Kneen's construction of sexuality defies an assumption of normativity and incorporates various sexual alternatives that are 'bad', 'abnormal' and 'unnatural', creating alternatives in which individual sexuality can exist without restriction. The stories deviate not only from heteronormativity, but also from 'morally' acceptable sexual practices; however, their sensitive and thoughtful construction mean that the reader is forced to question sexual ethics and the perceived immorality of particular sex acts when the power balances are all but eradicated, consent is explicit and there is no apparent evidence of abuse or lascivious manipulation. Even on a basic level, Aaron, although constructed as engaging in sexually deviant practices, is a 'good' man, evidenced by his acknowledgement that women should stop being so critical of their own bodies, and that he "would appreciate them for what they were" (157).

Kneen's libertarian stance influences the construction of the sexual practices, and while the erotic stories between lovers who are siblings, or not human, or ultimately invisible, are at times disconcerting, they deviate from confined and conventional practices in ways that open up conversations about sex acts and the representation of sex acts. Kneen's sexual ethics, as author, are clear. While the situations do not become acceptable, the fact that they are allowed to exist unproblematically in these texts is important. As she stated in the panel discussion at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne about writing literary erotica, "Paper is safe, no-one's getting hurt" (Kneen, et al.). Erotic texts offer space to explore scenarios without the real-world consequences. The freedom and opportunity to explore the possible alternatives in terms of gendered and sexual experiences are available in all texts but are routinely hidden, and opportunities to transgress restrictive norms are missed. Presenting

conventional portrayals of sexuality framed by gender or representing the punishment of all deviance simply reinforces the status quo. Pons argues:

True eroticism (as opposed to mere debauchery) can only emerge in a consensual encounter between equals, when both partners freely choose to pleasure each other's bodies, when neither has to submit, against his or her will, to the other's desire, to be nothing more than the passive object of that desire. (23)

He continues: "The circulation of desire between the partners must go unimpeded" (24).

Despite myriad ways that the concept of consent is evident in each of the texts discussed in the course of this chapter, ultimately the importance of reciprocity in terms of desire is emphasised in each.

This chapter addressed Australian erotic novels and short stories, which each comprise a range of different sexual scenarios that challenge, in some way, normative constructions of femininity because of their explicit embracing of women's sexuality. Despite this, in some texts—namely *The Bride Stripped Bare* and *Eat Me*—there is an evident tendency to resort to particular gendered heteronorms and dynamics within their constructions of character and the sex in which they engage. The other texts discussed—*Suck My Toes* and, to a greater extent, *Triptych*—deliberately subvert the particular norms associated with sex acts.

Gender and sex in 'the real world' are indeed not the same as gender and sex in fiction, as subjectivity in fiction can only be an illusion. However, constructions of these in the world *are* reflected in their construction in literature. These are different constructions, but rhizomatic—or, to use a different metaphor, the constructions are in conversation with each other. Moreover, alternative constructions that differ from those sanctioned in 'the real world' can—and should—be explored in fiction, since because of their nature as representations, positive or negative consequences of such deviance are equally constructed. Literature has the potential to subvert norms and experiment with particular constructions

of sex and gender without confronting social restrictions, perhaps making way for alternative modes of expression within a safe space by challenging narrow assumptions of normality.

CONCLUSION

THE TURNING POINT

Literature is produced by and within a societal context. Its fictional status demarcates it as distinct from society, but the attitudes and values of fictional writing cannot be wholly removed from the culture in which it was written. Evident neo-conservative and post-feminist ideologies with regard to gender roles, and ambivalence, apathy, or anger towards feminist views of gender, are equally apparent in Australian fiction across the past two decades as they are in broader Australian society. Where some texts analysed in this thesis evinced valuable challenges to these sites of contestation—namely *Taming the Beast*, *Triptych*, *How a Moth Becomes a Boat* and *Suck My Toes*—a majority of the texts chosen for analysis exemplified particular trends evident in Australian society and reflected prevalent assumptions and stereotypes. These trends and norms are limited, and they rely heavily on heteronormative expectations of gendered behaviour, particularly with regard to women's bodies, affects, and sexuality. The ways in which fiction relies on heteronormativity and dominant expectations of femininity and masculinity in its representations of sex, too, is patent; I have demonstrated that a focus on sex—even subversive sex—does not guarantee a subversion of gender norms. Deliberately sexually provocative texts do not necessarily offer a progressive view of sexuality or gender, and throughout this thesis I have established that many representations of sexuality work within limited and dichotomous frameworks, and reiterate, rather than challenge, heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality.

The prevalence of 'norms' in contemporary Australian literature is evident across a diverse range of texts. At times these gendered constructs are contradictory, but work within the same limited discourse: for men, masculinity necessitates strength, control, an ability to 'provide', and a kind of calm that exists in opposition to the irrationality of women—evident in the characterisation of Jules from *The Architect*, Aaron in *Triptych* and Rory in *Pants on Fire*, each of whom offer 'rational' interpretations of events that their feminine counterparts

react to emotionally—or, conversely, aggression, dominance and violence—such as the case of Roger in *Steam Pigs*, Sade in *The River Ophelia*, Ari in *Loaded*, Daniel Carr in *Taming the Beast* and the young protagonists of *Rohypnol*. Failure to meet these hegemonic norms often results in ‘punishment’ of some kind: Luke, in *The Pillow Fight*, is the victim of abuse; *Praise’s* Gordon abjectly forces himself into sexual relationships he does not want, abusing drugs and alcohol to avoid his feelings of inadequacy and dysfunction. For women, norms necessitate a regulated corporeality and beauty, maternity (which require a woman to be nurturing, loving, accepting and acquiescing), ‘sexiness’ or arrant sexual appeal, gentleness, kindness, submissiveness (or appearance of submissiveness). These qualities affect characters’ behaviour and vernacular. At least some of these traits are evident in each of the women characters discussed in this thesis, with the exception of the characters from Rowe’s and McGregor’s short stories.

These stereotypical traits of femininity and masculinity work dichotomously and are complementary to one another. They are also inherently limited, and set up an assumption of essentialism and determinism. These gendered traits and patterns of behaviour are not related to any biological imperative, but are social expectations imposed on subjects. This imposition is evident in what I described as ‘deviance’: where characters are interpreted or constructed as deviant, they are measured against, and in light of, aforementioned norms; it is their failure or disinclination to meet societal expectations that marks them as ‘other’. In fiction, it is not imperative to link expected gendered traits to particular characters because the social imperatives are as constructed as the characters themselves—yet gendered norms are reiterated and reinforced.

I applied constructs of deviance to representations of sexual behaviour that defy cultural norms and embrace taboos, and patterns of sexual behaviour that subvert expectations: namely, queerness, ‘promiscuity’—distinct from sanctioned attitudes towards sex, endorsed in post-feminist ideology—sexual aggressiveness or lack of sexual control, or a lack of sufficient potency. In *Praise*, for example, ‘deviant’ sexuality is represented in both

Cynthia and Gordon; while Cynthia's sexual desire is constructed as insatiable, Gordon fears for what he considers an ineffectual masculinity because of his low libido. The explicit representations of sex in the novel indeed subvert heteronormative expectations of sexuality. However, the extent to which those subversions are successful depends on the ways they challenge the hegemonic and patriarchal power dynamics that shape constructions. While *Praise*, for example, offers subversive constructions of sexuality, it fails to interrogate the gendered norms that demarcate their specific sexualities as deviant in the first place: Cynthia and Gordon are deviant only because their sexualities are incongruent with their genders, and the reversal of traits would reflect dominant expectations of sexuality. These subversions, I argue, do not pose a real challenge to hegemonic heteronormativity.

Heteronormative constructions of characters were the specific focus of Chapter One, yet are integral to my analyses in each of the chapters. Some of the elements of normative and stereotypical gendered characterisations of women characters evident in Chapter One were equally apparent in texts that are ostensibly more subversive—such as *Eat Me* and *The Bride Stripped Bare*, which were included in Chapter Four in order to consider their erotic focuses. Despite their attempts to open up the discourse of feminine sexuality, both novels work within limited gendered paradigms.

I examined the genre of chick lit for its reliance on reiteration of specific and limited heteronormative archetypes for the heroine and secondary characters. The generic tropes determine the roles of characters and predict the inevitable dénouement in terms of social norms. The characters in *Pants on Fire*, for example, are financially successful, consumerist, determined, beautiful, superficial, and concerned predominantly with sex—as well as ultimately securing a long-term monogamous relationship. The characters in Jaivin's novel reflect these generic archetypes evident in Alderson's novel, yet the descriptions of sex in *Eat Me* are overt, rather than implied, and sex with multiple partners is endorsed as an ideal, rather than a means to an end—that end being marriage. Despite these differences in constructions of sexuality, both novels rely on a post-feminist understanding of femininity

that embraces raunch culture and fails to interrogate the ways in which expectations of sexuality are constrained by patriarchal gender norms. These post-feminist tendencies show only a superficial expectation of equality, and because they function within hegemonic constraints, the novels offer no challenge to contemporary understanding of gender or sexuality.

The Mint Lawn, I argued, also demonstrates some of the problematic elements of the apathetic acceptance of stereotypical gendered roles as normative, if not imperative. Gendered norms, in the novel, were constrictive and contributed to Clementine's ennui. Clementine's marriage is represented, deliberately and subtly, as both abusive and restrictive, but her acceptance of her feminine role as definitive suggests both the limitations of unquestioning adherence to heteronormative conventions because of their conventionality and the comfort associated with convention. Similar values were evident in *The Bride Stripped Bare*, but Gemmell's novel self-consciously endorses the value of these stereotypical roles, despite constructing a particularly submissive account of femininity. The protagonist reiterates the importance of her marriage and her husband to her sense of self throughout the text, yet her husband is controlling, condescending and adulterous. Despite her avowals that to be a wife and mother is *all* she wants—the ultimately feminine desire—she is consistently represented as dissatisfied. Both *The Mint Lawn* and *The Bride Stripped Bare* finish with the end of the protagonists' marriages: Clementine finally—and ironically—being empowered to leave after she is raped by her husband, while the protagonist of Gemmell's novel disappears without a trace. The novels' constructions of both gender and sexuality rely heavily on heteronormative assumptions that quintessential femininity comprises passivity and acquiescence, but they also signal some of the problems with this construction.

Camille's Bread, in contrast, simultaneously employs and interrogates normative forms of femininity and masculinity. Lohrey's novel highlights the unequal, dichotomous power dynamics between Marita and Stephen that result in Marita's subjugation. Despite relying on gender and essentialist gendered stereotypes, the novel necessitates a

consideration of how gender can both form and restrict characters, and the interactions and experiences available to them. Lohrey's reliance on stereotypical qualities is not implicit, and instead she explicitly considers femininity and masculinity *as constructs* deliberately undertaken or challenged by the characters in the novel: Marita *wants for* femininity, and she embraces maternalism and domesticity to feel as though she is a good woman and a good mother. She strives to accomplish femininity. Stephen's masculinity, in contrast, is a source of contention for himself and for Marita; Stephen fights against masculine stereotypes of violence and dominance and quests for a sense of peace and order—and it is this quest that Marita observes as overwhelmingly masculine. The novel relies on normative constructs of gender, but, as I have demonstrated, this reliance importantly foregrounds the constructed nature of those norms.

Constructs of norms and deviance have also framed my analysis of the theme of violence. Power dynamics, and the ways in which these are constructed as normal or deviant, have been central to my analyses of abuse and sexual assault. Often, these power dynamics relate to hegemonic constructions of masculinity. The novels do not present violence as normal, but the power dynamics that *facilitate* violence are shown to be acceptable and accepted. The power dynamics in the relationships between Marita and Stephen in *Camille's Bread* and Sue and Roger in *Steam Pigs*, for instance, rely heavily on the power imbalances associated with the characters' genders. Stephen and Roger demand deference from Marita and Sue respectively, expecting their partners to cede to their desires. It is this ingrained assumption of obedience and submissiveness presented in the novels that sets up the normalisation of violence. Stephen's underlying threat of violence towards Marita and Camille never culminates, and thus the novel's ending with the relationship still intact, despite Marita's apprehension, brings into question the extent to which the *threat* of violence constitutes *actual* violence; Marita's quest for domesticity and the "feminine principle" thus concludes with an uncertain, passive suggestion of victimhood. In contrast, Lucashenko's Sue is empowered to leave a relationship *after* she is a victim of significant

physical and sexual assault; the extent of the violence is that which provides the impetus for her to leave Roger. Her friendship with Kerry and Rachel allows Sue to develop another way of interpreting her role in the relationship, and this understanding of her systematic subjugation forces Sue to challenge the norms of masculine dominance and violence that she previously accepted. Condon's *The Pillow Fight* also emphasises the elements of relationships that relate to violence, but his discussion focuses on intimate-partner violence as perpetrated by a woman. Charlotte, however, is a feminine anomaly; she is a feminine archetype, not stereotypically *feminine*. Because of this, the novel does little to explore the actual context of the violence, but rather shows the kinds of traits that make a woman capable of violence. Condon's novel relies on archetypal constructions and does little to question the phenomenon: it rather seems to be a statement about how 'men are victims, too!' offering nothing further than bringing this observation to light. Lucashenko's novel, in contrast, makes an explicit feminist statement about intimate partner violence that interrogates normative responses to men's violence against women. It focuses on Sue's experience, rather than overt descriptions of violence, a focus which highlights that the violence is *part* of her relationship, *part* of her experience, shifting attention away from the representations of violent acts, which, in other novels, can be almost fetishising, to the wider implications of unquestioning acceptance of violence against women.

Assumptions of norms, and representations of deviance from these norms, also extend to the construction of bodies, particularly those that are damaged, or presented in a way that disrupts expectations of how things should be—as is the case in *Indelible Ink* and *The Architect*. McGregor's and Watkinson's respective representations of deviant bodies bring into question cultural expectations, and the extent to which we read value and erotic expectations as written on bodies. I argue that the 'othering' that defines the protagonists' bodies as 'deviant' in these novels is not specifically gendered, but that the fact of their deviance can influence how they are understood in terms of gendered and sexualised constructions. In *The Architect*, Jules's vulnerability because of his disfigurement

immediately positions him as othered. This othering works to turn Jules into an object—often sexual—for those around him, but also by Jules himself; he is unable to view his altered corporeality as part of him as a subject, instead maintaining a distinction between his body and self. In contrast, in *Indelible Ink*, Marie's numerous tattoos mark her as subversive within her particular privileged context of upper-class society in Sydney, but these marks of difference reinforce a renewed sense of subjectivity. These marks of difference allow for a reconsideration of how we, as readers, tie gendered expectations, as well as assumptions of sexuality, into corporeality, and extend understandings of self and other, subject and object. Where in *The Architect*, Jules has little autonomy over his body and is objectified, McGregor's Marie increasingly governs her own body—she does not succumb, but instead ends her own life with deliberation, agency and control. Her death is not negative or passive, and does not construct Marie as a victim; it is an active assertion of her reclaimed corporeality and her power.

While depictions of both sex and bodies that challenge our assumptions of normality are valuable, because they necessarily question the norms on which our expectations are based, these character constructions—apart, I argue, from Marie in *Indelible Ink*—work within a normative framework of gender. The behaviours may challenge sexual heteronorms, but particular traits and power dynamics reflect and seem to rely on and accept stereotypical and dichotomous expectations of gender.

Because fiction is, of course, *fictional*, the effects of deviating from particular gendered norms are necessarily whatever the author chooses to represent. It is, of course, necessary to take into account feasibility and likelihood of characters' constructions, particularly with regard to generic conventions, but it is entirely possible for an author to endorse or condone particular behaviours and censure others in their deliberate constructions of characters and situations. Some of the focus texts of this thesis have demonstrated that a deliberate interrogation of heteronormative and neo-conservative constructions of gender allows for a reconsideration of what gender *means*, particularly

when the gendered subject is a fictional character. Rowe, McGregor and Kneen have subverted hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality, and opened up the potential to consider a multiplicity of experiences. Although they address different aspects of gendered identity—namely normative assumptions, deviant corporeality, and taboo sexualities—Rowe, McGregor and Kneen demonstrate that fictional challenges to norms of gender and sexuality are still realistic and able to be related to, but by subverting stereotypical constructions they reveal the very constructed nature of those normative expectations that are usually reiterated. Maguire and Tsiolkas, I argue, also offer interrogations of the hegemonic and heteronormative constructions of sexuality evident in most other texts examined in this thesis, but parts of their novels rely heavily on limited gendered paradigms. Most problematic are the texts that purport to explicitly challenge cultural norms and gendered restrictions, but instead perpetuate norms of violence and rape culture: Ettler's and Hutchinson's 'interventions' and attempts to subvert norms are limited at best, offensive at worst.

Ettler and Hutchinson each attempt to interrogate problematic and restrictive norms of gender and sexuality, but I maintain that both failed to achieve this adequately in their novels. *The River Ophelia*, for example, has the potential to critique contemporary society and sexual culture, as well as a number of common literary archetypes on which Ettler bases her characters—yet she offers a number of pathetic female characters who lose all measure of control over men. Her characters are overtly sexual, but sex is rarely associated with pleasure, and instead, in most cases throughout the novel, it is abject, demeaning, and a mode of control over another. Ettler indeed frames her novel around her female protagonists, and attempts to interrogate a particular method of writing that relies on the degradation of women. However, her own novel offers no viable alternative, ultimately relying on the gendered conventions she aims to subvert. Ettler's Justine is a masochistic victim, and while Ettler attempts to subvert objectifying tropes of women victims by allowing such victims a

voice, her own construction simply reiterates discourses of passivity and weakness by failing to offer alternatives.

Hutchinson, in *Rohypnol*, attempted to question the motivation behind the crime of rape through his representation of the sociopathic "Rape Squad". Despite this, he does not challenge the cultural contexts that allow such crimes to occur regularly in contemporary Australia, which, I argue, is manifest in the association between violence and masculinity that permits a culture in which rape is not only accepted, but has become the responsibility of the victim. The novel focused on sexual violence through the deliberate drugging and rape of women represented in various scenarios throughout the novel, and shows the unquestioning ease with which young women are often judged by society as responsible for violence against them, and the willingness to excuse the behaviour of young, privileged men. The novel demonstrates Australian 'rape culture' that facilitates assumptions that young women are always potential victims, and are therefore already implicated in their own victimhood. The novel is not evidently critical of rape culture, but, instead, I argue, it is complicit in it. Despite the intention of Ettler and Hutchinson, I argue that their failure to meet their own challenges show how ingrained cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality are, and how easily fictional constructs perpetuate them.

Tsiolkas's *Loaded*, in contrast, offers an alternative to the strict adherence to cultural norms. Ari sits between definitive concepts of identity with regard to his gender, his ethnicity and his sexuality, and he feels uncomfortable identifying with any one aspect specifically. His experiences as a young gay man cannot be isolated from his Greek family background, and his characterisation demonstrates the importance of an intersectional reading of identity. The novel incorporates an explicit questioning of what gender is, and how it defines a person in relation to their cultural context, and highlights how these elements affect Ari's own subjectivity. Tsiolkas also offers an explicit interrogation of the ways in which stereotypes and labels restrict understandings of identity, and while this allows for a consideration of intersectional identity that is *not one thing*, the characters around Ari are

two-dimensional and stereotypical, and Ari's judgements of them work against his own views. However, despite Ari's attempts to subvert the limitations he feels are placed on him by his culture, and despite the fluidity of his sexuality, he both relies heavily on and endorses hegemonic constructions of masculinity. Tsiolkas's novel offers ways to consider a multidimensional and intersectional identity, yet repeatedly returns to limited stereotypes of gender, sexuality and ethnicity.

Maguire's novel, *Taming the Beast*, presents a disjunction for this thesis, in that it simultaneously presents an empowered young woman who defies normative expectations regarding her sexuality, yet also consistently links her sexuality to a history of sexual abuse. Her portrayal of a taboo sexual relationship between a fourteen-year-old girl and her English teacher invites questioning of particular taboos, evident in her relationship with Daniel Carr, and constructions of deviance, evident in Sarah's characterisation, her feminist approach to her sexuality and also how she views her relationships. The novel represents an exploitative power dynamic, but is also problematises assumptions about victimhood, consent and innocence, as well as bringing into question the active and agential sexuality of children under the age of consent.

Sarah does not view herself as a victim, and this is an essential part of the story—to what extent is one a victim of sexual abuse if one views the acts as consensual? The difficulty of the novel is that her view of her relationship with Daniel Carr and her abuse is not presented in a way in which we are able to take Sarah's word for it, so to speak. The reader is unable to view the relationship between Sarah and Daniel from the perspective that Sarah holds, because it is ultimately constructed in the narrative as abusive. While the novel indeed interrogates the ways in which we view abusive relationships, Sarah is read as a victim who is unwilling to accept that she *is*, in any way, a victim; she is presented as an object of pity, but to pity her means that her sexual agency is pathologised and her agency diminished. Her relationships with men are constructed as damaging and abusive, but they are consensual, if not sought, by Sarah. The novel brings into question the problematic nature of consent, but

the reiteration of the connection between sex and abuse is a fraught contradiction of agency and objectification. While, in a way, the contradictory construction of Sarah's sexuality supports Maguire's assertion that women are caught between the dichotomous norms of "girls gone wild" or "chaste virgins looking for true love" (*Princesses* 3, 4), Maguire misses an opportunity to subvert these archetypes completely. *Taming the Beast*, however, is an important text for its incorporation of a number of concerns that are relevant to this thesis, such as stereotypical norms and sexual deviance, violence, power, and consent, and it demands a consideration of the ways in which we read relationships, sex and gender.

There are, however, texts that meet the challenge and present viable alternatives to heteronormative constructs, simultaneously interrogating norms and opening up space for change. The short stories in *Suck My Toes* "make room", as Levy requests, for alternative constructions of gender and sexuality, as well as corporeality. McGregor represents women's sexuality unapologetically, and incorporates stories of BDSM as well as more conventional romances. In this collection, she constructs women's bodies as necessarily different, rather than 'other'. Her formulation of *subjects* allows for representations of sexuality that are not delimited by constrictive expectations of gendered characterisation. This is not to say that her representations are not without *judgement*, but these judgements are tied into subjective readings and constructions of characters as opposed to objective appraisals of how characters adhere to external values. *Suck My Toes*, as well as McGregor's novel, *Indelible Ink*, demonstrate characterisations of women that are not constructed as the dichotomised other to men; instead, a viable and complete range of character traits are explicitly attributed to women with no qualification, or punishment, or presentation of them as actually deviant. She also represents as equal, and equally normal, a multiplicity of sexualities.

A subversion of the stereotypical and limited concepts of gender is also evident in *How a Moth Becomes a Boat*. Rowe's short stories bring into question how much we consider gender a necessary part of characterisation. Rowe's characters can be read as normative or subversive but can also, most importantly, be read as entirely genderless; their

characterisation is in elements of their character, rather than lying within predetermined traits. The sexualities of the characters are not tied to their gender, and thus the interpretation of a particular sexuality can lie in the readers' inscription of a gendered identity. Moreover, it can reiterate that sexual identity is not the same as gendered identity. A consideration of the range of subjectivities is necessary to read Rowe's experimental stories.

Kneen's *Triptych* incorporates challenging, if not absurd, scenarios into her stories as she deliberately and explicitly plays with concepts of taboo and sexual ethics. However, these challenges are presented in a way that pre-empts the reader's outrage and counters that which we find offensive, assuaging our moral umbrage. As discussed in my analysis of *Triptych*, Kneen goes to every effort to assure the reader that no abuse is taking place, and she destabilises the structures of power that makes the taboo *dangerous*. The deliberate muddying of cultural taboos brings about a necessary questioning of the extent to which we hold these taboos as absolute, and while this is not to suggest that the stories endorse particular relationships, or even that one's opinion about these relationships will change, they explicitly destabilise the foundations on which such assumptions are made. They necessitate a reconceptualisation of what is valuable, and what it is that *we value*—or devalue—within sexual relationships.

The cultural context within which a text is written influences fiction, but fiction also offers the space to create a new version, or offer a new impression, of society—an alternative to the normative iteration. Literature is not obliged to challenge norms, but its capacity to challenge norms is part of its value. The short stories and novels that I critiqued in this dissertation purport to challenge neo-conservative, prescriptive and dichotomous norms in representations of gender and sexuality. The manifestations of this have differed substantially between texts; for example, the conservatism evident in both *Pants on Fire* and *The Bride Stripped Bare* differs substantially, although each is based on post-feminist agendas. Moreover, while these texts challenged conservatism through maintaining heteronormative and neo-conservative values combined with 'liberated' sexual agendas,

their attempts differ substantially from the challenges produced by Kneen, Rowe and McGregor. In most cases, the extent to which representations confront stereotypes and archetypes in gendered characterisations are limited, and there remains an evident reliance on normative assumptions of femininity and masculinity evident in fiction—which, in turn, tends to produce heteronormative constructions of sexuality. The paucity of representations that depict alternatives to hegemonic and dichotomous understandings of femininity and masculinity signifies the entrenchment of these gendered norms; alternatives are elusive, even in fiction. Fiction, I argue, is an ideal mode to interrogate gendered norms, because representations of individual characters are explicitly *constructions*; the author fabricates *all* aspects of the characters—including their particular traits or behaviours and the ways in which these conform to or subvert expected norms in their characterisation.

Fiction offers a safe space to examine personal or private thoughts and practices, because such examinations are not evaluating the lives or experiences of ‘real people’; rather, these *representations* of gender and sexuality can be evaluated with critical distance. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that despite the conventional, heteronormative, stereotypical constructions that are endorsed and maintained in Australian society and in its cultural and artistic productions, there are a multiplicity of ways in which sexuality and gender can be represented that offer viable alternatives. The problem lies in the ongoing assumption that particular constructions are incontrovertibly natural and typical of particular genders, and these are repeated in stereotypes and archetypes manifest in characterisation. These normative types are invariably restrictive, and contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of those that do not conform to these norms. There are, however, texts that succeed in challenging restrictive norms from within realistic constructions. These texts demonstrate traits that question or challenge dichotomous gendered expectations, and allow for behaviours that are realistic, yet lie outside the constraints of normative limitations. Producing and accepting a wider range of representations outside of dichotomous norms would better represent the diversity of actual experience. Literature that offers constructions

of gender that interrogate or defy assumptions of normality or essentialism is that which acknowledges the multiplicities of subjective experiences.

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