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“I don’t care, whatever, I’m trans” – Wounds, Wants, and Transgender Fiction

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“I don’t care, whatever, I’m trans” – Wounds, Wants, and Transgender Fiction

Evelyn Millard

When I sit down to write this paper, I do so from a position of woundedness, like the French critics of decades past, Cixous, Barthes, Derrida. A lover arrives; we make plans for later in the night; I joke quietly with them that, once they leave, I’ll scratch at my scars, open old wounds, generate pain so I can produce words. Later, they put on their jacket and stand in the doorway; they smile; “Have fun getting sad.”

I do not claim to know the mindset of the two authors I analyze here – Imogen Binnie and Aevee Bee – nor do I claim a monolithic understanding of transgender experience or transgender literature. Instead, my goal is to be vulnerable and make an almost overly simple claim: the literature of trans women is marked by a socially imposed woundedness carried by the body and by a want to produce a better world for our children.

Nevada, a novel by Imogen Binnie, can be summarized easily enough: Maria, a trans woman, realizes she’s never bothered to live. So she buys \$400 worth of heroin, drives across the country, and talks endlessly about what it’s like being trans. It’s your typical American road novel. Except it’s obviously not, considering how much time is spent on Maria’s junk.

How do you solve a problem like Maria’s junk?

Junk. Discarded waste. Rubbish.

One of the infinite, invisible wounds marking the trans feminine: its imagining of its own genitalia, stitched up within the womb, bearing a meaning the child never meant, a mark on the body transferred onto paper, a single letter, demanded by the state; it follows the child into the future.

Nevada opens with BDSM queer sex between two women; Maria and her cisgender girlfriend, Steph, engage in asphyxiation play and Maria fakes an orgasm. The mark of female difference forces her out of her body: “the moment her pants

come off, she stops being in her body, and when she's off in the cloud desperately trying to make an emergency peace with her own junk, trying not to think about how bad her junk has fucked up so much of her life and what she can do about it" (3). Every time the text references Maria's genitals, it's her junk. The term appears and reappears, time and time again in the text. Gender neutral, derogatory, slang, atypical, self-selected, a lump which masks and draws attention to her difference, both from other women and from men. Junk marks the text like the penoscrotal raphe marks the trans feminine body.

In the beginning, God "took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh" (Genesis 2:21 NIV). Yet, as an odd letter to the editor in the *American Journal of Medical Genetics* points out, the rib lacks any real metaphoric meaning in relation to generation. What's more, "the Hebrew noun translated as 'rib,' *tzela* (*tzade, lamed, ayin*)... could be used to indicate a structural support beam. Interestingly, Biblical Hebrew, unlike later Rabbinic Hebrew, had no technical term for the penis and referred to it through many circumlocutions" (Gilbert & Zevit). While most humans have an equal and even number of rib bones (did God make Adam asymmetrical?), most lack a penile bone, making the species unlike most other mammals and all but one other primate. Therefore, Gilbert and Zevit argue the bone God takes from Adam, the original wound which generates woman, is the lost penile bone; God closes up the wound, leaving behind the scar of the penoscrotal raphe: the point on the body where the edges of the urogenital folds, which become the labia minora on another phenotype, fuse together to form the underbelly of the penis.

The scar of the trans woman, the mark on her body, the penoscrotal raphe consumes estrogen, grows darker, becomes more visible upon hormonal transition. On a typical penis on a typical body of a typical cisgender man, the raphe matters little. It is waste material from the womb, the barely visible unimportant fragment of a preoriginary moment; it's valueless; it's junk. On a trans woman, the raphe *is* her junk. It's a potent reminder, the barest trace of woman's mythical origin out of man, of her own preoriginary moment prior to that of sexual difference, prior to when testosterone flooded her mother's womb and fused her folds together. It is the mark of difference stitched into her body, into the fragment of herself which society denotes as most obscene, most public, most crucial to her existence. Her junk.

No wonder Maria desperately tries to make emergency peace with her junk, finds herself driven out of her body when faced with her junk, accuses her junk of ruining her life. She confronts the problem of her genitalia, her sexuality, her relationship to her body, and she confronts her body's relationship with others' bodies: "Maria likes Steph's junk but on some level she kind of hates Steph for just automatically getting that kind of junk just for free. How do you tell your girlfriend that? How do you make that okay? More specifically, how do you make that okay enough to calm down and get off?" (3). For free, without payment; Steph never has to consider "what she can do about" the problem of her junk. She lacks this invisible wound, unique to the trans feminine experience, generated by a complex mixture of biology and society.

Meanwhile, Maria's junk interrupts. It demands recognition. It refuses peace. It's the wound of presence as well as lack. It's the mark of unease. It generates envy; it generates want.

Aevee Bee's *We Know The Devil* is a digital narrative, a sort of hybrid between a video game and interactive Choose Your Own Adventure novels intended for younger readers, written by a queer and trans person about being queer and trans; it follows three queer adolescents – Venus, Jupiter, and Neptune – while they attend a Midwestern summer camp where they must fight the Devil himself, or fall trying. Venus is *We Know The Devil's* envious character, a boy defined mostly by awkward attempts to be nice to everyone around him, even cruel bullies, who, in one possible narrative route, comes out as a queer woman. It's not a particularly subtle or shocking revelation; after all, the astrological symbol for Venus and the social symbol for female are one and the same.

In a dialogue with Neptune where the two characters attempt to point out each other's faults, Venus's envy gets placed front and center. Neptune tells her, "Venus, your problem is that you are very nice. But you want something. And you think being nice is going to give it to you. But it never will. And until you figure out what it is you want. Every kindness of yours will be full of that want." A desire to transform, to bring out the interior for all to see, lies at the center of Venus's kindness. She desires acceptance, but she remains hidden with the shell of a male-designated identity for most of the text. Thus, Venus attempts to garner acceptance through kindness, even when no one can possibly accept her if she remains within her old skin. The interior, the queer within, demands recognition, yet it simultaneously retracts away from the harsh light of a queerphobic society. Venus's want, her desire to become, infects her niceness, explaining why Venus seems to bumble awkwardly from social mistake to social mistake. Venus wants and wants, but seemingly can never be fulfilled. The wound of non-recognition, of the body unwanted, demands stitching up.

Where does this wound, this want, this demand come from? Is its origin the raphe, the extraction of femininity by God, by the womb, by society? During a sequence in *Nevada* in which Maria ponders this question, she settles on a truly simple conclusion: "I don't care, whatever, I'm trans" (41).

Two distinct parts compose *Nevada*: the first part "Late October" centers Maria, the shambles and successes of the life she created for herself and now longs to escape: the second part "Late November" follows her roadtrip and introduces James, a gender-questioning 20 year old man, and revolves around Maria's desperate attempts to educate him about his possibilities, his future, his potential, while James resists at every turn. There's a reason trans women often offer copies of Binnie's novel to those who are in the process of questioning their gender identity: *Nevada's* second part can easily be read as the heavy-handed transgender equivalent of a conduct manual, although admittedly a conduct manual written from the perspective of a self-described dykey gutterpunk trans woman who just wants to ride her bicycle,

eat bagels, and not deal with men hitting on her. The least literary portions of *Nevada* are the sections where the novel most clearly reaches out to its potentially trans reader, offering clear guidance and statements about what it's like to be trans and how to deal with these struggles, from relationships to shaving. The novel becomes a preachy guide for questioning youth, trying to show them the way, rather than a piece of literature aspiring to be art for art's sake.

I don't care, whatever, I'm trans.

I'm not interested in art for art's sake, and neither are the trans artists I'm interested in studying. Each work vibrates with an intense want, but unlike the jealous want of the closeted trans woman or the out trans woman wishing for the ease of cisgender life, their want projects simultaneously backwards and forwards in time: each artist wants a better life for their kids: their kids are their past selves embodied in a younger generation.

We Know The Devil's "true ending," accessed through carefully selecting scenes so as not to exclude any of the three characters, something else happens. Something beautiful. The three girls break the rules of the camp: they refuse to select a third wheel, a scapegoat. The devil speaks to all three, begs to be accepted. At first, Jupiter resists, while Venus and Neptune quickly realize how unfairly the summer camp treated them up to this point. Finally, all three agree with one another to fall.

What follows is a scene of queer self-exploration and queer love. The monstrous forms from the first three endings, depicted as horrific queer interiors which must be destroyed, become beautiful ethereal beings which come together and aid one another in becoming: "This is the new touch-the feeling of fingers pushing painlessly through our skin, the feeling of the muscle and fat, the weight of it, the intention: it's best friends forever. It's a first kiss. It's a love story. It's imaginable, but it doesn't exist anywhere, not any planet. We're a dream. We're becoming people no other people have ever been. A human that humans are not." When the rest of the kids and counselors in the summer camp come to destroy them in the next scene, they're unable to do so against the ascendant queer selves. Instead, the other high schoolers join Venus, Jupiter, and Neptune: "As it turns out, they were pretty unhappy in those bodies too... So we think they'll like it here too. A new world, with new bodies. How lovely will that be? We have a new apple. For everyone in the world."

We Know The Devil imagines a new world, a queer world for the misfit children growing up alienated from their bodies in a world which teaches hatred. Embracing the images of the monstrous and the obscene projected upon queer youth, *We Know The Devil* offers a hopeful fantasy to the outcasts. It recognizes the impossibility of some elements of the fantasy, perhaps all of it. It's imaginable, it's a dream, but it doesn't exist. It's impossible to shed the skin and become a literal different kind of human through bringing the interior out. However, the fantasy provides a palliative against the horrific treatment of a queerphobic world. The clear, textual depiction of other queer youth provide readers with media that doesn't demand resistive reading to find signs of one's self. Trans kids have a video game for them and about them. The dream of new bodies in a new world with new rules and new guardians generates hope for a better tomorrow. *We Know The Devil* wants a better world, it

waits for the day when the unreal and the real meet like the drawn characters who appear over photographic backgrounds in its own artwork, but, for now, it wants to teach its readers to dream.

Nevada's final chapters abruptly veer away from the transgender survival guide that typifies "Late November." Instead, James rejects Maria's advice and decides he's not transgender, or at least he's not going to do anything about it right now. He steals half of the heroin out of her glove compartment. They go to a casino; he loses Maria, finds her, goes outside, calls his girlfriend for a ride home, and then abandons Maria. The final chapter ends with James considering if he should ask his girlfriend to pull over at the truckstop where they had their first date, if "the yellow light and nostalgia can turn his body inconsequential enough to get hard. He wonders whether there's enough room in the back seat of Nicole's car for her to give him head" (243). *Nevada*'s ending obfuscates any simplistic reading. One clear element: the text connects James with Maria, ending with James thinking about sex and the problem of his body's consequentiality in much the same way as Maria does when the text opens. Thus, *Nevada* returns to its original question: how do you solve a problem like Maria's junk? Or is it James's junk? Considering James's abandonment of Maria, refusal to listen to her, and theft of her heroin, *Nevada*'s ending depresses. And yet, the question of junk. Of garbage. Of genitals. And of heroin (OED 1.e). Heroin hidden in balled up socks, an article of clothing only appearing one other time in the text: when James jacks off. Maria: "The only time I couldn't lie to myself about who I wanted to be... is when I was jacking off" (213). Heroin, injected into the body. Estrogen, injected into the body. Maria's junk. James's junk. James runs away from Maria, from the casino he loses her in, the space of play he can't stand to stay within, but when it comes to the casino, it "turns out there are a bunch of other entrances" he might one day return and enter through, and now James has half her junk (241). *Nevada* wants to be stolen from. It's a transgender survival guide, but it doesn't demand a response. It lays out its needles, then looks the other way. Readers can take what they need; the novel's junk is their junk.

Nevada and *We Know The Devil* each offer a hand to past selves and, in doing so, to others who struggle and question their validity, their identity, their ability to survive in this world. What they want is for the queer youth of the future to want less, to have more than queer youth had at the time of the text. They each imagine a new world. A world where the vice-president does not support gay conversion therapy, where confused children don't fall into the trap of negative discourses surrounding trans women set by a culture desiring the extermination of trans people. They imagine a world with a new human, one which includes us. They write to free us. They write to free themselves. They transform the blood and ichor pouring from the wounds of their past into a thread to stitch up the wounds which bleed these very texts into existence, into a thread for future selves to follow.

I address this paper to my past self and to my future kids. I have no interest in bringing people out of the closet; they'll come out when they're ready. I have no interest in biological children, valuable considering I'll never reproduce. Maybe I would have under different circumstances, but the wound stitched up in the womb makes it impossible to get pregnant while the patch on my body releases hormones

which cause my wound to grow darker every day dramatically decrease the chance of getting someone else pregnant. My current choice of partners reduces that chance to zero temporarily. Orchiectomy, the removal of the testicles, will reduce that chance to zero permanently.

I say I have no interest in biological children because I cannot say I have an interest in biological children. My junk interrupts; it gets in the way of my ability to speak clearly about what I want because, when I'm honest with myself, truly honest, I want desperately to bear children. But I am a wombless woman, and I feel envious of all the women who do not face the absolute impossibility of this fact in their life.

Every day I'm envious of: children growing up happily, girls learning how to apply make-up without being stigmatized, boys not caring they don't know, women looking like women, men existing in privilege, lovers easily dealing with their junk, heterosexual couples holding their partner's hand without a thought, cisgender people existing easily in physical space, people not thinking about being transgender every single day and using that energy and brain space towards projects and thoughts that don't revolve around surviving in a world that wants nothing more than to exterminate them and people like them.

My future kids are not biological. They're just kids who look like I did.

Maybe not at age 13, unaware that what they're doing online might set off a few alarms back at the gender police headquarters.

Maybe not at high school, unaware that the reason marriage and children don't make sense is because they're not a straight boy.

But maybe they look like me at age 21, confused by their erotic appetites, pursuing a bachelor's degree in English, sitting in a living room with their best friend and saying, "I think I'm trans." They read *Gender Trouble*, *Gender Outlaws*, *Nobody Passes*. They log into some academic databases, they go hunting for articles, and when nothing appears, they think, Okay, except, like, where are all the literary critiques on works by trans women? Works by trans women exist, don't they? They have to exist. Where are they? Who writes about them? Where is the scholarship about them? Where am I?

Except

My future kid shouldn't have to ask those questions. My future kid should never have to be as jealous as I was, as I am.

I want this paper and those like it to appear instead.

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