



## Learning to See: Transgender Self-Determination and Unmarked Objectivity in April Daniels' *Dreadnought*

Jamiee Cook, Department of English, University of California, Santa Barbara

**Abstract:** Young adult [YA] science fiction has seen a significant rise in LGBTQ+ storylines in the last several years. Despite sci-fi's history of inventive gender systems, transgender storylines remain underrepresented, or shrouded in metaphoric mystery. This paper will analyze the role of gender "passing" and deadnaming (calling a person by their birth name even if they have developed a different identity), as well as the effects of biological essentializing. Through this analysis I will assert the potential of transgender YA science fiction to upend notions of cisgender supremacy and validate transgender coming-of-age experiences.

*Keywords:* transgender, YA sci-fi, transfeminism, deadnaming, superhero

Just pages into April Daniels' 2017 novel *Dreadnought*, teenage Danny takes the bus downtown, past curfew, risking the ire of her strict parents, to complete a seemingly mundane task: purchase a bottle of nail polish. Known as Daniel to her family, Danny paints her toenails in an empty alleyway, exercising one of the only methods by which she can safely enact her gender. Soon, her harmless, covert feminine ritual is interrupted by loud explosions -- and then she is hunched over the dying body of a superhero named Dreadnought, who bestows his powers upon her in his final moments. Through this transfer of power, Danny is physically transformed: she can now "pass" as female, granting her both literal (super)powers of strength, agility, and flight, and the social power of an ideal feminized body that correlates with her gender identity. A process that would have taken years of hormone treatments and surgical intervention has miraculously happened in just moments. And yet, despite this super-powered transition that materially and irreversibly modifies Danny's body, and despite her self-identification, people close to Danny still fail to see her as a girl. *Dreadnought* presents this familiar challenge of transgender acceptance and recognition alongside a

gripping plot featuring young Danny's attempt to save her city from the impending danger of Dreadnought's murderer, the cyborg named Utopia. Daniels' superhero narrative works alongside the thematic focus on transgender visibility and acceptance to provoke questions about visibility, identity, and perspective, offering a rich and suspenseful trans-feminist bildungsroman for young adult and adult readers alike.

Danny's super-powered transition in *Dreadnought* is met with disbelief by both her family and the structural powers that govern superhero activity in the novel. Unlike her predecessors, who have taken on the mantle of Dreadnought and also experienced physical modifications in the process, the legion of superheroes questions Danny's legitimacy as both a woman and a superhero, and this questioning is a direct result of her status as transgender.

Some got a little taller, one grew back, some lost toes, that sort of thing. But they were all cis -- that is to say, they weren't trans -- so their bodies didn't change to match their gender identities because they were already matching. (Daniels, 2017, p. 53)



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Although each carrier of the mantle has undergone a physical transformation that gifted them with their ideal physical forms, Danny is questioned by “The Legion” of superheroes and her family after her transition, as though she is playing a joke or attempting to deceive them. This distrust offers an important parable for modern-day narratives of transgender people as deceptive or uniquely performative, allowing YA readers to question and envision what it would take for a cis-sexist society to recognize and accept transgender people as valid and legitimate. This paper analyzes the rhetorical methods by which both political conservatives and trans-exclusionary radical feminists [TERFs] work to delegitimize transgender identity during Danny Tozer’s journey toward both visibility and the right to self-determination in *Dreadnought*. Through an analysis of the character-based reactions to Danny’s gender transition in this first installment of the *Nemesis* series, I analyze the rhetorical methods underlying the concept of unmarked objectivity and expose their role in perpetuating transphobic ideas and systems. Unmarked objectivity derives from Donna Haraway’s 1988 essay “The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” I use unmarked objectivity here to signify the partial perspectives held by those in seemingly unmarked bodies and identities -- bodies and identities that possess (racial, gendered, and/or sexual) privilege and therefore have been positioned as universal, rather than specific and marked. These bodies and identities are, of course, as specific and marked as any, despite this normative construction. By virtue of this privilege and status as universal and unmarked, these perspectives are often treated as objective, rather than also deeply entrenched in personal experience and influenced by specific cultural and social constructs, including the gender binary. YA transgender science fictional narratives like *Dreadnought* critique this notion of unmarked objectivity by centering marginal perspectives, situating ideological conflict amidst the coming-of-age

process, and reimagining social and technological systems to benefit the marginalized. Daniels depicts both the gender euphoria Danny experiences through her super-powered gender transition and the instances of gatekeeping and transphobic gaslighting that impact her super-hero narrative, offering a rich coming-out story filled with several opportunities for a critical investigation of how the concept of objectivity is weaponized to support transphobic social and political aims.

## Visuality as an Instrument of Unmarked Objectivity

Notions of objectivity and unmarked positionality are at the core of exclusionary politics, like transphobia, which positions cisgender identities as default, natural, or universal. Daniels’ novel disrupts the normative ideologies that underlie many supposedly objective accounts of reality. The choice to literalize power (through *Dreadnought*’s granting of power to Danny) and use it in service of a transgender protagonist challenges cisnormative notions of unmarked positionality by gifting Danny with the same superpowers and bodily transition offered to her cisgender predecessors; the transphobic reaction to this transition illustrates that these predecessors were received as normative and rightful successors of *Dreadnought*, exposing the ways in which cisgender identities operate as faux universal positions in modern culture. Common tropes of disenfranchisement, violence, and death often plague trans and gender-diverse characters in literature and other forms of narrative media; Daniels’ novel rejects these tropes, and instead poses larger epistemological questions: what does it mean to know one’s gender? How do cultural assumptions and norms surrounding gender limit our perspective? How can we broaden our individual and cultural perspectives, and what role does visuality play in that effort?



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Objectivity is closely associated with visuality, in that visuality can be wagered as an extension of objectivity -- to see is, for some, to believe. This association is often used to delegitimize transgender people by suggesting that because a transgender person's body does not replicate the dominant perspective (figured as the objective truth) of what a particularly gendered body should look like, their gender is then false, a misconception, or a psychological condition. This association of visuality with ways of knowing, recognizing, categorizing, or delimiting gender is complex and can cause harm to gender diverse people who are not offered such an extreme science fictional transition as Danny, people whose visuality may not appear to coincide with cultural expectations of gender.

Butler writes that gender is "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (Butler, 1988, pg. 522). From birth, visuality is positioned as an objective method of knowing and recognizing gender. Viewing the genital outline of a fetus in utero via a sonogram is considered a medically viable (in other words, objective) method of identifying sex, which is constructed as a determinant of gender. To all but a doctor trained in the science fictional technologies of Danny's world, her body represents what the medical establishment would characterize as "female." Daniels' narrative disrupts the idea that anything is objective -- even biological sex -- by allowing biological sex to act as a malleable characteristic in this world. It is later discovered that Danny does not have a womb, and therefore will not be able to become pregnant.

Although her reproductive transition is what TERFs in this narrative might call "incomplete," simply introducing biological sex as determined by one's desire for a specific body and enacted by opaque technologies of power ("super powers") offers a reading of both sex and gender as product of social construction and partial perspective. Danny's

transition in *Dreadnought* exemplifies Butler's assertion that gender "conceals its genesis;" her transition is bodily, and her sex assigned at birth is only determinable via a series of complex medical tests at the headquarters of the superhero association Legion Pacifica. If the visualization of genital sex is seen as the genesis of gender, Danny should be recognized and accepted as a girl. That she is still questioned and positioned as false or performative in her gender illustrates both the immense complexity of gender as a construct and the limitations of visuality in facilitating knowledge or recognition of gender identity.

The limitations of visuality as a method of knowing is further exemplified by Danny's interactions with her parents following her transition. When Danny returns home, unaware at this point of her superhuman capabilities, her father Roger is unable to see her. Despite the fact that her mother recognizes Danny as some version of the child that left her house that morning, Roger's visual limitations, restricted by his inability to recognize himself as having a perspective (as opposed to just *knowing*), prevent him from recognizing his child. When Danny says "Hi, Dad," Roger immediately reads her body as a young woman's, and therefore *not* Danny's: "Wh- I don't have a daughter" (Daniels, 2017, p.22). Once Roger is finally convinced that the girl who stands before him is, in fact, Danny, he vows to "fix" her, and sets in place a plan to force Danny into de-transitional medical care (p.24). While readers can infer that Roger does not believe that Danny's bodily transition makes her a girl, he somehow believes that bodily detransition will make her a boy. The limitations of visuality here are Roger's: despite the fact that Danny's gender identity is now perceived by most to "match" her appearance (a problematic itself), and despite the fact that Danny articulates repeatedly that this is a desired transition, the perspective held by Roger, derived from his position as her father and as a cisgender heterosexual man, interferes with his ability to actually recognize her.



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Roger's inability to see Danny offers a new, metaphoric use of the invisibility trope in superhero fiction. Rather than invisibility acting as a superpower, as protection against harm or a stealth tactic, the metaphoric invisibility here works as a consequence of unmarked objectivity. As a remedy to ways of seeing that allow the perceiver to remain unmarked, Haraway calls for an embodied vision that is constituted through the body and through our respective positionalities (Haraway, 1988). Like Sandra Harding's notion of the view from below, Haraway calls for a rejection of knowledge produces via a "gaze from nowhere" (p. 581). The idea of an objectivity that "mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (p. 581) is linked to the universalizing of certain identities, and therefore the specification (or marking) of others. By claiming the power of seeing but rejecting the return of that gaze, cisgender people are afforded the category of universal, default, or "normative" genders, escaping that return vision. Thus, while cisgender people are afforded the protections of the supposed invisibility of our gender and its unmarked state, transgender and gender-different people experience not the protection of invisibility but the burden of it.

Roger claims this "power to see and not be seen" in his rejection of Danny's new body and her now-visible identity as a girl. Danny's mother does not identify her immediately, but slowly begins to recognize her child. She encourages Roger to pause and attempt to see Danny: "This is Danny. Look at... well, *look*" (Daniels, 2017, p.23). Daniels then writes that Roger's eyes widen, apparently evoking his attempt to follow his wife's imperative to just *look*. However, clearly, all Roger can see is what Danny is not:

"We're going to make this right. I love you. You're my son."

I take a half step back. "Well... not anymore."

We'll go to the doctors. We'll get this looked at," he says. Dad doesn't sound like he's all here anymore. He's not really looking at me. He's looking past me, toward some kind of pathetic optimism where he doesn't have to deal with who I really am. (Daniels, 2017, pp. 23-24).

Roger takes his wife's instruction to look as an opportunity to look for the person he wants to see – his son. Because he allows (consciously or otherwise) his perspective to masquerade as objective and unmarked, he can only recognize Danny in context of a mistake requiring medical intervention. He does not know himself to be the father of a daughter, so therefore Danny must not be a girl. Were he to truly attempt to look without projecting his own identity as the father of a son onto Danny, he would see Danny's "same short blond hair, same basic face, but softened by the puberty [she] should have had" (Daniels, 2017, p.22). As he looks "past" Danny, feigning vision but seeing someone who isn't there, he demonstrates the limitations of a marked perspective that cannot acknowledge its own partiality. He cannot see who clearly stands in front of him: his daughter who now meets all normative cultural criteria to be viewed as a girl, and who responds to his statement that she is his son with a clear statement to the contrary: "Not anymore" (Daniels, 2017, pp. 23-24).

Surprise, astonishment, and inquiry are expected in this situation; after all, Danny left the house that morning looking very different from the physical form she returns in. It is not Roger's inability to *accept* Danny that I am admonishing here -- although, as the novel progresses, that too is worthy of critique. Before acceptance, before reintegration into the family structure, and before comfort with Danny's gender identity can be achieved, the first and most basic step is for Roger to *see* Danny. This is something he, and others who knew her before her transition, repeatedly fail to do and, importantly, that failure is unknowable to them. When those with socially normative identities conflate their perspectives with objectivity, they begin to lose sight of that which they



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cannot see. Roger's inability to see Danny illustrates this profound lack.

## The False Promise of Passing

Danny's transition suggests then that visibility, when figured as a method of knowing or understanding the truth of identity, is limited. This limitation of visibility is closely related to the concept of passing and its cultural associations. Passing is a fraught term usually applied to someone who is marked by (gendered, sexual, and/or racialized) marginality but is viewed or perceived as in the dominant, unmarked group. Julia Serano writes of the potentially harmful use of the term: "Primarily, it gives the impression that the marked person is the active party (i.e., they are working hard to achieve a false appearance), and that the perceiver is merely a passive and objective observer who is 'fooled' by the marked individual" (Serano, 2013, p. 194). While Danny's body now succeeds at representing the dominant perspective of womanhood -- so much so that Danny realizes her body is actually modeled from a "photoshopped underwear model" -- she is still viewed as an interloper, treated as though she is attempting to fool the world with her created body (Daniels, 2017, p. 54).

Some may interpret Danny's gender transition as a reaffirmation of binary gender systems or a valorization of passing, as it is her physical transition that provides mental and emotional relief from feelings of gender dysphoria and suicidality, but I read Danny's transition instead as provoking several questions about the link between visibility, identity, and social power: What if this life-saving, gender-affirmative medical care, meant to allow people to acquire the physical characteristics commonly associated with their gender identity, was readily available, and this simple? Or -- what if such care was rendered less necessary? What if, culturally, we divorced identity from visibility? Or constructed their linkage from a different position, a different perspective? What power (and protection) is inherent in passing, in reaffirming the existing cultural link

between identity and visibility, and how might we make that power accessible, or irrelevant?

Shapeshifters reveal, alongside an idea of identity as unfixed, an indication of the central role the visibility of the body plays within the process of identity. They also characterize and represent an idea of identity as embodied performance, subject to the limitations of visibility available to the "shapeshifting" body. (Kirkpatrick 2015, p. 129)

To be clear: Danny is not a shapeshifter. Her body is transformed only once, at the moment the mantle of Dreadnought is bestowed upon her, and her bodily transformation is a result of her own internal desire. So, the lack of identity fixity Kirkpatrick references is less applicable to Danny's journey. Unlike many non-cisgender people, Danny does not experience her gender as continually changing, evolving, or malleable: she is, and always has been, a girl. When her mother, in an attempt to process her sudden transition, says "I feel like I've lost my son," Danny firmly replies "Mom, you never had a son" (Daniels, 2017, p. 188), reflecting this fixity. Despite these divergences from Kirkpatrick's concepts of the shapeshifting trope above, the role of visibility in identity development and the notion of identity as "embodied performance" which is "subject to the limitations of visibility" offers an important framework for considering this narrative's implied rejection of unmarked objectivity (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p.129). While a rejection of binarized notions of gender is important, and transgender validation should never be predicated on appearance or compliance with gendered norms, visibility often plays an important role in the social and interpersonal lives of trans peoples.

While Danny now has unquestioned access to the "embodied performance" of her identity through her newly transformed body, she is still limited by what Kirkpatrick calls the "limitations of visibility available to the shapeshifting body" (2015, p. 129). As Serano's positioning of the perceiver as "merely a passive and objective observer" reveals, "identitarian" positions that are seen as unmarked -- in this case, cisgenderism --



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only obtain this non-categorization through access to unquestioned social and political power. Despite the social and political privilege of inhabiting a dominant, unmarked positionality, the view from such a position is not unencumbered; Kirkpatrick's "limitations of visibility" are actually limitations of this supposedly unmarked perspective. By acknowledging the position of the "passive and objective" observer as an active, specific, marked entity, subject to the limitations of its own perspective, the supposed universal category is exposed as just another variation of human existence. In order "to become answerable for what [or whom] we learn how to see" - or whom we refuse to see - we must undo this binary of marked and unmarked perspectives and acknowledge these visual limitations (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Danny's bodily transformation defies the cissexist idea that passing confers legitimacy; Danny now passes, but her passing body does not overcome the entrenched cissexism that limits individual perspective in both human and superhuman worlds.

The valorization of passing is a cissexist reaffirmation of biological essentialism. In addition to this critique is the reality that passing is not accessible for everyone, even if they desire it or require it as a method of protection against transphobic violence. Part of the initial appeal that Daniels' series offers to young adult readers is that it imagines a world in which a "passing" physical transition is not only possible, but accessible. In light of the massive impediments to transgender healthcare in the U.S., an instantaneous, painless, non-pathologized, and free gender-affirmative transition like the one Danny experiences is highly compelling. Despite the incremental progress toward greater trans and nonbinary inclusion in the United States over the past half a century, the path to accessible and affordable gender-affirmative healthcare is riddled with barriers, many of which are steeped in notions of unmarked objectivity. For example, in 2018, the Kansas State Republican Party voted against any measure that would legally validate the existence of transgender

diverse people in their state.<sup>1</sup> In their committee resolution, they write that they believe in "God's design for gender as determined by biological sex and not by self-perception" (Neira and Lee, 2021, p. 121). The use of self-perception" in this statement calls back to Serano's critique of the perceiver as unmarked: it is not only gender-diverse people who have their own perceptions of gender, despite this clear implication. One might even argue that gender itself is a perception. By introducing "biological sex" and "self-perception" as dichotomous, the writers of this resolution encourage us to believe that biology and scientific accounts of the body are not also influenced, perhaps even governed by, perspective. This separation of "fact" from perspective and positionality continues to endanger queer and trans people who are excluded from health care and civil society due to its influence.

This particular resolution by Kansas State Republicans also reveals an impulse among gender conservatives toward "the god trick," a rhetorical move that Haraway criticizes in her 1988 essay. Despite its linguistic resonance with the use of "God's design" in the Republican resolution above, Haraway's formulation of "the god trick" is not about Christian power, but about the hegemonic power of dominant perspectives. The god trick is employed either consciously or subconsciously as a tool of manipulation, convincing others that the "scientific" perspective that is most objective, trustworthy, and rigorous is one that is without perspective at all -- the "trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). To state that "God's design for gender" is "determined by biological sex" is a highly conspicuous use of the god trick; it conflates a supposedly universal understanding of a religious "God" with the equally suspect universalizing of "biological sex," removing the author's own social, religious, and gendered perspectives from the meaning-making process. *Dreadnought*, as a text concerned with perspective and particularity, rejects the god-trick by illustrating clearly the ways in which individual perspective and social location shape and limit who is



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able to be seen, and by whom. That Danny's identity remains invisibilized, unable to be seen as a girl despite her transition and self-declaration, suggests that while passing is unethically figured as a necessary precondition of transgender acceptance, it does not always buy admittance into a gendered identity category.

## Centering Transfeminist Epistemes

The importance of naming is a key theme in Daniels' *Dreadnought*. Self-selected names offer one of the ways in which transgender people, especially transgender youth, "render themselves intelligible" to their families, friends, and to a cisgender-dominant culture at large (Sinclair-Palm, 2017, p. 2). Danny has gone by "Danny" her entire life, and continues to do so throughout the novel but, importantly, she articulates her true full name as Danielle. After Danny is transformed by the dying Dreadnought and receives both the power of the mantle and her desired physical form, she is summoned to meet the Legion Pacifica, an elite group of superheroes formerly led by the previous Dreadnought. It is at this point that Danny first asserts the power of naming by asking Doc Impossible to introduce her as Danielle Tozer. Doc Impossible, who has already proven herself to be Danny's greatest ally in the Legion, gladly introduces her: "Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce Danielle Tozer, carrier of the mantle."

This empowering moment of self-declaration is soon interrupted by Graywytych, a woman superhero who functions as Daniels' archetypal villain and TERF.. Graywytych immediately interjects: "*Daniel* Tozer" (Daniels, 2017, p. 58). Danny's internal dialogue reveals the depth of Graywytych's hostility: "She's looking at me like I'm an interloper" (p.58). Graywytych's refusal of Danny's appropriate name is called "deadnaming," or the practice of using a transgender person's pre-transition name (Sinclair-Palm, 2017, p.5). This is a delegitimizing tactic that permeates anti-transgender rhetoric from all political directions, and it assumes a sense of omnipotence on the part of the deadnamer. By disregarding Danny's

chosen name and reasserting a gendered name that fits with her interpretation of Danny, Graywytych is communicating that she knows who Danny is with more certainty than Danny herself.

This calls back to Serano's indictment of the perceiver in her analysis "passing." She writes that the perceiver is positioned as a "passive and objective observer" who is being "fooled by the marked individual" (Serano, 2013, 194). Graywytych confirms her self-perception as the objective observer and Danny as the interloper when she states, unfoundedly, that Danny does not wish to carry the Mantle of Dreadnought: "He only wants to keep it to be sure of being able to continue perpetrating this masquerade of his [sic]" (Daniels, 2017. p. 66). By calling Danny's gender identity a masquerade, Graywytych illustrates Serano's conception of the perceiver as viewing the transgender person as an imitation or simulation, someone who is attempting to fool them. Further, this implication that Danny is masquerading as a woman resonates with common rhetorical moves in trans-exclusionary radical feminism which often positions transgender women as impersonators or interlopers, rather than simply women.

To put the importance of self-selected names in context of this larger discussion about the false security provided by notions of perspective-less objectivity, I return to Haraway's writings about the importance of social location and partial perspective in knowledge-making:

We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name. So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about the particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. (Haraway, 1988, p. 583)



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I read Haraway's imperative to "name where we are and are not" as a reaffirmation of the importance of acknowledging our partial perspectives that are informed by social location -- location which is laid out across a map in which the center is figured as the site of power, knowledge, and omnipotence, or a sort of view from above. By naming herself and asserting that name to the novel's trans-inclusive feminist mentor, Doc Impossible, Danny is communicating where she is on that map -- or, perhaps more importantly, where she is not. Thus, self-selected naming practices offer for trans youth a method by which they can assert their perspective in all of its partiality and contingency. Graywytch's deadnaming of Danny, in addition to presenting a clear desire to delegitimize her identity as a woman, also asserts this "false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility." "The audacious implication that Graywytch, having met Danny only seconds before, might somehow have the unencumbered vision to define Danny for herself is a clear illustration of partial perspective masquerading as universal and unmarked objectivity. Graywytch positions herself as the knower, and Danny the object to be known, denying her and transgender women like her the agency to articulate their own self-knowledge. Trans-exclusionary radical feminism's use of objectivity to delegitimize transgender identity offers a departure from the universalizing impulse of political conservatives, like Kansas State Republicans and, arguably, Danny's dad, Roger, whose identity as a cisgender, heterosexual man is often perceived as universal or unmarked. The TERF iterations of transphobia often operate, not as a universal or unmarked perspective, as in the case of Kansas State Republican's equation of their god with the supposed facts of biology, but as inherently specific and marked. They articulate their gender theories as cisgender women, and gatekeeping admission into the gendered category.

The history of lesbian separatism, a political movement active primarily in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, offers a rich archive of lesbian-feminist community building and political activism that undoubtedly has shaped feminist theorizing in the 20th century. That tradition comes from a clear understanding and valuation of women as inherently marked, or different from men. One such contribution is separatist group Radicalesbians's concept of the "woman-identified-woman," coined in their self-published essay of the same name (Radicalesbians, 1970, p.1). The "woman-identified-woman" was meant to signify a political identity for those who sought economic, political, social, and romantic life outside of the relations provided by heterosexual culture. Lesbian separatism was largely a cisgender movement, and individual separatist groups like Dykes and Gorgons and The Gutter Dyke Collective<sup>2</sup> often strongly condemned the inclusion of transgender women in their spaces.

Julie R. Enszer advocates for an understanding of lesbian separatism as a nuanced, contradictory, and at times productive political theory. For the purposes of this critical examination of YA science fiction's potential to destabilize transphobic notions of unmarked objectivity, however, I focus here on the transphobic iterations of lesbian feminist thought to contextualize their appearance in *Dreadnought*. Enszer's writing about the conflict between Olivia Records, an all-women music production company, and Janice Raymond, infamous anti-trans theorist and writer of *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), provides a clear example of the transphobic rhetoric used in the separatist movement. Olivia Records employed Sandy Stone, a transgender woman, in 1974 as part of their production team, which Raymond and other known trans-exclusionary separatists protested (Morris, 2015). Enszer quotes Raymond, who wrote to the record company: "We feel that it was and is irresponsible of you to have presented this person as a woman to the women's community when in fact he [sic] is a post-operative transsexual" (Enszer, 2016, p. 187).



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Raymond's transphobia, characterized by Halberstam as a sort of "lesbian feminist paranoia"<sup>3</sup> reveals a core belief in her own objectivity, rooted in biological essentialist views of gender as a product of sexual labeling. This conflation of perspective with objectivity suggests a deep inability to reckon with the role of

difference within political identity groups, and a rigidity in her view of sex and gender. Enszer suggests that this conflict between Raymond and Olivia Records reveals divergence in lesbian separatist thinking: "The Olivia Records collective asserts a vision of lesbian separatism that is relational and evolving, while Raymond and the other feminists named in the letter ask for clear and definite boundaries" (Enzer 2016, p.187). The notion of a political theory that is "relational and evolving" is akin to Haraway's advocacy of an embodied vision which acknowledges its partiality and perspective; after all, "clear and definite boundaries" must be drawn from a particular perspective, and must present as objective truths, despite their construction, to enforce compliance.

This focus on biological labels and their supposed relationship to binary gender categories upheld by some lesbian separatists and contemporary Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists makes a clear debut in Graywyth's rejection of Danny in *Dreadnought*. When the Legion begins to discuss Danny's suitability for the mantle, and by extension her ability to claim the name of *Dreadnought* as her "supranym," Graywyth affirms Danny's earlier observation that she has cast Danny as an "interloper," both within The Legion and within a women's community:

"Well... the circumstances of his [sic] empowerment are...unusual."

"Her," I say, and everyone looks at me, like they'd forgotten I was here already.

"That's in dispute," says Graywyth primly. "You were raised to be a man. Your privilege blinds you, makes you dangerous."

"I'm just as much a girl as you are."

"Oh really?" She leans forward, steepled her fingers.

"Do you even know how to put in a tampon?"

[Daniels, 2017, p. 65]

In this excerpt, we see Graywyth return to her assertion of omnipotent power by misgendering Danny and asserting her ability to put Danny's gender into "dispute," as though both her gender and Danny herself are an object of study, subject to some sort of scientific process of legitimation. Graywyth then begins to echo TERF rhetoric by expounding two key talking points often found in anti-transgender feminist writing: that trans women do not belong in cisgender women's communities because they have been tainted by male privilege, and that the biological fact of having a vagina and uterus is the only sufficient condition to warrant identification as a woman.<sup>4</sup> On this first argument, the privilege afforded to cisgender men is evident, and not something I wish to dispute, although it is an accusation that is often levied without appropriate attention to other social factors, like race and economic class.<sup>5</sup> And yet, to return to the importance of naming and of self-identification: Danny is *not* a cisgender man, and to argue that transgender women are somehow afforded more social and political protection is patently false. Even when trans people desire and gain access to medical transition, and even if they are able to "pass" as cisgender, they are statistically at a greater risk of discrimination and harassment, both socially and in the workplace.<sup>4</sup> So while the feminist talking point of "male privilege" is a convenient rhetorical tool to delegitimize trans people who were assigned male at birth, it is a gross misrepresentation of the actual lived experiences of transgender and gender-different people in a cissexist system. Danny's experience of an abusive father who attempts to masculinize her at an early age and insists repeatedly that she undergo de-transitional medical care is a clear indicator that Danny's childhood



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does not present the “danger” associated with “male privilege,” as Graywytch would have the Legion believe (Daniels, 2017, p.65).

“Male privilege” aside, the most pervasive and insidious argument made by Graywytch here is that biological sex categories are a necessary determinant of gender identity. Despite the fact that much of feminist organizing has attempted to reject the association of womanhood with only what we widely refer to as “female” bodies, those who feel threatened by transgender women’s inclusion in women’s identity communities often resort to this form of biological essentialism, which, to think with Haraway, “threaten[s] the fragile space for social constructionism and critical theory” that has been “called into being by feminist concepts of gender as socially, historically, and semiotically positioned difference” (Haraway, 1988, p.591). In other words, when TERFs (represented here by Graywytch) resort to these biologically-essentialist views of gender, they assert a sense of unmarked objectivity that betrays the constructionist roots of feminist theory, instead relying on patriarchal tropes that form the basis of misogyny. Despite the feminist roots of gender constructivism, many trans-exclusionary thinkers have rejected the social constructionist model entirely. This dates back to one of the first lesbian-separatist articulations of an anti-transgender political agenda. The Gutter Dyke Collective published the first statement in 1973 that stated “male-to-constructed-female transsexuals are not wimmin” (reproduced in Spinster, 1988, p. 101).

The derogatory use of “constructed” in this document indicates a belief that transgender women are false, that their identity as women is a creation of their own imagination, and that cisgender women are somehow outside the process of social construction; their identity as women just *is*. This denies both transgender and cisgender women any agency in constructing their gender, and their selves.

Haraway, though, is very careful to avoid disregarding notions of biology and the importance of

the body entirely. She warns that to disregard biological accounts of sex is to position “the body itself as anything but a blank page for social inscriptions, including those of biological discourse” (Haraway, 1988, p.591). She calls for an embodied viscosity that embraces the partiality of individual perspective as a key component in the knowledge-making process, so it therefore follows that “authoritative biological accounts of sex” remain important to this embodied vision. The question, then, is who bestows authority on these biological accounts? For Haraway, and for Danny’s trans-inclusive feminist mentor and scientist Doc Impossible, that authority must come from the “object” (subject) of study. Haraway writes that under “White Capitalist Patriarchy,” which “turns everything into a resource for appropriation,” the object must never become the agent and must never be responsible for the creation of knowledge (Haraway, 1988, p.592). If the “object” -- here, Danny’s transgender body -- were to become the agent -- Danny herself -- then Graywytch, the supposed objective perceiver, would be displaced as the central knower of Danny’s identity. Were Graywytch to adopt this cognitive framework, she would be encouraged to decenter her own perspective in support of Danny’s self-determination.

## *Dreadnought* as a Trans-Feminist Bildungsroman

Daniels’ *Dreadnought* transcends the boundaries of the traditional bildungsroman form in its depiction of a specifically transgender coming-of-age. The bildungsroman, or the novel of development, was coined by Karl Morgenstern in 1819 and has since been considered the “fundamental form” of the European novel (Frow et. al., n.p.). The traditional European form often presents a male character, usually racially and/or economically privileged, who encounters a test or challenge that facilitates character growth, moving the character away from childhood and into adulthood (which often marks a move away from provinciality).

Daniels offers a strong shift from this traditional form in both genre (science fiction) and the framing of the central character: Danny, while racially privileged, is marked by her inherent lack of visibility and marginal status as a transgender girl. Due to the centrality of the bildung form in European and American literature of the



## Learning to See, continued

20th century, there has been significant revisioning in bildung scholarship from a feminist and critical race perspective. Annis Pratt's concept of "growing down" and Joanna Frye's notions of multiple feminine selves in the bildungsroman inform many of these feminist approaches to the genre. Geta LeSeur's 1995 book *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* offers an analysis of Black iterations of the genre and a critique of male dominance in the field. These are formative texts in the study of the marginal bildungsroman and represent an opening of the generic frame that has historically restricted these narratives of young adult emergence, but the scholarship on LGBTQ+ iterations of the coming of age genre are lacking. Meredith Miller's 2018 essay "The Lesbian, Gay, and Trans Bildungsroman" offers important critical insight into queer coming-of-age narratives, but focuses primarily on cisgender gay or lesbian texts at the expense of explicitly trans characters. *Dreadnought* is a particularly unique example of the transgender bildungsroman because it features a transgender girl who also identifies as a lesbian, offering multiple avenues for cross-coalitional and intersectional analysis.

*Dreadnought*'s Danny offers readers and scholars of the genre a new model for the transition between childhood and adulthood by centering self-determination and staging a rejection of unmarked objectivity. Although Danny's gender transition does not render her a woman in the eyes of her father, Roger, or the TERF-archetype Graywytych, it provides her with a sense of self-assuredness and a feeling of legitimacy, marking a move away from adolescent insecurity to an imperfect, but enduring sense of validity in her identity. At the end of the novel, after Danny has succeeded in an epic battle and saved the lives of several, she holds a press conference as the new holder of the mantle of *Dreadnought*. In an act of public visibility, she tells the press: "I am transgender, and a lesbian, and I'm not ashamed of that" (Daniels, 2017, p. 281). For Danny, this articulation of her identity is a reclamation of power and an act of self-representation; it allows her to tell her own story, rather than only asserting her identity when faced with

the essentializing rhetoric of others. In spite of her now-estranged parents' and Graywytych's transphobia, which constitute the major social and internal challenges in this bildungsroman, Danny is now able to recognize the power inherent in asserting her own marked perspective. This revelation advances a new perspective on the modern coming-of-age journey: characters may not only undergo transformation into a state of maturity *by* the outside world, but via an emerging self-understanding and, in Danny's case, a specifically gendered agency.

Despite the challenges posed by transphobic notions of biology and normative gender identity, *Dreadnought* offers Danny one important ally in her coming-of-age process: Doc Impossible, the doctor and scientist for The Legion. Doc Impossible fulfills the mentorship role typical in many bildungsromane. Apprenticeship is a strong thematic focus of many bildungsromane in the original German form, and that connection is clear in *Dreadnought*. Danny, as a newly-transitioned superhero, must learn the rules and expectations of the trade (and, in *Dreadnought*, superhuman capabilities *do* function alongside capital to constitute an occupation or trade). As a scientific and medical authority on superhuman powers and technology, Doc Impossible is a highly capable mentor for young Danny. However, her role here is unique in the larger context of the bildungsroman genre because she both reflects Danny's identity as a woman, and validates Danny's transgender identity as a scientific authority. As Maroula Joannou's writing on the female bildungsroman asserts, same-gender mentorships are typical for male protagonists, but exceptional for women: "the guidance of a mentor of their own sex is *de rigueur* for the male hero but not the female characters in the classical bildungsroman" (2019, p. 211).

Doc Impossible's mentorship not only breaks convention in positioning a woman as a key authority figure; she offers YA readers a different model for thinking about the relationship between science, medicine, and transgender identity. At several important junctures in Danny's early post-transition life, Doc



## Learning to See, Continued

Impossible offers her solace and defense against biological essentializing, which come both from Graywythch and from Danny herself. As part of Danny's medical examination at Legion Tower (an examination all new superheroes are subject to), Doc Impossible discovers that Danny, despite her fantastical transition that defied the limits of current medical science, does not have a uterus. Danny's reaction is one of extreme dejection, provoking an emotionally violent outburst. She says to Doc Impossible, through tears, "I guess I just thought that I was finally a real girl" (Daniels, 2017, p.53). Danny's invocation of the concept of *realness* in delegitimizing her own identity calls back to the cisnormative conditioning she has been exposed to throughout her life; she too has come to ascribe to Graywythch's conflation of constructed biological categories with gender identity. Doc Impossible, enacting her role as mentor, replies, "Hey! None of that! You think it's a uterus that makes a woman? Bullshit. You feel like you're a girl, you live it, it's part of you? Then you're a girl. That's the end of it, no quibbling. You're as real a girl as anyone" (Daniels, 2017, p.53). Doc Impossible's response here emphasizes subjective feeling ("you feel like you're a girl"), lived experience ("you live it"), and identity formation ("it's a part of you") to provide Danny and readers with a model of scientific practice that both acknowledges the realities of the body (that Danny will never be able to become pregnant) and validates the importance of subjective experience and perspective. Because *Dreadnought* is ultimately a bildungsroman, the challenges Danny encounters due to the transphobia of her father, of Graywythch, and her own sense of internalized transphobia constitute an important challenge to her character, which she is tasked with overcoming. Doc Impossible's mentorship as the didactic voice of the novel asserts the value of self-determination, affirming Danny's self-knowledge rather than imposing notions of biological determinism and adult intellectual superiority that often plague YA narratives of coming-out.

## Conclusion

Daniels' *Dreadnought* both affirms and transgresses generic boundaries of science fiction, young adult literature, and the bildungsroman in order to offer a picture of transgender sovereignty and self-actualization rarely seen in depictions of trans and gender nonconforming stories. Often, narratives of transgender youth focus on a linear path from one constructed biological sex marker to another, highlighting family and societal strife and the journey toward hormones and surgical transitional care (Bittner et. al., 2016, n.p.). Through the suspended disbelief available in the sci-fi genre, Daniels' begins where other narratives end. Instead of marking Danny's physical transition as the end of her coming-of-age narrative, Daniels positions her physical transition at the very beginning of Danny's journey, illustrating that transgender agency, growth, and development does not hinge on or end with medical intervention. Relatedly, the forward positioning of Danny's transition also illustrates that a "passing" body does not necessarily afford transgender people the right to unquestioned self-determination.

In presenting this "what-if" scenario of an instantaneous and physically painless medical transition, *Dreadnought* asks YA readers to question the limits of perspective and visibility -- to question what our bodies and our standpoints allow us to see, and to validate the existence of that which we have not yet learned to see. Like so many science fictional narratives of marginalization and struggle, *Dreadnought* implores us to hold space for the identities, perspectives, and experiences that our always inevitably marked perspectives have yet to offer us access to, and gestures toward a future in which deviance from cisheteropatriarchy is not delegitimized by an unmarked, bodiless, "conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581).



## Learning to See, Continued

### Notes

<sup>1</sup><https://issuu.com/tcj5/docs/resolution> Conferring validity and visibility upon trans and nonbinary identities in the eyes of the state is a necessary precondition to mandating coverage for transgender health care.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Dykes and Gorgons, The Gutter Dyke Collective, and other separatist groups, see *For Lesbians Only : a Separatist Anthology*, by Sidney Spinster, published by Onlywomen Press in 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Halberstam, 1998, p.147

<sup>4</sup> For some of the most current iterations of these decades-old talking points, see J.K. Rowling's (writer of the beloved children/YA fantasy series *Harry Potter*) latest foray into anti-transgender activism on her personal blog. Philosophy scholar Kathleen Stock's essays on the platform Medium provide additional fodder for these trans-exclusionary arguments. For what I consider origin writing on trans-exclusion in feminist spaces, see writings by Sidney Spinster and Janice Raymond.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberé Crenshaw's writings on intersectionality in legal studies have offered an important theoretical basis for critiques such as these.

<sup>6</sup> See Emilia L. Lombardi PhD, Riki Anne Wilchins, Dana Priesing Esq. & Diana Malouf (2002) Gender Violence, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 42:1, 89-101, DOI: [10.1300/J082v42n01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v42n01_05)



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