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»Future early«

Trans* Body as Metaphor in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019)

Jeanette Winterson's newest novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story* revolves around technological innovation and its effects on human development. The book's examinations feature trans* character Ry Shelley and transhumanist Victor Stein who interprets Ry's transitioned body as a metaphor for his ideal transhumanist future. This metaphor is based on three main textually conceptualized similarities between trans* identity and transhumanism: a hybridity in Ry's gender identity and embodiment as well as in a transhumanist vision of future human identity, the dissolution of biological determinism and the autonomy to change one's body, associated with recent technological advancement. The novel characterizes this metaphORIZATION process as questionable, positing it with a character who represents not just the Frankenstein archetype but a possibly metaphysical, non-human entity. However, despite this inherent critique of harmful practices of objectification and exploitation of trans* people, *Frankissstein* ultimately reproduces similar practices in other aspects of its trans* representation.

Introduction

2019 saw the publication of British writer Jeanette Winterson's most recent novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story*.¹ In the same year, I realized that I was trans²

- 1 Jeanette Winterson: *Frankissstein. A Love Story*. London 2019. In the following, I will be referencing this edition using in-text citation.
- 2 I will follow Jack Halberstam in using the term trans* to signify an openness to the diverse terminology used in the past and present regarding gender non-conforming and/or non-cis identities (e. g. »transsexual«, »transgender«). When speaking of indi-

and I started to grapple with the fact that ›the trans* body‹ wasn't just one of many kinds of embodiment that I happened to inhabit. Much more than that, ›the trans* body‹ is and has always been a cultural concept of public contestation, a battleground on a political level as well as a projection screen by which others could produce meaning around gender and other aspects of the world. *Frankissstein* displays one such way of instrumentalizing the trans* body in how one of the cis – i. e. non-trans* – characters interprets a trans* character's body as »future early« (p. 119), a manifestation of what is to come on a wider scale in terms of self-determined body modification. In this paper, I will take a closer look at this kind of metaphorization process as portrayed (and critiqued) in the novel, as well as other aspects of Winterson's trans* representation.

Frankissstein was published at a point that makes a discussion of its portrayal of trans* issues and experiences particularly relevant. At the end of a decade that has seen the so-called »Transgender Tipping Point«³ in 2014, sensationalist media attention surrounding the topic has been more and more rampant in Western countries. Internationally speaking, the United Kingdom has become particularly infamous regarding gender-critical or trans-exclusionary radical feminist (short: TERF) talking points like the supposed dangers of opening women-only spaces to trans* women or the accessibility of trans* healthcare to trans* youth. With this backdrop in mind, it's easy to see how the trans* body as »future early« represents a charged metaphor, especially amidst the widely unchallenged media rhetoric that paints the new-found visibility of trans* people as a recent trend or the newly emerged menace of a ›trans* ideology‹.⁴

Frankissstein on its part contextualizes trans* identity into a larger thematic framework around the advancement of technology and the changes it has brought and will continue to bring to humankind. The novel tells two stories alongside one another, interweaving them and blurring the lines between the two. On the one hand, we follow Mary Shelley's biography, starting off with the original *Frankenstein's* (1818; 1831) genesis. On the other hand, we read a modern re-telling of the original *Frankenstein* set in the 21st century, where the protagonists are trans* surgeon and first-person narrator Ry Shelley⁵ and transhumanist researcher Victor Stein. Transhumanism in

vidual trans* people, I will use their self-chosen labels. Cf. Jack Halberstam: *Trans*. A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Berkeley 2017, p. 4.

3 Katy Steinmetz: »The Transgender Tipping Point«. In: *Time* (29/05/2014). <https://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/> (Last accessed: 30/10/2022).

4 Cf. Shon Faye: *The Transgender Issue. An Argument for Justice*. Dublin 2022, p. 5–16.

5 As will be discussed in further detail later, Ry doesn't correct other characters, who address them as a man, while the character themselves expresses a fluid gender identity in their first-person narration. Since Ry never explicitly clarifies their pronouns nor gives a definition of their gender identity that clearly identifies them with one of the binary genders, I will refer to them using gender-neutral language.

general can be defined as an intellectual movement aiming to enhance human body and human society via technology, often to the point of a newly developed humanoid life-form or a significant rise in power of artificial intelligence.⁶ With this in mind, it may come as no surprise that it is Victor who constructs the before-mentioned metaphor and that it is Ry's body that is metaphorized. These two characters, the concepts they represent – trans* identity and transhumanism – and their associated themes come to be at the heart of the novel's topical labyrinth, most prominently exemplifying the questions driving the text: Which conventional categories will dissolve and which boundaries will be crossed as we walk towards an unknown future in which technology dominates more and more of our lives, bodies and minds? And in what alternative ways may we think of a future society if we zoom in on our understanding of what differentiates human/technology, mind/body, man/woman, fact/fiction, and past/present/future?

Academic discussions of *Frankissstein* have so far centered on what Mojca Kregel calls the novel's »actualizations of the Monster motif«⁷ as derived from Frankenstein's monster. This has been observed in the novel's conception of monstrosity as emblematic for a modern human experience⁸ as well as on a narrative level.⁹ The novel's trans* representation has been a repeated point of discussion, focused on by Maria Ramnehill,¹⁰ while Lin Shaojing has examined the novel's transhumanist conception through Promethean mythos.¹¹ Their omnipresence in the novel's reception underlines how these two concepts form the basis of *Frankissstein*'s own discussion of what a possible future might look like.

However, the assumed connection between trans* identity and transhumanism is one that stands on shaky ground. In this paper, I would like to analyze how the novel approaches the metaphorization of the trans* body in a transhumanist sense. I will describe trans* identity and transhumanism as concepts as they appear in the text and, given that a metaphor in the

6 Cf. Sean A. Hays: »Transhumanism«. In: *Encyclopedia of Nanoscience and Society*. Ed. David H. Guston. Los Angeles et al. 2010, p. 769f.

7 Mojca Kregel: »The Monstrous Cosmos of Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*«. In: *ELOPE* 18.2 (2021), p. 85–100, here: p. 86.

8 See Emily McAvan: »Frankenstein Redux. Posthuman Monsters in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*«. In: *M/C Journal* 24.5 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2843> (Last accessed: 30/10/2022).

9 See Kregel: »The Monstrous Cosmos of Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*«.

10 Maria Ramnehill: »Den postmoderne Prometheus. Natur, teknik och transtematik i Jeanette Wintersons *Frankissstein*«. In: *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 50.2–3 (2020), p. 47–54. It is my personal misfortune that I don't speak the language in which the most pertinent-seeming article to my discussion is written. I will therefore have to limit myself to the abstract when referring to Ramnehill.

11 Lin Shaojing: »Another Humanist Ideal. The Transhuman Future in *Frankissstein*: A Love Story«. In: *Forum for World Literature Studies* 13.1 (2021), p. 44–58.

Aristotelian sense works on assumed similarities,¹² examine which textually supposed similarities are instrumentalized to justify the metaphor and which differences make it fall apart throughout the text. Concluding my findings, I will also comment on the novel's trans* representation as a whole from my own perspective as a queer trans man who speaks from a similar place in society as the novel's Ry Shelley. I have come to believe that to see the future in a present body means to idealize this body in a sentiment of hope but also to alienate it from the present. This process is ultimately one of objectification and exploitation – in the following pages, I seek to make clear in which ways the novel aligns with this sentiment and in which ways it doesn't.

1. Building the Metaphor

In a flashback that recounts their first intimate encounter, Victor finds himself enthralled by the sight of Ry's naked body. His scientific interest intrigued, he interprets Ry's transition as foreshadowing what transhumanism might accomplish in the future. The scene is marked by a fetishization of the trans* body on his part that is only emphasized by its description as a scientific examination. Victor touches Ry »as though he was scanning [them]« (p. 119) before the narrative gives a detailed account of Ry's physicality and how they divert from a binary sex model due to their transition.¹³ At this point, Victor delivers one of two accounts of the trans*/transhumanist metaphor: »Weren't we just saying that in the future we will be able to choose our bodies? And to change them? Think of yourself as future-early.« (p. 119) In a conversation between Ry and Victor in the present plot, he specifically ties this conception to his attraction to them, stating: »[Y]ou had a sex change. You chose to intervene in your own evolution. You accelerated your portfolio of possibilities. That attracts me. How could it not? You are both exotic and real. The here and now, and a harbinger of the future.« (p. 154)

This interpretation of trans* people as »harbingers of the future«, transcending conventional categories is, of course, nothing new.¹⁴ The prefix »trans« can signify an epistemological movement of traversing through or beyond

12 Cf. Gerhard Kurz: *Metapher, Allegorie, Symbol*. 5th rer. ed. Göttingen 2004, p. 7–14.

13 Although this focus seems to follow Victor's perspective, the first-person account is still Ry's, giving a troubling sense of legitimacy to this kind of sensationalism around a body that appears incongruent to a cis gaze. Cf. Katja Anton Cronauer: »Geschlechtvielfalt lesen – Geschlechtvielfalt schreiben [Queering Literaturbetrieb]«. In: *54books* (14/09/2020). <https://www.54books.de/geschlechtvielfalt-lesen-geschlechtvielfalt-schreiben-queering-literaturbetrieb/> (Last accessed: 31/10/2022).

14 In terms of non-autonomous description, see for example Arthur and Marilouise Kroker's concept of »transgenics«. Cf. Jay Prosser: *Second Skins. The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York 1998, p. 90f.

categories that is also at the core of Trans* Theory.¹⁵ This might lead one to assume that there is some inherent quality shared by trans* (gender) identity (despite the pitfalls of generalizing the diverse experiences of trans* people in terms of their gender identity alone) and a transhumanist ideal. Fittingly, *Frankissstein* primarily follows a modern understanding of »transgender« as an umbrella term of all forms of non-conforming gender identities and expressions.¹⁶ However, allusions to a more historical definition, coined during the 1990s in differentiation to the conventional »transsexual«, can be found in Ry's heavily emphasized forgoing of genital surgery: *transsexual* as understood to be everyone who underwent a so-called »sex change«, i.e. a medical transition that includes genital surgery, and *transgender* as primarily associated with a social transition, understanding gender as the social counterpart to sex.¹⁷

Although they are mostly identified as a man by the characters around them, an alignment which they outwardly reinforce with cis-friendly testimonials such as, »I am now a man, although I was born a woman« (p. 83), Ry's inner monologue discloses a more fluid, non-binary self-image: »I don't consider myself part of the binary« (p. 155), they describe themselves as »fully female, [...] also partly male« (p. 97) and »what I am is not one thing, is not one gender. I live with doubleness.« (p. 89) In this context, we may focus especially on the term »hybrid« (p. 83) which is the first label Ry uses to describe their identity in dialogue – they only out themselves as »trans« (ibid.) after a character expresses confusion about the term.

Hinting at a »hybrid« (trans-)gender conception that Ry is supposed to embody, the techno-scientific connotations behind the term also indicate an association with transhumanism. The above-mentioned coming-out on Ry's part directly precedes a presentation by Victor Stein on a science exposition. His version of transhumanism expressed therein seems to echo at points what we have just learned in the context of Ry's gender identity. To the reader, Victor's talk thereby projects a personal concept of hybrid self to a societal development in a transhumanist framework: »[Victor would] say there are no sides – that binaries belong to our carbon-based past. The future is not biology – it's AI« (p. 72) and »The world [...] that AI will make possible [...] will not be a world of labels – and that includes binaries like male and female,

15 Cf. Cael M. Keegan: »Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans*«. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*. Ed. Siobhan B. Somerville. Cambridge, England et al. 2020, p. 66–78, here: p. 69.

16 Cf. David Valentine: *Imagining Transgender. An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham 2007, p. 32f.

17 See, for instance »When I look in the mirror, I see someone I recognise. That is why I have chosen not to have lower surgery.« (p. 89) In 1998, Jay Prosser characterizes the protagonist of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), who undergoes a similar transition to Ry, as »embodied transgendered subjectivity.« Cf. Prosser: *Second Skins*, p. 178.

black and white, rich and poor.« (p. 79) As McAvan has pointed out, the novel follows Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* in how it proposes hybridity to be at the heart of a globalized society intertwined with technology – hybridity, after Haraway, being a »tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true«¹⁸ in a mode of speech and action that results out of certain 20th-century »boundary break-downs«¹⁹ such as those between nature and machine.²⁰ Likewise, Victor Stein's transhumanism paints the human body, its conceptualization and impact on a social level as central to the functional system of society at large by connecting social »binaries«, human »biology« and identificatory »labels« and declaring all of them as soon-to-be obsolete. Consequently, if the material body is dismantled and left behind, a radical change in (human) reality will ensue, Victor's transhumanist revolution. As we later learn, dissolving his own body is exactly what Victor aims to do and possibly succeeds in doing.

After an epistemological link to hybridity, it seems therefore apparent to add the overcoming of the »physical limits of our bodies« (p. 73) and, along with that, biological human/gender essentialism to our list of similarities between trans* identity and transhumanism. Ry's narrative voice seems to suggest as much when trans* people and transhumanists are characterized as having a similarly pain-riddled relationship to their individual embodiment, equating a transhumanist strive towards an optimized body to a trans* person's gender dysphoria that is here illustrated by the rather typical »wrong body« trope:²¹ »I am part of a small group of transgender medical professionals. Some of us are transhuman enthusiasts too. That isn't surprising; we feel or have felt that we're in the wrong body. We can understand the feeling that any-body is the wrong body.« (p. 104)²² Overall, these quotes as well as Victor's interpretation of Ry's body show Victor seeking a psychical autonomy from matter, the human body, that, in his words, has been prototypically realized in the form of medical transition.

What trans* identity and embodiment as well as transhumanism are set out to share in *Frankissstein* comes down to, firstly, an inherent hybridity that has the potential to restructure or even completely abolish social categories, among them gender. Secondly (and somewhat paradoxically to the first point), human mind and body are seen as separate to the point that the self

18 Donna J. Haraway: *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis/London 2016, p. 5.

19 Ibid., p. 10.

20 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 5–16.

21 Cf. Bernadette Barker-Plummer: »Fixing Gwen. News and the Mediation of (Trans) Gender Challenges«. In: *Feminist Media Studies* 13.4 (2013), p. 710–724, here: p. 711f.

22 This kind of comparison risks relativizing the struggles of trans* people in relation to gender dysphoria, of course, which warrants its own discussion at length. For the purposes of this paper, I shall limit myself to calling this, to put it bluntly, a bold claim.

as an epistemological concept can possibly be removed from the body, either completely, or in the sense of biological determinism that dictates one's identity according to certain body parts, e. g. sex characteristics. All this is, thirdly, realized through self-determined transition or other kinds of body modification. The second point especially reveals the metaphor's cracks by which the novel subtly hints towards the differences between Ry's trans* self-ideation and Victor's transhumanism.

2. Deconstructing the Metaphor

Towards the end of their first sexual encounter, Victor assumes Ry to »once« (p. 121) having been a woman. Ry promptly corrects him, explaining: »I am a woman. And I am a man. That's how it is for me. I am in the body that I prefer. But the past, my past, isn't subject to surgery. I didn't do it to distance myself from myself. I did it to get nearer to myself.« (p. 122) In this and other instances, Ry's identity is clearly shown to be tied to their embodiment,²³ contrasting the trans* with the transhumanist mind-body relationship despite all superficial similarities. Ry's »self« here is closely linked not just to their material make-up but also to language – labels like »man«, »woman«, »not part« or »part of the binary«, labels that Victor's AI is supposed to renounce.

We can understand this through the lens of Judith Butler's notion of the gendered body's »materialization« and the »citationality« that produces this materializing effect: There is no matter that is the emblem of »sex«, often taken to be the biological, factual counterpart of a constructivist »gender.« Rather, the performative effect of sex/gender includes the body in how normative power structures are recalled to make sense of it, even when bodies move outside of a hegemonial grasp. »The process of [...] what we might call *materialization* will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the ›I.«²⁴ In the scope of this novel, trans* as a social, medical, and overall discursive identity needs to refer to existing categories, practices and narratives – such as binary gender labels, the »wrong body« trope, the dichotomy between assigned birth sex and true gender identity – to constitute a trans* person's individual sense of self. All this firmly roots Ry with the human, their environment²⁵ and the present where, as Victor during the Q&A following his presentation concurs, »calling things by their right names is more than giving them an identity bracelet or a label, or a serial number. We summon a vision. Naming is power.« (p. 79)

23 See also Ramnehill: »Den postmoderne Prometheus«.

24 Judith Butler: *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London/New York 2011, p. xxiii. Emphasis in original. Cf. *ibid.*, p. xiv–xxiv.

25 Cf. Ramnehill: »Den postmoderne Prometheus«, p. 54.

Ry manifesting, giving shape, body, matter, to Victor's form of ideally disembodied transhumanism brings the inherent paradox of this metaphor to the forefront. Ry has transitioned and thereby has had their »homecoming« (p. 295) that Victor still seeks for himself by practically dissolving his own body. Through that he would return to what he describes, amidst retelling a Gnostic story of creation, as humanity's »true nature of beings of light« (p. 294). The dubiousness of Victor's scientific perspective is not just stressed by his recurring to religion but also by Ry himself: as he explains his attraction to Ry, declaring them to be »new data« that will influence the »outcome« (p. 123) of his research, Ry calls Victor's motivation into question, telling him »You love the idea of me« (p. 154), or wondering in an inner monologue: »(Is he the teller? Am I the tale?)« (p. 189) *Frankissstein* therefore portrays a process wherein the trans* body is instrumentalized as research subject and tool to further one's own theoretical field and ideas, like it has historically been the case in fields such as sociology and gender studies among many others.²⁶

This directly ties in with the intertextual dimensions of the novel and its alignment of the transhumanist representative with the Victor Frankenstein archetype. As *Frankissstein* nears its end, we find that the following core narratives intertwine and relate to one another: (1) a biographical retelling of Mary Shelley and the (historical) characters around her, (2) the transhumanist re-imagination of her classic *Frankenstein* that has been at the center of this analysis so far and (3) the original *Frankenstein*, i. e. the story around Victor Frankenstein and Frankenstein's creature as it has been told by Shelley and ingrained into Western culture. This narrative web reaches its peak in a section set in Bethlem Royal Hospital where Mary Shelley meets a mental patient who vehemently claims to be Victor Frankenstein come true. This possibly materialized »Frankenstein« seeks to reclaim the metaphysical nature of a fictional character, urging Shelley to »[u]nmake« (p. 214) him: »I wish to disappear! I do not belong in this body. This gross body! [...] I scarcely recognize it. I am Mind. Thought. Spirit. Consciousness.« (p. 215) The similarities to Victor Stein's »homecoming« are more than apparent as the text posits transhumanist metaphysics alongside the realm of fictional stories, while Ry is, by virtue of their name – and »Naming is power«, after all –, linked to the historical Mary Shelley and to a traceable past from the reader's point of view. All the same, these clear-cut descriptions fall short of how the novel equalizes the factual and the fictional by materializing conventionally literary figures, fictionalizing historical figures and ultimately expressing, according to Krevel, a postmodern understanding around the »permeability, connectivity and interchangeability of all the potential realities.«²⁷

26 Cf. Julia Serano: *Whipping Girl. A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville 2007, p. 204–212.

27 Krevel: »The Monstrous Cosmos of Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*«, p. 93. Cf. *ibid.* p. 90–97.

In this line of thought, it only follows that ›Victor Frankenstein‹ would echo Ry as he says: »*I do not know if I am the teller or the tale*« (p. 194, emphasis in original). Their interaction in *Bedlam* characterizes Shelley and ›Frankenstein‹ as creator and creature respectively, playing on Victor Frankenstein's and his creature's mutual obsession and hauntings, projecting these onto the artistic act of creation, that is, of storytelling. This echo around the question of which subjects get to tell and which subjectivities get told, who has a hold on the power of media and the agency to tell the story, sheds more light on the fictionalizing aspect behind Victor's metaphor of the trans* body and the de-humanizing violence behind it. ›Frankenstein‹ only underlines this as he speaks of the uncontrollable existence of the immoral scientist archetype as it was the basis to the original *Frankenstein*:²⁸ »Outside waits one whose fiendish, pitiless cunning will instruct others to experiment as I did – without any care for the human race.« (p. 215) We can certainly understand this as a comment on the contemporary starting point of the modern sciences and their moral implications that formed one of the main themes of Shelley's novel. At the same time, the archetype is said to be »one« whom we can possibly interpret to be personified as Victor Stein in Ry's reality.²⁹

In this sense, I would agree with Ana Horvat that Ry, despite the complex web of references to a historical or fictional Mary Shelley, is also put in a position akin to Frankenstein's monster as Victor Stein subjects them to his scientific gaze.³⁰ I would, however, stress that this process of objectification doesn't remain uncommented but rather characterized as problematic by the figural references and thematic associations I have so far described. It is subtle commentary – and to question the true effectiveness of it is a necessary and rightful point of discussion – that hints at an awareness of the troubled relationship between trans* people and the sciences that are said to have made possible the transitioned body while at the same time silencing trans* voices and curbing trans* agency. Unlike Frankenstein's monster, however, Ry exhibits an independence from Victor that relativizes his power over them: »He is in control of what he creates. He hasn't created me and so he feels uncertain.« (p. 158)

In her 1993 essay *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*, Susan Stryker examines this relationship between trans* identity and Frankenstein's monster more thoroughly, putting herself as a transsexual

28 Cf. Andy Mousley: »The Posthuman«. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*. Ed. Andrew Smith. Cambridge, England 2016, p. 158–172, here: p. 165–167.

29 Shaojing points out that another 19th-century equivalent of Victor Stein might be found in Mary Shelley's husband Percy Shelley who voices similar idealistic musings about humans' metaphysical nature and similarly abruptly disappears out of his lover's life. Cf. Shaojing: »Another Humanist Ideal«, p. 48–52.

30 Cf. Ana Horvat: »Trans Is Hot Right Now«. On Cisgender Writers and Trans Characters in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* and Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*«. In: *Gender Forum* 79 (2021), p. 79–137, here: p. 90f.

woman in the shoes of the monster. Using this metaphor, she describes the role of the sciences as follows:

»The consciousness shaped by the transsexual body is no more the creation of the science that refigures its flesh than the monster's mind is the creation of Frankenstein. [...] The scientific discourse that produced sex reassignment techniques is inseparable from the pursuit of immortality through the perfection of the body, the fantasy of total mastery through the transcendence of an absolute limit, and the hubristic desire to create life itself.«³¹

As Stryker exemplifies, the monstrous characterization of trans* identity and embodiment has been a staple of trans* thought at least since the 1990s. Thereby, questioning the boundaries between those that are seen as human, natural, real and those that are seen as non-human, artificial, and unreal is a line of thought that firmly puts *Frankissstein* in the tradition of trans* people's self-conceptualization. Moreover, as McAvan has pointed out, monstrosity, which is intrinsically connected with hybridity, comes to be a universal mark of (post-)modern subjects as portrayed by the text.³² Ironically, this again lends credibility to Victor Stein's description of trans* identity as »future early« on a holistic societal level. None of this is to vouch for *Frankissstein* as a worthwhile addition to a discourse by or »about« trans* people. Summarizing the findings of this paper in the last section, I will also comment on certain harmful practices in trans* representation which the novel ultimately perpetuates.

3. Conclusion: Contextualizing the Metaphor

Technology has always been a point of interest both in discussions by trans* people and about them. Early TERF perspectives like that of Janice Raymond, Professor emerita of Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, have argued since the 1970s that trans* women in particular were profiting off, if not even conjured by, a medicalization of the categories sex/gender in the 20th century. According to Raymond, this was only possible due to the technological advances of the time.³³ Dangerously, if something undesired is seen to have a cause, the search for ways to reverse it becomes all too obvious, aiming for »the elimination of transsexualism«³⁴ as Raymond does in this case. Although I would argue that *Frankissstein* focusses its thematical explorations on technology and the changes it induces, the novel follows the proposition that all of humankind has been altered by its co-existence and merging with

31 Susan Stryker: »My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix«. In: *Transgender Reader*. Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York/London 2006, p. 244–256, here: p. 248.

32 Cf. McAvan: »Frankenstein Redux«.

33 Cf. Janice G. Raymond: *The Transsexual Empire. The Making of the She-Male*. New York/London 1994, p. 139–153.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

technology, dismantling a human body's supposed naturality. Hybridity, a transcendence of conventional social and biological categories, an independent relationship between mind and body, and the autonomous freedom to modify the body are shared characteristics of a 21st-century human subjectivity – it is simply that, to the cisnormative³⁵, humanist eye, they appear most transgressive in trans* identity and transhumanist vision.

Situating the metaphor with the views of a character underlines its subjective nature, inviting criticism from other characters and readers alike. The novel further subverts Victor's position via metafictional and intertextual implications. These implications re-contextualize the motivations behind his transhumanist idealism, associate his position with that of metaphysical fictionality instead of human experience and associate him with the morally dubious Frankenstein archetype. All of this abounds to the novel's commentary on narrative-building around trans* embodiment from a scientific perspective that, confronted by a trans* person's objection, falls short of trans* experience. This begs the question, however: What kind of trans* experience does the novel depict?

The initial reception of *Frankissstein* has been nearly free of discussions of possibly transphobic dimensions within the text – that is, if you leave aside anonymous Goodreads reviews and online articles by trans*, inter* and/or non-binary writers like that by Katja Anton Cronauer. Cronauer mentions the novel's perpetuation of a transphobic, cisnormative mindset in how misgendering, fetishizing and questioning trans* people is normalized without effectively dismantling these as harmful patterns.³⁶ Quite truthfully, there is barely a cis character in the modern-day plot of the novel that doesn't showcase some kind of transphobic behavior at some point or another: Ron Lord, the sex-bot manufacturer, falls into the usual trappings of cisnormative questioning of Ry's identity and their validity as a man (cf. p. 83–88), journalist Polly D. asks Ry for an interview because »Trans is hot right now« (p. 97), Claire, a devout Christian, denounces Ry for transitioning and thereby changing their God-given body (cf. p. 240f.), and Victor's handling of Ry's trans* identity and body can by all accounts fill entire papers. None of these characters are shown to be ultimately right. Still, Ry lines up in a long tradition of tragic minority characters who experience discrimination at every opportunity and are rarely granted relief, sense of community, and overall happiness. In *Frankissstein*, this culminates in a scene in which Ry is sexually

35 Cisnormativity describes behavior and thought patterns that propose cis identity and the male/female gender binary to be the norm while trans*, inter* and non-binary identities are mainly regarded as deviation from that norm. Cf. Israel Berger and Y. Gavriel Ansara: »Cisnormativity«. In: *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*. Vol. 1. Ed. Abbie E. Goldberg and Genny Beemyn. Los Angeles et al. 2021, p. 121–125, here: p. 121f.

36 Cf. Cronauer: »Geschlechtervielfalt lesen – Geschlechtervielfalt schreiben [Queering Literaturbetrieb]«.

assaulted by a stranger in a public restroom, an act that, as Ry describes in their inner monologue afterwards, »isn't the first time [and] won't be the last« (p. 244), while oddly leaving no ramifications on the remaining plot.

Considering Ry as trans* representation from a moral standpoint, the problem lies not just in their excessive suffering but in the fact that they, simply put, stay. They stay when their identity becomes a talking point to be discussed alongside the ethical dimensions of sex robots, cryonics or AI, and they stay with Victor despite every objection they voice towards him. Dubiously, Winterson's first explicitly trans* character endures a discourse around them that eerily resembles sensationalist media debates about »the transgender issue«. The text to a certain degree enables this scrupulous look at trans* identity, from very directly answering the ancient question of what Ry might have »down there« to having Ry readily engage in conversation about their own validity. *Frankissstein*, despite its criticism on objectifying practices in the sciences, engages in these very same practices at the same time. The trans* representation found in the novel is clearly not one written with a trans* readership in mind but a cis/-normative readership³⁷, one that is inclined to follow Victor's train of thought as he muses in monologues of various length about the exemplary status of trans* embodiment in the face of present technological developments, about what a Guardian review has deemed »the implications of both transsexuality and transhumanism.«³⁸

Working on this paper, especially working out the specific details of the metaphorization process of the trans* body has often felt like an involuntary mission to apologize dimensions of the novel that, in my opinion, can't be explained away by textual interferences, subversive commentary or narratological mastery. While *Frankissstein* represents a nuanced and multi-layered examination of what it might mean to be human today and tomorrow, it still stands as a testament to a present in which being recognized as fully »human« remains a privilege denied to certain groups. As diverse visions of the future unfold around us and wait to be realized, it remains my fervent hope that we don't focus as much on the Frankensteins of the modern day but on those who have so far been shunned from taking action and having their voices be heard.

37 Another instance of cisnormativity can be found in the belief that any form of early medical treatment for trans* youth asks that youth to make choices they aren't ready for whereas an on-setting »biological«, i. e. cis puberty is seen as harmless – a belief that might express itself in saying that one doesn't want »kids to feel that they have to make a choice too early« when »[offered] a different body« as Winterson herself has done. Hugo Greenhalgh: »No Rush to Change Gender - UK Writer Joins Trans Debate«. In: *Reuters* (30/05/2019). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-lgbt-books-idUSKCN1T028R> (Last accessed: 30/10/2022).

38 Sam Byers: »Frankissstein by Jeanette Winterson Review – a Dazzling Reanimation of Shelley's Novel«. In: *The Guardian* (24/05/2019). <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/24/frankissstein-jeanette-winterson-review> (Last accessed: 30/10/2022).

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