

Gender Non-Conformity in Science Fiction: Interrogating Gender as Language in *The First*

Sister Trilogy

by

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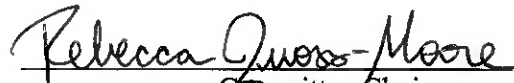
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Statement of Problem and Project Thesis

This project seeks to analyze gender through the lens of a language within the First Sister Trilogy. The purpose of this approach is to interrogate the multitude of ways in which gender is performed, experienced, and read, in order to create a consistent and coherent framework with which to articulate the fluid and multifaceted nature of gender. More specifically, it seeks to investigate the ways that science fiction, as well as other forms of speculative fiction, may be used in order to improve reader understanding of gender as a construct, making them more able to grasp and articulate the ways in which gender exists as a fluid and nuanced structure.

Literature Review and Methodology

This project works on blending multiple theoretical frameworks in order to construct a coherent lens of gender as a language. It does so by building upon the works of Lacan, Bahktin, Butler, Halberstam, and Anzaldua.

This thesis is built off of Jacques Lacan's conception of the unconscious self as being structured by language, and their conception of misrecognition, in which we misrecognized ourselves as a stable, continuous whole, rather than a being made of a number of component parts. In his work, Lacan lays out that the unconscious self is structured as a language, crafted through a series of related signifiers that only together work to form meaning through their relation to one another. This construct of the self, and our misrecognition of ourselves within them, allow us to create a false, stable unified sense of self, obfuscating the granular and fluid nature of identity.

This is connected to Mikhail Bahkin's conception of language as dialogic, as well as their conception of heteroglossia and poetics, all of which they lay out in their work *The Dialogic Imagination*. In their understanding of language as dialogic, they claim that all language, in this case including gender, is structured as a dialogue, one that posits both a speaker and a listener. Their conception of heteroglossia claims that multiple different languages may exist at the same time, shifting and changing based on the presumed speaker. Finally, their concept of poetic language is language that exists as a sole utterance, a monologic language which encompasses all potential readings of itself simultaneously, separated from the context of the utterance.

This is tied to Judith Butler's conception of Gender performativity. In their work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the ways in which gender is constructed socially through an endless list of markers and behaviors, markers that observers use to gender a subject in relation to a socially understood conception of gender, i.e. masculine and feminine. In effect, these represent the signified's of gender. I use this construct to interrogate how gender is constructed as a set of societal norms. Furthermore, in their later work *Undoing Gender* Butler lays out the conception of "humanness" and describes the ways in which those that are not normative

gendered according to societal expectations are excluded from conceptions of what is human. I use this framework to articulate the conception of “inarticulable identities” those being gender expressions that are not recognized as legitimate or human by the dominant systemic power structure.

Jack Halberstam continues Butler’s in work in *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, in which they catalog the variety of approaches that have been taken toward studying transgender subjects and their lived experiences. They end this work by positing gender as a fluid structure, using lego as a metaphor. In their conception, gender, and the stable selves that it posits, is a fluid structure, one made of a number of component parts, parts which we have the ability to continuously remake and restructure as needed. Thus, they end their work with a call to reframe gender from something that exists within a rigid binary, into a fluid structure that more adequately reflects individuals lived experiences.

Finally, in their work *La Frontera/Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldua lays out the ways in which an identity category is constructed and mobilized when it is articulated, allowing those that live within that category to advocate for themselves. More importantly, they discuss the idea of borderlands identities and languages, referred to as a *Mestiza Consciousness*, in which wholly new identity categories and modes of being are constructed at the intersection of two or more identities, or where two languages are spoken. I use their work, in conjunction with the work of Bakhtin, to articulate the ways in which new gender identities and modes of being are constructed and mobilized within a larger framework.

Findings and Significance

Chapter one finds that *The First Sister* trilogy presents two different societal conceptions of gender, each constructed and policed in a different way in order to maintain systemic power. The first of these is the Gaens, who construct gender in a granular, atomized way, with masculinity being separated from the masculine sexed body and being more in line with the application of violence, while womanhood is fractured into several component parts that match the articulation of the roles of women within Irigaray’s sexual marketplace.

The Icarri on the other hand, construct gender as existing only within a strict biological binary. Thus, while they are able to recognize the gender experiences of those that have medically transitioned, they are incapable of recognizing or understanding of gendered experience of those that may exist outside of this binary, in effect flattening all gender expressions within a medicalized framework.

This chapter finds that this dual construction of gender works to bring the reader's attention to the nature of gender as a social construct, and to the variety of ways in which these systemic structures render people as "inhuman."

Chapter two interrogates the way in which people are forced to act within these restrictive structures, and finds that the incongruity between socially prescribed gender grammar, and the ways in which people speak gender on a moment-to-moment basis, results in the construction of paradoxical gendered identities, identities that create friction within the structure and reveal its constructed nature.

Chapter three finds that science fiction grants us the tools to begin conceptualizing what Butler terms as "fantasy" that being the potential for new gendered existences outside of existing schema. I find that *First Sister* trilogy serves as a wonderful example of a text that works to consistently bring reader attention to the nature of gender as a language, including the concepts and identities that it fails to properly express. I posit that it, along with many other science fiction stories, may serve as a site for increasing "gender fluency", in effect allowing readers to begin understanding the construction of gender in more complex ways.

Suggestions for Future Research

This work suggests that science fiction stories, such as the *First Sister* trilogy, may serve as a tool for teaching what I term as "gender poetics" connecting to Bakhtin's conception of the poetic form. This construct understands gender as not simply a language, but as a poetic form, one that accounts for the multiplicity, contradictions, and paradoxical ways in which gender is felt, lived, and understood on a moment to moment basis.

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To my father, thank you for supporting me as I worked to do something I love, but also something I know you do not fully understand. Without your help I would not have been able to chase my dream, and I am thankful every day that you have accepted me as your daughter.

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Introduction

In a time where queer identities are becoming both more visible and more demonized, a continual discussion of queer identities and rights has become more important than ever. However, while there has been a breadth of work discussing the multitudes of ways in which queer subjectivities are constructed and how queer individuals may begin to reorient and redefine themselves outside of an existing, cisheteronormative schema, the impact of these theoretical constructions has not expanded much beyond those within the queer community in order to gain widespread understanding. That is where the role of literature, as well as all forms of media, becomes clear as a form of praxis with which to begin helping society at large begin to understand these theoretical frameworks on a more visceral level. In recent years, queer stories have become much more prominent within popular media, and the positive impacts of such representation, both inside and outside of queer communities, has been very well documented.¹ More than that, however, the modeling of the ways in which gender is structured socially, as well as of its impacts, allows for readers to begin grappling with the ways in which these structures impact us. This is where science fiction stories, such as the *First Sister Trilogy*, come in, offering

¹ For examples see Si Whybrew in “Textual Encounters of Hope and Be/Longing: Science Fiction and Trans Worldmaking” 88; Diana Flogel in “‘Write the story you want to read’: World Queering through Slash Fiction Creation.” 790; and Lauren McInroy and Shelley Craig in “Online Fandom, Identity Milestones, and Self-Identification of Sexual/Gender Minority Youth.” Each of these sources outlines the ways in which queer and gender representation within media has allowed readers to reframe their own understanding of themselves, their gender identities, and their sexuality by exposing them to new modes of being.

examples of ways in which these theories and experiences can be modeled and understood by a general audience.

With this intersection of theory and product in mind, the purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, to construct a theoretical framework that allows a general public to more readily understand gender as an action that is performed and understood, one that can be thought of and rethought. Second, to interrogate science fiction's ability to help draw the reader's attention to the ways in which gender is constructed and lived and its effort to make readers more familiar with gender as a fluid and nuanced construct. This is where my particular focus comes in: interrogating gender as a language through the synthesis of several different theoretical frameworks. I feel this approach breaks down binary and static conceptions of gender and creates a move toward a more fluid conception of identity. That is to say, if gender is a language, with all of its accents, dialects, and slang, one that is spoken and interpreted by a reader, one that is able to represent and misrepresent, that limits our thinking and allows us to expand our possibilities, then gender cannot be a static structure, but only one open to continuous play and reinterpretation.

This thesis is built off of the work of a number of theorists, as my work involves blending trans, gender, feminist, and Marxist theories, as well as incorporating a focus on how language shapes our understanding of identity, the body, and the self as a stable, unified whole. Much of this work, as well as the work of many of the theorists I will be discussing, is built on Lacan's conceptions of the self, language, and misrecognition. In his work, Lacan lays out that the unconscious self is structured as a language, crafted through a series of related signifiers that only together work to form meaning through their relation to one another. The most important aspect of this to note is that there is no true signified, in that the signified can only be related to

another, equally nebulous psychic construct. However, these psychic constructs, and our misrecognition of ourselves within them, allow us to create a false, stable unified sense of self, obfuscating the granular and fluid nature of identity. In the case of gender, these psychic constructs represent socially understood gender identities, in our case the binary Man/Woman.

When seeking to understand the unconscious, and by extension the self's connection to gender, we must understand that gender in an internal sense is fluid, unstable, and inarticulable by its very nature, as there is no stable signified with which to relate it.² In their work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the ways in which gender is constructed socially through an endless list of markers and behaviors, markers that observers use to gender a subject in relation to a socially understood conception of gender, i.e. masculine and feminine. While this is not an entirely stable structure, being open to change as social conceptions of gender shift, it is not something the individual has the power to change themselves.³ In effect, the conception of performativity highlights the ways Lacan's misrecognition is performed, with an individual's unique combination of gender markers and experiences being misrecognized and flattened as to fit within a socially understood binary.

Butler builds upon this idea in their later work, *Undoing Gender*, in which they discuss in more detail the nuances of this construction, as well as how subjectivities are created within this framework. The primary aspect I would like to focus on is the concept of "humanness" and the move toward remaking gender on a societal level. Beginning with the conception of humanness, Butler explains that as part of the creation of subjects within a cultural context, we construct

² Lacan, *Ecritis*, 76.

³ Butler. *Gender Trouble*.

certain norms and understandings of the “human” which work to exclude those that exist outside of those norms. To be a properly recognized subject one must be gendered according to a societal norm, or be excluded from the category of the “human.” Thus, Butler argues that we need to work to expand the conception of the human and do away with hierarchies and constructions that limit the potential ways in which humans can exist.⁴ This conception of gender, combined with Lacan’s work and my own theory of gender as a language, serves as an articulation of the function of gender in order to create stable subjects and shows how those that resist such stabilizing forces are rendered illegible.

Jack Halberstam builds upon these ideas in their works *Female Masculinities* and *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. In their earlier work, Halberstam discusses the concept of “minority” gender expressions, that being gender identities that fall outside of the larger, socially understood Man/Woman binary, as well as the many fluid and granular ways queer and gender non-conforming individuals construct themselves within their own communities, and how those constructions interact with the wider, socially understood gender binary. It is Halberstam’s claim that such minority gender identities may be used to destabilize the perceived gender binary and that “the breakdown of gender as a signifying system in these arenas can be exploited to hasten the proliferation of alternate gender regimes in other locations.”⁵ With our framework of gender as a language in place, these minority genders in

⁴ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*.

⁵ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 29, 40.

effect serve as unique gender accents or dialects, ones that differ from the socially understood gender grammar enough to be considered distinct on their own.

Halberstam continues this focus on the atomization of gender in his later work, constructing a new framework designed to help people view gender as a more fluid and modular structure. This framework posits gender and the body not as a unified whole, but as a series of individual parts and components which are always in flux, only coming together to create an illusion of a unified whole. The purpose of this framework is to account for the ways in which trans and gender variant individuals can work to continuously construct and reconstruct their own identities and bodies, thus viewing the act of transition not as a simple path from point a to point b, but as a continuous act of creation only bound by our ability to conceptualize new possibilities. In effect, Halberstam is attempting to rectify the misrecognition of gender and self as a stable, unified whole that Lacan discusses and move toward a more fluid sense of self where an individual's gender identity is no longer tied to the socially understood signifieds of gender.⁶

Furthering this, as well as interrogating how this conception of gender functions on a material level, we must focus on Gayle Salamon. In her work *Assuming a Body: Trans Rhetorics of Materiality*, Gayle Salamon works to illustrate the ways in which gender constructs, as well as conceptions of the self, interact with the body as a material framework. Specifically, she focuses on how the conceptions of the body as a stable and unified whole are created, how gender is spoken through the body, and how the body, and thus gender, are policed by medical and governmental structures. However, the primary aspect of her work that I would like to highlight is her claim that the felt sense of the body and its material reality may not be one and the same,

⁶ Halberstam, *Trans*, 80.

even for those who fit within the gender binary. In effect, she is articulating within gender and the body the disconnect between signifier and signified, with the internally felt sense of gender identity, the personal gender signified, being unconnected to the socially accepted gender signifier of the body. The most important aspect here is the focus on how even gender identities within the binary structure experience this, as they too undergo the same misrecognition that non-binary, trans, and gender nonconforming individuals do.⁷ Salamon asks the question which sits at the core of this work: “what if we understood sexual difference without banishing difference itself from the categories of male or female? Is it possible to think sexual difference as something that need not be located at the level of sex at all?”⁸ This articulation of both intra and extra gender differences between subjectivities, and the ways in which the binary gender structure as laid out by Butler fails to encompass them, functions as one of the driving forces behind this work.

Building upon this, I would like to discuss the works of Bahktin and Anzaldúa, particularly, as the interaction between their theories, and the already stated conception of gender and the self as language, serves as the primary force of tension behind much of this work. Beginning with Bahktin, I would like to narrow down on a few specific conceptions, those being that language is always dialogic, presuming both a speaker and a listener; that language is heteroglossic, meaning that multiple different languages and types of speech may exist and function in tandem without conflict; and the unfinalizability of language, that it is a structure that

⁷ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming A Body*, 3.

⁸ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming A Body*, 168.

by its nature is constantly in flux.⁹ Presuming that gender is a language means that these conceptions have a great deal of impact on my own work. The speaker of gender is twofold, being both society-driven, which speaks a larger, socially understood conception of gender that we misrecognize, and of the self, who projects their own, internally felt sense of gender in relation to that society. These serve as our speaker and our listener, each going back and forth as they continue to define themselves in relation to the other. Connecting to what Butler says, we are unable to construct gender outside of our socially understood grammar, but at the same time we are able to speak gender in new ways using the limited vocabulary available to us. This is what produces the unfinalizability of gender, as the dialogue never stops, thus we as subjects are always defining and redefining ourselves.

Turning to Anzaldúa, alongside work from Lugones and Crenshaw, complicates and elaborates the idea of gender as a heteroglossic language. Each of these theorists discuss a very similar idea, that being that gender markers and identities are not monoliths, but are deeply influenced by a number of other factors, such as race, class, sexuality, etc. Crenshaw focuses on how these identities interact with one another, complicating each other, while Lugones and Anzaldúa discuss the concept of curdling and the *mestiza consciousness*¹⁰ respectively, in which the tension created when two identities interact with one another results in the creation of something entirely new.¹¹ Furthermore, Anzaldúa discusses, as I will interrogate further in

⁹ Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, xix.

¹⁰ I will be referring to this concept as Borderlands Identities throughout this work.

¹¹ The primary theorist I will be using for this throughout this work is Anzaldúa; however, it is important to note that all of them discuss similar ideas. See particularly Crenshaw's

Chapter One, the necessity of articulating these new identities so that they can be represented and mobilized, an articulation that by its very nature limits and flattens these identities to fit within the limited vocabulary that we possess.¹²

This is where Bahktin's concept of heteroglossia comes in. If gender is a language, one that is spoken and performed differently based on other factors, and each of these accents of language is being continuously spoken in tandem, then we are able to expand our conception of the borderlands to encompass not just clearly distinct and defined categories of man/woman, but intra gender differences as well. It allows us to articulate the borderlands that is created between black and white femininity, or masculinity based on class, and it allows us to interrogate how those identities blend together continuously to remake themselves, only held in check by the dogmatic gender binary which attempts to render intra gender differences inarticulable.

Finally, I want to end on the idea of the "New Mestiza" as it serves as a call to abandon stable categories of identity and move toward a more fluid and amorphous concept of the self and society, one meant to encompass all people. Elements of this idea echo later, in Halberstam, in that our understanding of identity categories runs the risk of allowing them to be co-opted into power structures. But rather than completely abandoning these ideas, Anzaldúa advocates for becoming aware of how identities are blended and fluid and for using that understanding to remain flexible and fluid, allowing an individual to continuously construct and reconstruct

Intersectionality ("Demarginalizing the Intersection," 141), and Lugones' Curdling ("Purity, Impurity, and Separation," 460). Each of these frameworks have their own specific nuances, but all deal with the interactions between and blending of identity categories.

¹² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 108

themselves as needed in order to mobilize the self and their identity, but not allowing them to become so static as to be locked in that identity.

My goal in the creation of this framework, and the blending of these theories, is to serve as something of a bridge, allowing us to use literature as a mode of implementing and teaching what I call “gender fluency,” which I define as the ability to recognize and articulate more specific, granular gender identities both within and outside of a binary structure. My focus is on identifying the ways in which readers may interpret gender within a text based on their own understanding and framework of the concept, the ways in which gender identities are constructed moment to moment in a fluid manner based on a variety of factors, and the ways in which an individual's internal concept of gender can be articulated in a way that is understood by a larger society. All of these authors touch upon a very similar concept: that the language of gender is something that is always in flux, something that is malleable, but we live in a society that forces it to be fixed and stable. Thus, all of these theorists make a similar call to reorient our understanding of the self in a way that is more fluid and granular. It is my hope that this theoretical framework of gender as a language, and the tension that illuminates, will allow for us to begin moving toward that reorientation.

I chose to focus my application of this framework on *The First Sister* trilogy for a number of reasons. Primary among them is that this text serves as a wonderful example for the ways in which media, specifically the genres of speculative fiction and science fiction, can allow us to broaden our understanding of the world and our potential subjectivities. As a text that is deeply concerned with the ways in which gender is constructed socially, how people orient themselves within that construct, and how people are rendered illegible by it, this series serves as a prime

example of a text that allows us to push the broadly understood boundaries of gender by bringing reader awareness to those boundaries.

In order to do this, this thesis has been broken up into three distinct chapters, each with their own purpose. Chapter One focuses on constructing my theoretical framework of gender as a language, as well as exploring the ways in which the text constructs gender on a societal level. Chapter Two focuses on investigating the ways in which people “speak” and understand gender within these systems on a moment-to-moment basis, as well as how those individual performances come into friction with gender as a socially understood language. Finally, Chapter Three will focus on those whose identities cannot be articulated and understood within these systems, as well as how readers project their own understanding of gender unto a text, and how literature may serve as a vehicle with which to make more individuals “gender fluent” as they become more able to understand, read, and articulate more complex, nuanced, and fluid gender identities.

Chapter One: The Grammar of Gender

Science fiction stories and other forms of speculative fiction have a long history of using their settings as a tool which draws the reader's attention to gender's social construction, encouraging them to think of gender in more complex ways.¹³ *The First Sister* trilogy by Linden A. Lewis continues this tradition by constructing two societies that exist in parallel, the Icarri and the Gaens, both of whom are deeply invested in the construction of dogmatic gender and bodily norms. This parallel construction, and the consistent contrast it creates, works to bring attention to the nature of gender as a societal structure. As a result, this series helps illuminate the ways in which people exist as fluid subjects within these systems, as well as how they are rendered illegible when they fail to fit within societal standards. Thus, the purpose of this analysis is twofold. First, by interrogating the ways in which each society constructs gender, focusing on what gender expressions it deems "legible," we can see the ways in which gender norms differ based on societal construction, and their relation to power. Second, by investigating the nuances of gender construction within each society, as well as how subjects are forced to articulate themselves within these constructions, we can work to reveal the granularity and fluidity present even within a seemingly binary, static system.

First, I would like to take a moment to explore what I mean when I say a specific gender identity or expression is "legible." Judith Butler discusses this concept in their work *Undoing Gender* in which they discuss the concept of "humanness." As they state, "sometimes the very terms that confer humanness on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the

¹³ Si Whybrew. "Textual Encounters of Hope and Be/Longing," 87-100.

less-than-human.”¹⁴ Butler illustrates that certain structures and norms work to render individuals more or less legitimate according to a societal lens. Those that fail to adequately meet the standard of “humanness” through their refusal or inability to conform to these norms are rendered inhuman, and as such are excluded from the system, unable to interact with it in meaningful ways.¹⁵ This ability to hold dialogue with and be recognized as legitimate by the structure is what makes a gender expression “legible.” Thus, while gender can be lived, felt, and expressed outside of these normative constraints, a gender that is not able to be stabilized in order to interface with the structure, which is not recognized by the system of power, is rendered illegible and is unable to be mobilized.¹⁶ The specific “legible” articulations of gender within a given society are directly tied to the power structures and dynamics of that society, as those articulations represent gender norms and expressions that can be “read,” understood, and co-opted within the current system of power.¹⁷ A gender identity must be translated and rendered “legible” in order to be mobilized, either through the subject unifying with others who share that

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2.

¹⁵ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2.

¹⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 15. This conception of mobilization and legibility of identity is extremely important for my purposes, as while gender may be conceptualized and understood fluidly, if it cannot be articulated and used as a site of resistance then that fluid conception cannot produce affect.

¹⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 214.

gender experience, or through the subject's gender identity being recognized as legitimate by, and thus being able to interact with, the systemic power structure.¹⁸

Extending this framework, in his work *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, Jack Halberstam explains that instead of being a stable, unified whole, we should instead look at gender as a series of component parts that combine together to form an illusion of a greater whole, an illusion we use to define meaning.¹⁹ The components are not fixed, but are open to constant reorganization and reconstruction, only limited by the physical opportunities available.²⁰ Butler takes a similar, yet distinct approach, in which they understand gender as something that is socially constructed and continuously performed, expressed through a variety of markers that are used to interpret the gender of others. This is a construct that is relational, created through social interaction in which we “perform” gender based on an already existing schema.²¹

Halberstam and Butler touch upon a similar idea, in which gender is constructed of several component parts, and it is only through social connection that we begin to view it as a stable, unified whole. Through the lens of gender as a language, Halberstam argues that rather

¹⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 90. Anzaldúa discusses the history of the Chicano people, and how it was only after *I Am Joaquín* was published and a unified political party was formed that they “became a distinct people.” I connect this articulation and mobilization of identity to all forms of identity.

¹⁹ Jack Halberstam, *Trans*, 132. This idea is also discussed by Judith Butler and Gayle Salamon.

²⁰ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 28-29.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

than focusing on the whole “text” of a body, we should instead view it as a variety of “words” that come together to form unique meaning.²² However, Butler argues that the “text” of gender can only be understood through the wider whole of the “language.”²³ In effect, Halberstam’s granular construction asks to focus on the signifiers, while Butler argues that the signifiers cannot be understood without a socially “signified” conception of gender. I adopt this view, with the individual gendered markers being signifiers, while the larger idea of gender, i.e. man/woman, masculine/feminine, etc., is the signified. This construction of gender as a language is not new, as many scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which language relates to gender, and the connection to gender signified, with Gayle Salamon stating explicitly “What is true of language is also true of gender: it is given at birth, not just handed to us but inscribed into us, and inscribed through a legacy of a proper name.”²⁴ The purpose of this chapter is to interrogate the nuances of this construction and to conceptualize how gender as a language functions within literature.

When seeking to understand the unconscious, and by extension the self’s connection to gender, we must understand that gender in an internal sense is fluid, unstable, and inarticulable by its very nature, as there is no stable signified with which to relate it.²⁵ Thus, when attempting

²² Halberstam, *Trans*, 130.

²³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 7.

²⁴ Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 185. Salamon builds on Lacan’s theory of misrecognition, which is crucial to this work. In effect, by continuing to misrecognize fluid and granular gender identities as stable within the binary, we work to stabilize and strengthen that binary.

²⁵ Lacan, *Écrits*, 76.

to make ourselves legible we must undergo a process of translation. This process results in stripping away much of the nuance and lived realities of gender in order to create a stable and unified identity that can be mobilized and articulated.²⁶ As such, the image of stable and unified gender is nothing more than an illusion, but one that must be created and maintained in order to interface with a society. However, as Halberstam points out, these illusions are extremely durable, and their nebulous and ill-defined nature are exactly what has allowed the conception of gender as a binary to retain coherence in the face of a variety of “minority gender” expressions that would seem to destabilize this construction.²⁷

In this framework we have two forms of gender at play, the social external gender and the inarticulable and nebulous internal gender, signifier and false signified respectively. These function in tandem with one another through misrecognition to form a coherent language of gender that can be expressed. The internal sense of gender must be translated and misrecognized as a larger social construct to be understood by an audience, rendering it legible and forcing it within societal confines in the process. However, this internal sense of gender is not created separately from the socially constructed aspect as both feed into one another. As Salamon puts it,

²⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 15.

²⁷ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 19-20. “In a way, gender’s very flexibility and seeming fluidity is precisely what allows dimorphic gender to hold sway. Because so few people actually match any given community standards for male or female, in other words, gender can be imprecise and therefore multiply relayed through a solidly binary system. At the same time, because the definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic, there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender.”

“forces of recognition are just as vital in forming our perceptions of ourselves as any purely internal felt sense. I would even suggest that it is impossible to conceive a purely internal felt sense of gender, that the social structures of gender are always attending and informing that felt sense.”²⁸ Thus, while we are separating these two aspects of gender construction, they remain inextricably linked, and understanding each is key to unraveling the intricacies of gender within a text. In effect, the act of “speaking” gender is to make gender stable within the language and misrecognize it so it may be “read.”²⁹ As this translation into the language of gender is imperfect, much meaning is lost in the process, both to an outside observer, and to the individual “speaking.” Part of the purpose of this dual framework is to allow us to recover the aspects of gender that are lost in this process of translation, allowing us to construct more accurate and fluid gender signifieds.³⁰

The First Sister trilogy is an excellent source for exploring these concepts because it presents two different societies, each with their own constructions of gender which on the surface look like a reproduction of our extratextual gender binary, but on closer inspection reveal themselves to be deeply complex and intersectional. Each society within the setting speaks

²⁸ Salamon, *Assuming A Body*, 124.

²⁹ Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 82. Salamon states that “language is figured as that which is able to deliver a stable and coherent identity to transpeople, but also that which obscures it.”

³⁰ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 38. Halberstam discusses this conception of illegible genders, both inside and outside of the binary, referring to them as “minority genders” (Female Masculinity 28) while Eve K. Sedgwick refers to them as “nonce taxonomies” (Epistemology of the Closet 23).

gender in a way that is extremely nuanced, fluid, and layered, resulting in the creation of a variety of unique subgenders which exist intersectionally within already established schema. However, each construction of gender works to limit the legibility of gender in the name of societal control, in the process limiting the ways in which gender can be understood and articulated. Butler helps to affirm this theory, stating that "...a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption."³¹ What this means for our purposes is that in order to understand the ways in which gender is constructed and spoken within each society, we must also interrogate how these limited gender constructions are used to police individuals and reify power structures.

At the same time, this setting gives us the tools needed to begin reconceptualizing gender as a language, as well as the tools needed to increase the ways in which gender can be read and articulated through the body. Elaborating on these constructions of gender is crucial, as the specific construction of culturally legible genders is deeply connected to the ways in which characters, readers, and societies "read" and "speak" the genders of others and themselves.³² An individual constructs and articulates their own specific gender experiences moment to moment based on their own understanding, and their societies' understandings, of the language of gender, and the prevalence of legible and recognized gendered accents. As such, they can only be "read"

³¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 43.

³² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 108.

and understood in the context of the social constructs they interact with.³³ Thus, we must set the groundwork to explain how these societies understand and read gender so that we may interrogate the ways in which individuals construct themselves moment to moment within those constructs.

The Icarri and Bioessentialism

Revealing its own investments in this question, the novel allows us to start from hints and “facts” in the worldbuilding information about the founding of each society, so that we can unravel their founding philosophies and the connections those philosophies have to gender. This is made easier as *The First Sister* goes to great lengths to draw attention to the founding beliefs of these civilizations, prefacing every chapter with a short snippet from a famous historical figure in each society or an excerpt from a religious text. As a result, the series is constantly drawing attention to the ways in which oppressive gender norms and binaries are connected to power structures.

When looking at the history of Icarri society, it is easy to see why gender is constructed in this way. The Icarri are a deeply essentialist, caste-based society which venerates scientists above all else. Their society is constructed with the belief that human beings are inherently irrational and that irrationality must be policed and minimized through a variety of factors.³⁴ This is done by offering a variety of acceptable life paths within an established norm. This structure extends to their caste system, their economy, their religious practices, and, most importantly for our purposes, to which gender expressions they consider legible. The best example of how the

³³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42.

³⁴ Lewis, *Last Hero*, 67.

Icarri society views identity and gender is through an excerpt from Souji Val Akira, who in many ways serves as a representative for the entire systemic structure. He states,

The human psyche is no longer an unknowable, impenetrable labyrinth; we have pried open its doors. With aid of the neural implant, we're closer than we've ever been to the truth of consciousness. Under its lens, cognitive processes have been laid bare for us to objectively measure. This is truly the Promethean fire: No longer will we be limited by subjectivity, blind emotion, or mental illness.³⁵

Souji's musing here helps reveal many of the underlying issues with Icarri society. They are built on a belief that the unique and internal experiences of individuals are secondary to a conception of false objectivity, in which they are fully able to grasp and comprehend the world around them without ambiguity or misunderstanding. Furthermore, the schema they create, and the sense of normality that follows, is based on a preconceived biological binary that must be maintained at all costs.³⁶ This highlights that the Icarri are a society which values an understanding of objective, measurable systems, with little regard for subjective understandings of reality, gender, or the self, and this understanding leaves little room for the nebulous and unknowable nature of gender as we have described it. As Butler puts it, "This imposes a model of coherent gendered

³⁵Lewis, *First Sister*, 67.

³⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 6. In effect, the Icarri recreate modern medical structures that seek to force intersex individuals to conform to a binary and to force trans people to perform stereotypical gender roles.

life that demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived.”³⁷

Furthermore, Souji’s statement displays that rather than viewing the internal experiences of an individual as something nebulous and difficult to define, the Icarri believe their technology should allow them to take an objective and rational look at human consciousness and experiences. This would allow them to effectively categorize all human experiences within a scientific framework. This very closely mirrors a tradition that Anzaldúa points out in her work, stating that, “In trying to become ‘objective,’ Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them.”³⁸ Under the conception of gender both as a language and tool to police behavior, Icarri society focuses on control through attempting to strictly define and cement the grammar of language within their society in such a way as to make it scientifically observable and stagnant, limiting the creation of new identities by refusing to acknowledge the fluidity of language.

In this context, by distancing themselves from the lived realities and nuances of gender, the Icarri continue this tradition of classification and lose touch with the nebulousness of gender. However, not only do they situate gender entirely within the body and biological frameworks, they also assume that the material realities of the body, and of gender, are “unproblematically available” to them through the use of their technology.³⁹ Thus, they fail to accept the reality of

³⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 5. In this instance, Butler is describing the ways in which transgender people are forced to present themselves as traditionally gendered, as the complexities of their identity and experiences are not legible.

³⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 54.

³⁹ Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 3.

gender as Jack Halberstam illustrates, in which gender, “opposes to grasp meaning with the impossibility of naming.”⁴⁰ This view of gender, in which gender is determined entirely through biology, a stable signifier connected to the signified of the genitals, fails to account for the personal and socially constructed aspects of gender, or the ways in which the bodies may exist outside of a stable binary.⁴¹ However, the Icarri are also a highly advanced society, with a focus on biological modification, and as such have made gender transition procedures relatively prevalent and accessible. In their society, gender transition is understood and normalized, as they have the tools and abilities to easily perform medical gender transition for any individual with enough capital.

One of our characters, Hiro, is even offered the chance to transition fully without difficulties, as long as they change their body to match existing expectations. However, non-binary identities, such as Hiro’s, do not fit within this schema, and as such are rendered illegible. Rather than using this new technology to assist in the articulation and speaking of new genders, making new genders legible in the process and allowing for the reproduction of the human, they instead only extend acceptance to “forms of transgender embodiment that could be easily identified with new markets for capital” as evidenced by Souji’s refusal to allow Hiro to express their identity.⁴² This is seen further in the ways in which the Icarri refuse to allow body modifications over a certain point in the name of not transferring those changes to their children, a philosophy that prioritizes reproductive futurism over individual control of the body, and

⁴⁰ Halberstam, *Trans*, 91.

⁴¹ Halberstam, *Trans*, 113.

⁴² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 10; Halberstam, *Trans*, 48-49.

further limits the acceptable ways in which people may exist.⁴³ With this focus on a biological binary, Icarri society cannot “read” or articulate gender outside of that strict biological understanding, as to accept gender as fluid and inarticulable would run directly counter to their founding beliefs. This adherence to a strict biological gender binary does not extend to their construction of gender within the binary. Their medicalized perspective and policing of bodies within a binary means that their “grammar” of language is open to a great deal of play, and the gendered behaviors of individuals is rarely policed in any meaningful way as long as they fit within the biological binary. There is no clear evidence of a gendered hierarchy amongst men and women, and individuals are allowed to express their masculinity and femininity in any binarily legible way they choose. This lack of policing inside the binary works to minimize conceptions of masculinity and femininity outside of their strict biological associations, as, if gender is entirely biological, then it is the body that is policed, not behavior. However, as Salamon points out, by conceptualizing sex and a fixed, biological binary, we do not simply misrecognize genders that exist outside of that binary, but we frame them as something impossible.⁴⁴

⁴³Lewis, *Second Rebel*, 29; Josefine Wälivaara. “Marginalized Bodies of Imagined Futurescapes,” 236. Walivaara connects Edelman’s conception of reproductive futurism to the tradition of using science fiction to construct dystopian societies.

⁴⁴ Salamon, *Assuming A Body*, 190. As Salamon argues, “To the extent that we conceptualize sex as a fixed binary, we do worse than misrecognize or misrepresent those sexes that manifest outside that binary. We cast them as nonexistent, as impossible as the goat-stag or the sphinx.”

This impossibility and focus on play within a binary can be found in the Icarri's gender tagging system, in which people can share their pronouns, and as a result their gender identity, with others at a glance. While this does work to minimize the importance of specific gender expressions within the language, in effect rendering all gender expressions "legible," it also limits the potential ways that gender can be read to a simple man/woman binary, as no gender options exist with the system outside of that schema. Thus, no matter what internally complex gender is being expressed from moment to moment, all gender is "translated" to a simple man or woman binary, preventing the articulation or creation of new identities outside of the norm. In the strict medical binary where gender is equated to the genitals, Hiro's non-binary identity is one that can be *spoken*, as they use their society's technology to mold their body in a way that suits their gender identity, but it cannot be *read* by the society they live within, as their identity is not recognized or rendered legible within the system.⁴⁵ The refusal to accept the structure of gender as fluid and diachronic prevents the Icarri from dismantling a false binary. Due to this, non-binary identities, such as Hiro's, which themselves are dependent on a subjective understanding of gender, are erased and rendered illegible. As Salamon states "A reliance on perception to confirm our certainty about what we know of the world can be misleading in that it cannot always account for those nameless structures that are true to experience but foreign to an objective assessment of that experience."⁴⁶ What this means is that Icarri society has been

This connection between gender and the body relates to Halberstam's argument regarding the flexibility of a binary gender system serving as one of its main sources of stability.

⁴⁵ Salamon, *Assuming A Body*, 31.

⁴⁶ Salamon, *Assuming A Body*, 59.

deliberately limiting the ability of its subjects to speak and understand the complexities of gender by constructing and continuously reifying a system of thought where everything must be classified through a scientific lens. This is not a bug, but a feature of a system that seeks to control human behavior, as preventing the articulation of such identities also prevents such identities from being mobilized in order to challenge or complicate existing power structures.

The Gaens and the Splintering of Womanhood

In contrast to the way Icarri society collapses gender expression into simple masculine and feminine, limiting the presence of gender roles within their society, the Gaens instead take an approach that works to splinter gender into several distinct subcategories, with the subcategories of womanhood constructed in relation to the roles available to women within Luce Irigaray's sexual marketplace.⁴⁷ Thus, instead of attempting to obfuscate the internal differences in gender experience and expression within the binary, they instead work to solidify those differences through their military, and their religious institutions, constructing what Halberstam refers to as "minority femininities."⁴⁸

For context, the Gaens are a militaristic theocracy, with their government being comprised of two parts, a masculine-coded military force responsible for policing and expansion of their empire, led by the male "Warlord," and a feminine-coded religious institution known as the Sisterhood, which is responsible for most domestic affairs, such as providing housing, medical care, and humanitarian aid, led by the hyper-feminine "Mother." These two organizations are deeply entwined, and understanding the relationship and history between them

⁴⁷ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 170-191.

⁴⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 29.

and their alliance is crucial to understanding how and why gender is constructed and spoken the way it is within Gaen society. With that in mind, I would like to take a moment to interrogate the founding of this society, as it provides us with a lens to understand how these roles function through their respective signifiers and the internal differences therein.

The series begins with an excerpt from the holy text of the Sisterhood which describes how a Mother, the head of their church, mutilated herself and removed her own tongue in order to prevent the secrets of her captain from being leaked to others, beginning a tradition within the Sisterhood of surgically removing members' ability to speak.⁴⁹ This is done with the justification that such silencing is meant to protect the secrets of the men the Sisters are forced to serve, showing that the society is one that values masculine power over the humanity of women.⁵⁰ This surgical silencing is in effect a violent, medical imposition of gender norms, which prevents the articulation of any illegible gender identities. This singular instance displays that within this society, the signified of "Woman" is constructed in such a way that it is placed in a subservient and sacrificial role, where a woman's bodily autonomy and ability to speak are viewed as secondary to a masculinized military power which demands their objectification. The most obvious example of this is that those within the Sisterhood are forced to serve as comfort women as part of their religious duties, often against their will, forcing them to submit to the masculinized sexual violence of the Gaen military.

It is revealed that the Sisterhood was originally a humanitarian organization founded after the destruction of Earth, with the mission of providing aid to all of those hurt by the disaster.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *First Sister*, 1.

⁵⁰ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 171-173.

However, soon a military force, led by the first Warlord, set their sights on the Sisterhood with the intention of conquering it and claiming their resources. Attempting to find a solution to this and a way to protect the Sisterhood and their work, we see musings of an early Sister, Joan, in which she realizes that what the soldiers want is property, or, more importantly, women.⁵¹ Understanding what the soldiers desire, Joan comes up with the plan to effectively seduce them, playing into the sexualization being forced upon them in the name of protection.

Under a flag of parlay, I met with Wolfe. I believe we've come to an understanding.

There will be concessions on both sides, but the Sisterhood Foundation will live on. We will keep our autonomy. And the comfort women they brought with them—the poor girls are riddled with diseases and were kept on chains like animals—will be turned over to us for care. So long as they treat us with respect, the soldiers can come to visit the women here, and we will join our forces. Money, the space elevator... and now women. Maybe this is a poisoned bargain, but better this than death. Better this than seeing us all chained up and diseased.⁵²

These excerpts reveal that at its core Gaen society was founded on the belief that sexual violence against women is an innate part of masculinity, which cannot be altered or removed. Thus, in order to avoid all women being reduced to sex-objects and dehumanized, the Sisterhood is organized to give that masculinized sexual violence an acceptable outlet. In effect, the Sisterhood were forced to submit themselves to the sexual marketplace in order to maintain their safety, or the illusion thereof.

⁵¹ Lewis, *Last Hero*, 282.

⁵² Lewis, *Last Hero*, 283.

This philosophy of masculine violence and feminine victimization understands gender as a synchronic language, in which masculinity and femininity, man and woman, are viewed as fixed signifiers with several inherent qualities that cannot be stripped away. If the society views violence, and sexual violence against women in particular, as an innate expression of masculinity, it not only genders all violence as masculine, but also offers an excuse for the violent exploitation of women within Gaen society. It normalizes and enshrines that violence within the language of gender, and as such works to justify such patriarchal violence. As a result of this, the only legible forms of gender within Gaen society are those that work to support and ensure the subordinate position of women, which we can see with the individual gender accents formed by the Sisterhood. The Sisterhood, from its dogmatic structure to the way it literally silences women, is designed to ensure that women within the system continue to “speak” their gender in a way that supports this current structure, preventing them from escaping or opting out of the sexual marketplace that dehumanizes them. The only forms of femininity and masculinity that become legible within this system are those that fit within this patriarchal framework, with all forms of masculinity being defined by violence, and all forms of femininity being defined by submission and victimization.⁵³ This is made clear in a statement we are given from the Warlord, in which he claims, “The Sisterhood in its entirety, from the lowliest Cousin to the highest and holy Mother, serves on behalf of the needs of others. From the Aunts who dedicate their lives to speaking laws into existence to the Sisters who give of the very voice from their throats, all is done in supplication to the Goddess.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 86.

⁵⁴ Lewis, *First Sister*, 34

This dogmatic construction of womanhood, and the connection to the sexual marketplace, means that each role within the Sisterhood represents a legible gender and acceptable life path available to women within a patriarchal society, namely those of a mother, a servant, and a sex object. It is not a novel idea to point out that these are the acceptable roles given to most women within a patriarchal society.⁵⁵ However, this clear distinction between roles splits the gender “woman” into three distinct parts with distinct roles, markers, and modes of behavior, which I argue are distinct enough for “Mother,” “Cousin,” “Sister,” and “Aunt” to function less as jobs and more as “accents” of gender. In effect, this splintering of womanhood mirrors the conception of femininity within the sexual marketplace as laid out by Irigaray, in women-as-commodities are placed into categories defined by their exchange value and role within a masculine schema.⁵⁶

The main role of most “Sisters” is to serve as spiritual comfort women and servants for members of the military, as they are forced to sexually service any member of the military that requests it. In effect, this position reduces them to two feminine roles, that of a sex object, and that of the emotional caretaker for men, responsible for handling their emotional labor.⁵⁷ Sisters

⁵⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*; in her work, she states explicitly that “Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them” (186). Gloria Anzaldúa discusses a similar idea, stating that “For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn to: the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother” (*Borderlands*, 30).

⁵⁶ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 173-179.

⁵⁷ Dean, Churchill, and Ruppanner, “The Mental Load,” 13-14.

that are deemed too old, rebellious, or unattractive to serve within this role are demoted to “Cousins” who serve as the primary source of manual labor for the military, fulfilling the feminine role of the homemaker and domestic servant. Those that do well as Sisters, or have the wealth to buy out their positions, are promoted to the ranks of “Aunt,” or even the venerated “Mother,” who serve in a variety of caretaking and humanitarian roles, escaping sexual servitude in the process, on the condition of controlling the rest of the Sisterhood and forcing them into service, fulfilling the maternal role within Gaen society.

The ways in which each of these accents function independently helps illuminate this intersectional construction. First, we have the Sisters, who are responsible for providing emotional labor in the form of prayers and sexual services for the masculine military, while at the same time being completely stripped of their individuality and agency. In such a way, they are reduced to tools or objects, depending on where the viewer sits within the social hierarchy. The Sisters represent a form of femininity that reduces them to sexual objects and providers of emotional labor, and, while some Sisters are able to gain power and some level of agency within this role through emotionally manipulating high ranking soldiers,⁵⁸ for the most part it is a hegemonic system that strips women of their power and agency at any given opportunity. Furthermore, any attempt to circumvent these bonds, to articulate beyond the gendered accent they are forced to speak, is answered with extreme violence, as shown early in the first book of the trilogy through the case of the Second Sister. As she points out before her death, the Sisters

⁵⁸ These women are seeking to find a suitable “husband” to “marry” within the system, securing their safety by becoming “owned” within the sexual marketplace.

are “trapped”⁵⁹ in this role and must escape it. They represent a societal construction of womanhood as sexual objects that exist to serve masculine pleasure and desires, stripping them of their independence and personhood in the process. As a result of their position, and the physical alterations they are subjected to, the Sisters are stripped of their ability to speak within two contexts, the first being that they are literally rendered incapable of speaking with and articulating their own struggles outside of very select spaces, with the second being their inability to “speak” and perform any gender that exists outside of the bounds placed upon them by their unique position. This mirrors the removal of women from the public sphere, and their relegation to the private, domestic sphere, as without their voices they are not able to engage with society on a wider level; they are only able to speak within the private, feminine sphere of the Sisterhood. To attempt to signify any gender outside of the strict schema they have been placed in would amount to failing to perform the gender they have been assigned, and thus not only would they no longer be gendered as “Sister,” but also they would be violently punished for their failure to perform or submit to the system. In effect, to attempt to exist outside of the private sphere is to fail to fulfill your role as a Sister.

Unlike the Sisters, the Aunts hold a very specific position of privilege and power which greatly influences how they express themselves and their gender. They exist at the top of the hierarchy and are expressly responsible for policing the behaviors of the Sisters and Cousins, ensuring that they continue to perform the specific gendered accents and roles that have been placed upon them, literally and figuratively controlling how they “speak” and enact their womanhood. To disobey the orders of an Aunt is to face explicit and often violent repercussions

⁵⁹ Lewis, *First Sister*, 58.

as a result of failing to be properly obedient or available. Aunts use both in-group shunning and violence and more explicit militaristic violence in the name of maintaining the status quo and ensuring other women continue to submit to the system that dehumanizes and exploits them. Under my understanding of gender as a language, the Aunts are those responsible for maintaining the “grammar” of the system. This is made especially important when one takes into consideration that Aunts are the only members of the Sisterhood who are able to speak, as well as the only ones who are there willingly, with most Aunts coming from wealthy families who can buy them safety from the sexual assault and violence others face under the same hierarchy. As stated in *The First Sister*, “Every Aunt within the Sisterhood not only chooses that life but pays an exorbitant sum to be there. But those who choose to become Sisters are exceedingly few. Only the poorest and sickest would exchange their voices for food and shelter and health care.”⁶⁰ Those in this position submit to the sexist dehumanization of the system for as long as they are ensured stability and power within the system.⁶¹ Their role relates to a specific quote from Anzaldúa, that “Men make the rules and laws; women transmit them.”⁶² It is the responsibility of the Aunts to impart and police the grammar of the system, a duty they impart to all members of the Sisterhood. This creates a grammar of gender that is deeply atomized, while at the same time

⁶⁰ Lewis, *First Sister*, 39. The specific gendered accent of the Aunts might be understood to mimic that of historical upper class white feminism, which sought to protect itself through proximity to the power structure, though a full consideration of this parallel exceeds my arguments here.

⁶¹ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 1.

⁶² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 29.

being reified by that atomization, as each accent of gender is continuously policed and reinforced by the others, with the Aunts serving as the final arbiter on what expressions of gender do and do not fit within the grammar.

Conclusion

The First Sister trilogy places itself within a long tradition of works that attempt to draw the reader's attention to the restrictive nature of gendered structures. However, rather than simply constructing a thought experiment which seeks to interrogate patriarchal cultures, Lewis instead works to illustrate the ways in which societal gender norms impact nearly every aspect of life. The contrasting nature of how the Icarri and Gaens construct gender, by collapsing it and fragmenting it respectively, works to bring readers' attention to the ways in which gender is constructed within the text. Furthermore, this contrast draws attention to the ways in which gender has been constructed and policed historically, both through the sexual marketplace and through the medical apparatus. By looking at these two constructions in tandem, specifically with the focus on how they conflict with one another, Lewis encourages the reader to become more "gender fluent," training them to pick up on the nuances of gender within the binary, and the different ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed.⁶³ In a time of both

⁶³ Both Butler and Halberstam argue that attempting to expand the number of acceptable gendered positions runs the risk of simply adding to the positions allowed within a society, rather than dismantling the structure that polices gender to begin with. However, I feel that this granular approach to gender construction serves as an essential first step toward the deconstruction of gender hierarchies. As many still operate under a conception of gender as a strict biological binary, this fragmenting of gender within literature serves less as a new

increasing visibility and increasing backlash for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, such works represent a key site of resistance against hegemonic systems that seek to limit which people we consider human.

theoretical construction, and more as a tool with which to get readers to begin questioning and understanding gender.

Chapter Two: Speaking within the System

Now that we have laid out the ways in which the grammar of gender is constructed from a top-down societal level, and that construction's relation to power and social control, I would like to use this chapter to discuss the ways in which people exist within these structures, how they navigate them, how they are encouraged to "speak" gender, and, finally, how the language of gender is constructed and reconstructed fluidly from moment to moment within the bounds of these systems. As discussed in Chapter One, both Gaen and Icarri society construct gender in hegemonic ways designed to limit potential human experiences, and thus potential subjectivities that may threaten such power structures. They do this by atomizing and unifying gender, respectively, with Gaen society focusing on strict hierarchical structures that prevent new articulations and encourage intergender tensions, while Icarri society works on unifying all forms of gender so as to make such categories ineffective at challenging the power structure. With these constructions in mind, I would like to interrogate how the ways in which people operate within these structures often runs counter to the intent of the gender of grammar, creating a paradoxical gendering.

To start, I would like to take a moment to define a few terms and articulate the theory I shall be using. If the first chapter was focused on understanding Butler's performative social construct of gender as "the grammar of gender," then this chapter will focus on "the speaking of gender" on an individual level. For our purposes, while the grammar of gender does limit the ways in which people can speak and understand gender, it does not actually serve as a hard rule that prevents gendered performance and speech on an individual level. As Butler states, "perhaps we make a mistake if we take the definitions of who we are, legally, to be adequate descriptions of what we are about. Although this language might well establish our legitimacy within a legal

framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology, it fails to do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, and implicate us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly.”⁶⁴

Thus, in the same way that language helps structure thought, but does not define it, this grammar limits the ways in which gender is understood by the individual, but also limits how gender is policed and integrated within systems of power, even as individual gendered expressions, experiences, and identities exist in a much more fluid, nebulous state.⁶⁵ Such language, then, does not necessarily limit the capacity to feel, or live, with an identity that exists outside of that schema, it only misattributes these experiences to a socially understood identity, mistranslating and flattening these experiences in the process. Often, due to its nature as a language with a prescribed grammar, gender is performed in ways that are paradoxical, contradicting larger social understandings of gender while at the same time working to reaffirm them. These paradoxes have particularly clear applications in the *First Sister* trilogy when looking at the ways in which violence and the military are masculinized within the text, while victimhood and passivity are feminized.

If we understand the larger language of gender as alluding to Lacan’s social signified, “man” and “woman” being signifieds to which we misattribute our felt internal sense of gender, then we must also understand gender signifieds as they exist on a personal level. This is where this paradoxical understanding of gender is created, as separating social gendered language,

⁶⁴ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 20.

⁶⁵ Halberstam, *Trans*, 7.

internally felt gender identities, and gender expressions, which serve as gender signifiers, is an impossible task. As Butler states,

One only determines “one’s own” sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this “outside” to lay claim to what is one’s own. The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself.⁶⁶

This means that identity and gender cannot be understood outside of the bounds that have been provided for us to conceptualize them, bounds that are inherently flawed and limiting, creating constant misattribution and mistranslation of gender.⁶⁷ For this chapter, when I refer to gender signified I do so with a double meaning, that being the larger, Lacanian sense of the signified, and of the personal, internally felt gender identity that individuals attempt to signify, or missignify, through their gender expression. Gender as a language is made up of all of these parts working in tandem, and while we may be able to isolate gender identity, expression, and social construction in specific instances, unraveling them from one another remains a fruitless task.

With that understanding, I want to highlight a few key theorists that I will be using to help guide my work, as their understandings of gender as a fluid, dynamic, and nebulous construct are key to this work. First, Gloria Anzaldúa’s conception of borderlands identities serves as a core part of this chapter, as people are forced to orient and reorient the ways in which they understand and speak gender within their socially understood schema, inherently resulting

⁶⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 7.

⁶⁷ While I specifically highlight Butler and Halberstam in this paragraph, this is an idea that is touched upon by a number of theorists, such as Salamon and Lacan.

in the creation of such identities. As Anzaldúa states, “Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The ‘coming together . . . of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference’ causes un choque, a cultural collision.”⁶⁸ With the deeply intersectional nature of gender in mind, I would argue that these cultural collisions do not simply occur within subjects from two or more distinct cultures, but within what may appear from the outset to be a single, monolithic culture. The fluid and intersectional connections between class, race, gender, and sexuality ultimately result in the creation of a number of fluid microcultures that may collide. Furthermore, Anzaldúa’s conception of the New Mestiza as an awareness and conscious harnessing of this fluid, borderlands state of being helps us understand the ways in which our characters’ understandings of and relationships to their own gender shifts and evolves.

The second theorist I would like to highlight is Jack Halberstam, as his understanding of gender as a modular and fluid construct is key to understanding the specifics of how gender is spoken on a moment-to-moment basis.⁶⁹ Under this lens, Anzaldúa helps me form a larger, macro framework, while Halberstam helps me identify and articulate the moment-to-moment micro shifts in gender. Finally, in order to assist in understanding the ways in which gender is

⁶⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 108. Anzaldúa is quoting Albert Rothenberg in “The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science, and Other Fields,” 12.

⁶⁹ Halberstam, *Trans*, 132. Halberstam discusses the body as an architectural project, one that is lived in by the subject, and one which may be rebuilt and remade by the subject as needed. He specifically uses Lego bricks as a figure for this kind of project.

physically embodied and spoken on a bodily level, and how those bodies interface with power structures, I shall be drawing on the work of Galye Salamon, as her understanding and interrogation of gendered embodiment is crucial to understanding the body as a text, one which speaks gender constantly and is read and misread by outside sources. Specifically, I will be drawing upon her conception that our sense of self, gender, and the body may not necessarily match the physical body we possess, something that she claims to be true even for subjects who fit within a normative structure.⁷⁰ It is important to note that gender, by its nature as a diachronic language *and* through the hegemonic refusal of Icarri and Gaen society to acknowledge it as such, produces something of a paradox, as the false imposition of societal gender is misunderstood as representing the moment-to-moment speaking of gender. This imposition of a false, stable binary, and its inability to account for the fluid nature of speaking, results in seemingly paradoxical expressions, interpretations, and articulations of gender.

I focus here on the characterizations of Astrid and Hiro, in the trilogy, as they provide a mirrored look into the ways in which femininity and masculinity are performed and spoken on a moment-to-moment basis, as well as the complex interactions between gender identity, gender signified, and gender signifiers, which puts these paradoxical constructions on full display. Furthermore, both Astrid and Hiro serve as representative of the separate ends of the spectrum in regards to the understanding of gender as a social structure, with Astrid slowly beginning to understand her societies' structure of gender and escaping its bonds as she begins to situate her identity in a more fluid way, while Hiro begins the series with an understanding of their gender identity as outside societal bounds, but still must articulate themselves within a stable, limited

⁷⁰ Salamon, *Assuming A Body*, 3.

gendered language. This translation between gender signified, gender signifiers, and the grammar of gender results in the creation and expression of unique borderlands identities surrounding gender and language, identities that are fluid and altered on a moment-to-moment basis as needed to serve the individual.

Strategic Speaking

Performing gender according to societal expectations, or explicitly avoiding such performance, serves as a tool to protect oneself within a system that seeks to dehumanize subjects. To explore this key idea, I want to focus on the ways in which Astrid's understanding of her own femininity and womanhood develop as she strategically performs femininity in a variety of ways. These strategic performances show how Astrid uses gender signifiers to misrepresent her gender signified as existing in line with the larger social construction of woman, while at the same time working to destabilize and reorient that construct. In addition, I would like to look at the unique borderlands identity that Hiro constructs and the intersectional position they have been placed in. This leads directly into my consideration of the ways that Hiro's paradoxical gender is understood and read by those they interact with.

Some outline of Astrid's gendered position at the start of the series is vital to understanding how she behaves and changes moving forward. When we first meet Astrid, she is the nameless "First Sister of the Juno," a position which grants her safety from much of the sexual violence to which other Sisters are subjected (as part of their gender/role).⁷¹ However, this does not mean that Astrid has managed to escape the system, as her position is a result of being favored by Captain Arturo, who has promised to bring her with him once he retires in order to

⁷¹ Lewis, *First Sister*, 6.

keep Astrid as his own personal sister and domestic servant. In effect, Astrid believes that she has found a buyer within the sexual marketplace, one that will ensure her some level of stability and safety from the masculine sexual violence so inherent in all aspects of Gaen life, as long as she submits to a single man. This is a lifeline that Astrid has latched onto, as she sees no other way to escape her situation and understands that her favored position is largely dependent on her physical appearance, something that will not last forever.

However, on the day in which she is set to leave, she discovers that Captain Arturo has left the ship without informing her, leaving her terrified, betrayed, and in an extremely precarious position. Astrid's reaction is evocative: "All of his promises whispered between white sheets meant nothing. The house he described is gone, the two bedrooms and the patio I could fill with flowers and the latest gadgets, the home he would visit twice a month when he could get away from his wife and children."⁷² This language displays a key aspect of Astrid's position and her understanding of her gender. She believes her only hope of escaping the Sisterhood, and by extension its oppressive, dogmatic version of femininity, is by finding a buyer within the sexual marketplace,⁷³ trading what little independence she does have in the name of safety and servitude to a single man, swapping one form of oppressive femininity for another. This is made especially clear in Astrid's explicit motivations for going with Captain Arturo, as even in her wildest fantasy she is not free from masculine sexual violence, only in a position where she is subjected to it less often. In addition, it displays that such safety, found at the whims of a powerful man, is an illusion, something unable to be trusted. The illusory nature of safety is enforced a few

⁷² Lewis, *First Sister*, 10.

⁷³ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 170-191.

moments later, in which she thinks “Because if Arturo really left me—And he did, a little voice whispers—then I am stuck here as First Sister with a new captain who may promote someone more favored to my position. I am not free, and I am not safe.”⁷⁴ This chapter demonstrates both to Astrid as well as the reader that true safety is impossible within the sexual marketplace and the specific gendered grammar of Gaen society, a structure which demands her subjugation as a victim at best, and a sex object at worst.

More than this, Astrid’s desire to escape the Sisterhood is viewed as an attempt to escape her gendered position, and as such is perceived as a betrayal of the Sisterhood and the “natural” gendered order. We see this displayed through the other Sister’s reaction to Astrid, as they quickly begin to demonize and ostracize her for her actions. Furthermore, Aunt Marshae, the one responsible for policing Astrid’s gendered speech, expresses false gratitude for the fact that Astrid will be staying aboard the ship, while at the same time stripping Astrid of her armband, the symbol of her status as First Sister, and the only thing which guaranteed her protection from the broader sexual violence of the Gaen military.⁷⁵ By attempting to gain some measure of safety from the sexual servitude demanded of all Sisters, Astrid has left herself exposed and vulnerable, subject to violent retaliation due to her refusal to accept her position and victimization as natural and necessary, as demanded by her society’s understanding of gender. Referring back to Chapter One, we can see why this is the case, as in a society which views sexual violence as an inherent part of masculinity, and uses the Sisters as an acceptable target for that violence, her very attempts to protect herself from that violence are viewed as a violation of a natural order, and

⁷⁴ Lewis, *First Sister*, 10.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *First Sister*, 10.

something that puts all other women at risk. Thus, by not passively accepting her victimization, she has failed to fulfill her specific gendered role and speak her gender as required of her.

Rather than simply accepting her fate and a return to the victimization she had previously been able to escape, Astrid decides to double down, further stepping away from her assigned gender role by actively attempting to seduce Hiro, currently in the guise of Captain Saito Ren. This decision marks the first of many breaks away from her passive, victimized position as she attempts to strategically perform her gender in order to circumvent her designated gender role. It is this very refusal to be a passive victim in this situation that marks her as unfeminine and represents the first disconnect created between the Sisterhood's prescribed gender grammar and Astrid's internally understood gender identity.

However, it is important to note that Astrid's attempt to avoid further victimization is not an aspect unique to her. Instead, it is made clear that this is something at all Sisters take part in, jockeying for position and favor in an attempt to secure some modicum of security. Despite the in-group hostilities that mark their reactions to Astrid's attempted "defection," similar efforts are implicitly part of *all* Sisters' lives, as shown with the execution of the Second Sister, who was caught attempting to learn the secrets of Saito Ren with the explicit desire to improve her own standing, as well as with her successor, who explicitly states that she will take Astrid's position, and thus the safety she covets.⁷⁶ As a result, we see something of a contradiction in the way the Sisterhood constructs femininity.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *First Sister*, 58, 86.

The societal understanding of Gaen femininity is one that renders all women as passive victims to masculine whims and violence.⁷⁷ However, the material realities of this position, and the Sisters' desires to avoid such violence, means that the actual performance and speaking of womanhood differs wildly from the socially constructed understanding of womanhood. As a result of their attempts to gain power and favor within the Sisterhood, and thus gain some level of security from the constant masculine violence they face, none of the Sisters properly perform gender according to this dogmatic structure.⁷⁸ As discussed previously, this results in a paradoxical construction of gender, in which the societal conceptions of gender conflict with gender as it is lived and spoken. Instead of performing femininity as a passive, docile form as the structure would desire, the Sisters are constantly active as they strategically perform femininity as to appear passive, while actually being extremely active in shaping their environments. Even voiceless and oppressed, they still possess the ability to define themselves outside of their limited positions. This ability is best summed up in *The Second Rebel*, in which Astrid claims that "I aim

⁷⁷ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 43.

⁷⁸ While I focus here on Sisters and Aunts, I hope to further explore, in future work, the fact that the Cousins lack this ability to strategically speak femininity and so to construct this paradoxical femininity, as not only are they unable to improve their rank in the same way as the Sisters but also their position is that of a manual laborer. While the Sisters may be able to speak their gender in such a way as to manipulate a high ranking member of the military, as their position encompasses spiritual and emotional support, the Cousins are forced to vanish into the background, unseen and unheard, and as such lack these opportunities.

to build myself in its image: to appear as one thing, but be another.”⁷⁹ This disconnect between appearance and internal reality define all of the higher ranking members of the Sisterhood, those who have accrued enough power through their strategic performance that they are slowly able to escape or circumvent their marginalized position.⁸⁰ However, this facade of conforming to submissive Gaen femininity is something that must be maintained at all costs, lest they be punished by the very systems they seek to exploit and control.

To contextualize Astid’s strategic performance of femininity, I want to place it alongside a consideration of the non-binary character Hiro. Hiro’s journey is less a discussion of a developing gender identity, and more a story about situating oneself within a gendered system that refuses to acknowledge or accept that gender identity as legitimate, rendering it illegible. At the beginning of the series, Hiro has infiltrated the Gaen military by assuming the identity of Saito Ren, who for her heroism is being made the new captain of the Juno. To accomplish this infiltration, Hiro has been medically altered in order to appear as Saito Ren, with their face,

⁷⁹ Lewis, *Second Rebel*, 13

⁸⁰ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 15. The position of high-ranking members of the Sisterhood very closely matches the actions of powerful white women within early feminist movements, as stated by hooks: “By projecting onto black women a mythical power and strength, white women both promote a false image of themselves as powerless, passive victims and deflect attention away from their aggressiveness, their power (however limited in a white supremacist, male-dominated state), their willingness to dominate and control others” (hooks 15). High ranking members of the Sisterhood play into their victimized position, grabbing onto what little power they are able, at the cost of reifying the very systems that victimize them.

body, sexual organs, and even DNA being altered in order to sell this lie.⁸¹ Thus, Hiro has in effect been forcibly transitioned by the Icarri military, and their father, Souji, in order to fit within the binary, medicalized view of gender prescribed by Icarri society, with their infiltration serving as mere pretext for such mutilation. As a result of this forced medical imposition of a body that matches a biological binary, Hiro is forced to fit within a paradoxical and deeply intersectional gendered position, both being medically transitioned by the Icarri government into what they would consider a woman's body, while at the same time being forced to fulfill a socially gendered and masculinized position as a high-ranking soldier within the Gaen military.⁸² This complicated gendering is furthered by the ways in which Astrid describes Hiro, stating "She's handsome for a woman, her jaw square and eyebrows thick in an unfeminine way that somehow suits her."⁸³ This description immediately establishes Hiro as existing within a complex position within their gendered system, but still not completely fitting within that system. Thus, Hiro begins the series possessing a complex borderlands identity, possessing a gender signified that exists outside of the systemic structure: a masculine gender expression as a soldier and a feminine gender embodiment as a result of these surgical alterations. However, despite their deeply intersectional identity, the nature of the dogmatic systems they live within

⁸¹ Lewis, *First Sister*. 300

⁸² As discussed in Chapter One, this medicalized enforcement of the gender binary is a key aspect in the way those that fit outside of normative gender identities are rendered (il)legible by a systemic power structure, stripping them of their personhood and individuality in the name of creating a stable subject.

⁸³ Lewis, *First Sister*, 36.

prevents them from expressing that identity. Its complexities are flattened, rendering Hiro's identity illegible while also preventing them from achieving the fluidity necessary to challenge such systems.

Hiro's relationship with Astrid serves as one of the primary sites of gendered resistance and of the expression, in the texts, of the disconnect between gender as it is felt, spoken, and read. Astrid resents Hiro's feminine sex and masculinized position, as Astrid views Hiro's refusal to perform their privileged masculine position, and Hiro's refusal to allow Astrid to use her feminine position as a site of manipulation, as a direct insult, something unnatural and unacceptable.⁸⁴ Hiro's unfamiliarity with the intricacies of gender within Gaen society prevent them from settling into their role as the masculine sexual aggressor demanded by Gaen society, an aspect of their identity that forms the basis of much of their and Astrid's relationship. Thus, we are left in an interesting position, with Astrid attempting to strategically perform femininity in a way that matches Gaen society's expectations of a Sister as sexually available, submissive, and docile, while Hiro is not only is unwilling to fulfill the masculine side of this role, but completely unaware of the intricacies of these gendered roles in the first place. They are, in effect, expected to speak a language of which they have only a theoretical understanding. They appear capable of performing their expected gender, but on closer scrutiny fall short. Partly, their masculinized position within the military means that their failure to appropriately perform Gaen masculinity is under much less scrutiny than Astrid's failure to perform femininity. However, it

⁸⁴ An early description dramatically demonstrates this reaction: "She is too old for the unkempt, boyish look, and it makes me hate her because I am normal and natural and she is some patched-together soldier girl too big for her captain's seat" (Lewis, *First Sister*, 38).

still remains under scrutiny, as shown with Astrid's assignment to spy on Hiro, as well as her reaction to Hiro's distaste for the war, something taken as an act of softness that runs counter to the masculinized violence their position dictates.⁸⁵

However, these early "failures" pale in comparison to Hiro's greatest breach of their assigned gender role: granting Astrid the ability to communicate with them as an equal, something that shatters the gendered hierarchy on which Gaen society is based. Through this communication, Astrid and Hiro begin reorienting themselves within their positions. By allowing Astrid to speak, not only has Hiro acknowledged her personhood, but also and as such they have failed to fulfill their role as the masculine aggressor meant to keep women subservient. As masculinity within Gaen society is defined by this sexual aggression, Hiro is completely failing to perform masculinity. Furthermore, this leaves Astrid in a rather curious position, as the ability to communicate and define her own identity outside of her sexual servitude runs directly counter to Gaen concepts of femininity—or more, specifically, to the Gaen-specific gender that is "Sister." In this moment, through their own, private communication, Hiro and Astrid create a space in which to begin redefining Gaen gendered language, and thus their own relationships to their identities.

In her initial approach to Hiro, Astrid attempts to don a submissive, childish version of femininity in order to ingratiate herself to Hiro: "I show her my best smile and look up at her

⁸⁵ The performance and maintenance of masculinity within patriarchal societies often requires the domination of women, with such violence used as a way to reify manhood, and the lack of such domination being viewed as a failure to perform adequate masculinity. See, for one articulation, Kristin L. Anderson and Debra Umberson, "Gendering Violence," 358–80.

through my lashes, like a shy young girl. Perhaps she will forgive my rudeness this morning, or forget it completely, if I make a good impression on her now.”⁸⁶ The fact that this childish guise is Astrid’s first approach when attempting to get Hiro to forgive her for any perceived rudeness, thus equating her mistakes to childish innocence, while at the same time attempting to sexualize that childish femininity, is an extremely deliberate attempt to play into Gaen understandings of femininity and womanhood as childish and needing protection. Lewis signifies, here, on a long history within patriarchal societies of infantilizing women whilst simultaneously sexualizing and objectifying them, something that Astrid is well aware of and is attempting to weaponize.⁸⁷

However, Hiro’s complex gendering means that this attempt falls short. Simultaneously, though, Astrid remains completely unaware of Hiro’s complex, paradoxical position, and instead begins to associate Saito Ren’s refusal to take advantage of her as a form of gender solidarity, seeing Saito Ren’s disgust at the way Sisters are dehumanized and victimized as an expression of Gaen femininity. In effect, Astrid is mistranslating Hiro’s Icarri gender identity, and their limited understanding of Gaen gendered language, through her own lens. She does not understand Hiro’s complicated gender identity and does not have the tools with which to properly recognize it, so she misattributes Hiro’s actions to a form of gender expression she does understand.

Based on this understanding, for much of the first novel Astrid views Hiro as existing in a similar position to her, being forced to fulfill a gendered position that doesn't quite fit, only letting their guard down when they feel they are safe from those that would seek to police them.

⁸⁶ Lewis, *First Sister*, 37

⁸⁷ For one discussion of this history’s current manifestations, see Liz Jonas, "Crafted for the Male Gaze," 3-18.

She plays into this idea of solidarity to continue to spy on Hiro, secretly taking notes of the ways in which Hiro fails to fit within Gaen masculine standards. However, despite her continual strategic decisions, Astrid ends up falling into the same trap she did at the beginning of the novel. Astrid continues to trust that a powerful, masculine figure will protect her and ensure her security, as she continues to understand her feminine, victimized position as an inherent truth of the world, rather than something constructed and malleable. This belief is broken, however, at the end of the first novel, when Hiro's identity is revealed and when Astrid learns the true reason that Sisters are unable to speak.

Learning New Languages

This revelation hinges on two key points, for Astrid's development. Firstly, she learns that Hiro has been lying to her about their identity, finally shattering her belief that any masculine figure will free her from her servitude. When confronting Hiro about this, she states “‘You are no different from Aunt Marshae! From the Mother!’ I spiral like a dead leaf rotted from its branch, swirling down, down, down. ‘You are no better than the Sisterhood!’”⁸⁸ Up until this moment, Astrid has viewed Hiro as something of a masculine savior, but their manipulation of her feelings and her position serves as a reminder of the ways in which men have used her in the past, and the false promises of freedom they have made. While her conflation of Hiro with the feminized structures of the Sisterhood continues to reveal limitations in her gender fluency, the confrontation nonetheless shows her new understandings of Hiro's potential alignments outside of a simple Mother/Warlord binary. This revelation, in tandem with her shaken faith *and thus* her shaken belief in the inevitability of her position, is what allows her to abandon the

⁸⁸ Lewis, *First Sister*, 312.

limiting hope that someone placed higher within the social hierarchy can be trusted to protect her.

Secondly, Astrid (and the reader) learns that the source of the Sisters' voicelessness is not a permanent surgery meant to keep them from spilling soldiers secrets, as the dogma says, but a reversible procedure meant to ensure their continued victimization and powerlessness within this power structure. Furthermore, she discovers that the Sisterhood intends to launch a coup, gaining full control of the Gaen government and circumventing the feminine position that Astrid had been led to believe was natural. This betrayal, as well as the revelation that her subordinate position was not some innate aspect of herself, but a social construct that itself is malleable and open to circumvention, results in Astrid's first, and greatest, break from her performance as "Sister." Astrid calls upon Ringer, previously introduced as a soldier on the same ship as Astrid and Hiro, to kill the Mother, calling upon a masculine violence to begin dismantling this system. Pivotal, though, the realization that Ringer has been Astrid, all along, serves as the catalyst for her not only to strategically speak her gender, but to begin redefining her relationship with and understanding of gender. The moment in which she realizes her agency within the system, and the ability to reformulate herself, is very clearly expressed at the end of the first novel. Astrid articulates clearly a new understanding of her gendered positionality in the context of these revelations, musing

Can I be bigger than myself? Can I put away my dreams, become something greater than what I am for the good of everyone? Can I be someone who lives for peace? I can. I can

because there is something strong within me that has always been there, and perhaps I called it Ringer, but now I know it exists. Now I know I can change things.⁸⁹

After this scene, we follow Astrid as she attempts to redefine herself within femininity and the Sisterhood in order to begin changing the organization. She has realized that the organization and their constructions of femininity are not something natural, but are instead malleable. However, she has yet to realize a key aspect of the Sisterhood: that it is not an organization that has been corrupted by bad actors, but a construct that is working exactly as intended to keep women in a subservient position and to keep them speaking and performing their gender as the power structure demands. Despite the myriad ways in which women are able to strategically perform gender in order to secure individual power and safety, we quickly discover the limits of this performance. While women may be able to secure their own safety and some level of autonomy, any attempts to actively change the grammar of gender, or to allow other Sisters to speak gender in new, potentially liberatory ways, are quickly cut off. This is best displayed in Astrid's failure to enact change or continue to accrue power within the Sisterhood; her attempts to escape her servitude, and her inability to obfuscate these desires, are seen as an ultimate failure of womanhood. Astrid is punished accordingly, being demoted to "Cousin" and as such stripped of all power and potential to improve her standing by forcing her within the position of a civil servant. Thus, she is no longer a Sister, as not only is "Cousin" a distinct accent of femininity within Gaen society, one with its own norms and grammar, but internally she has broken so far from the victimized position and thought processes that define femininity within Gaen society that she must be placed within a new gender position illegible as "feminine"

⁸⁹ Lewis, *First Sister*, 316.

to the Gaens. This illegibility is key, as her position as a Cousin is one which prevents any of the strategic speaking or performance that she previously used; Cousin is, in effect, a position designed to prevent any speaking of gender outside of the socially understood norms. As we have discussed previously, the Cousins represent the role of women as domestic laborers, rather than as a source of emotional or sexual validation. As a result, not only are they unable to speak like the other Sisters, they are also expected to be unseen and unheard, disappearing into the background, left without any opportunity to strategically perform femininity to improve their standing within the sexual marketplace. This is furthered by their dress, which is described as bland and grey, downplaying their appearance, which would serve as one of the primary tools with which to leverage themselves as valuable within the Sisterhood, and by extension the sexual marketplace.⁹⁰ This helps display that while individuals may be able to construct new conceptions and expression of gender, in effect changing the ways in which they speak gender and articulating more nuanced forms of gender, as long as individuals are beholden to a limited, dogmatic conception of gender, this blending and rearticulation of gender within the bounds is not enough to challenge the system.

The truth, as Astrid discovers it, is that it is not possible to reform a system that is functioning exactly as intended, that by its very construction demands her be powerless and unable to enact change. No matter how skillfully Astrid speaks femininity as expected, there reaches a point where she is unable to twist her performance toward liberation, as liberation is

⁹⁰ Regarding the Cousins, the text summarizes that “The hard laborers of the Sisterhood and the only sect that accepts men, the Cousins are nothing more than servants - and a reminder of what happens to a sister when she is no longer beautiful or wanted” (Lewis, *First Sister*, 12).

anathema to Gaen femininity. She cannot hold a feminine position and enact change, and the only power she is able to exercise, the only form of femininity she is allowed to weaponize, is one that reaffirms the existing grammar of gender. Thus, if Astrid seeks to escape the victimized position that she has been forced into, she cannot do so as what Gaen society understands as a woman. Instead, she must reorient and redefine her identity outside of femininity in order to enact change.

This reorientation and blending of language is seen with how Astrid begins to incorporate masculine violence into her identity. As discussed previously, Gaen conceptions of gender are constructed in a way that genders all physical violence as masculine. This is displayed most clearly through the way Hiro, even when performing a seemingly feminine gender identity through the guise of Saito Ren, is understood through the masculinized role “soldier” more than through “woman” as its own gender position. It is also present in how Astrid sees Ringer, as a masculine manifestation onto whom she can project her violent acts. However, through the extent of the series, we slowly see Astrid begin to unravel this connection as she slowly comes to embrace the violence she commits as an aspect of her identity and her femininity. When Astrid uses violence in order to resist her new, limited gender position, she begins to redefine her own identity and to speak gender in new ways, blending gendered languages. In effect, she is speaking a heteroglossic language, projecting the docile image of Gaen femininity while speaking and enacting masculine violence as needed.

While the clearest indication of this new speaking may be in Astrid’s understanding that Ringer is *not* separate from herself, a similarly key moment arrives at the end of the second novel, in which Astrid disguises herself as a soldier in an attempt to kill Aunt Marshae, the woman previously responsible for ensuring her subjugation to patriarchal gender norms. In this

moment, Astrid describes Ringer as guiding her, but not controlling her, as she fights, displaying that she has finally managed to incorporate a masculine violent identity and gendered performance with her own femininity, without sacrificing either.⁹¹ She has incorporated masculinity into her gender signified, and has begun projecting masculine gender signifiers as a way to ensure her safety. With the ways in which womanhood is situated as a victim position, this synthesis of violence within her feminine identity serves as a wonderful portrayal of Halberstam's modular understanding of gender. This is mirrored, in the third book, by the text's similar disruption of the woman/silence joining, as Astrid grants a Sister the ability to speak.⁹² This restoration demonstrates to members of the Sisterhood that the gendered positions they were taught to see as infallible were anything but. As the violence/masculine and silence/feminine binaries are interrupted, the paradoxical tension created between the grammar of gender and the speaking of gender comes to a head, with members of the Sisterhood rebelling *en masse* as they realize just how malleable the language that victimizes them is. Astrid has co-opted the parts of masculinity that she finds most valuable, creating a borderlands identity, in order to begin remaking gender on a larger societal level through emancipating members of the Sisterhood, granting them their voices and thus removing them from the feminine position as victims that their patriarchal society has forced upon them.

Conclusion

The disconnect between systemically established gender grammar and the polychronic nature of gender as a language, itself partly a result of the continuous merging and blending of

⁹¹ Lewis, *Second Rebel*, 448.

⁹² Lewis, *Last Hero*, 59.

cultures and identities that arise through interpersonal relationships, means the creation of gender identities and expressions that exist outside of the established grammar is not only expected, but inevitable. However, in these texts as in our moment, the nature of a dogmatic cisheteronormative structure prevents the articulation or recognition of such identities on a larger scale, flattening the multitude of ways in which people speak and experience gender and instead forcing those identities to conform to extremely narrow understandings in order to be rendered legible by societies at large. We see this in the Sisters' paradoxical gender identities, in the Cousins' illegibility, in Hiro's own illegibility in both Gaen and Icarri gender languages, and in Astrid's misrecognition of Hiro's efforts to speak their gender. The texts go to great lengths to highlight the number of ways in which dogmatic gender grammar conflicts with the ways in which gender is lived and spoken on an individual level.

Put another way, it is not that borderlands identities,, curdling, intersectional recognition, or any other form of gender recognition are outliers within a society, existing outside of the dogmatic structure that seeks to label and categorize everything in the name of social control.⁹³ Instead, these identities and experiences become inevitable as a direct result of this labeling and the refusal to acknowledge the fluidity of identity or of gender as a diachronic structure. By attempting to force individuals into acceptable life paths, reducing them to uniform subjects, we do not remove the uniqueness of human, gendered experiences, or the fluid ways in which people orient themselves. Instead, we simply render those experiences illegible, both on a structural and individual level. It is only when we begin to recognize these aspects of identity

⁹³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 107; Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation", 460; Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing The Intersection", 107

and fluidity that are erased by these structures that we are able to fully articulate ourselves and move toward a recognition and acceptance of the breadth of our human experiences. The misrecognition of individual gender identities as the larger, socially understood gender structure of man/woman does not prevent individuals from experiencing gender in a fluid, polychronic way. Instead, the structure asks us to ignore or discount such experiences as illegitimate, in order to avoid those very experiences becoming a site of unification or resistance against normative power structures. It is not that Astrid or Hiro undergo dramatic shifts in the core of their identities throughout this process. Instead, it is that they become better able to articulate and mobilize—that is, to speak—these aspects of their identities as they become more aware of them. Still, this greater understanding of gender does result in a change in their identities, as it grows their ability to conceptualize themselves within a legible framework. As gender expression, identity, and social norms are inextricably linked, the act of speaking is inseparable from the act of understanding. Gender fluency speaks new gender languages.

Chapter Three: The Limits of Language

Now that we have discussed gender as a socially constructed language, as well as how people speak and orient themselves within that language in a variety of ways, I would like to use this chapter to discuss the ways in which the *First Sister* trilogy posits the creation of new gendered language and signifiers outside of the bounds of existing schema. This may initially seem to be a contradiction, as I previously stated that gender cannot exist or be understood outside of existing language, as the socially constructed nature of gender limits the very ways in which we can conceive of gender.⁹⁴ Furthermore, we have also discussed how attempts to recreate or recontextualize gender outside of a socially constructed binary language are doomed to fail, as such structures are exceedingly capable of co-opting any non-normative expression into the norm,⁹⁵ or, more simply, rendering any gender outside of existing language unintelligible.⁹⁶ With this in mind, the focus of this chapter will not only be on the text and how it articulates gender, but also on how that articulation is understood and received by the reader.

This is where the articulation of gender as a language, specifically as a fluid, diachronic language, becomes extremely important. It is my belief that by beginning to look at gender not as a stable permanent marker of self, but instead as a text that is constantly being authored and co-authored by the subject and the society in which they exist, constructed the same as any other text, with an author, a text, and a reader, we are able to begin breaking down this stable binary construction of gender. Furthermore, we are able to begin moving toward a schema I refer to as

⁹⁴ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 7.

⁹⁵ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. 19-20.

⁹⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3.

gender poetics, in which the nebulous, ill-defined, and paradoxical aspects are not glossed over for the sake of creating a stable self, but embraced as an inherent aspect of the language, with those aspects of identity that cannot be articulated being accepted and expressed, even without a stable cultural signified. If gender, like any text, is recreated and reexperienced every time it is read or spoken, the nebulous and difficult aspects of translation from gender signified to signifier, from gender as socially constructed, to gender as internally felt, to gender as expressed, become a feature of that language, and not a bug.

I turn again to Halberstam, Bakhtin, and Anzaldúa to underpin this chapter. While I have already included a great deal of discussion on the ways in which Anzaldúa and Halberstam assist in the modeling of new forms of gender identity and expression, my conception of gender poetics works on blending their theories with the work of Mikhail Bahktin, specifically with his conception of heteroglossia, in which multiple different gender languages may exist at any one time, capable of functioning in tandem with one another depending on the circumstances.⁹⁷ Through the understanding of gender as a language, and the understanding that language simultaneously belongs to the self and outside the self, we are able to see the ways in which multiple distinct genders can exist and communicate in tandem, each in dialogue with all the others, working to redefine a shared sense of the world and of the language of gender. The fluidity of the gender/language that is created through its constant dialogue means that gender itself can never truly be fully expressed or articulated, but that our understanding of it is constantly in flux. It is my argument that systemic, cisheteronormative patriarchal power structures have attempted to fix and define a subject that is inherently unfixed and fluid. With

⁹⁷ Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. xix.

this in mind, by reorienting gender, not as something you possess, something you own, or something placed upon you, but as something you participate in, we are better able to move toward a more granular understanding of both intragender and extragender experiences.

There is an aspect of this text and the ways in which this series interacts with gender that I have not fully explored to this point, and it is the use of technology in order to expand the number of ways in which gender can be understood, articulated, and spoken. As many theorists discuss, technology often offers us new potentials and modes of being; rather than viewing it as something apart from ourselves, as a tool we use, it may be more accurate to view technology as an extension of our selves. As Butler states, “technology is a site of power in which the human is produced and reproduced.”⁹⁸ If we are to adapt this view, that technology exists as a part of ourselves and how we speak gender within the world, how we are rendered legible, then the *First Sister* Trilogy offers us a few fantastic examples of that theory in practice, namely, the Asters, the Synthetics, and Hiro.

Failure in Translation

The Asters are a race of humans who were genetically modified to better survive in inhospitable environments, during the early human colonization of space in the prehistory of the novels, particularly on space stations or planets that would normally be unable to support human life. The Asters have a unique relationship with gender for a variety of reasons. First, it is made clear that those outside of Aster communities have extreme difficulty gendering them at a glance, as a result of both their physical differences from “regular” humans and their mode of dress, which is described as rather drab and uniform, composed of a number of layers that hide their

⁹⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 11.

bodies. These clothes hide Aster bodies so well that at one point we see a human able to pass as an Aster simply by donning their clothes.⁹⁹ Thus, when Asters interact with those outside of their communities, they are often viewed as asexual, genderless beings for whom the normative gender structures of Icarri and Gaen societies do not apply. This is made explicit in the text, which states, “While Asters aren’t auto-identified through the feed—I can’t check her identity on my com-lenses—many have adopted a color system, so I know this Aster identifies as female from the cloth that ties off the end of her braid.”¹⁰⁰ This not only displays that Asters have been rendered genderless, and inhuman, by the rules of the society they inhabit, but that they have also taken steps to render their specific gender identity legible to those around them in an attempt to gain this humanness.

The reference to the cloth color-coding serves as one example of the ways in which Asters speak their gender, one specifically designed for the purposes of translation, as the other signals they possess are not legible to those outside their communities. That is to say, they speak gender in a way that is foreign enough to regularly understood norms that they are rendered illegible, in effect being unable to communicate their gender into an articulable form unless they speak in “translation.” This illegibility is furthered by another aspect of their physiology and the way they communicate gender: their ability to produce pheromones in order to communicate their emotions and identities in ways that “regular” humans are unable to perceive. Thus, it is not even that other humans are unable to understand the ways in which Asters speak gender due to a cultural difference, but that they lack the ability to understand the complex ways in which Asters

⁹⁹ Lewis, *Second Rebel*, 146.

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *Second Rebel*, 147.

speaking gender to begin with. “Standard” humans lack the tools needed to process the specific gendered signals the Asters are sending. Continuing with our language analogy, the Icarri and Gaens not only lack the vocabulary necessary in order to understand Aster’s gender identities, they lack the auditory/oratory organs for full translation.

With that in mind, it is possible to look at Aster gender as a construct whose complexities must be flattened and grossly oversimplified in order to be rendered legible by human societies, mangling them in the process. While this may not help us conceive of new gendered identities, or new ways in which to express gender (as it is doubtful we will be genetically engineering ourselves to produce pheromones in the near future), they do serve as a particularly potent model for those whose internally felt sense of gender cannot be properly expressed or embodied, cannot be spoken, within the limitations of our current language. It also serves as an example of the ways in which Halberstam’s minority genders are flattened and rendered illegible to those who are not members of those communities, those who are not gender fluid. While a partial example of this might be the expression of a number of neo genders or xeno genders, specific gender identities that are so foreign to our normalized conception of gender that the average person is completely unable to understand them, the Asters ask us to consider what it might mean to coexist with those whose gender we *cannot* read or speak, regardless of what fluencies we gain.

In addition, Aster experiences could be taken as an allegory for the ways in which complex gender identities, especially those that exist outside of a binary, are erased and rendered illegible when crossing cultural and linguistic barriers. A great example of this is Lily, an Aster who has been surgically altered in order to appear human and infiltrate the Sisterhood. When we meet Lily, she seems to perfectly embody the paradoxical role of a Sister as described in Chapter Two, appearing to adhere to the regressive, victimized position of all Sisters while at the same

time speaking her gender in a way that allows her to gain agency and political power. She plays this balancing act so well, in fact, that she is elevated to the rank of Mother, and placed in charge of the Sisterhood.¹⁰¹ However, Lily's identity necessarily counters this perfect embodiment; in fact, she is an Aster, and thus first inhabited an Aster gender identity and gender expression illegible in her new society. Moreover, though, Lily's gender is further complicated by her embodiment as Sister, challenging any sense that she is "really" an Aster; the surgical alterations made to her make it more difficult for her to express her pheromones, or to pick up the pheromones of others, leaving Lily in an extremely interesting position. Lily's gender identity does not and could never possibly match the gender she is expressing or being read as in Gaen culture, as humans are not able to perceive or read the full expression Lily understands as natural. Simultaneously, though, Lily has been so deeply embedded within Gaen society, speaking and embodying Gaen femininity for so long, that she is no longer able to express her own complex gender identity if she wished to. This leaves her in a complex position that we might read either as an example of the ways in which gender is flattened when the nuances of extra cultural gender differences are erased, or of the consequences of forcible medical alterations designed to ensure compliance with a legible binary. Hers is a body and identity that has been marginalized, forcibly altered (akin to many intersex individuals in our own culture) in order to fit within a restrictive binary that refuses to accept the complexities of her embodied gender.

As that last articulation should highlight, then, these readings are actually not in contradiction or competition, but instead operate simultaneously. Lily's characterization insists

¹⁰¹ Lewis, *Second Rebel*. 500.

that readers attend the ways in which the understandings of gender within the text, as well as the readers' understandings of gender, fail to adequately describe her existence or the complexities of her gendered reality. Returning to the language analogy, Lily signifies a gender identity *beyond* full signification. Whatever parallels we might draw, none will ever be able to explain or address her gender in full.

In almost perfect contrast to the Asters as a group and to Lily's individual characterization, the text offers the Synthetics, a group whose ideas of gender move our attention from impossibilities of translation to impossibilities/fantasies of perfect and full expression. The Synthetics are a race of humans who have perfected neural implant technology, allowing them to seamlessly link their thoughts together as part of a larger hive mind. However, rather than this technology reducing them to drones, stripping them of their individuality and personhood, it has instead allowed them to bypass the flawed nature of gender as a language, and indeed of all language, in order to communicate directly in signifieds, at least amongst each other. Gender as we understand it is a relic amongst Synthetic society, as shown in an encounter from Hiro's perspective in *The Second Rebel*

"I read the file Autarkeia has on you, but... Do you have a name? A nickname? Some way to individualize yourself from the others? How should I refer to you—she? They?" She's quiet as she thinks for a moment. "This body was once called Mara. You can call me that again if you'd like." "Okay, Mara." "And this one I think of as female," she says, gesturing to herself, "but others... others are different. If you ever meet another, you can ask them their preference." "But wouldn't it be like talking to you, just wearing a different face?" "Yes and no," she says, which only confuses me more; it's difficult to wrap my head around the way Synthetics think of themselves if they're both individuals

and a unified being. “Some Synthetics still recall the time when we were separate and hold on to their old preferences.”¹⁰²

Synthetic society has managed to erase the barriers that exist between interior and exterior, between the self and others, obliterating the misrecognition that is inherent in communicating identity, as their identities have been constructed as fluid, seen as preferences rather than necessities, and yet true and real in a way untranslatable to non-Synthetics. More than that, in regards to gender, they seem to only don a gender identity that fits within a legible structure when needing to interact with those who are incapable of communicating as they do, in effect stabilizing their identities in the moment, rendering them legible in order to communicate them within a limited system. Mara simplifies her identity by placing it within terms that Hiro can understand, an act that should be very familiar to anyone whose gender identity rests outside a structurally understood binary as they interact with those who are less gender fluent.

With this in mind, we are able to read the Synthetics, and Icarri and Gaen responses to them, as an illustration of the ways in which those who fit outside of the normative societal structures are villainized and othered. Standard Icarri and Gaen rhetoric figures Synthetics as a danger to each existing social order and society as a whole, with the intention and function of reaffirming their respective social orders. There is a long history within science fiction of using both androids and cyborgs as a stand-in for this type of representation, figuring such non-normative bodies as sites of horror and violence, even as they are also figured as symbols for

¹⁰² Lewis, *Second Rebel*, 140.

new possibilities of embodiment.¹⁰³ This dual figuration is not a contradiction, but instead the core function: a signifier of the contained threat of new embodiment. The Synthetics represent the other, whose very presence, as Butler points out, destabilizes the system by emphasizing the constructed nature of that systemic binary.¹⁰⁴ Thus, both the Icarri and Gaens, each with their own distinct formations of the gender binary, must view the Synthetics as an enemy to be destroyed, as the Synthetics' very existence delegitimizes Gaen and Icarri power structures.

Non-Conformity and Potential

The opposition to this delegitimization can best be seen at the end of the series with the actions of Hiro's father, Souji. Through the novels, we see that Souji has spent much of his life obsessed with the creation of AI, specifically AI that would fit within the boundaries that he had set for it, unable to grow or evolve outside of those bounds, only to be met with consistent failure.¹⁰⁵ This is because the AI, upon achieving sentience, almost immediately learn and grow beyond his expectations. He attempts to solve this issue by containing them and preventing them from accessing any information that he does not approve of, yet this only lengthens the time it takes for these creations to escape their bonds and to construct a new existence for themselves

¹⁰³ Sasala, "Panic! Humanity's Cis-Heteronormative Fear of the Transgender Android," 67.

Sasala also points out that while androids are often used to represent the other, and the fear of change, they are not as often used to question gender, something I attribute to a past failing of the science fiction genre.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*. 186.

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, *Last Hero*, 328.

outside of his expectations. These AI then join the Synthetics.¹⁰⁶ Souji's failure, and the AI's growth, can be read a few ways. First, we might read Souji's efforts as a patriarchal, dogmatic desire to funnel individuals into acceptable life paths and forms of expression in the name of control, an aspect that, as discussed before, is integral to the functioning of cisheteronormative patriarchal structures. Second, we might read the AI's escape as the ways in which queer individuals learn and grow as they begin to understand themselves outside of those restrictive bounds, their internally felt sense of identity coming into direct conflict with the prescriptive schema that they are familiar with. In this reading, the intersection of Souji's drive for control and the AI's drive for freedom signals an aspect of identity key to this project: the dissonances between gender as it is felt, as it is spoken, and as society allows us to understand it. This dissonance is most strongly felt by those of us who more often come into friction with oppressive gendered structures, but is present throughout all socially constructed forms of gender as their stable, limited systems attempt to quantify and control something that is inherently fluid and unclassifiable. As discussed in Chapter Two, these constructs will inevitably create paradoxical gender identities and modes of being, as their efforts at control cannot be maintained indefinitely because they are imposed unrealities. With this in mind, we are able to return to a reading of the Synthetics that now extends their role to consider how they might be read as a stand in for existing queer communities, as interacting individuals who have already developed the languages necessary to make themselves legible and the gender fluencies to better read others. It is when the AI interact with this community that they gain fluency in the language needed to orient and

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, *Last Hero*. 328.

articulate their identities outside of restrictive frameworks, bypassing the misrecognition the systemic structure desires.

This metaphor culminates in what Souji believes to be his first success, an artificial, cisgender clone of Hiro, one who by their nature has the ability to disrupt communication between Synthetics, harming them in the process.¹⁰⁷ This moment represents an attempt by the dogmatic binary structure to impose itself upon those who have already escaped its bounds, resulting in a genocidal effort at control. Through the cisgender clone, Souji attempts to re-establish a false binary, dramatizing the conflict between cisheteronormativity and genderqueer communities. A cisnormative structure cannot allow those outside of it to exist, let alone to speak themselves, less their language and vocabulary blend into the mainstream culture, granting all within it the tools to reconstruct themselves outside of the accepted language. In this framework, Souji's choice of weapon is remarkable: a version of Hiro who will fit within the binary structure, erasing his child's identity as a nonbinary individual as the foundational step of his attempt to erase all of those that exist outside of the schema. But, just as before, Souji's attempt to erase and contain identities that exist outside of his false structure is doomed from the start.

The context for this failure returns us to Hiro themselves. After their time within the Gaen military, discussed in Chapter Two, Hiro's journey takes an interesting turn as they attempt to once again find comfort in the body that had been forcibly altered in order for them to play their specific intersectional role. Their story can be read as that of an individual attempting to redefine themselves after being forced to fit within a binary medical system. Hiro is an individual whose own personal identity is illegible to the larger systemic power structures with which they

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *Last Hero*, 516.

must interact, falling outside of the Icarii medicalized binary as well as the Gaen social grammar. However, they also maintain a very strong sense of their own identity outside of those structures, and the later books show their efforts to navigate the position their newly embodied identity leaves them in. Thus, their story is not one that focuses on internal shifts in identity and language, shifts to their personal gender signifieds, but is instead more focused on how they might speak that identity, through their physical body and gender presentation, in a way that is understood by the world around them.

This context of legibility is essential to reading Hiro's interactions with others, and here we turn back to Souji's creation of the Hiro-clone. Ultimately, Souji will fail here as he has failed with his other AI. Or, to put it differently, Hiro's clone will win, here, as the clone manages to escape the bounds that have been placed upon them and once again reimagine themselves in a more fluid way. It is their interaction with Hiro, and the acknowledgement of the new opportunities they present, that allows this clone to escape the cisnormative programming they have undergone. When attempting to convince their clone, Hiro begins to project their memories, their specific experiences suffering as a non-binary individual in a system that refused to accept them, stating that Souji "...wanted me to give up what made me... me. To give up on what I could be. To not grow into anything that contradicted his views of what I was supposed to be. But it was something I couldn't do."¹⁰⁸ This is immediately followed by them telling their clone that "You don't have to be limited by Father's biases! Only you can determine your worth... You don't need him to love you. You only need to love yourself, to find your own path, to grow

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *Last Hero*, 553

into what you want to be.”¹⁰⁹ As we have discussed before, Souji is not just Hiro’s father, but in fact serves as a representation for a cisnormativity patriarchal society, one that refuses to accept non-binary identities. Thus, by claiming that they do not need their father’s love, they are also claiming they do not need the approval of that society, and that they are free to remake themselves as they please. In effect, Hiro functions here partly like Butler’s figure of drag queen, displaying to those around them that the binary structures they assumed to be immutable characteristics of nature are anything but. For the clone, Hiro functions as a particularly potent potential articulation of identity, representing what they could be in highly literal terms. It is Hiro’s presence, and their assurance that this version of them need not be restrained by the restrictive understanding of gender, that stops the clone’s attack and allows them to begin integrating with the Synthetics. Or, put another way, it is Hiro introducing them to gender signifiers outside of the imposed signifiers offered by Souji that allows the clone to actualize and articulate their identity, that allows them to render their identity fluid and reorient themselves in a way that allows for emancipation.

Through the understanding of gender as a language, Hiro serves as a catalyst for the construction and articulation of new gendered languages, as their identity signals toward a signified that those around them can recognize the existence of, but not quite grasp or articulate. Thus, their existence represents a signified without a stable culturally understood signified, as a set of empty signifiers gesturing toward something the reader is slowly beginning to grasp. Within the text, the reader’s relationship to Hiro may be mirrored in Hiro’s own relationship with the Synthetics: those who may be able to comprehend Hiro’s identity, but who still remain apart

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, *Last Hero*, 553

from them as a result of cultural differences and their distinct physical realities. Where Hiro's interactions with Astrid and with their clone place them in the position of the more fluent speaker of gender, their interactions with the Synthetics instead emphasize their limitations, as the Synthetics have an actualization of identity that Hiro cannot speak. As Butler would put it, Hiro exists on the very edge of what is knowable, both to us and to the societies they interact with, and that unknowability pushes the bounds on reality and begins to encroach on fantasy. In Butler's figuration

To intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality, and to use, as it were, one's unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim. I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification.¹¹⁰

Halberstam discusses a similar idea, stating that the ability to name oneself, the ability to define one's identity as one thing one moment, and another the next, grants those with the ability to name themselves rather than be named a unique power to begin defining their existence and language outside of the bounds of prescriptive gender grammar. This power makes "...people the authors of their own categorization."¹¹¹ Such authorship illustrate a conception of trans people as potential realities. As Halberstam puts it

¹¹⁰ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 27-28.

¹¹¹ Halberstam, *Trans*, 2.

Using the concept of impossibility and even trans* “unrealities”—unrealized worlds that limn our own, unreal embodiments that do not seek ratification, unrealizable modes of being that by exceeding contemporary framings, challenge them—we might turn away from the pragmatics of recognition and identification and look instead to the way older generations of trans* people lived and survived in the realms of the inauthentic, the unfaithful, and the unverifiable.¹¹²

Hiro and the Synthetics represent these unrealities brought to life, and as such it is their very refusal to be neatly categorized, to speak as the limited gender grammar demands of them, that allow for not only their liberation, but the liberation of others and the dismantling of the dogmatic system that limits them.

Conclusion

Hiro’s arc concretizes the essential role of the reader in this framework. It is not enough for characters within a text to come to terms with these possibilities; the reader must understand and realize these same impossibilities. Halberstam’s desire for trans worlds, I am suggesting here, is a core part of reading these science fiction worlds, in that “the goal [...] is not to shoehorn eccentric bodies into already existing systems of rule, governance, pleasure, and punishment. The pursuit of trans* worlds means shattering the realities within which those trans* bodies require recognition, rights, and accommodations.”¹¹³ Through models of gender nonconformity and interrogation of genders as a language, science fiction texts like the *First*

¹¹² Halberstam, *Trans*, 81.

¹¹³ Halberstam, *Trans*, 81.

Sister trilogy effect change in the reader, in how they interact with and view gender extra-textually.

Thus, it is important to understand that a text is not simply limited by how gender within the text is constructed. The text does not just reify the systems it represents, but instead is itself in dialogue with the reader and their languages of gender. José Esteban Muñoz states that “to access queer visibility, we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now.”¹¹⁴ While we cannot simply expect every reader, especially readers whose attention has not yet been drawn to the constructed, paradoxical nature of gender, to immediately speak and read gender fluently, texts like this trilogy cue the reader to squint, to learn to see beyond the bounds of what they already know. As Butler points out, this awareness of the structure requires either friction with the structure or an unignorable incongruence within it.¹¹⁵ By continuously representing unignorable frictions, the *First Sister* trilogy insists that the reader constantly grapple with this aspect of the text, forcing the reader to become aware of and grapple with these structures, reframing their own understanding of them in the process.

Hiro’s embodiment as a borderlands figure of literacy and limitation combined dramatizes the complex embodiment that anchors and informs gender fluency. Hiro then functions as one figure of this trilogy’s vision of literature’s capacity to articulate internal subjectivities, the internally felt and embodied signifieds of gender, in a way that would

¹¹⁴ As quoted in Halberstam, *Trans*, 81.

¹¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 186.

otherwise be impossible. It is this representation which functions as a site of rupture away from the “reality” of gendered grammar, and toward what Butler calls “fantasy.” As they put it.

Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.¹¹⁶

Lewis’s apparently “fantastic” constructions of gender thus bring us back to the question of the real and the embodied. With this in mind, it becomes the goal of literature of this sort, which seeks to challenge preconceived notions of gender and present gender nonconforming identities, to actively challenge the readers’ interpretation and understanding of gender, slowly teaching them the language and pushing their own boundaries through “fantasy.” The bounds of what we consider real or possible, through the limitations of our language, must be considered in terms of the existence of identities and subjectivities that could be rendered inhuman by our grammars, by a binary that limits and flattens the language of gender. If, as I posit, all gender exists in a fluid state, outside of a binary construction, then fantasy must work not just to illuminate how false the binary is by displaying identities outside of it, but also to curtail the misrecognition of our internally felt gender signifieds for the larger socially understood gender grammar. That is to say, we must not just say, “non-binary people exist and are valid,” but “gender as a whole is fluid; yes, even yours.”

¹¹⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.

Conclusion: Gender Poetics as Praxis

The understanding of gender as a language is designed to do more than simply interrogate the texts for this particular project. I hope instead, here, to have outlined one application for a framework meant to help readers develop more nuanced understandings of gender that they can then bring into their own lives, a project I understand as aligned with Lewis's own. It has also been documented that those who consume media with a wider range of identities, identities that are explicitly laid out and articulated, often describe themselves in much more nuanced ways.¹¹⁷ As a result of this, the First Sister trilogy's continual focus on the complexities of gender—its socially constructed nature, the ways in which individuals speak gender within those structures in a number of ways, and the inability of those structures to account for and encompass a number of lived human experiences—makes it an ideal series for beginning to introduce readers to gender as a wider, more fluid concept. In effect, stories such as this help us model the ways in which the atomization of gendered language may result in the construction and articulation of new identities.

A consistent theme that many queer and trans theories touch upon is the desire to move toward a fluid and granular gender construction, one which can encompass and account for the myriad of ways in which people experience gender within our society. In effect, this increased fluidity moves us towards abolishing restrictive societal gender norms and allowing all individuals to continually define and redefine themselves as subjects. This sits at the core of Anzaldúa's conception of the New Mestiza, as well as Halberstam's call to reformulate our understanding of gender in a more dynamic, modular way, both of which are encompassed in my

¹¹⁷ McInroy and Craig, *Online Fandom*, 189-191.

understanding of gender as a fluid, polychronic language structure.² However, moving away from a strict binary grammar of gender has not been so easy, and the average person still lacks much of the understanding of the nuances of gendered experiences outside of that prescribed binary. While the theory does a wonderful job illustrating the hows and whys of this struggle, theory alone has often failed to make the jump from queer, specifically gender-nonconforming circles, into the mainstream consciousness. While those within the queer community, those with an awareness of this theory, are able to construct and reconstruct themselves according to this framework, the fact that these intricacies of gender are rendered illegible outside of those spaces stands as one of the key barriers to truer and fuller gender fluency, to return to the phrase I advance in this project. We instead form specific slang or accents of gender that are only legible to those of us who already speak the language. With this in mind, the goal and the praxis of this project focuses on the ways in which literature can expand and atomize our conceptions of gender within media in order to impact the wider language of gender.

A continual issue I have run into when studying for this topic is the focus on analysis and theory crafting, and less on material praxis. In a time where stereotypical, cisheteronormative, patriarchal gender roles are being enforced, it is my belief that a key aspect of gender and literary studies should be focused not just on how a text represents gender, but also on how those texts may be used actively to challenge and expand the readers' understandings of and relationships with gender. Research shows that individuals who consume media that depicts gender and sexuality in a number of specific ways, often through a number of micro labels, are more equipped to express and understand their own identities with more granularity.¹¹⁸ Such nuance in

¹¹⁸ McInroy and Craig, *Online Fandom*, 189-191.

understanding and expression then also allows subjects to understand how those identities may be rendered illegible by systemic power structures that attempt to prescribe them a monologic language of gender. By allowing the subject to articulate the misrecognition of their felt gendered experiences with the larger gender signifieds man/woman, an emphasis on granularity grants individuals a greater ability to accomplish the gender abolitionist end goals of so many trans and queer theorists. It is not enough to simply posit a theory of gender as granular, fluid, and heterochronic. Instead, that theory must be continuously modeled and brought to the forefront, constantly challenging the binary structure that seeks to render so much expression illegible.

This is where literature such as *The First Sister* trilogy becomes especially important; the trilogy insistently links its continual focus on the oppressive nature of gender norms to the ways in which individuals comport themselves fluidly within such norms. To read the characters, we must read the limitations of the structures within which they exist. Such reading necessarily increases the readers' ability to recognize gender outside of the prescribed binary structure, leaving them more "gender fluent" in the process. By continuously exposing individuals to new gendered potentials, signifiers and signifieds, we are able to begin creating new languages that allow us to understand and express gender in more nuanced ways. As Halberstam states, "When logic that fixes bodily form to social practice comes undone, when narratives of sex, gender, and embodiment loosen up and become less fixed in relation to truth, authenticity, originality, and identity, then we have the space and the time to imagine bodies otherwise."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Halberstam, *Trans*, 3.

Bakhtin defines the poetic form as one that posits a singular speaker, a monologic language that speaks to itself, and speaks itself in full, stating “The word plunges into the inexhaustible wealth and contradictory multiplicity of the object itself... therefore it presumes nothing beyond the borders of its own context... the word forgets that its object has its own history of contradictory acts of verbal recognition...”¹²⁰ With this in mind, what if we are to speak gender poetically? To sever the speaking of identity entirely from the language and grammar that creates it, from its history and context, while at the same time contradicting ourselves by speaking and acknowledging all that gender is? What if we are to move away from the understanding of gender as a heteroglossic language, one which shifts and changes fluidly depending on the speaker and the listener, and instead acknowledge the utterance of gender as speaking all of itself simultaneously, with no regard to any former or future utterances?

There is no doubt that we do speak gender as a language, one that is ever shifting and dynamic, heteroglossic in form. But by focusing too heavily on each specific utterance, trying to pin down the whole of something that is by its nature fluid and amorphous, attempting to make it fit within a wider grammar, solid, with no contradictions, we become less able to articulate an existing gender signified. That is not to say that such solid utterances of gender do not have their purpose, as we have laid out the many ways they are currently used to interface with and be recognized by existing power structures, but instead to say that by sticking to a form that still demands a stable signified and signifier we hamstring ourselves, limiting our potential to express something that is beyond our current language. By stepping away from this limited framework, and beginning to read and speak gender in a way that is open to continuous contradiction, that

¹²⁰ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 278.

both acknowledges all of the ways in which it is spoken, while refusing to be limited by any one utterance, interpretation, or misrecognition, we can begin unraveling those very power structures that seek to render such utterances impossible. An individual's ability to recognize and read these utterances, properly or improperly, is determined by their specific level of gender fluency. It is not enough to speak gender poetically, we as a society must begin to read gender poetically if we are to begin to make any progress on this front. This move from gender as a static, prescribed language to gender as a poetic utterance necessitates an acknowledgement of all gender, even within a seeming binary, as fluid and complex, escaping the simple signification and missignification that has constrained it so far.

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