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Born Again Hard: Transgender Subjectivity in Paul Chadwick's Concrete

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Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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BORN AGAIN HARD: TRANSGENDER SUBJECTIVITY IN PAUL CHADWICK'S CONCRETE

(Spine title: Born Again Hard)
(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

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Graduate Program in Media Studies
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Born Again explores how the alien-hybrid character Concrete from the eponymous comic can be used to generate understanding of transgender (trans) lives. I use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading in order to formulate an understanding of Concrete that generates new theoretical insight into trans lives, while also ensuring the development of what Viviane Namaste calls “ethical trans theory.” Born Again argues that even though Concrete does not “look like a transgender person is supposed to,” his experiences of gender dissonance and queer optimism allow him to act as a source of amelioration and pleasure for readers who are attentive to the queer consequences of his behaviour.

Keywords: transgender, queer theory, trans theory, reparative reading, Sedgwick, Namaste, Concrete, Chadwick, comic book
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My colleagues in the 2012 M.A. colloquium, Dr. Jonathan Burston and Dr. Amanda Grzyb all deserve credit for the especial polish on the first chapter of this thesis. Their advice was of immeasurable value, and generously given.

I proudly take credit for the flaws, errors and outrageous falsehoods that remain in this document, in spite of the best efforts of the aforementioned scholars. I hope they will not begrudge me my tendency to stubbornly cling to pet arguments in the face of well-posed alternatives.

I thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the second year of my degree.

This thesis is dedicated to Felicity.
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PROLOGUE

“Can't say I've ever been too fond of beginnings, myself. Messy little things. Give me a good ending any time. You know where you are with an ending.”

This preface began its life as the conclusion to my thesis. It was conceived as a small mercy to the brave souls who managed to read the entire thing. Uncertain about what, if any, role I had in my own work, I thought it best to keep my presence unmentioned until the very end – let the reader pass judgement on my ideas, and then conclude with an emotional argument for the value of my work. As my project drew to an end, it became increasingly clear that the reader was entitled to some orientation before setting off on the task of reading my thesis. Thus, echoing another self indulgent author, I open at the close.

The composition of this prologue has presented a significant challenge for me. Writing the thesis proper has been one of the most powerfully liberating experiences I have ever had. Written during a time of tremendous personal upheaval, it has been my lodestone, guiding me through the dark wood. If my thesis were to only act as a testimony to my academic competence, that would be enough. However, as is the case with anything we manage to pursue passionately, it has been the secret, surprising moments that I have experienced in writing this manuscript that have given it its true meaning.

With the exception of the following few pages, these surreptitious moments are the only time I make myself visible in the body of my thesis. This was, perhaps, a mark of cowardice on my part. It was, in many ways, easier for me to write this thesis as though the gender dissonant comic book reader was someone else – a friend, or an academic abstraction who could carry the weight of visibility for me throughout the thesis, so that I could get on with the task of writing.

Having completed the bulk of my writing, I owe it to myself and my project to undermine these precautions. Though not ideal, a belated claim to ownership of these readings is in the spirit of Namaste's call for ethical theory, and Sedgwick's optimistic appeal for reparatively understanding your own subject position.

Concrete is the first comic series I have found emotional resonance in. Prior to discovering Chadwick, I only ever read about who I wish I could be, never who I already was. As is my way, I have no recollection of how or why I found Concrete in the first place. The text stands as one of the most important works I have ever read, and I could not tell you why I began reading it. I have come to realize that there is something beautiful about a conclusion which has had time to forget its beginnings.

This forgetting is twinned by my efforts to come to terms with what Concrete tells me about myself. I do not know when it happened, but it slowly became clear that my thesis is not just about ethical trans theory – it is about understanding why trans bodies were important to me at all.
My subjectivity is complicated. A useless, but comforting, confession. I doubt I will ever suffer serious discrimination because of how I locate myself in the world. I am too inconspicuous, I pass too easily. I am terrified by Stone's advocacy of a radical failure to pass. When I attempt to articulate the part of me that is trans – that experiences gender dissonance – I choke. I am crushed under a sense of contempt for my own complicity in how I pass. I will never understand the oppression experienced by those brave trans individuals who can not or will not pass, and I still struggle to find the space where I can understand how trans theory does (and does not) speak to me. Even as my efforts to persuade the reader of my mastery of my subject are expected to be at their most vigorous, I am obliged to concede that I am only just beginning to understand the tools I have developed with my research.

Concrete is important to me because he struggles alone.\(^2\) Concrete is important to me because his body can not fit into the world around him. In a way, Concrete being a man's brain in a golem, or a man's consciousness in an alien body, or something else entirely, is irrelevant. Much more important is how his body functions as a hinge that creates space for my own body to exist. Concrete can be labelled “unrealistic” or “fiction,” but that does not mean it is not true. Concrete takes on the burden of the inadequate husband, the incapable lover and the broken body so that I do not have to. It is this deferral of visibility, of conspicuity, that makes Concrete so pleasurable for me to read. It is this need for invisibility that has kept me at the margins of my own analysis. It is the counterpoint to this that I must at these last moments of composing my thesis.

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\(^2\) Note, however, he does not suffer alone.
restore a sense of balance by taking up all at once the deferred visibility. There is such a short distance left, short enough that I can carry it.
1. INTRODUCTION

The role played by representations of transgender (trans) individuals in the formation of trans subjectivity is heavily debated. Existing trans scholarship often laments the deleterious consequences of how trans people are portrayed in films and television shows, suggesting that these representations are grounded in the transphobic beliefs of media producers and distributors who lack the experience to fairly represent the experiences of trans individuals. An ongoing theoretical debate is rooted in this criticism, situated at the intersection of feminist scholarship, queer theory and the budding field of trans theory. Through a careful reading of the comic series Concrete, my thesis will discuss the current state of trans theory, explore the aforementioned theoretical battle and illustrate how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notions of paranoid and reparative reading can be used to formulate one possible resolution to the rift that exists between trans and queer theory.

Because of the fluid nature of terminology within queer theory, it is necessary to first establish formal definitions of the concepts on which my thesis depends. It is important to appreciate that this discussion is provided for the sake of clarity, and not to devalue any alternative definition of any of the terms provided. I eschew the convention of using “sex” to describe the genital configuration of an individual, while using “gender” to refer to some abstract culturally manufactured variation of an individual's sex. Instead, the word gender (with what prefixes are necessary for clarity) will describe both the

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3 This decision to deviate from the prevailing custom of using both gender and sex is a matter of personal preference. This approach is echoed in Serano's tendency to utilize careful description rather than neat binaries in organizing her thoughts. I have selected this approach for my own investigation because it provides the maximum degree of flexibility for my exploration, and avoids the risk of an essentialized privileging of biology.
biological and cultural components of an individual's sex. For the purposes of my thesis the word “transgender” (often shortened to trans) designates an individual who experiences a distinction between their socially designated gender, and their own understanding of their gender. This disconnect is described as “gender dissonance.”  

Note that for the purposes of my discussion, there is no distinction between a trans person who has undergone medical procedures or who utilizes pharmaceutical or cosmetic items to change their appearance, and a trans person who has not. Some authors attempt to distinguish these two groups (along some dividing line) by using the phrase transsexual to describe a transgendered person who has undergone surgical procedure(s) to change their presented gender. A person who does not experience gender dissonance is described as “cisgendered.” When discussing a trans individual's gender, the phrase “trans-man” refers to a trans self-individual who identifies as a male, while “trans-woman” describes a trans individual who self-identifies as female. It is important to appreciate that when the word “woman” is used without qualification, it refers to both trans women and cisgendered women.

Written in 1987, Sandy Stone's “The Empire Strikes Back” is arguably the text which gave birth to trans theory. Motivated in part by a desire to respond to Janis Raymond's slanderous text The Transsexual Empire : The Making of the She-Male, Stone goes beyond a targeted rebuttal of Raymond. “Strikes Back” establishes the foundational tenets that shape the study of transgendered bodies, and highlights what have become the

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4 The reader will note that this definition can potentially include individuals who might not otherwise be understood as transgender. As with much of queer theory, a designation such as transgender is dependent upon an individual's own interpretation of their experiences, and their willingness to take up such a title.

features that distinguished trans theory from the related fields of queer theory and feminist theory. Trans theory, though it is understood to have its roots in the late 1980s, is usually situated as a subset of queer theory. This conceptualization is a result of both the perception that “trans bodies are a subset of queer bodies” (and thus theorizing transgendered experiences form a subset of understanding queer lives) and the fact that queer politics were, at one point, the only venue for trans politics. In spite of this linear characterization, the relationships between trans theory and both queer and feminist thinking are burdened by questions of appropriation and exclusion. By looking more closely at how these branches of theory work to both help and harm trans theory, I situate my research project along genuinely interdisciplinary lines.

Julia Serano locates an important intersection between feminist theory and trans theory in her book *Whipping Girl*. Serano argues that the broader constellation of transphobia is informed largely by socially sanctioned forms of misogyny. *Whipping Girl* frames the characterization of transgendered bodies as “fake” or “constructed” as an extension of the popular understanding that any display of femininity suffers the same deficiency. Serano notes that by locating trans representations within a formula of surgery and cosmetic concealment, popular media highlights the supposed “constructedness” of trans femininity. The important subtext of this implication is that even cisgendered women are fake, because they partake in similar efforts to perform their femininity.

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6 This line of reasoning is also present in the relationship between misogyny and homophobia. [The “unnaturally feminine male” standing in for all gay men, with (butch) lesbians being rendered invisible in the same way, and for the same reasons, as transmen.]

7 Serano notes a second level of sexism in this portrayal – trans women come to stand in for all trans people. This emphasizes the “strangeness” of a “man who would willingly adopt a female identity”, while also obscuring the fact that trans men can function to destabilize masculinity in a similar fashion.
Serano's discussion of the presumed artificiality of femininity serves as a bridge from the more historical accounts of both Serano and Stone to the theoretical exploration of Judith Butler. Butler is often cited as one of the progenitors of queer theory, and her work often closely explores gender in a way that makes it valuable to feminist scholarship. Much of Butler’s most celebrated work consists of explorations of how gender is constituted through performativity. This understanding is powerful in its capacity for undermining essentialist definitions of gender; however, this characterization carries with it the risk that we overestimate the power individuals (trans individuals, in particular) have to pursue their desired gender subjectivity. In *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, William B. Turner hints at the danger that exists from this apparent effort to serve both feminist and queer principles. Turner notes that though queer theories grow out of “distinctly … feminist political and scholarly activity” there is always the threat that queer specificity will be lost in the broader feminist movement. Author and activist Viviane Namaste devotes considerable attention to this tense relationship, formulating a critical response to how queer theory operates on trans bodies. In “Undoing Theory” Namaste takes issue with Butler’s use of trans bodies as specimens illustrating the “phenomenon of gender.” “Undoing Theory” suggests that by fixating upon “the transgender question” feminist theorists are able to make use of trans bodies without endeavoring to serve trans people with their work. Namaste argues that this practice is

11 Ibid.
12 Viviane Namaste, “*Undoing Theory: The ‘Transgender Question’ and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory.*” *Hypatia*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Summer, 2009), 11.
13 Ibid., 12.
exploitative, and suggests that transgendered people can best be served by establishing a new theoretical basis that does not allow for this form of appropriation. In particular, Namaste argues that by abstracting trans bodies in the way that Butler and others do, the material conditions of trans lives are occluded. For example, “Undoing Theory” notes that “violence against trans people” is often a designation that fixates on the question of gender. This approach fails to recognize that attacks on trans people are often related to the fact that transgendered individuals seeking employment are frequently discriminated against, denying them access to an income, and leading many to resort to sex work. In this way the material reality of trans subjectivity can place individuals at risk, making labour itself, and not the transgression of gender norms, a source of danger.\textsuperscript{14} \textsuperscript{15}

This discussion highlights the fragile nature of the relationship between trans theory and existing feminist epistemology. While it is necessary for trans theory to acknowledge and respectfully draw from its feminist roots, the risk of being neglected by feminist theory that does not address the needs of trans people, or too easily claims to understand gender expression, cannot be ignored. We will return to Namaste's call for a new trans politics that reconciles these needs later in this chapter.

If the relationship between feminist theory and the study of transgendered lives is characterized by competing goals, then the relationship between trans and queer theory is one typified by confusion. Queer theory celebrates diversity and diversion, and thus seems like an intuitive basis for studying the experiences of transgendered individuals. However, queer theory often approaches issues of identity from intensely theoretical

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{15} The reader should be careful not to make the inverse error by completely discarding the role that gender plays in violence against trans people. Instead, it will become clear that a broad approach is ideal.
perspectives. This degree of abstraction can, in a fashion similar to post-structuralist feminist theory, overlook the specific characteristics of day-to-day life as a trans individual. Queer theory is notorious for defying definition, and any attempt to remedy this elusiveness would take far more than the space available in this thesis. For my purposes the term queer theory very broadly references the collection of work produced in the past three decades that grows from the traditions of authors such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Though only a small segment of the community of queer scholars, these three authors are often cited as the foundational pillars of queer theory, in addition to sitting at the crossroads of feminist and sexuality studies. An alternative characterization would be that queer theory is the body of scholarship that addresses, comments on, seeks to assist or has been appropriated by queer communities or individuals. It is important to note that there is a slight transition here between queer theorists and theorists who are queer. (The former being those who work queerly, and the latter specifically producing theory from queer experience.) This definition, while providing some topical clarification, admittedly does nothing to specify the quality or value of the designated scholarship.

Returning to Stone, the value of a queer theoretic approach to trans theory is immediately clear. “The 'Empire' Strikes Back” describes the act of passing as a foreclosure of opportunity – an “imperfect solution to personal dissonance.” Instead, Stone demands that the reader consider the possibilities created through rejecting this imperative. By opening the door to a spectrum of self-representations, Stone argues for an

approach to understanding the trans experience that is distinctly queer. Mixing bodies and bifurcating genres are what “Empire” describes as a “deconstruction of the necessity to pass.”  

This is meant to work to undermine the medicalized imperative for trans individuals to render themselves invisible. Surely nothing could be more in line with the approach of queer theory. However, despite these similarities in approach, there are significant gaps between the fields of queer and trans theory. Riki Wilchins beautifully captures this theoretical abyss when she describes early trans activists as “living under the broad umbrella of the gay community”.  

Though welcome to “love being queer,” Wilchins asserts that trans individuals are not understood to “look or act queer.” The basis for this separation is two fold. The first is that, according to Wilchins, queer activism is often (and often only implicitly) devoted to the question of sexual orientation. This generates a perceived divide between “gay issues” and “trans issues”. While this divide is useful in that it generates context to discuss distinctly trans concerns, it also leaves trans issues vulnerable to being overlooked by queer activism's focus on non-normative sexualities. As with the discussion of Butler considered above, the role of gender outside of “the trans question” is often obscured. The second reason trans theory is not always served by the scope of queer theory is, as mentioned above, that queer theory is often focused on criticizing institutions and ideas on a theoretical level. By returning to Namaste, it will become clear that trans theory necessarily requires a more concerted effort to integrate material considerations into its scholarship.

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18 Ibid., 353.
19 Wilchins, 22.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 26.
In *Invisible Lives*, Namaste pays particular attention to the issues surrounding trans theory's integration into the larger body of queer theory. Suggesting that queer theory does not consider the material reality of trans lives, Namaste asserts that:

“[a]lthough the violation of compulsory sex/gender relations is one of the topics most frequently addressed within queer theory, this body of knowledge rarely considers the implications of an enforced sex/gender system for the people who have defied it, who live outside of it, or who have been killed because of it.”

Namaste locates this disconnect primarily within the structure of academia. Pointing to the university departments where queer theory flourishes (literature, cultural studies and philosophy), Namaste suggests that “scholars [of queer theory] habitually choose a narrow scope of texts for analysis: novels, films, plays, drag performances and other sites of cultural representation.” However, *Invisible Lives* asserts that despite locating their work within a specific social context, academics within the field of queer theory “offer little analysis of how social relations are inscribed therein, and virtually no examination of the institutional mechanisms in which these texts are produced.”

Namaste believes that this problem grows out of queer theory's inability to pass beyond descriptive characterizations of the social relationship of sexuality and gender. *Invisible Lives* cautions the reader against accepting queer theory which seeks only to investigate in an abstract sense. Namaste believes that “queer theory as it is currently practiced must be challenged because it exhibits a remarkable insensitivity to the substantive issues of transgendered people's daily lives.” Thus it is necessary to forge a new theoretical

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23 Ibid., 20.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 22.
26 Ibid., 23.
approach that respects the legacy of queer theory while ensuring that it provides meaningful insight into the materiality of transgendered experiences. It is this project that I will concern the rest of this chapter with, however it is important to clarify precisely how my project is seeking to engage with what Namaste is arguing for. I do not produce a theoretical approach that embodies the specific research paradigm Namaste outlines. Instead, through an exploration of the motives behind Namaste's research principles, I am able to produce theory that embodies these important factors.

At its most basic, theory is a designation which connotes a level of abstraction. To be a queer theorist is not simply to work with queer things, but to work queerly. This abstraction is understood as a means of distinguishing theoretical work from the empirical scholarship of grounded theory. Grounded theory allows theory to emerge from the lived experiences of individuals, generating new insights from these observations. Instead, theorists are charged with the task of working with broadly defined terms and abstracted phenomena and producing not just observations, but understanding. The ultimate goal of a theoretical piece is not simply description, but to provide the tools and the context for understanding. However, this description of the (seemingly) worthwhile goals of theory does not provide a complete story. If we return to the criticisms provided by Namaste in “Undoing Theory”, we can gather a sense of the complicated relationship between theory and its subject. When criticizing how feminist theory addresses its transgendered subjects, Namaste argues that it is not sufficient to evaluate the history of transsexual women in feminist scholarship. Instead, a full understanding of the relationship can only

be generated through understanding the way trans women contribute to the generation of knowledge.\textsuperscript{28} This distinction is hugely important – instead of privileging the theorists themselves, Namaste would have us consider the lives and experiences that generate the material that theorists work with.\textsuperscript{29}

It is easiest to understand the distinction between Namaste's perception of theory and our initial definition by considering the example of the work performed by trans bodies provided in “Undoing Theory.” Namaste notes that Butler's \textit{Gender Trouble} begins with a consideration of trans bodies in order to theorize the way we understand and reproduce gender.\textsuperscript{30} However, while utilizing transgendered bodies as markers of gender, Butler becomes so focused as to overlook the important role played by work in trans lives.\textsuperscript{31} Namaste illustrates the extensive interrelationship between trans women and labour, and argues that by neglecting it in order to argue for a feminist theory that is solely focused on gender, Butler acts to appropriate the experiences of trans individuals without respecting or serving them in return.\textsuperscript{32} Namaste argues for a more considerate conceptualization of feminist theory – one that undermines the ideological nature informing “the transgender question” in \textit{Bodies That Matter} and \textit{Gender Trouble}. “Undoing Theory” argues that such an approach can only serve trans communities by respecting four principles: empiricism, relevance, equity of community participation and ownership.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{28} Namaste (2009),12.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 12-13.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 19-20.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 21.
Namaste argues that while Butler's post-structural analysis is necessarily suspicious of appeals to “empirical” evidence, it ultimately suffers from an underdeveloped empirical approach. (Arguably, Butler fails to articulate any clear empirical structure at all.) In particular, “Undoing Theory” argues that while Butler's study of specific subjects may have been rigorous, she fails to properly contextualize the societal and political contexts surrounding her subjects. Namaste argues that because of this oversight, Butler (and the feminist research which uses Butler as its foundation) is incapable of properly situating the role of regulation and power in trans lives.

An appeal to empiricism, however, cannot be construed as an unrestrained rejection of the importance of subjectivity and partial perspective. “Undoing Theory” argues that ethical research depends upon an ability to appeal to indigenous forms of knowledge. Namaste broadly understands indigenous knowledge as being drawn from awareness and responses to colonial forms of knowledge production. By correcting the silencing of trans voices that occurs within academia (including feminist theory) Namaste hopes to provide an alternative to the gender-centric work of Butler. Attendant to the use of indigenous knowledge is an imperative to avoid any misrepresentation of trans voices while working in concert with them. By this, Namaste means that academics must be ever vigilant that they not attempt to speak in place of the trans individuals whose experiences

34 Ibid., 22.
35 It is important to emphasize the nuanced distinction between empirical and experiential. Work, such as this thesis, that focuses on situating events in relation to an individual's experience must not be carelessly generalized.
38 Ibid., 24.
they are studying. This includes allowing contributing voices the ability to revise and mediate the results of the academic's work. As essential as this empowerment is a commitment to relevance in the research that trans theorists perform. Relevance here is not defined by the researchers, and is not a euphemism for the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Instead, Namaste argues that trans theory should be beholden to the communities and individuals who participate in its production. By this Namaste means not just theorists, but the individuals whose lives are the foundation of trans knowledge.

These principles advanced by Namaste find common purpose in the principle of equity in partnership. “Undoing” Theory argues that the question of relevance is dependent upon an understanding of who decides what is relevant. In order to avoid exploiting the experiences of trans individuals, Namaste insists that all participants in research must be provided with an equal ability to shape the results and uses of the resultant research. Clearly, this demand for equality upsets the conventional understanding of the relationship between researcher and research subject. However, Namaste makes it clear that without allowing the subjects of research the ability to influence the methods and direction of study, it is difficult to produce ethical research that is meaningful to transgendered lives.

In the aftermath of my exploration of the meaning and nature of theoretical research, I now turn to consider what new potential has emerged for understanding what theory does, and specifically what theory can do for transgendered individuals. It is the

39 Ibid., 25.
40 Ibid.
hope of theorists that their work can provide meaningful insight into the subject under consideration. However, Namaste has provided us with the basis for demanding that this insight does not position the reader as a detached spectator. Instead, the reader must form the basis for meaningful improvement in the lives of the subjects. According to Namaste, it is not enough to look to theory to provide us with a clever perspective on the experiences of another – instead, we must demand that theory be ethical and never at risk of erasing the specificity of its subjects' lived experiences. In the case of Butler's imagination of trans lives as a gendered affair, Namaste instead urges us to prioritize an account that addresses the role of labor and its attending social relations. Namaste does not deny that this produces messy or inelegant theory – however, that this is not the point is precisely the point of “Undoing Theory.”\footnote{Ibid., 27-28.} Instead, Namaste asks that we re-imagine our work as an endeavour to preserve the voices and experiences of those who might otherwise get lost in an effort to fashion theory that is useful to academics.

In the wake of this harsh criticism of existing feminist inroads into trans theory, the obvious question is whether there is room to perform research that is ethical in the way Namaste describes, while also focusing on the study of fiction texts. As I have already discussed, Namaste is particularly critical of theoretical work which focuses narrowly on a cultural text without exploring the social relations or institutional mechanisms which produce the text.\footnote{Namaste (2000), 20.} The goal of the remainder of this chapter is to characterize and demonstrate one possible method for working with a specific cultural text while still respecting Namaste's call for ethical research.
In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the traditional method of reading a text as 'paranoid' – being characterized by a desire to come to terms with the oppressive forces within the text. An understanding of the text as a rigid document leads to a fear that any negative element of the text represents the utter failure of the text to be productive. By deploying a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” the reader is able to prepare for the worst possible outcome of the text.

“Paranoid Reading” describes this style of interpretation as one founded upon the need to always be prepared, always anticipating, and to never experience surprise at the threat offered by a text. I argue that it is the unwavering pursuit of a paranoid style of reading that opens theoretical work up to the sort of criticism provided by “Undoing Theory”. Paranoid reading necessarily asks the reader to presume a level of mastery over the subject matter, in order to allow for the removal of any possibility of confusion or doubt. This degree of control can work to remove any possible outside source of influence, even at the risk of silencing the voices of the subjectivities portrayed by the text. This silencing is not an intentional effort to occlude the perspective of the subject from one's work, but rather a consequence of the fixed style of reading necessary for paranoid interpretation.

Sedgwick asserts that one characteristic of paranoid reading is a “faith in exposure.” In other words, paranoid reading is dependent upon the assumption that if the reader is capable of producing a sufficiently comprehensive account of the problems within a text, they will have provided their audience with all the information necessary to undermine

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44 Ibid., 9.
the damage performed by the cultural work under study.\textsuperscript{45} In this way theorists are able to absolve themselves of responsibility for considering the material reality of the subjects they seek to theorize. Through a paranoid determination to uncover the meaning \textit{built into} the text under consideration, the reader is at risk of forgetting that factors external to the text can shape the meanings within the text.

The alternative method of reading provided by Sedgwick holds the seeds of our effort to perform ethical theorizations. “Paranoid Reading” argues that the potential for useful reading lies in a reparative approach to understanding a text. Reparative reading allows for the possibility that surprise and uncertainty can be positive forces.\textsuperscript{46} This rejection of a fatalistic style of reading allows for the possibility that just as the future is mutable and uncertain, so the past need not have been fixed in the way it has been.\textsuperscript{47} This characterization foregrounds the need for ethical and thoughtful performance of research, and the possibilities which exist only when the theorist is willing to relinquish control of their project (to, among others, the subjects of study).\textsuperscript{48} To paraphrase Sedgwick, it is necessary to move away from considering how \textit{we should} read, and to approach the question of how \textit{we do} read.\textsuperscript{49} We are now able to begin drawing connections to Viviane Namaste’s criticisms of the current state of trans theory. As Namaste is primarily concerned with the power held by those who have the privilege to interpret the lives and works of others, the particular way that reparative reading functions (through the disavowal of this authority) makes it an ideal tool in the effort to produce ethical theory.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 17.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 24.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 26.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 25.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 2.
\end{itemize}
There is a second line of reasoning which Sedgwick cites in arguing for the potential of reparative reading. Sedgwick notes that a paranoid framework cannot find value in the reparative approach because reparative reading relies on the generation of amelioration. This partial dispersal of pain works at odds with the goal of paranoid reading, which is for the the pain of confronting the cruel meaning of the text to motivate the paranoid reader to action. Armed with the flexibility and optimism provided by the technique of reparative reading, I will now introduce Concrete and then conclude this chapter by discussing how Concrete can function as a trans character, and how Concrete can be read reparatively.

The comic series Concrete has been in production since 1986, with the latest instalment coming from author/illustrator Paul Chadwick in 2006. The series focuses primarily on the adventures of the eponymous protagonist, a one of a kind alien human hybrid that contains the mind of Ronald Lithgow. With the help of his assistant Larry Munroe and scientist Maureen Vonnegut, Concrete explores the earth while trying to come to terms with a body that functions simultaneously as a fantastic survival machine and a sensory deprivation chamber. This fractured subjectivity is central to both the series, and my analysis. Ultimately, it is the combination of Concrete's status as an engaging text, and its presentation of a character that tugs at the mind as a queer subject that makes it an ideal object of study. I have felt an imperative to explore Concrete's situation further, and it is that drive that justifies its status as the text at the center of my

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50 Ibid., 22.
51 Though the use of Concrete's former name is contextual within the comic, for the sake of clarity I will use “Ron” to refer to the entity which existed up until the creation of Concrete, so that the name “Concrete” specifically refers to the agent who possesses Ron's mind and a large stone body of alien construction.
thesis. After describing the plot and characters of Concrete, I will proceed with a discussion of how Concrete's body functions as a crucial focus for exploring the material meaning of the transgender body.

*Depths*, the first volume of Concrete, opens *in media res*. Larry is seen responding to a job posting for a personal assistant, and is shocked to discover the employer is Concrete. Their interview is interrupted by an urgent call from Concrete's former boss, Senator Douglas. It transpires that a mine has collapsed in an important political district, and Concrete's tremendous strength and inexhaustible stamina are required to help liberate a dozen trapped miners. This plot contrivance is popular within Concrete, creating an urgent situation that forces Concrete to think on his feet and (in so doing) explore (or break through) the limits of his body. In this instance, Concrete accidentally triggers a massive cave-in, trapping himself with a limited supply of air, and giving him opportunity to reflect on the implications of his being trapped within a constricting and seemingly fatal tomb of stone. These images of imprisonment and physical futility resonate strongly with Wilchins' characterization of the perception of trans subjectivity. Though Concrete ultimately manages to escape this deathtrap, his experiences (as they always do) leave him with an improved understanding of his body. It is (often more subtly) through this introspection that the reader is provided with many of the tools I will demonstrate are necessary for understanding Concrete as a reparative character. After several similar vignettes, *Depths* takes a dramatic turn. Concrete agrees to tell Larry about his true\(^\text{52}\) origin after Larry risks his life to save Concrete during an adventure.

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\(^{52}\) This should not be understood as a confirmation of the accuracy of Concrete's story, but rather a means of distinguishing it from the explicitly false cover story created by the American government after Concrete's escape from the aliens. The reason I am hesitant to characterize this story as accurate is because much later in the series (in book six, *Strange Armor*) Concrete writes an autobiography which
Though Chadwick provides an expository panel which suggests that the narrated story is accurate, that it is Concrete telling the story leaves room to question this assertion.

Concrete explains to Larry that prior to his transformation, Ron was an aspiring author and a speechwriter for Senator Douglas. While on a camping trip with friend Michael Maynard, Concrete and Michael stumble upon a strange cave in the side of a mountain. As they explore the cave, they are captured by aliens. When the two awake, they discover that their minds now inhabit large golem-like bodies. (Fig. 1.1) These bodies weigh thousands of pounds, have telescopic eyesight and possess many of the physical qualities of concrete. Concrete and his friend are held captive with other golems, which they later conclude contain the minds of various terrestrial animals. After an unspecified amount of time being subjected to experimentation by their captors, Concrete and Michael daringly escape from their prison. During the escape, Concrete's companion refuses to leave without “[his] body,” implicitly leaving Concrete as the only survivor when the aliens flee from their encampment within the cave, destroying most of the mountain in the process. After his escape, Concrete contacts Senator Douglas, and is remanded to the custody of the American government. After additional testing, this time at the hands of the American military, Concrete is permitted to leave the direct control of the government. This release is conditional upon Concrete's willingness to participate in an elaborate effort to disguise the true origin of his body. This sense of necessity in complying with official discourses of the unusually constituted body echoes Stone's describes a dramatically different experience.

54 The language I use to describe the process by which Ron becomes Concrete is intentionally ambiguous. Though the text implies that Ron's brain is transplanted into the stone body, the reader is given ample opportunity to develop alternate interpretations which are not refuted by the text.
Fig 1.1: Concrete

discussion of how medicalized discourses of trans subjectivity can be forced on unwilling trans individuals. Instead of being the result of alien experimentation, Concrete is presented to the world as the sole survivor of the American military's attempts to create a cyborg soldier. Under the guise of being a heavily classified military project, Concrete is able to deflect questions about his genesis, while also justifying Maureen's constant
presence. Maureen is a government scientist who devotes her time to studying Concrete and who also functions as a seemingly unobtainable romantic interest for Concrete throughout the series. To further conceal Concrete's origin, his government handlers orchestrate an elaborate public relations campaign with the purpose of oversaturating the media with “Concrete content.” The mass production of toys, news stories and television appearances (along with an adorable resurgence in the popularity of the pet rock) are all consequences of the American government's plan to quickly transform Concrete from a novelty into an annoyance. Once the public has had its fill, Concrete is notionally free to use his notoriety to find employment and pursue his dream of being a famous adventurer and novelist.

The first such adventure is featured in a vignette titled “An Armchair Stuffed with Dynamite.” Riding high on his cresting popularity, Concrete is contacted by a world-famous musician named Duke. Duke, a character modelled on Jimi Hendrix, is convinced that with Concrete as his bodyguard, he will become the “rock and roller [he] was meant to be.” Duke becomes increasingly erratic as a web of intrigue and murder threats closes in around him, and it is only Concrete's timely intervention that unravels the mystery.

The sequel to Depths is appropriately titled Heights, and it represents an expansion of the original volume's method of educational storytelling. Opening with images of Concrete toiling to help a family save its farm from debtors, Heights offers the reader stories that begin to test Concrete's ability to discover “the purpose of [his] body.” Though this exploration represents the central theme of Concrete, it does not begin in earnest until after the exposition of Depths is completed. One of the primary subplots of

55 Chadwick, Depths, 159.
Concrete also moves to the fore in *Heights*. Concrete's infatuation with Maureen takes a dramatic turn in the story “A Remarkable Life,” when Maureen's (up to this point undisclosed) husband Lars shows up at Concrete's door with the information that Maureen failed to properly complete their divorce before she left him years ago. Lars' arrival coincides with the emergence of two inexplicable growths on Concrete's head. As these protuberances grow into a network of interwoven horns almost as tall as the roof of the warehouse he lives in, Concrete is increasingly isolated by his immobility. (Fig. 1.2)

Concrete's drama concludes when his arms atrophy to the point that he can slip free of the bindings Maureen has used to restrain him. Alone and starving, Concrete demolishes his horns and devours them. Having determined (in the most reckless way possible) that damaging the growths will not harm him, Concrete develops a method of using an industrial stone-shaping tool to grind his head into a smooth shape. It is only at this point that Concrete dramatically realizes he has gone through a sort of puberty, with these horns functioning as a secondary sex characteristic similar to facial hair. This characterization of Concrete's body as a terrain of the unknown offers space for conceptualizing it as a text which is open to alternative readings. After this humourous digression *Heights* returns to the serious contemplation of what purpose Concrete's body serves. On a mission to (illegally) climb Mount Everest solo, Concrete is kidnapped by a team of Soviet special operatives who are seeking to redress the balance of the Cold War. In addition to reminding the reader of the significant threat posed by the technology of Concrete's body, the geographic location of the story allows Chadwick to write the first cross-cultural perspective exploration of Concrete's body.
The title of the third volume of *Concrete, Fragile Creature*, subtly hints at the emerging dualism that exists between Concrete's outer shell and inner subjectivity. This contrast is most starkly spelled out in the brief story “Burning Brightly, Brightly.” In this vignette we meet the aptly named Melissa Strangehands, a fledgling artist who has taken

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56 Note that in this panel, Concrete's body is desiccated by starvation. Maureen has restrained him in the hopes that by preventing Concrete from eating, the horns will stop growing.
Concrete as her muse. Strangehands envisions Concrete as a lonely, quixotic figure—her art often depicts him alone, often wistfully confronting the helplessness of his carnal isolation. The irony of her interpretation is lost on Strangehands, though the reader knows better. As she struggles to navigate the populated street to get to the post office (in order to mail her latest letter to Concrete), we are given contrasting panels of Concrete amicably walking elsewhere in the city, accompanied by both Larry and Maureen. The reader can't help but notice that for all the weight of his stone body, Concrete does not appear nearly as lonely as Strangehands herself. This sits in stark contrast to what we might expect, given how sharply Concrete's body differs from those of the people around him.

This dark undertone flourishes more fully in *Killer Smile*, the fourth volume of *Concrete*. Situated at the center of the series, *Killer Smile* is the last volume that remains true to the vignette style of storytelling that Chadwick relied upon through the beginning of the series. The reader follows Concrete as he is repeatedly, violently forced up against the limitations of the human body. It is only Concrete's timely intervention that saves Larry from the murderous intentions of a suicidal kidnapper. Though Larry is thankful to Concrete for saving him, he is left shattered by his own inability to act, feeling it is a manifestation of the weakness of his own body. *Killer Smile* loses no time transitioning to a series of rapid fire examinations of Concrete's apparent lack of gender. As his longing for Maureen grows ever stronger, Concrete is repeatedly reminded of the fact that he cannot physically fit into her life. Passing a restless night outside of the hotel room that Larry and Maureen share, Concrete is tortured by the fact that Larry is alone with the object of
his affection, and that Concrete would be too awkward to intervene, even if he thought it were appropriate. The volume ends on an uncanny note, with Concrete attending a Hallowe'en party dressed in an oversized suit and prosthetic facial features. In choosing to dress up as a conventional man, Concrete simultaneously enacts a sort of wish fulfilment, and comments on the fact that significant premeditation goes into the production of the “natural” male appearance. (Fig 1.3)

*Think Like a Mountain*, the fifth volume of *Concrete*, represents a dramatic shift from the previous narrative style of the series. Chadwick moves away from short, discontinuous vignettes and instead weaves a book-long tale about Concrete's involvement with a band of eco-terrorists. This exploration represents the culmination of Concrete's efforts to establish the “purpose” of his body. This shift from shorter tales to a longer story provides space for the exploration of more complicated topics, and for Concrete to develop more significant emotional ties to the people and places he is involved with.57 Convinced of the importance of Earth First's (the radical environmentalist organization) goals, Concrete agrees to infiltrate the Hidden Valley, a vast tract of Canadian forest that is coveted by lumber corporations for its valuable old growth trees. This infiltration quickly leads to destructive intervention, with Concrete's tireless body carrying the bulk of the load. When Earth First orchestrates an elaborate Bigfoot hoax in order to draw public attention to the Hidden Valley, Concrete is forced to confront his own involvement in the illegal actions of the eco-terrorists. Ultimately unable to commit to the cause, Concrete elects not to continue in his role as the fake

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57 For example, Concrete's dramatic transformation from sceptical onlooker to passionate environmentalist would have been difficult to believe in a shorter storytelling arc.
Figure 1.3: Concrete reframes the problem of passing as a man.

Bigfoot, leaving one of the Earth Firsters to be shot to death by an overzealous employee of the logging company. Though this death leads to the public attention that Earth First sought, Concrete is left to meditate on the fact that his stony body would have been unharmed by the bullets that killed his comrade. Just as Concrete seems to be coming to terms with the potential of his body, his corporeality becomes a site of crisis. The fact that Concrete's body is uniquely suited to physical survival means that his decision to stop participating in the protest placed more vulnerable bodies in the line of fire. This has the consequence of forcing Concrete to reflect on not only the abilities, but perhaps the responsibilities of his body.

Volume six builds on this theme of rebirth, retelling Concrete's origin story. Unlike in *Depths*, however, *Strange Armor* contextualizes Concrete's story in this telling
as an attempt at autobiography. The process of autobiography is a complicated one with many theoretical consequences, especially within the field of trans theory. The reader's ability to make meaning of “Strange Armor” is further complicated by the fact that there are huge differences between the story Concrete tells here, and “A New Life,” the story he offered to Larry back in volume one. The changes introduced by “Strange Armor” tend towards finality at the expense of possibility. To wit, in “A New Life” Concrete speculates that his brain has been swapped with that of an alien. Justification for this conclusion is provided by the fact that Concrete has large stitching marks on his skull, and later in the story he comes across Ron's body, moving normally in spite of the fact his consciousness appears to no longer be “in there.” These observations are countered by things the reader might note, like the fact that the brain that would fit into a giant body like Concrete's would not fit into the skull of a deer (which the reader is shown acting similar to Ron's body, colluding with the aliens.) This collection of contradictory facts allows the reader to build their own “truth” of Concrete's origin. In contrast, Strange Armor shows (what Concrete claims is) the actual process of transplanting brains into the golem bodies. The polyphonic potential of “A New Life” is sacrificed in order to generate the authority that Concrete demands for his autobiography. (Fig. 1.4)

The final volume of Concrete (thus far) is the aptly titled The Human Dilemma.”

This text focuses on the question of reproduction and overpopulation (the human dilemma) but also dramatically alters the reader's understanding of Concrete's physiological and psychological capacity.

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58 The reader should note that my decision to avoid explicitly invoking themes of trans autobiography in my own analysis is a personal one. There are many valuable reasons that the analysis I advocate/perform could benefit from a thoughtful dialogue with the conventions of trans autobiography.
Figure 1.4: The creation of Concrete (?)

*The Human Dilemma* opens with Concrete facing a strange proposition. Walter Sageman, CEO of a multinational pizza chain, wants to use Concrete's “childless, race neutral” image to promote a dramatic population control plan. In exchange for money, counselling and free post-secondary education, qualified participants must agree to be sterilized, and to never adopt children. Sageman hopes to redefine what the life of a successful adult looks like. This fixation on the consequences of reproduction sets the tone for *The Human Dilemma.*

60 Strangely, the usually perceptive Concrete fails to comment on the heteronormativity of Sageman's perspective.
Returning from the beach, Concrete and Maureen discuss the implications of Sageman's proposal while they are stranded in a traffic jam. As tempers rise in the unbearable heat, a nearby collision leads to gunfire, resulting in Maureen comforting a man as he bleeds to death on the scorching asphalt. The comic cuts away from this scene, returning to show Maureen covered in blood, being hosed down by Concrete outside of his warehouse. At this point, without any warning, Concrete and Maureen's relationship changes dramatically. Maureen strips off her bathing suit, allowing Concrete to rinse her off and see her naked. This sudden familiarity continues as Maureen enters the house and dons a jacket that reaches only to her thighs. (Rising provocatively whenever she stretches or reaches for objects.) Concrete, in spite of his previous fixation on Maureen, does not seem surprised by this sudden change in her attitude toward him. Suddenly, Maureen makes a startling announcement (Fig. 1.5)

With wavering encouragement from Concrete, Maureen discards her top and begins masturbating for Concrete's pleasure. As Maureen approaches climax, Concrete makes an observation that seems to be the only part of the scene that makes any sense – "my life is so damned strange." The scene closes with Maureen coming and several panels of a cross section of Concrete's body, along with expository text indicating that "a change occurs in [his] alien body which will, in time, mean a great deal." The subplot of "The Human Dilemma" follows Larry as he becomes engaged, however his inability to curtail his flirtatious ways leads him to impregnate Monique, who is not his fiance. As

62 Ibid., 50.
Larry struggles with the dislocation caused by his broken engagement and his sudden obligation to his unborn child, Concrete faces his own new problems. As he tries to meet the rigorous demands of his job representing Sageman's sterilization program, Concrete is afflicted by severe back pains, dramatic mood swings and nausea. The clues are readily available to the reader, but even as Concrete's back swells, both he and Maureen remain stumped by the sudden change in Concrete's physical and emotional disposition. The dramatic birth of Concrete's child strikes the final blow to Concrete's employment as a representative of Sageman's program, and represents the apex of *The Human Dilemma*'s plot arc. (Fig. 1.6)

As “The Human Dilemma” wraps up, Larry arrives at Monique's house to discover that she has experienced a miscarriage. Returning to Concrete's warehouse,
Figure 1.6: Concrete's Explosive Revelation

Larry, covered in blood, reflects on his narrow escape from the bonds of conventional domesticity, while Concrete is forced to consider not only his new obligations, but also his old understanding of who (and what) he is. It is this space of optimism (or at least, openness) that renders Concrete a significant site for reparative attempts at ethical theorization.

Stylistically, Concrete is an unremarkable comic. It is drawn with an eye to verisimilitude, and it is only on a rare occasion that Chadwick resorts to exaggerated facial features or unusual notations to communicate additional information to the reader. To compensate for this rejection of an important comic book convention, Concrete makes unusually frequent use of thought bubbles to express important private thoughts. This decision has several important consequences. Foremost, the frequent use of thought
bubbles works to transform the text from a single coherent story into several overlapping tales that share a central narrative, but are modified by the internal dialogue of each character. This feature is not unique to Concrete, though this particular comic uses it much more frequently than many other comic series. This fracturing of the central exposition is further enhanced by the fact that most of the stories of Concrete are framed as a series of vignettes, as opposed to the single coherent narrative. This organizational feature functions on a macro scale to recreate the dynamic style Scott McCloud analyzes when he discusses the space that exists between frames of a comic. In Understanding Comics McCloud notes that one of the primary distinctions between motion pictures and a comic strip lies in the fact that while a video appears to present a continuous stream of images, comics are separated into panels. These divisions create space where the reader is permitted (indeed, required!) to fill in the details. In a fairly linear story, these spaces are intentionally left brief, permitting the reader only a small amount of space to shape the story. In contrast, the individual stories of Concrete are divided in such a way as to create large gaps in which the reader can explore new meanings and ideas.

The question of how Concrete functions as a trans character is complicated by the way the text layers meanings and identities upon his stone body. Further, Concrete's apparent lack of gender creates a situation where our initial definition of transgender (a person who experiences dissonance between their gender identity and their socially designated gender) may seem inadequate. It is my contention that, at a basic level, the preoccupation of others with Concrete's lack of genitals is more than sufficient to justify a claim that his subjective understanding of himself as a male is often not consonant with

how others view him. With this technical definition satisfied, it is necessary to begin looking more closely at the particularities of Concrete's subjectivity for a more comprehensive understanding of the myriad ways that Concrete functions as a trans character.

The primary basis for discussing Concrete as a trans character lies in the nested nature of his persona. He appears to be a literal manifestation of the frequently deployed notion that transgender individuals are people who are trapped in the wrong body.64 The perception that Ron Lithgow's mind inhabits Concrete's giant stone body represents only one layer of of his trans subjectivity. Concrete's political cover as a cyborg built by the American military is lain over the (new) truth of his alien body. The fact that he labours under a false identity in order to be allowed to live (relatively) freely resonates with the struggles faced by trans individuals who must satisfy the expectations of medical discourse in order to access the resources they require to fulfil their lives.65 Stone explains that there is a particular, contradictory tale that must be told by individuals seeking medical assistance for their transition.66 67

Though there is some basis for asserting that Concrete functions as a trans character, there is a final point outstanding. I must respond to Namaste's call for trans scholarship that appropriately addresses the complex nature of trans materiality. I must concede that as a media text, Concrete cannot be said to physically improve trans lives.

64 As Serano, Stone and other authors note, this conceptualization of trans subjectivity is problematic and almost certainly a consequence of the power medical discourse has to shape many queer lives. Having said that, Concrete's ability to evoke this narrative is important, even if the narrative itself can in some instances be problematic.
65 Stone, 344.
66 Ibid., 346.
67 Including a need to identify alienation and dissatisfaction with one's body, a heterosexual identity (that “transitions” as you do and a desire to exhibit conventional gendered behaviour once you transition.
However, I argue that the satisfaction, reassurance and even pleasure that can be derived from being able to reparatively read a trans character can be essential to helping readers reflect upon their own gender dissonance. Concrete does not look like the sort of transgender person we have been instructed to expect by television and cinema. He does not meet our expectations of the pathetic transsexual who fails to pass, like the trans women we see on Jerry Springer. He also lacks the psychotic malevolence of the deceptive transsexual depicted in films like “Ace Ventura: Pet Detective” or “The Crying Game.” In many ways, the most remarkable aspect of Concrete's trans subjectivity is that it deviates so strongly from anything the reader may have ever seen in popular media. This is a powerfully important fact. When I look for elements of myself in public discourse, I do not find emotional resonance with the characters of Lois Einhorn or Jame Gumb, and I doubt many other gender dissonant readers do either. Concrete, on the other hand, creates a space that makes no promises about how easy life will be, but offers the reader the hope that difficulty can be not only overcome, but exceeded in the most beautiful, fulfilling way possible. Concrete (strangely, given his alien body) humanizes the elements of loneliness, bodily disorientation and longing for acceptance that trans individuals often describe when they characterize their experiences. Concrete allows any reader to imagine themselves surviving in a world that does not always understand or accept corporeal limitations, and it is this potential that makes reparatively reading characters like Concrete an important tool for improving trans materiality.

To conclude the theoretical portion of this chapter, I would like to turn to an

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68 Serano, 36.
69 The individual who is known as “Buffalo Bill” in Silence of the Lambs.
example of how Concrete can be read reparatively. The example I have chosen is, for the sake of clarity, relatively simplistic. In spite of this, it will clearly demonstrate the distinction between paranoid and reparative approaches to reading comics. The example I have selected is from the fifth volume, *Think Like a Mountain*. It depicts Concrete's attempt to sneak into Canada after agreeing to assist Earth First in their efforts to protect the Hidden Valley forest. While Concrete is encased within a massive clay totem pole, we see several border agents trying to determine whether the large object is solid, or being used to smuggle something across the border. (Fig. 1.7)

A paranoid interpretation of this exchange is readily available. Concrete, because of his distinct appearance, is not able to move freely across the border. Instead he must conceal himself within an acceptable exterior in order to be allowed to enter Canada. In spite of this concession, Concrete is still subjected to a careful inspection. In effect, he fails to pass as a cultural artifact and suffers intensified scrutiny. This act of visual interrogation is paired with a physical penetration that comes perilously close not only to revealing Concrete's hidden nature, but to fatally wounding him. By framing Concrete's need to pass as a life and death struggle, this passage seems to foreground the terrible risk faced by any individual who is unwilling or unable to meet the interpelling gaze of socially sanctioned authority. With this interpretation, the reader is initially overwhelmed with fear that Concrete might be discovered, only to have this fear replaced by a foreboding sense that Concrete's reprieve is only a temporary break from the constant scrutiny that awaits anyone with what Serano describes as an “illegally armed body.”

A reparative perspective on this same exchange undermines the power of the

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border agents while it emphasizes the playful nature of Concrete's concealment. Instead of fearfully hiding, we read Concrete as playfully outsmarting the border agents who (with their inflexible understanding of the cultural artifact they are investigating) can not imagine anything of import that is both heavy and immune to their penetration. This shift in perspective is important because it relocates power from the border guards to Concrete. Similarly, the guards' efforts to penetrate Concrete's disguise with their drill ceases to function as an assault on his person, and instead acts to demonstrate the feebleness of a traditionally masculine act. Though Concrete is surprised by the drill, ultimately he emerges unscathed, while the border agents have a broken and useless tool. This ruined phallic object is a symbol of the helplessness of traditional gender expectations in the face of the unconventional fluidity of Concrete's physical manifestation. Impervious to the probing of these guards, Concrete is a reassuring marker of the potential of unconventional bodies.

Though this discussion does not necessarily fit into my larger project of exploring Concrete as a marker for trans subjectivity, it does demonstrate the remarkable breadth of
interpretation that is available to the reader who is conscious of their predisposition to a particular kind of reading. When we accept the guards as symbols of genuine phallic authority and Concrete as a timid subversive, we are confined to a style of interpretation that is discouraging and not particularly useful. By reframing the power relationship between Concrete and the guards in Concrete's favour, we open the door to an interpretation of Concrete's unusual body that is empowering and optimistic. Just as he can deceive his enemies and undermine the phallic probing of the drill, Concrete can inspire in the reader a new faith in the strength of their unconventional bodies and unusual perspectives.

It is clear that my exploration of Concrete will address the question of trans subjectivity in an unconventional fashion. By abandoning the most familiar contexts that are used to develop trans theory, I generate an ideal environment for establishing a new theoretical frame though reparative reading. My analysis of Concrete will be organized along the various degrees of success attributed to Concrete's body. The next chapter will explore the ways that Concrete functions as a “failure” of the conventionally gendered body. I will discuss the ways that characters within Concrete fixate on Concrete's lack of genitals, and the difficulties that Concrete is forced to confront as a result of his unusual body. My third chapter will take a more pragmatic approach to Concrete's unusual form. By considering the possibilities of Concrete's body, I will demonstrate the amazing potential that is accrued to Concrete in exchange for the difficulties he faces with his body. This discussion will explore Concrete's efforts to discover the “purpose of his body” and the various unique opportunities his body affords him. My final analytical
chapter will unapologetically embrace the possibility that Concrete's body represents a successful reimagining of the gendered body. Drawing heavily on the dramatic narrative presented in “The Human Dilemma,” this analysis will discuss the most promising images of the queer body presented in Concrete.
2. The Failure and Potential of Concrete's Body

This chapter explores the complicated questions which surround the two ideas of the failure and potential of the gendered body. This discussion will begin with the exploration of how medical and social discourses have been used to produce expectations about how gender should sit on the body. This understanding will allow me to explore how these expectations in turn act to police and discipline bodies which dare to speak of gender dissonance. By taking up the work of Sandy Stone, Julia Serano and Ricki Wilchins, I will be able to situate this question specifically in relation to trans bodies. This understanding will provide me a basis for understanding how Concrete's body can be understood as a failure. Though the word failure carries severely negative connotations, my insistence to use it should serve to indicate how powerful its reclamation at the hands of reparative reading will be. Concrete's body may be a failure of gender in a particular sense, but the opportunities afforded to him through this act of failure can be powerful sites of inspiration to the reader. I will support this argument by pairing my analysis with a discussion of the post-apocalyptic comic series *Y: The Last Man*. This series, much more overtly concerned with questioning the meaning of gender than *Concrete*, will provide me with a simple “first step” to approach the discussion of *Concrete*. This exploration will allow me to characterize one possible way that reparative reading can be used to respond to challenges that trans subjects might face. With this, I will be well positioned to continue into a more optimistic investigation of the potential of Concrete's body in the second half of the chapter.
With her work appearing relatively late in a chronological sense, Julia Serano provides a refined explanation of how a body can be represented as successful (or unsuccessful) at gender. Expanding on my discussion from the previous chapter, I would like to explore how the presumed artificiality of femininity can in turn inform a suspicion of the authenticity of the gender displayed by trans subjects. Serano explains that popular conceptions of trans individuals focus on two primary roles – that of the deceiver, and the pathetic trans individual who fails to pass. This binary locates all trans identity within a network of artificiality. Either the trans person tries and fails to achieve their disguise, or they are successful.\footnote{Serano, \textit{Whipping}, 40-41.} This perception is clearly transphobic, refusing to accept the possibility of authenticity in gender performance of trans individuals; however \textit{Whipping Girl} also locates this criticism within a system of misogyny. Serano explains that this presumption of artificiality is reinforced by the fact that most representations of trans individuals in popular media\footnote{Note that this designation is meant to encompass both the portrayal of trans characters in fictional media, and “realistic” depictions of trans individuals on news programs and talk shows.} include one or more “dressing scenes.”\footnote{Serano, \textit{Whipping}, 41-42.} In these scenes the trans subject is shown dressing (often with an intentional emphasis on gender dissonant elements – such as panties being pulled over hairy calves) and applying makeup. This progression is combined with a focus on “before and after” images which emphasize the process of transformation and (thus) concealment. By assuring the viewer that the trans subject is just a male who is disguised as a female, these media representations provide a promise that gender is actual clearly binary, and trans subjects are cleanly located on either side, but never at risk of blurring the (apparently non-
existent) space in between. Serano's charge of misogyny stems from the fact that these representations also call upon a popular understanding that even cisgendered femininity is fake. The same reasoning that suggests that makeup and elaborate clothing acts as a disguise for trans individuals also leads to the conclusion that women are similarly artificial. (This tortured reasoning also allows for the binary conclusion that masculinity is authentic.)

At this point, the reader might be confused by my argument. After all, the previous paragraph, even if it is a reasonable argument, seems to only be partial. It neglects the question of transmen, instead only focusing on trans women. Whipping Girl argues that this incomplete representation is actually typical of how popular media approaches trans subjects. The cohesive argument “trans women are fake, just like women” functions to serve hegemonic interests, however to acknowledge trans men would undermine this bigoted logic. Either the argument that trans individuals are fake would have to be abandoned, or a concession would need to be made that allowed for the suspicion that all masculinity is similarly artificial. Consequently, the preceding argument is framed in this context – our understanding of the failed trans body is necessarily the body of a trans woman.

As I described in the previous chapter, Sandy Stone's “The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Post Transsexual Manifesto” is often formally understood as the first text of the field of trans theory. Though it provides a fragmented commentary on a number of issues regarding trans individuals, the overarching theme of Stone's work is a criticism of the

74 Ibid., 59.
75 Ibid., 43-44.
76 Ibid., 46.
ways that transgender bodies are attacked for their failure to respect hegemonic gender boundaries. “Empire” explains that the entire trajectory of the trans body is mediated by corrective authorities who seek to ensure that the trans individual learns to become invisible, erasing their trans subjectivity.\(^77\) Specifically discussing the biological frame of the trans body, Stone explains that the process of transitioning is arbitrarily divided into a “before” and “after.” This bifurcation acts to fix ideas of gender in place, substituting two distinct categories for the fluidity I describe elsewhere. This invented dichotomy carries with it the implication that each body contains an original (correct) configuration, and an alternative. This essentialist presumption forms the foundation for biological critiques of the bodily “gender failure” that we are exploring this chapter. Stone explains that the authority of medical professionals allows them to function as gatekeepers of medical treatment.\(^78\) In particular, because trans individuals are infantilized by the perception that they are “like women,” there is an implied understanding that they require the guidance of medical personnel in order to correctly understand their bodies. The existence of this authority reinforces the notion of successful (or unsuccessful) bodies – the presence of an authority implies the potential for expertise. As a result, the ability to designate “correct” gender performance is imbued in a very particular group of individuals. Stone also mounts an attack on the process of passing. Stone suggests that for a trans individual, the body becomes a text.\(^79\) In particular, the spaces created by undermining or blending expected gender performance acts as a language for articulating trans experiences and realities. For Stone, the trans body is constantly under threat of being silenced, and these

\(^{77}\) Stone, 345.
\(^{78}\) Ibid., 350.
\(^{79}\) Ibid., 352.
expressions are the only reliable way to express trans subjectivity. As a result of this, “Empire” argues that any attempt to achieve a recognizable and coherent gender identity is a betrayal of the trans struggle. Instead, Stone suggests that we should strive for a mixing/queering of bodily genres that rejoices in the variety created.

There is an alternative perspective to Stone's call for intentional failures to pass. I have already hinted at it in my description of Serano's discussion of the comfort of passing. Strategic essentialism, which has a number of formulations, is one alternative to the intentional failure to pass. Speaking broadly, strategic essentialism is the acceptance of an essentialist conceptualization of a designation for a specific strategic purpose. Thus, while an individual may not believe that all women share an essential similarity, they can permit such an intimation in order to pursue a political or social goal that is broadly understood to benefit those under this umbrella designation of “women.” Strategic essentialism functions as a response to Stone's recommendation of failing to pass by providing a way of understanding how passing can be necessary. While the theoretical benefits of Stone's failure to pass are clear, it is important to maintain a sympathetic eye towards the trans subject who can't safely fail to pass. For many individuals, the relief of passing, as Serano describes it, is tremendously important. Passing provides access to acceptance and comfort within one's life. While this may not be as theoretically powerful as Stone's alternative, it is important to remember that we are not talking about faceless pawns who can be sacrificed for such gains, but rather we discuss living people who must be allowed their own agency and happiness. Thus, an

80 Ibid., 351.
81 Ibid., 354.
appeal to an essential understanding of gender that permits this passing is valuable to our discussion.

In spite of the diversity of theoretical approaches that these authors represent, there is one common theme that unites their approaches. Stone, Serano and Wilchins all build their discussion around the nature and consequences of failing to meet societal expectations of gender. Social invisibility, manifested through expulsion from discursive spaces, acts to silence trans voices. This exclusion has as its material consequence, as Namaste emphasizes, a marginalization of trans individuals as working subjects. Namaste indicates that this can lead to an overrepresentation of trans individuals in prostitution, or demographics of poverty. Armed with this perspective on the popular understanding and material consequences of “gender failure,” I will now introduce \textit{Y : The Last Man} and begin a discussion of how reparatively reading the disjunction between Concrete's gender identity and the body he inhabits can lead to an inspired perspective on trans subjectivity.

\textit{Y : The Last Man} is a post-apocalyptic science fiction story written by Brian Vaughan and Pia Guerra. Collected in 10 volumes written from 2002 to 2008, \textit{Last Man} explores the consequences of an unexpected gendercide that seems to have killed every organism on earth with an Y chromosome, excluding the main character Yorrick and the helper-monkey he is training, named Ampersand. As should be apparent from this description, a scientific conceptualization of gender lies at the heart of this narrative. The story opens with a fragmented overview of a variety of perspectives in the moments before the gendercide. The narrative explores the reactions of a large number of women as the men around them suddenly die, before grounding itself in the aftermath of the
destruction of half the world's population. We are introduced to Yorrick, and the plot of
the story initially follows his efforts to reconnect with his girlfriend, Beth, who lives in
Australia. (Fig. 2.1)

Our first view of Yorrick does not present him as the unambiguously masculine
hero that we might expect from a comic book. The image positions the viewer above
Yorrick, looking down on him. He is further “weakened” by the fact that he looks off to
the side of the panel, neither confronting the viewer or another character in the comic.
His traditionally feminine positioning is further accentuated by the fact he is talking on a
telephone (to his mother, of all people!). This confluence of forces should alert the reader
to the possibility that Yorrick will be used to articulate a subversive framing of
masculinity, while he struggles to balance his own sense of obligation with the
expectations of those around him that he contribute to rebuilding the human race.

Yorrick's journey is (in theory, at least) managed by Agent 355, seen above. 355 is
a government operative assigned to protect Yorrick. She is read much more easily as a
heroic character than Yorrick. Her posture and gaze are active, and the implements she
holds (an asp and a gun) imply a level of agency that Yorrick's phone lacks. The phallic
connotations of these items further frames 355 as an active character.

Concurrent with this overarching theme are several secondary narratives. The
surviving women in the Israeli army pose a constant threat to Yorrick's liberty, desperate
as they are to capture him as a weapon to be used against “the enemies of Israel”
(understood as everyone, including insufficiently fervent Israelis) in the new world.
Simultaneously, The Amazons, a militant group of women dedicated to eradicating any
memory of male creatures from the planet, have caught wind of Yorrick's existence and constantly threaten to overtake his party. As Yorrick's journey becomes increasingly complex, he is forced to reshape his understanding of his role in the post-gendercide world. Though the text refuses to offer the reader a clear explanation for the cause of the gendercide, the tensions surrounding Yorrick's existence eventually dissipate, and the final issue of the comic is set in the far future, where a host of Yorrick-clones play a role in the reestablishment of the human race, while “Yorrick-one” confronts his old age in
apparent isolation, deemed too crazy and valuable to roam free.

For my discussion of how the failure of the gendered body can operate, I am going to use Yorrick’s progression through the narrative of Last Man to counterbalance and contextualize my discussion of Concrete. By reparatively reading both texts, I will highlight the value of these gender “failures.”

Yorrick's character is (for most of the series) defined primarily by his failed (that is, non-hegemonic) masculinity. Though Yorrick is not a trans character in the sense I have defined it in my thesis, the necessity of disguising himself as a female frequently creates a tension between his desire to be “authentically” masculine (that is – unmistakably not a woman) and his efforts at survival. This tension, in combination with the fact that Yorrick greatly overestimates his own masculine cache, is the source of much of Last Man's commentary on gender roles. At the time we are introduced to Yorrick, he is an unemployed street magician (specifically, an escape artist.) Yorrick's lot does not improve vastly post-gendercide. He is repeatedly subdued and captured by women (a conventionally emasculating turn of events) and even after he escapes them, he is forced to flee, rather than assert some hegemonic notion of masculine authority. Further, much of the early narrative is framed as a sort of bildungsroman, following Yorrick as he is constantly corrected and educated by women who Yorrick initially regards as his inferiors. This framing of Yorrick as helpless (and in need of reeducation from the women around him) gives him the cast of a particularly anti-heroic male character.
This tension is exemplified by the scene here in figure 2.3. Yorrick, in his first attempt to leave his apartment since the gendercide, comes across a woman who is working to clean up the rotting corpses of men. Yorrick's image as unemployed homebody is contrasted against the active and employed woman he meets. In case the reader is uncertain about the implications of this dynamic, the above figure makes it explicit. Reaching into Yorrick's pants to determine if he has a penis (“is male,” for the purposes of the body collector) it is revealed that he does (barely) qualify.

As should be clear, the reader can expect to see frequent use of these ideas of “failed gender” in Concrete and Y: The Last Man. As pop culture texts, these stories understandably draw on the narrative conventions of gender that are popularly held. The frequent visibility of this topic is important because it means that it will be one of the first, and most frequent, ways gendered bodies are confronted in the comics.
Consequently, the reparative suggestions I am able to establish are of particular importance because they will inform many of the contexts that will come up later in my thesis. Further, these seemingly negative representations (that is, our understanding of them as failures make them seem particularly hopeless) seem to offer the most natural place to begin our work reparatively reading. Since our culturally instilled predisposition is to view these bodies paranoidly, half of the effort of effecting a reparative read has already been done for us! Though there are significant differences between the two texts I am studying in this chapter, the way they relate through this notion of the failed male body makes them complimentary for the purpose of my analysis.

The first examples I would like to work with are both very direct illustrations of the sort of failure to pass that I have already described. Tellingly, both examples come from relatively early in their respective series. These examples thus function as introductory attempts to prepare the reader for the interrogation of gender that both series perform. In the first sequence (Fig. 2.4), Yorick is approached by a transman and (politely) criticized for the artificial appearance of his beard. After some light banter that reveals the transman is a prostitute, he and Yorick part ways. The accompanying piece from *Concrete* has a much less optimistic tone. (Fig. 2.5) While working to save a family farm, Larry becomes romantically involved with the sister of the farm owner. This woman (“little” Maureen, to distinguish her from Dr. Vonnegut) is characterized in this story as being young, innocent and vulnerable to the charms of Larry's “city ways.” In the two pages presented, Concrete tries (unsuccessfully) to caution Larry against sleeping

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83 This point of criticism is especially poignant given the metaphorical meaning of “beard” within queer society.
with little Maureen. This reproach leads to Larry harshly attacking Concrete's apparent physical lack, suggesting that without a penis, Concrete can have no insight into a romantic relationship.

The paranoid interpretation of these two exchanges is apparent. Both Yorick and Concrete appear as themselves, but are instead misread in some way. In the case of Yorick, his beard looks artificial and he is apparently flabby enough that it looks as though he has improperly bound his breasts. This failure to pass as a man (while a man) seems to represent a significant failing on his part to present a masculinity that is apparent, even in the wake of the presumed death of all the men in the world. The criticism of Concrete is materially similar, though reads more harshly because it is done intentionally. Larry is offended by Concrete's suggestion that he has dishonourable (or careless) intentions towards little Maureen, and grounds his rebuttal in the implication that Concrete (as either “out of touch” dad or sexless monster) is incapable of understanding romantic love. This criticism is grounded in the accusation that Concrete is not “whole” and is reinforced by the imagery of Concrete holding a large pipe between his legs in (unintentional) imitation of a penis. (Perfectly, at the moment of Larry's attack Concrete drops the pipe, his facade of masculinity destroyed.) In both instances the discussion ends before the injured characters can attempt to reassert their masculine identity – implying a helpless lack of agency that conspires with their loss of masculine privilege to present the reader with images of failed men.

Should the reader find this interpretation a bit of a stretch, consider the fact that Concrete and Larry are literally laying pipe in this scene, a term with euphemistic resonance to the conversation they are having.
ME?

YEAH... WHAT'S THAT BEARD MADE OUT OF?

OH.

IT'S SPIRIT GUM AND, EH... HORSEHAIR.

YEAH. THAT'S WHAT PEOPLE KEEP TELLING ME.

THOUGHT SO, YOU SHOULD REALLY TRY USING YOUR OWN HAIR. SAVE SOME CLIPPINGS NEXT TIME YOU GET IT CUT. LOOKS MORE NATURAL.
Figure 2.4 Yorrick passing as a transman
Raymond 56

Here we are, a couple of weeks from leaving. There's an understandable temptation. I think, to, well...

Now wait, just a minute! First of all, why is it any business of yours? And second, you have no right to regulate what Maureen and I have to do. What are you implying?

Just think, Larry. She isn't like the university educated city women you're used to. This is a farm girl who thinks you're Lord Byron!

Anyway, indulging yourself now will make the break so much more bitter.

Larry, Larry. What are you going to do out here and far away from L.A.? Be like a monk in L.A. or writing him every night? I know you better than that.

Incidentally, you should brush up on Shakespeare. You're mis-quoting about half the time.
Figure 2.5: Concrete and Larry fight over “little” Maureen
The reparative interpretation of the scene from *Last Man* is somewhat intuitive, and builds on the notion of strategic essentialism I have described earlier. Though Yorrick's apparent failure to pass as a man suggests an abstract failing of masculinity, the reality is that it is an incredibly practical “failure.” Given the importance *Last Man* attaches to Yorick's ability to conceal his gender, his ability to “hide in plain sight” (as a transman) functions as a blessing within this particular narrative. This foreshadows the argument I make in the following chapter, which suggests that the capacity to pass (even if, strangely, it is achieved by not passing) can be a powerful form of trans subjectivity. The deferral of confrontation is, itself, a victory. Yorrick puts this claim to the test by showing the reader that one can be misread but not crushed by the misreading. This is made most plain in the joking exchange Yorick shares with Ampersand after the conversation ends.

Concrete's argument with Larry is more fraught, but it too suggests a reparative promise to queer readers. Most obviously, though Larry lays claim to an authority that is apparently only found in the penis, his behaviour is petulant and childish. This disparity is made especially clear during the climax of the argument, when Larry snidely dismisses Concrete's “fatherly” advice and then flees in shame, ending the conversation. Concrete's patience and quiet dignity in the face of Larry's defensive response suggests that he has access to a source of wisdom more powerful than that of Larry's penis-knowledge.(!) Even the length of pipe that Concrete holds can come to be understood as a site of reparative power within the scene. Instead of understanding the pipe as a defensive attempt at compensation by Concrete (and consequently, its abandonment as proof of the
power of Larry's accusation) it can be read as an a prop taken up by Concrete in order to try and reason with Larry on his (phallic) terms. Here again we reread Concrete into a position of maturity, thoughtfulness and power. Recognizing that Larry might respond better to a “manly talk” than unsolicited advice, Concrete takes up the trappings of masculinity not out of fear, but in an effort to better convince Larry of his argument. Such a willingness to compromise on the part of Concrete can be heartening, instead of demoralizing, to the reader.

Figure 2.6, though a relatively minor part of Last Man, functions beautifully to set up one of the most powerful scenes in Concrete. Here we see Agent 355 confronting a woman named PJ, who has burst onto the scene, surprising Yorick and his companions. Though this scene is complexly laden with racialized meaning, it is PJ's first sentence that concerns us. “This is practical, not political” echoes both the strategic essentialism described earlier in this chapter, and Carol Hanisch's invocation that the personal is political. PJ's appearance acts as a startling reminder of the artificial nature of the aesthetically pleasing appearance of women. With the loss of men to impress (the notional reason for a woman to have pretty hair) PJ has found her hair to have become a liability. In this sense PJ has achieved a certain insight that has eluded many of the other women in Last Man. She has realized that letting the gendercide (or indeed, any significant event) crystallize her understanding of the world she lives in is dangerous. It is a refusal to learn, to adapt, and to move on. Though traumatic events can stun us into immobility, we must remain optimistic.

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85 The most obvious example of this would be the throngs of mourners gathered around the Washington monument, lamenting the loss of the salient point it represents.
In the following scene, Concrete makes explicit the implications of this analysis. These panels come from the end of *Heights*, after Concrete has visited his mother's deathbed against government orders, and revealed the secret of his identity. Concrete's mother was upset by his revelation, worried that Concrete's life was being wasted. Concrete's reflections here suggest that this conclusion is not accurate. (Fig. 2.7)

Each of the scenes I have explored in this chapter have illustrated elements of my theoretical discussion of how the “failure of the body” functions in trans discourses. The final two scenes I would like to review draw these ideas together into a powerful conclusion, one that Concrete vocalizes for the reader – there is no failure of the body
"...I've learned to accept that there are things I just can't do..."

"There will always be barriers between me and what normal people can do."

"But every adult must eventually face the limitations of his life. We don't get to do and have everything."
Figure 2.7: Concrete reflects on the capabilities of his body.
(just as there is no success) and such concepts rob each of us of the agency we need to understand our own unique situations.

The image from *Last Man* initially suggests an ultimate state of vulnerability and exposure. Similar to Serano's characterization of the deceptive trans individual who is explosively revealed, here we see Yorick in what can only be described as an unaugmented state. *(Fig. 2.8)* Captured by a journalist for the “Monthly Visitor,” a tabloid paper, Yorick is forced to disrobe for the penetrating gaze of the journalist's camera. The threat of being seen is made explicit by the journalist's phrasing (“I'm going to shoot you”) and is obviously also the culmination of the series of threats of revelation that have hounded Yorick since the first volume of *Last Man*. The helplessness of Yorick is further emphasized by the fact that he has clearly been stripped down carelessly in the middle of a street. A final note to this effect lies with his boxers, bunched around his ankles. Bound in this way, Yorick is literally trapped, even as he is symbolically captured on the film of the journalist's camera. A second, subtle threat is manifest in this scene. It seems to imply that (in spite of the work we've done) a biological understanding of nature is primary. The reparative potential of this scene lies not in the moment it occurs, but rather how it functions to shift the narrative that comes after it. In spite of this (seemingly) complete failure by Yorick, little changes for him. His plans and dreams remain difficult but obtainable tasks, his friends do not desert him (though his mother is admittedly mortified) and Ampersand remains a delightfully antagonistic sidekick. This continuity, which may elude the reader on a first pass, is in some sense an even larger emblem of promise than the singular reparative interpretations I have provided
Figure 2.8: Yorrick is photographed naked
previously. By speaking to a trans life as a full trajectory (rather than individual events) this scene offers an assurance that even the most difficult of events can be overcome – that single occurrences do not crystallize into an inescapable fate. Consequently, the primacy of a biological understanding of gender is at once confirmed (in this specific instance) and dispelled as a long term consequence. Within the context of the gendercide, Yorrick, a person with a y chromosome, is strange and worthy of notice. However, this specific instance in which his biology is essential quickly fades into the background of the larger collage of perspectives I have just described.

It is on this note that I turn to my final example from *Concrete*. This sequence is taken from *Strange Armor*, after Concrete and Maureen have escaped from the murderous intentions of Concrete's military handler, Stamberg. Stamberg, mutilated and facing incarceration for his attack on Concrete, is juxtiposed against Concrete as an example of a person who has lost much in the course of his life. Concrete is quick to emphasize the divergence of their paths, however. *(Fig. 2.9)*

Such is the strength of this scene that it cannot even sustain a paranoid reading. Though Concrete's characterization of his situation is initially distressing (he laments all of the senses he has lost, and suggests that he might be a “lump of scar tissue”\(^{86}\)), this foreboding discussion quickly turns to a tremendously optimistic conclusion. Climbing a massive mountain, Concrete casts aside these doubts and commends the reader to “embrace life, despite it all.” This hopeful conclusion persists through his explanation that there is no room to view yourself as a victim, because it is the nature of life to make victims of us all in different ways. This message is obviously a hugely powerful one for

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\(^{86}\) Which might bring to the reader's mind the film “Hedwig and the Angry Inch.”
I made the mistake of trying to share it with Stamberg.

But facing a life with useless legs, facial disfigurement and serious prison time...

...he was too busy with grief and rage and fear to hear me.

I have my journey. He has his.

I'm still moving through it.

That hurt most.

They took a lot.

Not to be able to touch.

I could look at a drop of water...

My sense of taste.

Smell. Touch.

And see the reflection of a star, 93 million miles away.

Life, all around me.

Blazing, shining life.

But they gave me these eyes.

I could shut myself off, a cold lump of scar tissue...
Figure 2.9: Concrete reflects on the potential of his body
the queer reader to take to heart. Though the notion of failing at gender might appear to be an unforgivable shortcoming – a deficiency that can not be surmounted – Concrete's conclusion argues that such a view is faulty. Instead, Concrete suggests that the presumed weaknesses of his body can be surmounted by his determination to make good the life he has been given.

The first half of this chapter has worked to dismantle one of the primary presumptions about trans individuals. By directly confronting the notion of the “failure” of the trans body, I have been able to illustrate that such an idea is strictly a hegemonic convenience. Further, I have been able to demonstrate how reparative reading of both queer and “normal” comic book characters yields many of the same conclusions that trans scholars like Stone, Serano and Wilchins have reached. By attacking this notion of distinctly binary gender (and the associated privileging of masculinity) I have not only demonstrated the absurdity of the so-called “failure of the body,” but I have also laid the groundwork for the second half of this chapter. As we turn to look at the potential of the trans body, my theoretical focus will shift from visibility to the promise of invisibility. Expanding upon Fuss's idea of strategic essentialism, I will illustrate how the promise of the unknown and hidden in reparative reading can function more literally as a means of interpreting the potential of trans bodies.

This portion of the chapter represents a shift in the tone of my exploration. The idea of trans potentiality is admittedly quite vague. In order to interrogate the promise of the trans body, I will begin with a particular example from the comic series Dykes to Watch Out For. After this discussion and some supporting theoretical development, I will
proceed to a Concrete example which will allow me to situate Dykes in relation to the method of reparative reading that I have already demonstrated. Having established this specific example, I will expand my conclusions into a more general framework for understanding the potential of trans bodies by drawing upon Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg. Equipped with this notion of cyborg identity, we will be positioned to transition to the final question my thesis addresses – the success of the trans body.

Dykes to Watch Out For is a comic drawn by Alison Bechdel. Published in a number of queer periodicals, Dykes was written from 1983 to 2008, and chronicles the lives of a number of queer characters. The initial basis for the strip is an exploration of the lesbian community surrounding the primary protagonist of the series, Mo. Much of the strip focuses on the difficulties Mo and her friends have in the social and political climate of the 80s, 90s and the new millennium. Prior to the introduction of Janis in 2001, the strip offered only fleeting glimpses of trans characters. When depicted, trans characters tended to be tertiary, and even when Lois (a main character) considers the possibility of a male identity, her struggle is in the background of Mo's complicated transphobia. In contrast, the reader closely follows the character of Janis (né Jonas) as she developed from a “gender confused” youth to a pubescent teenager transitioning with the assistance of hormones. This rigorous chronicling of Janis's development provides the reader with an interesting representation of a very particular kind of trans subjectivity. Because the reader follows Janis through much of her childhood, and

88 Janis is the child of Jasmine, a woman who for most of her tenure in “Dykes to Watch Out For” is in a relationship with Lois.
89 Bechdel, 288.
90 Bechdel, 358.
because we see her not simply as a trans character but as a character who happens to be trans, Janis comes to embody what I describe as radical invisibility.

The question of visibility is delicately situated within trans theory. The context that precedes theoretical consideration has a dual form – being found in both medical and social discourse. Trans theorists frame the medical gaze as a site of oppressive vision. By anointing themselves as arbiters of what constitutes a successful body, medical professionals act as oppressive gatekeepers who utilize vision as a means of regulating the transgender body. In this context, visibility is frequently understood as a negative characteristic.  

Visibility is regarded with a similar suspicion when considered in a social context. For the trans subject, visibility is most often tied to a failure to pass. As a result the exploration of trans visibility must contend with the fear and vulnerability often associated with a failure to pass. With this understanding of these two sources of tension, I will now explore existing theoretical conceptualizations of trans visibility in order to set the stage for what I describe as radical invisibility.

In “The 'Empire' Strikes Back,” Stone is critical of this pursuit of invisibility. Stone argues that “it is difficult to generate a counterdiscourse if one is programmed to disappear.” By this, Empire means to suggest that both the medical and social demand to “blend in” create extremely narrow definitions of trans subjectivity (which, in turn, deny expression.) For Stone, the value of a queer theoretic approach to trans theory is immediately clear.

91 Stone, 354.
92 Stone, 350.
The final question to be considered prior to my analysis is how the representation of an individual transgendered character can impact the lived materiality of trans experience. This question can actually be understood as two separate questions – how does the character of Janis inform the experience of a trans person him or herself, and how does it influence other readers who have the power to impact the material reality of trans lives? The former question is one that cannot be answered without either violating Namaste's strictures or performing extensive empirical research in the method prescribed by “Undoing Theory.” However the latter question is an excellent basis for our investigation.

We must now understand the nature of Janis' invisibility. In cultural texts, a transgender identity typically functions to make the trans character highly visible. In particular, trans bodies are typically construed as glaringly obvious (the pathetic trans character who fails to pass) or as spectacularly hidden (the deceptive trans individual whose “secret” is explosively revealed).93 The character of Janis repeatedly escapes both of these characterizations. Though she frequently makes her trans identity visible [through her unconventional (for a character who is assigned a male identity) identification with pop-culture icons like the Powerpuff Girls and Hermione Granger,] Janis is not a character who is failing to be female, but rather an individual who regards claiming her identity to be trivial (or unnecessary). She is already comfortable with her transition, she just waits (mostly) patiently for the adults to catch on.94 This confidence and poise marks Janis as separate from the so-called pathetic transsexual. Simultaneously,

93 Serano, 36.  
94 Bechdel, 271.
Janis's ability to fluidly move between masculine and feminine performance\textsuperscript{95} indicate she does not understand her transgender identity as an issue to be relegated to the past. Even though she displays an unerring confidence in her identity as a female, she continues to indulge the rest of the world in the idea that she is a male. This tolerance demonstrates that Janis is not attempting to conceal her identity, and instead regards it as unremarkable.

The unremarkability of Janis' trans identity is made clear in figure 2.10. Janis and her mother, having just returned from a visit with their extended family, complain about their relatives acting “[like] usual.” Unprompted, Janis explains that “Grampa called me a girly boy. But not in a nice way.” In the same panel, Lois responds “ahh, forget him.” A paranoid reading of this exchange prompts the reader to immediately regard 'Grampa' as an enemy and, consequently, Janis as a victim. This ascription of a victim identity to Janis is in line with a paranoid approach to understanding trans bodies. Namaste's characterization of Butler suggests that for Butler, gender is the essential characteristic of identity.\textsuperscript{96} An attack on Janis's gender identity is the most base of insults. Consequently, Lois's dismissal acts to diminish the (perceived) suffering of Janis. For a conventional queer theorist, this strip functions to downplay the suffering of trans bodies and to generate a policy of non-discussion to forestall analysis of the damage done by 'Grampa'. A reparative approach, however, yields much more hopeful results. By approaching the text as a primary source (not necessarily requiring a paranoid interpretation) the reader notices that Janis's statement “Grampa called me a girly boy.

\textsuperscript{95} Bechdel, 288.  
\textsuperscript{96} Undoing Theory, 3.
But not in a nice way” leaves open the possibility for the existence of a nice “girly boy”. The testimonial of a transgendered character gives voice to an alternative to the pathetic or secretive transsexuals caricatured earlier. Similarly, Lois's response is no longer a condescending dismissal, but rather a privileged perspective passed from one queer to another. “Forget him.” Forget him! What words can offer more hope to the reader (queer or otherwise) than these? Forget oppression. Forget the necessity of performance. Forget the context of paranoia! This reparative reading not only transforms the meanings conveyed by the characters to each other, but it also re-imagines the reader as a recipient (instead of fabricator) of meaning.

The apparent contradiction between Janis as an individual who does not conceal her trans identity and the idea of radical invisibility is the basis for understanding her as a subversive character. The premise of radical invisibility is that the potential for being subversive is not necessarily grounded in being dramatic, but rather can be accomplished through being unremarkable. Though Janis is undeniably a trans character, we do not understand her identity as primarily transgendered. In the comic, she engages in activities
that both the reader and other characters identify as conventionally feminine. However, the reader is not led to understand them as “performance.” In this way Janis undermines the expectation of “performing femininity” that Serano describes.

By relating this notion of radical invisibility to Concrete, I will demonstrate that it can function both in terms of physical and symbolic invisibility. This dual meaning is more robust than the relatively simple interpretation I have offered from “Dykes.” The material invisibility I would like to discuss appears in volume 5, *Think Like a Mountain*. Most of the narrative occurs in natural settings, and often at night. These facts create an environment in which Concrete's conspicuous body is less visible and his more unusual characteristics (such as tremendous eyesight) are emphasized.

In figure 2.11, we see an illustration of this form of invisibility (which is articulated through Concrete's movement from hypervisibility, as a giant stone body, to inconspicuousness.) After being discovered spiking a swathe of trees, a group of Earth Firsters that includes Concrete is pursued through the forest. Having disabled the lumber company's floodlights, Concrete uses his incredible vision to direct his colleagues through the forest. The invisibility of Concrete's body is made apparent in the first panel through the absence of shading and the minimal use of texture. This “colouring book” art style makes everything depicted (including Concrete) difficult to discern. This invisibility persists in the following panel, when the guards are able to begin using their lights again. Here the physical (material) reality of Concrete's body plays an active role in his ability to remain unseen. The same stoney skin that has made Concrete the butt of many jokes acts as the perfect camouflage in this forest setting. In addition to offering a

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97 Bechdel, 262, 288, 333.
Figure 2.11: Concrete uses his body to blend into the environment

more literal perspective on Concrete's search for the “purpose” of his body, this scene demonstrates how even the most conspicuous body can become invisible in an ameliorative way. By becoming “just another rock in the stream,” Concrete is articulating a way for his body to become (in a literal sense) unremarkable. A similar line of reasoning is made available throughout this volume. Concrete repeatedly escapes from capture attempts through his ability to leap great distances, see in extreme darkness and
hold his breath for a tremendous length of time. These demonstrations of how the materiality of Concrete's body can be positively manifested in a sort of subversive invisibility provide an exciting expansion of the process of reparatively reading Janis' radical invisibility.

A more abstract sort of invisibility illustrates Serano's discussion of invisibility as a form of relief. Serano explains that her experiences as a trans individual have included numerous interrogations of how she “should” understand her gender. This line of reasoning is dependent upon a particular understanding of not only how gender functions, but how it can (and should) be narrativized for others. In criticizing this expectation, Serano also explains that there is also value in meeting societal expectations, because they allow for a certain peace and freedom. Though not identical, the need for Concrete to identify himself as the product of military technological development is tied to both a need for “realism" in his existence, and a need for him to satisfy the anxieties of those who hold power over him. As I discussed in my introductory chapter, Concrete is publicly understood to be the product of a military program to develop cyborg soldiers. Concrete indicates to Larry that this narrative is a fiction that has been invented to conceal the existence of aliens from the rest of the world. This fiction, which presides over all seven volumes of Concrete published at present, possesses extreme potential to be read paranoidly or reparatively. A paranoid interpretation of this disguise grows out of Stone's characterization of passing as a violent silencing. Concrete, forced to conceal his true identity, must lie about himself in order to move freely through life. Indeed, this

98 Serano, 77.
99 Ibid., 82-83.
100 As though the constant expansion and improvement of killing technologies is either more desirable or more inevitable than the existence of aliens.
interpretation gains a (seemingly) damning degree of resonance with non-fictional trans experiences through noting that the American government's imposition of this story onto Concrete's life operates as a gatekeeping function almost identical to that of medical discourse which requires a certain framing of trans autobiography.

In *Changing Sex*, Bernice Hausman offers a characterization of how trans autobiography is a consequence of, and contributes to, a specific medically authorized discourse about trans subjectivity. Hausman suggests that trans autobiography tends to reinscribe hegemonic discourses about how trans subjects experience their gender. This articulation, in turn, acts to instruct readers on the “truth” of trans experience. Hausman is suspicious about this educational facet, because she feels that it undermines the ability of medical authorities to properly evaluate individuals who claim to be transgender. Hausman suggests that this is to the detriment of individual trans readers who she finds incapable of resisting the interpretive insistence of what she describes as a closed text. This insistence that there is a “correct” way of experiencing trans subjectivity, and that each individual trans person must come to embody the medically sanctioned narrative not through instruction, but through “authentic” agreement with it, is the authoritative inscription that Serano and Stone are critical of, and it forms the basis for the resonance I describe between Concrete's cover story as a military cyborg, and trans subjectivity.

There are two separate lines of reasoning which can allow for these facts to be read reparatively. The first is simply by noting that Concrete is enacting Serano's theory about passing as a means of seeking relief. Through a concession to a form of strategic

102 Ibid., 146.
103 Ibid., 156.
essentialism, it can be reasoned that Concrete's willingness to buy into a narrative that allows him to live as he would like is a right that is uniquely his. Indeed, to be critical of the trans subject's right to compromise risks treading near the Butlerian level of theoretical abstraction that Namaste is so critical of. The second way in which Concrete's passing can be understood reparatively is to recognize the subversive events that brought about his ability to go free at all. In Strange Armor, Concrete explains that he was only given the opportunity to live freely after he and Maureen escaped from a government compound and threatened to reveal his full story on television. Here Concrete's strange subjectivity is transformed into a powerful tool that allows him to negotiate his freedom. The fact that it is the threatening nature of his genesis that allows Concrete to negotiate his freedom is not unproblematic; however again, we cannot entirely discount his ability to master this element of himself and harness it for his own benefit. In these ways, Concrete's subversive invisibility is essential to his sense of liberty.

Concrete's efforts to “pass” as a military cyborg represent a convenient endpoint for my discussion of radical invisibility. It makes most explicit the messy, permeable boundaries between a subversive sort of trans invisibility and the hegemonic conformity evoked by the image military-industrial cyborg. This last thought might inspire in the reader a certain anxiety about the topic of this chapter. Where does this (implicitly weaponized) symbol of militarism, the cyborg, fit into a discussion of the potential of the (trans) body? An answer to this question is found in the figure of Donna Haraway's cyborg. By taking up Haraway's essay titled “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” I will transform my conclusions
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regarding radical invisibility into the foundation for an articulation of one possible way of understanding the seemingly divided subjectivity of Concrete. In “Cyborg Manifesto” Haraway articulates a strategy for allowing oppressed individuals to confront hegemonic forces in the technologically dense world we live in. By focusing on the specific tools Haraway develops, I will demonstrate how “Cyborg Manifesto” speaks to the question of trans subjectivity in Concrete.

Haraway opens her article with definitions for two important concepts. “Cyborg Manifesto” introduces blasphemy as a means of conceptualizing postmodern reality and situates the cyborg as the central figure in this understanding. 104 Haraway explains that blasphemy “protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community.... [it] is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes.”105 More plainly, blasphemy is a way of thinking that allows one to recognize the truth of a statement or situation while retaining awareness that this truth is neither inevitable nor immutable. Blasphemy is a language of compromise that gives one the strength to survive in the face of difficulty and the promise of a future worth surviving for. It achieves these ends by foregoing the search for a single coherent narrative, recognizing the inherently contradictory nature of attempting to “be” all of the distinct subjectivities that each of us bear. For Haraway, the cyborg is the hybrid creature that is constituted by these conflicting identities. A being that melds both biological and technological components, Haraway's cyborg is a survival machine that contains the contradictions, subjectivities and vulnerabilities of the modern subject.106 The language of blasphemy and the body of

104Haraway, 149.
105Ibid.
106Ibid., 149-150.
Haraway's cyborg are situated as reformulations of the need to read reparatively. Both are given to the reader as means of compromise, necessarily being rejections of the search for profound truths derived through exhaustive understanding. They allow us to hedge our bets, as it were, finding comfort and workable solutions in tentative and partial resolution. This ability to compromise and find bearable space in contradiction is the same impulse that motivates reparative reading.

The cyborg functions as a new political entity. It seeks to escape the constraints of identity politics by recognizing that one can not hope to be constituted from the term “woman” or “black” or “middle class.” Instead the cyborg has the power to graft all of these identities (and many others) together. It is through this alchemy that the cyborg gains its potency. The shifting collaboration of identities empowers the cyborg to speak from all of its subjectivities, without fear that any contradictions in its identity is the basis for denouncing its right to be heard. For example, Haraway's cyborg is present in Concrete's pregnancy, which I will explore more fully in the following chapter. Concrete's pregnancy demonstrates how he is more than “just” a trans character, he is also a pregnant character. This allows him to generate meaning, even if that meaning appears to cut across the confusion that seems to inform his gender identity. The voice that allows me to find reparative potential in Concrete's temporary ceding of trans subjectivity is that of the cyborg, shifting its subjectivity to allow for new articulations of identity.

I turn now to a more direct consideration of the discursive potential of the cyborg. For Haraway, adopting a cyborg subjectivity allows for the abandonment of both
innocence and victim identity. In particular, Haraway observes that identifying as a victim works to silence potential cyborgs. For Concrete, the renunciation of innocence means being willing to confront the fact that he has lost an important part of himself, and that this loss is a source of pain. Simultaneously, refusing to take up the identity of a victim means that Concrete should not allow this to plunge him into despair. As I noted when discussing Fig. 2.9, Concrete has lost much, but has also been given new tools to live a valuable life. Instead, “Cyborg Manifesto” suggests that identifying how categories of identity function can be more powerful than classifying categories of victims. Similarly, Haraway notes that attempts to frame one's identity category as a site of innocence is always already a lie. Using the example of feminist socialism, Haraway notes that claims to innocence often overlook one's own capacity for discursive violence. This claim resonates with Namaste's criticism of queer theory that appropriates trans experiences to explicate the suffering of cisgendered women. “Cyborg Manifesto” argues that by relegating these defenses to the past, the cyborg can confront sources of oppression on equal footing, claiming a validity that would be implicitly denied through an appeal to victimhood. For Haraway, taking up a singular subjectivity (such as “woman”) is fraught with guilt for the way that the designation occludes others who experience “woman” identity different from the speaker. This need for caution is mirrored in the care I took in constituting my own exploration of Concrete as an example of trans subjectivity. Further, efforts to read Concrete paranoidly, as only a marker of misery and loss, are examples of the appeals to an identity as victim that “Cyborg

107Ibid., 157.
108Ibid., 158.
109Ibid., 155-156.
“Manifesto” condemns. Sedgwick explains that the reader does not generate new knowledge through paranoid reading, instead, simply reframes an existing sense of oppression into a new context.\footnote{Sedgwick, 10.} Haraway condemns all claims that “victimhood [is] the only ground for insight,”\footnote{Haraway, 157.} further reinforcing my claim that to practice reparative reading is to read as a cyborg.

As is already clear, Concrete, and my work reparatively reading it illustrate the central ideas of “Cyborg Manifesto.” To conclude this chapter I want to discuss two of the primary characteristics of Concrete, and discuss how these ideas function as a practical exploration of Haraway's ideas. After performing this analysis, I will be able to describe how reparatively reading these elements of Concrete yields a strong resonance between “Cyborg Manifesto” and my thesis, a resonance that makes explicit the relationship between cyborg identity and trans subjectivity.

A central theme of Concrete is Concrete's persistent efforts to come to terms with the “purpose” of his alien body. Early volumes of Concrete make this quest explicit. Concrete uses his superhuman endurance to rescue miners who are trapped in a collapsed tunnel in order to determine if his new body should be used to save lives. Several stories later, a solo attempt to climb Everest forms the basis for Concrete's consideration that his body should be used to allow him to explore places and see things that no human could hope to discover. This aspiration to master his body is an articulation of Concrete's fulfillment of Haraway's command to reject innocence and the shackles of a victim identity. Concrete spends relatively little time fixated on his past, or a consideration of
what he has “lost.” Instead, he tries to come to terms with his “fall” from humanity, and to find meaning in this loss of innocence, as Haraway insists. Concrete's attempts to come to terms with the purpose of his body is necessitated by the confusing way that identities are thatched together to constitute his identity. Concrete's subjectivities are both physical and discursive. The reader is privy to the fact that Concrete is (in one sense) a male subjectivity inside a (seemingly) genderless stone body inside the identity of a military cyborg. This nesting of subjectivities creates a blend of identities that are always on the verge of exploding into visibility. At the same time, Concrete's search for purpose generates a shifting array of identities which constantly reframe his identity. Concrete is a celebrity, a worker, a machine, a eunuch and a pregnant person – often many of these things at the same time. This extensive array of identities positions Concrete as a prototypical example of Haraway's cyborg – always on the verge of a new perspective that will further transform his subjectivity and the role he can play in instructing the reader. By exploring Concrete's subjectivity and his search for bodily meaning, I will make it clear how important “Cyborg Manifesto” is for fully performing a reparative reading of Concrete.

Though the comparison of Concrete to Haraway's cyborg is a source of many examples that can be read reparatively, I would like to focus on two of the most engaging illustrations of the value of this connection. The first example is a complicated sequence from volume one, Depths. Appearing on a late night television show as part of the orchestrated overexposure of his persona, Concrete's interview is followed by a comedy routine performed by a man only known as “Anonymoose.” Anonymoose's routine is a
caustic attack on Concrete's apparently deficient body. (Fig. 2.12) This passage, taken alone, offers little hope for reparative reading. However, Concrete's response to this attack offers a shocking avenue for a reparative interpretation that draws on Haraway's discussion of innocence. As Anonymoose's segment ends, he makes the mistake of approaching Concrete to deliver a final barb to his face. Unexpectedly, Concrete lunges forward and grabs Anonymoose by his antlers. (Fig. 2.13)

Here, we see Concrete effect a stunning reversal. His body, apparently so worthless that it merited the prolonged attack the reader just witnessed, has no trouble defending itself. This inflection is mirrored by the helplessness Anonymoose displays. Begging for mercy he clearly does not deserve, the comedian becomes the subject of the spectacle he tried to create. Concrete imagines himself in the position of power, controlling Anonymoose's career – his life. At its most basic, this scene can be read reparatively because it relocates power from Anonymoose to Concrete. However, this interpretation in turn is at risk of criticism. Concrete takes control of the situation with physical force. This threat of terror may give Concrete power, but it does so in a way that might make peaceful readers uncomfortable. I argue that this militarization of Concrete's body is important, not only because it highlights a genuine tool at his disposal (just because the reader does not approve of Concrete's methods does not necessarily invalidate them) but because Concrete's willingness to indulge in this seemingly

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112 The rightmost element of the final frame is heavy with meaning. Concrete's apparent ability to drive Anonymoose to suicide resonates dangerously with the recent frequency of high profile queer suicides.
Figure 2.12: Anonymoose is critical of Concrete
Figure 2.13: Concrete Confronts Anonymoose

horrifying behaviour speaks directly to Haraway's advocacy of the abandonment of innocence. Anonymoose's attack itself is proof of the hostile environment that awaits queer bodies. In a world where people are not ashamed to laugh at Anonymoose's criticism, what sense does it make to commend Concrete to turn the other cheek? What
use is moral high ground to the besieged body of Concrete? The fact that Concrete's display of force is ultimately empty – he does eventually release his antagonist – does not undermine his initial act of aggression. This willingness to fight back may be a loss of innocence, but I argue that it represents a powerful display of agency in the spirit of Haraway's cyborg.

I would like to conclude my analysis of “Cyborg Manifesto” with a more lighthearted example. In *Think Like a Mountain*, Concrete's search for the purpose of his body brings him in contact with Earth First! who enlist his help in protecting a swathe of ancient forest. In the climactic issue of this volume, Concrete is impersonating a sasquatch in the hope that the media attention this stunt draws will prevent the forest from being clear cut. After several sightings of the “sasquatch,” Concrete regroups with his collaborators, trying to determine how they can conceal the flaws in the sasquatch costume. *(Fig. 2.14)* This exchange submits to the same basic mode of reparative reading that my thesis exemplifies. The humorous provision of a massive strap-on addresses the recurring challenging of Concrete's gender identity. By making the act of “fixing” Concrete's body simultaneously grotesque and absurd, *Concrete* makes a subtle argument that his body is fine the way it is. With regard to the argument of “Cyborg Manifesto,” the sasquatch strap-on acts as a blasphemous articulation of cyborg identity. The question of the purpose of Concrete's body is clarified by this humorous exchange. It crystallizes the notion that Concrete's exterior is secondary to the gestalt of identities that form around his person. Roland makes this distinction explicit when he tells Concrete that “you're a
Figure 2.14: Concrete as Sasquatch
sasquatch, not you. Dignity isn't an issue."113 Here, the exterior is devalued, while Concrete is understood as the bearer of a number of disguises. This framing makes Concrete's agency clear, and undermines what appears to be the ritualized humiliation of his “incomplete” body.

Concrete's next public appearance as the sasquatch acts as a postscript to this interrogation. After being sighted, Concrete flees from the horde of sasquatch hunters, trying to lead them towards the most extreme site of devastation in the forest. As he leaps from tree to tree, his hastily appended appendage is jarred loose, becoming a plummeting phallic projectile. (Fig. 2.15) Concrete's wry observation (“story of my life”) is central to the meaning of this sequence. It is this snide comment that emphasizes the transitory nature of the identity he has assumed. In spite of the apparent importance of the phallus throughout the text, at this crucial moment Concrete makes it clear that it only functions as a possible enhancement to his hybrid identity – it is not the sole location of his subjectivity. It is telling that the final example I discuss in the chapter concerning the potential of Concrete's body makes light of Concrete's long sought phallus. The image of the huge strap-on falling to earth functions as a powerful symbol for the central thrust of my thesis. On one hand, the social weight of Concrete's missing cock is so great that even his giant body can not support it. At the same time, his phallus takes on an ephemeral aspect in this scene. Relieved of its importance, Concrete is able to adopt and discard it in order to further his own goals. It is this second meaning that I will attend to to conclude this chapter. My efforts to articulate the value of Concrete as a trans subject has not paid

113Paul Chadwick, *Concrete Volume 5: Think Like a Mountain*. (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Publishing, 2006.), 127.
especial attention to his physical body. It is through this focusing that the hybrid potential of Concrete becomes our own. His ability to move between a variety of identities (and to let now useless identities fall by the wayside) is instructive to the reader. It is this demonstrative capacity that speaks to the ultimate purpose, and success, of Concrete's body.

The image of Haraway's cyborg is a useful note on which to transition into my final chapter. Though it epitomizes the potential of the trans subject, it also bears the unmistakable promise of the successful transgender individual. It is my contention that this promise does not mean that the trans subject becomes fixed or “complete.” Instead, the same sense of contingency that allows the cyborg to fluidly move through the various forms needed in the 21st century allows it to remain always an unfinished success – accomplished because it is always able to persist in becoming.
3. The Success of Concrete's Body

At this point, I have complicated the question of how meaning is inscribed onto Concrete’s body by interrogating both the apparent shortcomings and the implicit potential of his stony form. Through a reliance upon a reparative reading of how Concrete presents the titular character’s corporeal presence, it has become clear that Concrete has the ability to shrug off many of the questions of gender that are posed to him in the first six volumes of the series. It is with this final chapter that I will respond to the question of the “success” of Concrete's body, while also interrogating the most direct attempt by Chadwick to subvert Concrete’s masculine identification. By reading the pregnancy of Concrete through the study of male pregnancy (mpreg) fan fiction, I will demonstrate that even this most unconventional gendering of Concrete's (until now, implicitly genderless) body offers the thoughtful reader space for optimistic interpretation.

This chapter will work closely with the final volume of Concrete, titled The Human Dilemma. This volume explores the question of reproduction (especially as it pertains to overpopulation) and various formulations of love. As I conceded in my introductory chapter, the events presented in The Human Dilemma can initially be difficult for the reader to reconcile with their existing understanding of Concrete. Most notably, the sudden reciprocation of Concrete’s affection by Maureen is not foreshadowed by the previous stories. Further, the extensive work that has been done by Chadwick to position Concrete as a being with no genitals reinforces the reader’s passive assumption that the stone/cyborg body of Concrete lacks means of reproduction. By this point in my thesis, the reader should not be shocked to discover that the surprising role of
pregnancy in *The Human Dilemma* provides the reader with plenty of room to read reparatively. It is my contention that by reframing the seventh volume of *Concrete* with the theoretical work of Berit Åström, a tremendous amount of space is created for the reader to draw out the queerness\(^\text{114}\) of Concrete.

The most obvious line of investigation when discussing *The Human Dilemma* is one which questions how Concrete (who the text overwhelmingly encourages us to understand as a male) carries meaning as a pregnant character. One strong conceptual approach to this question utilizes existing fan fiction (fanfic) mpreg scholarship. Though a less visible site of male pregnancy than science fiction novels or comedy films,\(^\text{115}\) fanfic typically operates far outside of the view of popular culture, allowing it to explore the scope of male pregnancy more freely. By looking at how academics theorize the pregnant male body, I will be able to draw out the similarities (and differences) that exist between Concrete and pregnant men in fanfic. This comparison will, in turn, provide me with a frame for suggesting how Concrete's pregnancy can be read optimistically.

Broadly defined, fanfic describes media documents that are constructed by fans and which use popular media texts as the canonical foundation of their storytelling. Though any media document can be the subject of fan fiction, some of the most popular texts for fanfic include *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. A subcategory of fanfic (that is often understood as synonymous with fanfic) is the genre of slash fiction

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\(^{114}\)Note that this departure from the trans perspective in *Concrete* is only a reshaping of the central focus of my exploration. The distinctly trans nature of Concrete's pregnancy is brought to the fore later in the chapter.

\(^{115}\)Examples of this include novels such as *Left Hand of Darkness* and *I Will Fear No Evil* and the film *Junior*. 
The term slash refers to the homosexual, non-canonical pairing of two characters from within the canon under discussion, often written as Sam/Frodo or Remus/Sirius (for Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter slash, respectively.) Within the body of slash, mpreg represents one small subgenre. Mpreg describes any fic in which one of the “slashed” characters becomes pregnant. The means of impregnation are often context dependent, with slash based on fantasy canons able to resort to magical or supernatural explanations for the unusual phenomenon while more realistic narratives typically offer biological explanations for the pregnancy. The small amount of existing scholarship on mpreg fanfic typically interrogates how the pregnancy functions as a tool of resisting the narrative or heterosexist demands of the canon, and considers how mpreg fic differs from more “mainstream” genres of slash.

Before beginning my theoretical exploration of mpreg literature, I need to (briefly) consider how it relates to Concrete. Clearly the canonical body of Concrete is not slash fiction. This means that any assumptions made by my theoretical sources that hinge upon the subversive or metatextual nature of slash must be examined to ensure they are appropriate when discussing Concrete. Reparative reading acts as a means of allowing readers to generate their own new meanings for a work by actively empowering them to escape the paranoid necessity of fixating on the negative potential of the text, and for providing space for an amelioration of the pain found within a paranoid understanding of the text.116 However I cannot uncritically apply the subversive intent of mpreg fanfic that is presumed by some academics to Chadwick. Similarly, while the gender queering

116Sedgwick, 22.
that appears to be generated by the concept of male pregnancy is retained with Concrete becoming pregnant, the homosexual relationship that is foundational to slash fiction is not present in Concrete. In spite of these dissimilarities, I believe it’s clear that my attempt to come to terms with the fantastic nature of Concrete’s pregnancy benefit from my ability to draw upon this salient field of scholarship.

In her article “‘Let’s Get Those Winchesters Pregnant’: Male Pregnancy in “Supernatural” Fan Fiction,” Berit Åström discusses the way that mpreg fanfic intersects with a canonical understanding of the slashed characters, and how the trope of pregnancy functions to transform expectations of gender, sexuality, identity and the body. Åström opens by framing the question of mpreg slash in terms of the use of male pregnancy in Ursula Le Guin's novel The Left Hand of Darkness. In describing the famous line “the king is pregnant,” Åström suggests that the reader is forced to experience a “mental double take” in which the apparent conflict between a state of pregnancy and masculinity leaves the reader confused. While the use of male pregnancy in Left Hand is dismissed as a matter of semantics, Åström credits slash fiction with the ability to explore this issue in terms of emotion, interpersonal relationships and popular conventions regarding the meaning of pregnancy. “Winchesters” explains that while mpreg fic appears to be a subversive or resistant approach to predominately non-queer narratives of pregnancy, such an interpretation overlooks the conventional forms of

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117 It should be noted that while this article specifically addresses slash devoted to the television series “Supernatural,” the analysis of mpreg narratives is in most cases generalizable. I will be sure to identify instances in which the article's specificity may affect the generalizability of its conclusions.


119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.
domesticity that are utilized in framing male pregnancy, as well as the gendered
negotiation of the pregnant body.  

Åström identifies three elements of representation that are negotiated by slash
fiction in non-subversive ways. These elements are the conventions of representing
pregnancy, the intersection of pregnancy and the masculine body and the question of how
gender identity is understood within the genre. The nature of the “pregnant person” genre
is an intuitive place to begin exploring the male pregnancy. Åström observes that within
the genre, pregnant bodies are seen to be unstable (often displayed through morning
sickness and irritability), disbelieving (rejection of pregnancy, even in the face of positive
pregnancy tests) and ultimately precarious (television dramas are cited as particularly
notorious in their use of miscarriage as a dramatic device). This precarity fuels a sense of
anxiety that surrounds pregnancy narratives, giving additional impetus to our desire to
reparatively read the pregnant body. In addition to these characterizations of pregnancy,
Åström notes that pregnancy narratives often downplay the physical act of giving birth,
preferring a rapid transition from a state of pregnancy to one of having birthed the
child. “Winchesters” argues that by calling upon these familiar tropes, mpreg slash is
able to build upon readers' expectations about the appearance of a pregnancy, which in
turn allows slash authors to generate meaning through how their fic intersects with these
genre expectations. Åström claims that this focus generates stories that are transgressive,

121 Ibid., 1-2.

122 A point that Åström does not make, but could bear further scrutiny, is the fact that this omission allows
viewers to avoid the abjection that is coincidental with birth, permitting a pure (read: clean) birth
narrative. This tendency reaches its apex in mpreg narratives, which often completely overlook the
biological elements of pregnancy, leaving the messy elements of birth to women.
while deploying a “conventional” plot. These corporeal markers of pregnancy are similarly deployed in *Concrete*, when we see Concrete suffering from severe back pains and constantly at risk of vomiting. (Fig. 3.1) These behaviours are particularly fraught in *Concrete* because they represent extremes of Concrete's normal bodily performance (as opposed to conventional pregnancy narratives, which present the symptoms of pregnancy as new and markedly different than “normal” bodily functioning.) This suggests a dual continuity that can be read as a positive component of *Concrete*. In the first place, the reader is positioned as “in on the joke.” In a fashion most popular in comedic male pregnancy narratives, (as opposed to the dramatic or domestic framing of “Supernatural” slash) the reader is given ample opportunity to deduce Concrete's condition while the characters in the story remain baffled. Specifically, in addition to the physiological hints described above, we are given several cross-sectional images of Concrete's body, revealing portions of the baby-Concrete. This knowing wink can inspire in the reader an empathic link with Concrete's struggle to understand his own body. We are reassured that even in moments when we can not fathom the functioning of our body, there is hope for it to continue functioning successfully (and even to generate possibilities that might otherwise be unimaginable.) Simultaneously, by positioning Concrete's pregnancy as an extension of his usual bodily functioning, the reader is presented with an image of a body that blurs genders together, while also suggesting that the pregnancy is within the natural range of motion of this trans body. In this way, *Concrete* significantly evokes Åström's

123Åström, 7.
124Much earlier in the series, it is made apparent that Concrete experiences bodily discomfort and vomiting as a way of negotiating strong negative emotions. (His body is unable to cry or blush, forcing him to experience more violent forms of catharsis.)
conclusion: though the narrative devices are conventional, they enable a transgressive meaning to be carried thanks to their unusual deployment.

Looking more directly at the consequences of pregnancy for the male body, Åström notes that when a male character is negotiating pregnancy, the domesticating consequences are often complicated by the character's attempts to maintain a hegemonic masculine identity. Åström notes that within mpreg slash, pregnancy marks the loss of bodily authority for (typically) dynamic male characters. Speaking of a Sam/Dean fic in “Winchesters,” she explains that a pregnant Dean must sacrifice his autonomy as a male action hero in order to avoid “putting the baby's life in danger.”  

This tension maps neatly onto Concrete's ongoing struggle to negotiate the paradoxical nature of his body. As a character, Concrete has a particular predisposition towards a romanticized view of the world. His desire to become an explorer and the flowery language he uses in articulating his thoughts are both indicative of his passionate character. However, these impulses are often foiled by the cumbersome nature of Concrete's body. Too large and

125 Åström, 7.
heavy for many situations, Concrete's body seems to permanently require vigilant policing. Significantly, the nature of Concrete's body transforms the way pregnancy is inscribed upon him. Physically immune to many of the threats that the conventional pregnant body faces, Concrete is instead threatened by the conspicuous value of his body. His status as both celebrity and his disguise as valuable military technology has repeatedly put him in danger of attack or kidnap. This vulnerability, though different from that of the pregnant biological body, functions similarly. Concrete's body threatens to be transformed into a site unfit for gestation, generating anxiety in the reader.

The application of the expectation of the pregnant body to Concrete is complicated by the fact that Concrete (and those around him) are unaware of his pregnancy. This creates a wrinkle in the application of the above analysis. As the reader sees in *The Human Dilemma*, Concrete's devotion to the sterilization campaign puts him under considerable stress. Concrete is able to escape the expectations of the pregnant male body because he is unaware of his pregnancy. An interesting point to bear in mind is that while Concrete might not be anxious, the reader (who is privy to Concrete's condition) remains vulnerable to these expectations. The reader is able to bring not only social expectations, but also their own unique concerns to bear on Concrete's pregnancy. This creates an especially unique perspective on Concrete's pregnancy where we cannot look to the characters within the narrative for cues on how to respond to the pregnancy.

References to these existing cultural expectations in mpreg slash act to allow fic authors to carve out new narrative space surrounding the “gay pregnant couple” that
results. Åström observes that this negotiation is primarily centered on the question of gender identity and how this identity reflects on sexual orientation. She explains that this fixation is a consequence of the fact that these “stories are not simply dealing with a gay couple having a child, which could be accomplished through adoption, or insemination of a surrogate mother, but of two men reproducing themselves together.” This specific context is not one that is recognized as biologically realistic, and as a consequence it represents a new theoretical space to explore. Åström notes that within “Supernatural” canon, the sexual orientation of both Sam and Dean is explicitly straight, and charges of homosexuality within the show are met with hostility. This further complicates the task of “Supernatural” mpreg slashers, who must work with an explicitly uncooperative canon to tell their stories. “Winchesters” explains that attempts to write mpreg must negotiate the relationship between the slashed characters and the question of how the slashed characters are viewed in terms of their masculinity. For Åström, even though the same-gender pairing is the “point” of slash, mpreg narratives typically focus on the emotional connection between characters to the exclusion of a close inspection of their sexual interactions. The emphasis of emotional (instead of physical) connection is an important point, because it provides a means for extending Åström's analysis to my work on Concrete. After all, Concrete's pregnancy is presented to the reader as a consequence of his emotional (rather than sexual) response to Maureen's masturbatory performance.

126 Ibid., 8.
127 Ibid., 8-9.
128 Ibid., 4.
129 This discussion is an example of a situation in which Åström's analysis includes elements that are specific to “Supernatural” slash. Though other male pregnancy narratives might be set in a context that is less hostile towards homosexuality, the bulk of Åström's analysis remains relevant.
130 Åström, 9.
“Winchesters” negotiates the fear of “girlie” behaviour that functions as a comedic mainstay of “Supernatural” by noting that “Supernatural” slash tends to conceptualize unmanly behaviour (hand holding, snuggling) as distinct from homosexual behaviour. In Åström's words, “Sam and Dean may be gay, but they are not effeminate.”

This distinction underwrites Åström's central argument. While early attempts to theorize slash fiction resulted in shallow investigations that overstated the subversive or resistant elements of fic, there is room to recuperate mpreg fiction. Even located as it is in the tropes and problematic assumptions of popular culture, mpreg fic encapsulates an important dramatic turn in which the slashed characters (to some degree) forsake the lifestyles and privileges that they enjoy in canonical texts in order to embrace a (usually idiosyncratic) formulation of domesticity. Speaking specifically of “Supernatural” fic, Åström explains that the stories “explore Sam and Dean as fathers and homemakers, depicting family life with all its traditional trappings....resulting in conventional stories set in a very unconventional universe.” Here we see the crux of “Winchesters’” argument. It is this relocation of meaning-making that generates the subversive potential of mpreg fic. In the canonical world of “Supernatural” the driving narrative force is the impossibility of a happy ending for the main characters. Stripped of their family and outcast from a society that does not understand the monsters they fight, Sam and Dean face apocalypse after apocalypse, with audience members knowing that the (multiple) deaths of the main characters are only ever brief interruptions of their sisyphean efforts to

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131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 1.
133 Ibid., 11.
protect the world. The intervention of mpreg fic into this narrative in order to give Sam and Dean a chance to settle down, find love and raise a family represents the component of slash that meaningfully subverts the canonical text. The queerness of slash fiction lies in this hopeful rewriting of the fate of Sam and Dean, and not in any sexual act they might perform. It will become clear that these themes resonate strongly with Concrete's unique situation. His constant search for acceptance and purpose bear a striking similarity to the Winchesters' unending efforts to save the world. This foreshadows the reparative potential opened up by Concrete's pregnancy. Initially presented to the reader as isolated and lonely, Concrete's pregnancy (and its attending intimacy with Maureen) offers the hope of a sort of normalcy and peace. The potential offered by Concrete's emerging family is heartening to the reader, and sets the stage for my forthcoming introduction of the notion of the queer family as a space of acceptance for trans bodies.

Here again, I can clearly link my efforts to reparatively read Concrete's pregnancy with Åström's discussion of the queerness of mpreg fic. I will focus on two main examples to illustrate this connection. The first way that Winchesters' argument can be used to frame the events of The Human Dilemma is in the way Chadwick treats the pregnancies of both Concrete and Monique, the woman Larry accidentally impregnates. In particular, the tension between the “normal” but unhappy pregnancy of Larry and Monique and the unusual but fulfilling pregnancy of Concrete and Maureen is ripe for a reparative investigation that utilizes Åström's conclusions about the location of queerness within mpreg slash. The second way to use Winchesters to read Concrete's pregnancy is

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134Indeed, on at least two such occasions, the fallen brother is punished with the subjective experience of decades of infernal torture while dead.
through a reading of the role of trauma and intimacy in *The Human Dilemma*. Concrete's pregnancy and the early stages of child care depicted in the 7th volume of *Concrete* are marked by confusion over the cause of the physical changes he is experiencing, and uncertainty about how to best care for the newborn child. These portrayals ultimately carry a positive weight though, in spite of their dramatic contrast to the expected narrative. Similar to how Åström argues that “Supernatural” slash derives its subversive potential from how it reframes the lives of Sam and Dean, I will articulate a strategy for reading Concrete's confusion as ultimately a queerly empowering approach to the trauma of an unexpected pregnancy. Concrete's relative success in navigating these challenges (especially when contrasted with Larry's struggles) further supports my reading. (Fig. 3.2)

A mildly paranoid reading of *The Human Dilemma* can locate considerable anxiety around the way Concrete's pregnancy is situated in relation to Monique's. Concrete's pregnancy is marked by confusion, a failure to recognize the presence of the child and the unusual fact that it is understood as a male pregnancy. In contrast, Monique's pregnancy is quickly identified, situated within a heterosexual dyad and aside from the inconvenience (to Larry) of occurring outside of his engagement, is marked by conventional themes of paternal support from Larry and maternal anxiety from Monique. In all of these facts, there is potential for the reader to mark Concrete's pregnancy as illegitimate or inappropriate when measured against the conventional narrative of (unwanted) pregnancy. This anxiety can be undermined through an appeal to the notion of the queer family. Though the queer family has a number of formulations, it is most popularly understood as an outcome of the emergence of AIDS in queer communities in
At that time an overwhelming number of People With AIDS (PWAs) in queer communities could not expect or did not receive emotional or medical support from medical communities or their biological families. In this void, networks of queer friends and lovers were repurposed to support PWAs, knowing that if they should become ill themselves, their own networks of support would care for them. This reformulation of

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family as community (instead of biology) is full of potential for reparative reading. The fact that Concrete's pregnancy is not “normal” when compared to Larry's is irrelevant. His child is positioned to grow up in a loving environment, with parents who are happy to care for it. Consequently the reader can feel much more optimistic about the “abnormal” pregnancy of Concrete than they might feel for Monique and Larry. This conclusion is enhanced if the idea of queer family is complemented with an understanding of Concrete's pregnancy as a distinctly queer trauma.

In An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures Ann Cvetkovich explores how trauma and affect can create and reshape the meanings of the word archive. In the chapter titled “The Everyday Life of Queer Trauma” Cvetkovich describes trauma as “a site of unrepresentability.” Referencing the work of Cathy Caruth, Cvetkovich explains that “trauma presents an epistemological challenge,” standing at the “limits of our understanding” as well as the crossroads of the “complex relation between knowing and not knowing.” These characterizations frame trauma in the same terms that I have previously used to describe reparative reading. In so doing, Cvetkovich enables us to understand trauma as a location for new meaning, instead of simply a site of pain or loss. Trauma is a dislocation that occurs because of, and through, an unexpected experience. Much as Sedgwick understands reparative reading as an assemblage that repairs a fractured text to generate a whole that may not have previously

136In spite of the title, the text offers insight that is applicable to sites of trauma that are not distinctly lesbian (or even queer) in nature.
138 Ibid.
existed, trauma is an instance of creation, not destruction. It is an escaping, rather than a shattering, of hope in the moment of fracture.\textsuperscript{139}

This reformulation is best understood by recalling Haraway's discussion of victim identity. “Cyborg Manifesto” argues that there is a powerful distinction between being a victim and having been victimized. One internalizes the helplessness of being a victim, while the other identifies it as an external event. Similarly, I am arguing that trauma can function as a catalyst for a new perspective on an event, rather than simply as a site of tragedy or loss. I now return to the question of how trauma informs my understanding of Concrete. In spite of Concrete displaying many of the characteristics traditionally attributed to pregnancy, his pregnancy remains an unknown quantity for both he and Maureen until the baby is born.\textsuperscript{140} In this way, the characters' lack of understanding surrounding Concrete's pregnancy acts to give the reader additional reason to validate Concrete and Maureen's relationship. Similar to the queer family described earlier, Concrete and Maureen are bound together by affection and a sense of mutual importance. This unity, generated through the twin trauma of the bloody shooting that preceded Concrete's pregnancy and the shock of Concrete giving birth, illustrates the generative power of Cvetkovich's trauma. In contrast, as the following image suggests, the “perfect” knowledge shared by Larry and Monique does not position their pregnancy as especially successful. In this instance, the ability to avoid the trauma of an unknown pregnancy does not empower Larry and Monique to establish a stronger relationship.

\textsuperscript{139}Sedgwick, 8.
\textsuperscript{140}It is perhaps reasonable to suppose that these hints are exclusively for the benefit of the reader, creating the “pleasure of knowing” that I described earlier.
Figure 3.3: Larry and Monique discuss their pregnancy

Here the reader is made to confront the limitations of the conventional conceptualization of pregnancy. Though pregnancy narratives directed at men rarely (seriously) confront the breadth of consequences that attend to an unexpected pregnancy, *The Human Dilemma* reminds the reader that “doing the right thing”\(^{141}\) is a much trickier proposition than it might seem. Larry literally spells out the consequences of the unwanted pregnancy – he is obliged to either form an unwanted family\(^{142}\) or accept the frequently unacknowledged premature conclusion of the pregnancy narrative. This

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141 Chadwick, Volume 7, 126.
142 Note that this family sits as a sort of antithesis to the queer family described previously. It is grounded entirely in biology, with (seemingly) no emotional connection present.
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instrumental (and ultimately discouraging) example primes the reader to find an optimistic turn in the mirroring pregnancy of Concrete and Maureen. (Fig. 3.4) In Figure 3.4 we see the blending of queer and conventional familial tropes. In the first panel Maureen is seen cooing over the baby golem. Her presumption about the gender of the baby (‘it looks like a boy, it must be a boy’) might initially seem problematic, however such a paranoid reading overlooks the fact that in spite of the alien nature of the child, Maureen has already adopted it as her own. Similarly, Concrete's own framing of Maureen's response as being situated only on an axis of “objectivity” and “maternity” appears to problematically resort to a binary understanding of how gender shapes perception. This interpretation fails to locate Concrete's implicitly maternal role in the birth of the child, however. In a sense, the scene becomes “too messy” to be paranoidly deciphered. Sedgwick argues that one of the hallmarks of paranoid reading is the need to master a text in order to remove the potential of surprise. This approach fails the reader in The Human Dilemma because the shifting boundaries of Concrete's body and gender complicate any effort to (over)simplify the meanings which are built into the text. To further this point, I note that in the second panel, it is Ron, not Concrete, that Maureen is addressing. Even as she is forced to confront the alien nature of their child, her conceptualization of her partner is the man she never met, instead of the concrete giant she loves. The contingency and precarity of this relationship is the basis for its strength. While a popular trope of pregnancy narratives is the idea that the expectant couple feel as though they are “alone in the world in doing this,” Concrete and Maureen's
fantastical pregnancy makes this notion reality. They are an exceptional case, and are bound to raise their child in a truly queer instance of family.\footnote{Certain elements of Concrete and Maureen's relationship are presaged in Shulamith Firestone's characterization of an alternative to the nuclear family. In \textit{The Dialectic of Sex} Firestone describes a communal arrangement that redirects focus from the biological focus of family constitution, going so far as to argue for evolutionary necessity of developing a method of childbearing that is not the prerogative of women alone.}

An element of the aforementioned scene that might initially escape the reader's notice is that ultimately, Concrete and Maureen's relationship \textit{is} heterosexual.\footnote{Given the strangeness of \textit{Concrete}, this might seem like an unintuitive claim, however it is consistent with Concrete's gender identity.} This locating of heterosexuality so far outside of the conventional axises of sexual representation contributes an additional layer of queerness to Concrete and Maureen's
family. However, this implication runs in both directions. The queerness of their family also reflects a new light on the reader's notion of heterosexuality. The mutually reinforcing nature of these implications generates both the comfort that would be associated with familiar representations, and dissonance in response to the unconventional elements of Concrete's family. This complexity echoes Åström's assertion regarding the location of queerness in slash fiction. By rewriting the expected elements of a familiar narrative, Concrete generates meaning in a way that exceeds even the metatextual level.

_The Human Dilemma_ is a complicated volume of Concrete. It approaches a fraught element of human nature and interrogates the socially constructed meaning that we bring to pregnancy. By exploring this topic through the body of Concrete, Chadwick not only interrogates the meaning of pregnancy, but also provides the reader with a venue for asking how a gender dissonant body can reproduce. As I have made clear, in spite of the unusual method Concrete uses to tell this story, existing theorizations of male pregnancy narratives provide the means of engaging with _The Human Dilemma_ and for coming to terms with the capabilities of Concrete's body. In concluding my investigation of Concrete's pregnancy, there is a final observation to make. The role of gender admittedly takes a back seat to the complications that pregnancy presents Concrete. It might initially seem that by not foregrounding the gender dissonance that defines much

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145The issue of trans pregnancy is one which encompasses a number of issues already discussed. Though there have been a number of instances of pregnant transmen receiving media attention (perhaps most notably in the figure of Thomas Beatie) this visibility is in tension with a tendency towards invisibility of transmen in media more generally. The most we may be able to safely assert is that the tendency towards spectacularization of the pregnant trans body might make it a less suitable basis for meditating on this question than a fictional account such as that of Concrete.
of Concrete. *The Human Dilemma* does not contribute to the trans theoretic nature of my project. To the contrary, I argue that this actually further reinforces my conclusion regarding the empowering potential of Concrete's body. Coming at the end of the series, the seventh volume of *Concrete* transcends the direct questioning of Concrete's gender that dominate earlier volumes. In a sense, *The Human Dilemma* represents Concrete's apotheosis from trans character to a character who happens to be trans. This distinction offers the reader assurance that it is possible to reach a place where their trans subjectivity does not need to be a constant question, but instead just another component of a full human personality. This conclusion resonates strongly with my treatment of Janis from *Dykes to Watch Out For* in chapter 2. The strength of Janis lies in her subversive invisibility. By making her trans identity (occasionally) unremarkable, Janis makes apparent the fact that potential sites of pleasure for the trans body are the moments where it does not have to be a trans body. The directness of this trait in the character of Janis makes it easier for us to identify it in Concrete. His gender dissonance takes a backseat to his pregnancy, allowing us to get another glimpse of trans life that expands beyond the expected range of narratives.
EPILOGUE

“At least it's not a moral. Worse than beginnings, morals. I’ve got no time for them. No time at all.”¹⁴⁶

Now, at the very end of my endeavour, it seems appropriate to take a step away from the theoretical framework that has filled the previous pages in order to return to the spirit that initially animated my project. Obliquely, the most important task of my thesis is to have convinced the reader of the importance of pleasurable reading. It is the pleasure of the text that allows reparative reading to make its strongest case for itself. Reparative reading does not propose to subvert other meanings a text can contain. Instead, it is creating space where a text can function for an Othered reader in ways similar to how it does for a privileged reader. It is this sense of normalcy, more than anything else, that my thesis advocates. I hope that I have been able to clearly express the ways that Concrete can speak to bodies that are conscious of their own awkwardness. Though I have undertaken to explore Concrete through the lens of trans scholarship, it is the potential for Concrete to work more generally as a palliative text for a variety of readers that I hope stands as the final conclusion of this research. After all, having developed a mechanism to help the reader find optimism in difficult explorations seems a much greater accomplishment than a sterile claim to having contributed to the edifice of academic knowledge.

Underwriting the entire thesis, though only occasionally visible, is the question of ethical trans theory. My relationship to the conflict between Namaste and Butler is

complicated. Namaste is writing within a very particular theoretical paradigm that seeks
to respond directly to the material needs of transgender sex workers. Even as I find her
call for ethical theory to be a valuable frame for my research, I must acknowledge that
my research ultimately only bears a passing relationship to the work Namaste calls for. In
contrast, I count it as a good day when I can claim to understand Butler well enough to
even situate my work in relation to hers. It is with wry amusement that I blame these two
scholars, located so far from each other theoretically, for the genesis of my project. In
spite of the distance between each of Namaste, Butler and my own work, I think it is
fortunate that I have had their dialogue to inform my own thinking. My supervisor is fond
of describing a certain style of academic work as producing “the dead mouse.” Typically
the domain of undergraduate scholarship, “the dead mouse” is an isolated theoretical
nugget dumped (as though by an academic cat) on the desk of a professor. Detaching
their work from any larger context or contribution to academic discourse, the student asks
“aren't you proud of my dead mouse?”

The dead mouse is important. The dead mouse is the tangible result of our hard
work, and sometimes it is the only reminder of the fact that we're actually accomplishing
something. However, the dead mouse (who is clearly in danger of becoming a dead horse,
thoroughly beaten) is not enough. The most difficult task I have faced during the
production of my thesis has been ensuring that the dead mouse did not eclipse the more
academically mature task of developing new *insight*. Butler and Namaste have been
integral to this process. Though I have only occasionally been in dialogue with either of
them throughout my thesis, the reminder that my work is not an isolated act, but rather
part of a larger conversation, has been invaluable. The ability to locate my work in relation to other scholars – even if it is only through the decision to forge a path away from them – has animated my thesis in a way that no amount of isolated enthusiasm could have.
GLOSSARY

Cisgender: A cisgendered individual is one who experiences consonance between their societally assigned gender and their self-identified gender.

Gender: A term typically used to describe an individual's culturally manufactured experience of their sex. My theoretical frame includes an individual's sex in its framing of their gender.

Gender Dissonance: The experience of a disjunction between one's societally assigned gender, and one's self-identified gender.

Sex: A term used to characterize a person's gender, based on their biology. (Typically dependent upon the presence or absence of a penis.)

Transgender: A term used to describe a person who experiences gender dissonance.

Transsexual: A designation used by some schools of thought to describe a person who has undergone medical intervention (surgical or hormonal) to modify their sex. Some theoretical framework (including that used in this thesis) folds the transsexual designation into the definition of transgender.

Transwoman, Transman: An individual who experiences gender dissonance and, respectively, self identifies as a woman or man.

Woman, Man: A designation that includes both cisgender and transgender women, or cisgender and transgender men.


Namaste, Viviane. “Undone Theory: The 'Transgender Question' and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory.” *Hypatia*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Summer,
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