

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**INTERSECTIONAL NARRATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF  
TORREY PETERS' *DETRANSITION, BABY***

**MA thesis**

**MII VALGMA**

**SUPERVISOR: Prof. RAILI MARLING, PhD**

**TARTU**

**2025**

## ABSTRACT

This thesis applies the concept of intersectionality, a relatively underexplored framework in literary analysis, to Torrey Peters' novel *Detransition, Baby* (2021). Through the lens of intersectional narratology, it examines the complex identities and queer kinship relationships of the novel's characters, focusing on how they are both expressed in and reflected through the form of the novel. The thesis includes an introduction that contextualizes the novel and identifies a research gap. This is followed by a literature review that covers identity, gender, transgender identity, intersectionality, queer kinship, and the methodology of intersectional narratology. The analysis is divided into five subchapters, each discussing various formal and thematic narrative elements and how they express intersectional identities and queer kinship within the text. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

Keywords: Intersectionality, intersectional narratology, identity, queer kinship

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION	4
1. IDENTITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND QUEER KINSHIP: LITERATURE REVIEW	10
1.1 Identity	10
1.1.1 Gender Identity	12
1.1.2 Transgender Identity	14
1.2 Intersectionality	16
1.2.1 Queer Kinship	18
1.3 Intersectional Literary Analysis	19
1.3.1 Intersectional Narratology	23
1.3.2 The Formal Devices	24
1.3.4 The Thematic Elements	26
1.4 Methodology	29
2. AN INTERSECTIONAL NARRATOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF QUEER KINSHIP AND IDENTITY	30
2.1 Focalization and Power	32
2.2 Space, Embodiment, and Physicality	35
2.3 Time	39
2.4 The Significance of “The Baby” in Identity and Kinship Formation	46
2.5 The Liminality of Identity and Queer Kinship Bonds	52
CONCLUSION	59
REFERENCES	63
RESÜMEE	69

## INTRODUCTION

Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* (2021) explores the complex relationships between three characters navigating an unconventional co-parenting arrangement. The novel centers on Reese, a transgender woman who longs for motherhood; Ames, Reese's ex-lover who has detransitioned from living as a transgender woman to living as a man; and Katrina, Ames's boss and current romantic partner, who unexpectedly becomes pregnant. Ames proposes the co-parenting arrangement, bringing the three together. The novel delves into themes of gender, identity, love, and family. Although not the first novel to focus on transgender experiences, it is notably one of the few that discuss detransitioning—a taboo topic even among the trans community (Respaat, Terhune, Conlin 2022; Jones 2024: 83).

Peters is the first openly trans woman nominated for the Women's Prize for Fiction (in 2021) (Women's Prize 2021). However, the novel stirred considerable controversy among some audiences. The inclusion of Peters as a nominee for the Prize prompted a group called the "Wild Women Writing Club" to write an open letter to the Women's Prize decrying Peters' and her novel's inclusion. The criticism stemmed from transphobia directed at Peters and the characters in her novel, instead of an attentive reading of the text. (Cain 2021) Peters stated that the longlisting also generated numerous direct transphobic messages and comments on her social media (Kheraj 2021). However, the Women's Prize condemned such actions (Cain 2021), and media reception of the novel was uniformly positive upon its release. Its success is highlighted by its inclusion in The New York Times' list of 100 Best Books of the 21st Century (The New York Times 2024), it receiving the 2022 PEN/Hemingway award for a debut novel (Smith 2022), and its ongoing adaptation into a TV series (Butter 2021). Lavery (2021) from The Guardian calls the novel "the first great trans realist novel", alluding to its complex portrayal of everyday experiences of trans

people, and its focus on the commonalities in the experience of trans and cis people alike. She and Long (2021) in *The New Yorker* praised Peters for the refreshing indifference to persuading the public about trans individuals. Instead, they both commend Peters for allowing her characters to be as imperfect as anyone else. Similarly, the imperfect portrayal of the characters is highlighted by Kirkus Reviews (2020) and Hogan (2021) from *The New York Times*, who praise the novel for its original exploration of desire and the evolving nature of family dynamics. However, it should also be stressed that although the author of *Detransition, Baby* is a transgender woman and the novel talks about the experiences of trans people, it is not autobiographical. As Peters herself explains: “I find some facet of myself, and then I put that character in a situation that’s totally different than anything I’ve ever experienced. And slowly, the accumulation of that character being in situations different than me gives that character a different history.” (Peters in Olivier 2022)

In order to establish a research gap, the foci of previous works examining the novel should be described. Given that Peters’ novel also centers on the theme of gender, it is unsurprising that this subject is the primary focus of the few academic publications written about it this far. Gajdošíková (2023) and Hammes (2022), for instance, explore aspects of gender transitioning and the realistic portrayal of transgender identities. Similarly, the novel is one of two main sources in both Field (2024) and Pellegrini (2023), where the focus is on the existence and portrayal of transgender bodies, with the latter emphasizing the subversion of the conventional linear transitioning timeline. The focus of Oasvesi (2023) is similar, centering on the concept of passing as a trans person, also reflected in Hammes (2024) who examines the novel as a work of minority literature. The latter denotes literature written by trans authors about trans characters, where traditional elements of novels—such as themes, motifs, forms, and narrative techniques—have been used to reflect the trans community’s unique identity (Hammes 2024: 449). Some authors who have used *Detransition, Baby* as an example, not as the primary literary source include Cosker-

Rowland (2023) who focuses on the normativity of gender, including one of the main characters Reese as the main example in the discussion; and Filipova (2024) and Hammes (2024) who briefly analyze the novel from the perspective of trans temporality.

In addition to gender, family is another central theme in the narrative, explored in several articles. Jones (2024), for instance, examines the interconnectedness of gender and parenthood, with a bigger focus on motherhood and transness. *Detransition, Baby* is used to also include detransitioned people in the conversation on parenting. The article argues for a queer, intersectional, and ambivalent view of motherhood, something that Peters' work seems to do as well. Büyükgebiz (2023) explores the portrayal of masculinity in relation to family and parenthood. As opposed to Jones (2024), Büyükgebiz's paper includes trans masculinities in the discussion. Both Bradway's (2023) and Roulston's (2021) analyses of the novel focus on its malleable portrayal of queer parenthood and family structures. Similarly to the other sources mentioned here, the terms "family" and "parenthood" are left almost undefined, highlighting their ambivalence and changing nature. The gaps that are evident in the currently published research include deeper analyses of the portrayal of queer kinship and non-normative family relationships. The form and style of the novel have also previously not been extensively examined.

Although marketed as a work of literary fiction (Penguin Random House 2021), *Detransition, Baby* can also be considered as a work of trans literature. As defined by Mayne (2024: 442), this label refers to works written by trans authors that reflect trans experiences, often opposing societal gender norms and hierarchies. While not all, many trans novels can therefore also be considered "radical novels", since they often depict lives that question and challenge existing social structures while offering alternative ways of living. Mayne (2024: 444) highlights *Detransition, Baby* as an example of trans literature that does not directly criticize the idea of family but, by offering a different version of it, helps to think about how one might question or critique

the typical family structure. The stylistic elements of trans literature, as noted by Anae (2024: 261-262), often feature genre blending, intertextual references, fragmented narrative voices, and open-ended conclusions, which together reflect the complexity and fluidity also inherent in trans identities. Through these literary techniques, the trans novel “validates trans experiences against cissexist hierarchies specifically and reveals how epistemological and ontological premises order social life in general” (Mayne 2024: 442). Those premises are based on the idea that gender is a fixed, binary construct that is essential to maintaining specific social roles and hierarchical social order.

Literature is especially valuable for studying marginalized identities because of its ability to convey complex, layered experiences and to immerse readers in the interiority of characters, offering an intimate and nuanced understanding of them. Through its focus on narrative and character, literature can reveal the complexity, fluidity, and ambivalence of experiences, especially those that are often overlooked in mainstream fiction. (Keen 2022: 238) Torrey Peters (Butter 2021) has stated in response to being asked about transphobia that such arguments are difficult to address intellectually, which is why she prefers writing fiction over opinion pieces, as simply telling someone how they should feel is usually futile. Literature thus allows for the exploration of marginalized identities by engaging readers with the complexities of personal experiences and social issues, offering insights that go beyond straightforward arguments or intellectual debates.

My motivation for writing this thesis arises partly from wanting to explore the relatively new field of trans literature, especially how trans writers represent the complexities of trans existence. Transgender individuals are often misrepresented in current cultural, legal, and political debates (Sharp 2024: 1). As Sharp (2024: 1) and Oasvesi (2023: 34) point out, studying trans literature deepens our understanding of a frequently misunderstood demographic, while helping to create a counter-discourse to regressive ideologies. Sharp (2024: 9) also notes that trans literature

and trans studies have struggled to cultivate racial equity and make their approach more inclusive overall. By approaching a trans novel from an intersectional lens, this paper aims to contribute to this developing field, especially considering some of its previous shortcomings with regard to inclusion.

Another reason for writing this thesis stems from the fact that “family”—as one of the central themes of the novel—is often fraught with complex feelings for queer people (Uibo 2021: 25-26). As mentioned above, much of the focus of currently published academic texts about *Detransition, Baby* is on parental feelings and experiences. This has left a gap in the research for exploring the complex dynamics of queer kinship among the novel’s central characters. As Uibo (2021: 45) notes, it is not always possible to specifically define the relationships within such close relationship structures between queer people, for “it is not always straightforward to delineate friendships from family or from other forms of intimate/close relations” (Uibo 2021: 45). Since research into queer relationships also often focuses on romantic or sexual intimate couple relations (Roseneil, Budgeon 2004), it leaves room for the examination of connections that are more difficult to define than that.

This Master’s thesis aims to fill the gap established in the abovementioned research and examine the representation of queer kinship and identity in Torrey Peters’ novel through the lens of intersectional narratology. The given analytical framework examines how narrative techniques, such as point of view, focalization, and structure of the text, intersect with the portrayal of complex identities. The focus of the analysis is rooted in both the content of the novel, as well as how its narrative form reflects and constructs intersecting systems of power and identity. The process is guided by the following research questions: How does *Detransition, Baby* depict non-traditional (queer) family relationships and dynamics? What narrative and stylistic tools are employed to depict complex intersectional identities? How are the power dynamics between the characters

affected by their intersectional experiences? How do social relations (like power and others) complicate queer kinship? By combining the insights of narratology and intersectionality, the analysis will be able to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the novel's characters and their experiences.

# 1. IDENTITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND QUEER KINSHIP: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1 Identity

The debate surrounding the definition of “identity” is wide and complex due to the many fields and contexts it is used in (Brubaker, Cooper 2000: 6). Bilgrami (2006: 5) divides the concept into subjective and objective identity by defining the first as “what you *conceive* yourself to be” and the other as “how you might be viewed *independently* of how you see yourself”. Objective identity is based on the traits a person has that they do not necessarily have to identify with (Bilgrami 2018: 163; 2006: 5-6), such as race. For instance, a person of a mixed racial background may be labeled as “white” by societal norms, despite actually relating to their non-white identity more strongly. Subjective identity, on the other hand, expects a person to identify with some of the existing traits they have (Bilgrami 2018: 159; 2006: 5-6). For example, a person may identify strongly with their cultural heritage, like an immigrant who feels deeply connected to their country of origin through language, traditions, and personal memories, even if they have spent most of their life in a different country. Going against beliefs or customs related to subjective identity would feel deeply wrong or unthinkable to the person (Bilgrami 2018: 162). References to identity often serve to explain behavior, emotions, or life trajectories based on a person’s affiliation with a particular identity category (Taylor 2014: 933), such as nationality, ethnicity, race or skin color, culture, religion, gender, sexuality, class, age, dis/ability, migration or sedentariness, property ownership, geographical location and status in terms of tradition and development (Lutz as referenced in Davis 2014: 28).

Identity is therefore partly defined by the person and also partially influenced by others. Taylor (2014: 933) echoes this idea by stating that identity includes a person’s affiliation with

social groups or categories, such as gender, sexuality, or nationality. Her definition encompasses a broader sense of self (“who I am”) that is shaped by those categories, raising questions about the relationship between an individual’s personal identity, other people’s perceptions of someone else’s identity, externally imposed divisions within identity categories, as well as how different those different categories interconnect. (Taylor 2014: 933) Vignoles et al (2011: 2-6) also posit that, when viewed on an individual level, identity encompasses a combination of self-chosen and ascribed commitments, personal characteristics, and self-beliefs. It also includes the individual’s roles in relation to significant others, membership in social groups (along with the person’s personal status within the collective as well as the group’s status in a larger context), and a sense of belonging within geographical spaces. Hall (1996: 4) and Gilroy (1994) similarly suggest that identities are multiple, fragmented, and shaped by various overlapping and often conflicting discourses and practices.

Hekman (1999: 5) and Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 5-8) also highlight a tension within the concept of “identity”, arguing that it can be defined by two opposites: sameness and difference. According to them, to assert that something or someone has a specific identity is to claim both that it is similar to other entities sharing that identity, and that, as an individual entity, it has distinct qualities. This perspective aligns with Taylor’s (2014: 933) definition, which suggests that identity in academic contexts typically implies both a sense of similarity and affiliation between the individual and some wider collective or group.

Contemporary theories generally agree that identity is continuously under construction (Taylor 2014: 934). Vignoles et al (2011: 4) agree that what it means to have or be a certain identity differs according to place, time, and cultural context/discourse. The understanding of identity categories is also ever-evolving, with new ever-more specific labels to capture one’s sexuality, for instance, continuously being created (Brubaker, Cooper 2000: 8-9). According to Gilroy (1994)

identities can be described as the “changing same”, for they are not fixed but constantly evolve through historical and representational processes; they are influenced by tradition and by how it is reinterpreted over time. Kroskrity (1999), for instance, demonstrates how language and communication are important factors in identity formation, its continuation, and in actively conveying it to others. Language is thus used as a tool to designate oneself as part of a specific group or collective, such as by adopting group-specific vocabulary or assigning specific labels to oneself in line with the group. Choosing to use specific language variety is therefore an example of an act of *doing* identity, of choosing to participate in its recreation.

Despite the various categorizations outlined above, “identity” has also been criticized for being too wide of a term to be useful in most contexts. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 8-9) for instance critique it for having too many differing meanings, therefore remaining overly ambiguous. They argue that it would be more productive to use other, more specific terms, such as identification and categorization, self-understanding and social location, or commonality, connectedness, and groupness (Brubaker, Cooper 2000: 14-19). Despite this, it remains a productive term, because unlike narrower concepts, “identity” addresses the shifting, contextual nature of how people see themselves and are seen by others, making it essential for studying complex social dynamics that cannot be reduced to one aspect or category alone.

### **1.1.1 Gender Identity**

According to Segal, ““gender” remains *a*, if not *the* pivotal point in the study of identities” (Segal 2010: 321). In gender studies, the emphasis is placed on the social construction of gender and how it is shaped by societal contexts (Capdevila, Lazard 2014: 763-764). Debates about gender identity revolve around whether it reflects who people are or what they do. West and Zimmerman (1987: 126) argue that gender is something people “do” based on social expectations, as people

tend to enact gender roles in ways that align with societal norms. They contend that gender is not an inherent trait but an emergent feature of social interactions, constituting both a product of and a justification for societal structures and divisions. While engaging in social interactions, individual people organize their behaviors to reflect and express their understanding of gender, while also interpreting others' conduct through a similar lens (West, Zimmerman 1987: 127). Properly doing gender sustains and legitimizes the institutional structures based on sex categories.

A similar idea emerges in queer theory that examines gender as a "social temporality" that is sustained through repeated performances, creating the illusion of a "natural" and "fixed" gender identity (Butler 1990: 141). These performances, however, are not freely chosen, but "performed" in relation to societal norms and expectations. This is linked to what Erickson-Schroth defines as "gender expression" and "gender presentation", referring to a person's "appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions" (Erickson-Schroth 2022: 1470-1471), traditionally associated with masculinity or femininity. When individuals fail to meet these expectations, they, rather than the structures, may be held accountable for their perceived character, choices, or motivations (West, Zimmerman 1987: 146). Culler (2011: 118-119) emphasizes that while gender is performative, it should not be misconstrued as a mere choice or role, like selecting clothing in the morning, which would imply the existence of a gender-neutral individual capable of making such decisions. In reality, being a person inherently entails being gendered (West, Zimmerman 1987: 145). Butler (1993: 7) further argues that the self (the "I") is formed within the framework of gender relations, as it neither exists prior to nor follows the process of gendering but emerges through it. Hence, one's gender expression and gender presentation do not necessarily have to correspond with one's gender identity (Erickson-Schroth 2022: 1471).

### 1.1.2 Transgender Identity

Transgender, often shortened to “trans”, is a broad term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the one assigned to them at birth. The term has gained significant popularity in the recent decade or so (McCarthy Blackston 2023: 1-3), despite becoming widely used in the early 1990s and having origins that trace back to the mid-1960s (Stryker 2017: 38). It encompasses those who seek to alter their social gender, usually through changes in behavior and gender expression. This process may but does not necessarily have to include medical interventions such as hormone therapy or surgery. (Stryker 2017: 38-39) This group often includes nonbinary and genderqueer individuals—terms used by people who do not fit inside of the binary female and male genders (Jourdan, Keenan 2022: 33)—although not all of them consider themselves transgender (Jourdan, Keenan 2022: 27). Cisgender (or “cis”), in contrast, refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with the one assigned to them at birth. The term highlights the often-unacknowledged privilege of being nontransgender, challenging the default assumption that “woman” or “man” inherently refers to nontransgender individuals unless otherwise specified (Stryker 2017: 20).

Before the widespread use of transgender, the term “transsexual” was used but has now been largely abandoned due to its pathologizing connotations (McCarthy Blackston 2023: 1, Stryker 2023: x). The term was often associated with medical diagnosis aimed at “correcting” a person’s gender identity (Stone [1987] 2023: 22) or its connections with legal and medical bureaucracies (Stryker 2017: 40). Additionally, “transsexual” was seen as belonging to the same category as sexual orientation (Chu et al 2022: 1358), often leading to the misconception that a person’s gender identity was intrinsically tied to their sexual attraction. Stone ([1987] 2023: 15-16), in her foundational essay in the field of transgender studies, criticized the term for its binary

connotations, arguing that it pressured trans people to live inauthentically, and maintained the expectation on them to pass as cisgender and to conceal their pre-transition lives. Stryker (2017: 39) also points out that in recent years transgender has assumed a similar binary definition for many people. Thus, the boundaries between the two terms remain complicated.

Similarly to the term “transsexual”, transgender has also received some criticism. As Jourdan and Keenan (2022: 24) point out, its definition remains complex and “in various ways, understandings of “trans” [or “transgender”] can seem too expansive or too restrictive”” (Jourdan, Keenan 2022: 24). Sharp (2024: 6) also highlights that some interpret the term as obscuring the contradictions between different gender-nonconforming/gender-creative groups, such as those supporting medical transition, those resisting binary gender norms, and butch/femme or drag communities critical of transitioning. Nevertheless, in this thesis, the term transgender will continue to be used despite the criticisms it has received, since it remains a widely recognized and accessible concept in both academic and public discourse. It is also used by the characters in the novel analyzed in this paper.

As one of the main characters of Torrey Peters’ *Detransition Baby* (2021) has gone back to his pre-transition gender presentation, “detransitioning” as a concept should also be briefly explained. The term refers to the process where people cease some or all aspects of their medical or social transition, such as stopping hormone therapy, reversing surgeries, or changing back their names and pronouns (Vandenbussche 2021). However, the concept is often misunderstood (Ku 2024: 106). While some people who detransition express regret, others value their transition experience instead. People may also go through the process for many other reasons, including societal transphobia or realizing they identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. (Valdes, MacKinnon 2023) According to Vandenbusche (2021), some people may also detransition due to external factors such as societal pressure, discrimination, lack of support, and rejection from family, rather

than change in or regret about their gender identity. According to MacKinnon and Valdes (2023) and Vandebusch (2021), people who detransition or adjust their gender transitions outside of transnormativity commonly face hostility from the communities that once supported them, a reflection of deeper issues of structural transphobia (Ku 2024: 106). Many activists fear that detransition narratives, especially those involving regret, threaten access to gender-affirming care. However, these fears arise from the medical and political pathologization of trans identities, not from detransitioners themselves. (Jones 2024: 84) Their existence is also frequently weaponized by transphobes, despite the people in question usually continuing to live queer and gender-nonconforming lives (MacKinnon 2023). Detransitioning is therefore not a rejection of one's gender identity but a new expression of it.

## **1.2 Intersectionality**

The discussion surrounding intersectionality often intersects with the concept of identity politics. The latter term was coined by the Combahee River Collective—a group of Black feminist lesbian socialists active during the 1970s and 1980s—with the goal of empowering marginalized groups to advocate for their specific needs and rights based on their shared experiences of oppression related to their identities (Combahee River Collective 1977). In their Statement they oppose the separatism from men that many white feminist women saw as a given, instead pledging to support progressive Black men in their shared struggles against racism. As they stated, two things can coexist at the same time: struggling “together with Black men against racism” and struggling “with Black men about sexism.” (Combahee River Collective 1977) Identity politics is also connected to Bilgrami's distinction between subjective identity, rooted in personal self-perception, and objective identity, defined externally. He argues that “subjective identity is most immediately relevant to politics because people sometimes allow themselves to be mobilized in the

public arena on its basis” (Bilgrami 2018: 159). Thus, subjective identity can be seen as a key factor in the emergence of identity politics and people’s engagement with the concept. However, Meghani (2023) explains that it has faced significant criticism for being too narrow in its focus on *separate* identity groups, potentially leading to divisions within social movements and fighting over whose identities make them “more marginalized”. Critics, such as Brown (1995: 61) and Crenshaw (1991: 1242) contended that it encouraged marginalized groups to think of themselves primarily as victims and focused overly on intragroup differences, potentially impeding the much-needed cooperation between marginalized people.

Such critiques were pivotal in the emergence of intersectionality. The concept aims to uncover how experiences of different kinds of oppression and/or privilege, determined by various social identities, overlap and shape people’s experiences. More specifically, it focuses on how gender, race, sexuality, class, age, nationality, ethnicity, dis/ability, religion, and other differences interact and impact people’s lives, social practices, institutions, cultural beliefs, and power dynamics. (Hill Collins 2000; Davis 2008: 68; Bose 2012: 67) The term was first introduced by American feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), arising from criticism of the feminist and civil rights movements for treating issues of race and gender as separate. As Choo and Ferree (as referenced in Gill 2016: 69) state, people should not have to be “multiply marginalized” or compelled to prioritize race over gender, as all identities are experienced simultaneously and continuously. Crenshaw (1989; 1991) primarily used the term to emphasize the unique forms of discrimination faced by Black women, whose experiences were often overlooked within both feminist discourse, which centered on the struggles of white women, and anti-racist movements, which predominantly focused on the rights of Black men. Building on the Combahee River Collective’s ideas, she argued that existing traditional frameworks failed to account for the multifaceted discrimination endured by those belonging to multiple marginalized groups. For

instance, Crenshaw highlighted cases where Black women faced double discrimination arising from the intersection of gender and race. To illustrate this, she discusses cases of employment discrimination against Black women, where they lacked access to adequate legal protection because their experiences did not fully fit the conventional categories of either racist or sexist discrimination. Such cases were highlighted to demonstrate the compounded effects of intersecting identities. (Crenshaw 1989; 1991)

The concept is also closely related to “embodiment”, which emphasizes how lived, bodily experiences are shaped by intersecting systems of power. In Western contexts, people of color—particularly Black women—are often more readily perceived as “embodied” compared to white people, partly because their corporeal experiences are not seen as the norm. (Hill Collins 2000: 167; Lennon, Fischer 2024) Hill Collins (2000: 130) and Chou (2021: 65-66) argue that Black and Asian people are comparatively more sexualized than the bodies of the white majority, as they are racialized in ways that distinguish them from the more abstracted, individualized representations of whiteness.

### **1.2.1 Queer Kinship**

Queer kinship refers to close, chosen relationships formed by queer people for emotional, practical, and social support outside traditional biological or legal family structures. The term offers a way to describe queer relationships without the negative associations that “family” may sometimes evoke, since queer people’s connections with their families of origin may often be challenging, with feelings of detachment, parental abuse, or even homelessness being unfortunately prevalent (Pearson, Wilkinson 2013; Friedman et al 2011; Waller, Sanchez 2011). Uibo (2021: 45) suggests that kinship emphasizes belonging in diverse forms, and her research in Estonia highlights how the use of the word *lähedane* (“close one”) allows queer individuals to describe their

relationships outside of normative family structures. Butler (2002: 37) also connects kinship with community, saying that queer kinship blurs the lines between the two, making them indistinguishable in some contexts. However, not all queer individuals reject the term “family”. Some embrace it for its connotations of familiarity and happiness (Nay 2015). For these people, using that word helps validate and elevate their chosen relationship bonds to the same perceived level of importance as non-queer families (Uibo 2021: 126-127). Although kinship and family can have different connotations and nuances, both can still be productive terms to use.

Research into queer kinship, however, is not without its flaws. As Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) argue, queer studies often focus primarily on romantic or sexual relationships, overlooking other less definitively definable intimate relationships. Furthermore, Uibo (2021: 20) cautions against idealizing queer relationships as always subverting normative family models, as not all queer individuals feel the need to oppose traditional familial structures (Wesling 2008). In the context of this thesis, intersectionality is particularly relevant for studying close relationships, whether in families or queer kinship bonds, as the interplay of social identities shapes power dynamics and interactions (Rodríguez 2013: 330). Hames-García (2011: 71) reinforces this by noting that “sexual identities come into existence in the context of intermeshed social structures and personal experiences of ability-disability, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and race”.

### **1.3 Intersectional Literary Analysis**

Intersectionality has become widely used over the past decades, mostly in the social sciences but sometimes also by literary scholars. In the analysis of literary works, intersectionality has tended to be used for discussing the effects of the axes of different identities on the texts’

characters and how those effects and their interpretation can differ in different socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts (Hamam 2015).

An intersectional approach to literary analysis is often combined with postcolonial literary theory, queer theory, feminist literary theory, critical race theory, disability studies, Marxist literary theory and other approaches (Editorial Team of English Studies n.d.). For instance, feminist literary criticism primarily examines the effects of gender on narratives and characters, above all, women. Intersectionality expands this kind of analysis by recognizing that gender is experienced differently depending on how it intersects with people's other social identities. Marxist criticism, on the other hand, centers on class and economic systems, analyzing power relations primarily through the lens of capitalism. Intersectionality provides a more multidimensional approach by considering how class intersects with other identity categories. (Chadwick 2017) The approach's distinctive focus lies in examining how identities are not additive, but rather mutually constitutive (Lanser 2015: 27; Khan 2024: 27-28), therefore allowing literary texts to be interpreted with multiple facets in mind.

Davis and Lutz (2024: 223) and Keen (2022: 98) argue that intersectional literary criticism enables an in-depth understanding of how the interrelationships of various axes of identity affect the portrayal of characters, plots, and handling of various themes. For instance, as exemplified in Hamam (2015), intersectionality is often utilized in postcolonial literary studies to analyze how colonial historical events and diasporas affect characters, especially in terms of how the various axes of their identities operate differently in various historical and sociopolitical contexts. Considering those different contexts helps to uncover how other axes of the characters' identities, experiences, actions, and/or reactions, are affected. Applying intersectionality also allows literary critics to analyze characters and their identities comprehensively by illuminating how they challenge or conform to dominant gender and sexual norms within narratives (Keen, 2015: 125).

An example of this can be seen in Nikiema's (2024: 70) intersectional analysis of "the mother" in Driss Chraïbi's novel *La Civilisation, ma Mère!* as a work of Francophone African feminist postcolonial literature. As is often customary in the wider Maghreb culture she grows up in, the mother of the protagonists gets married at a very young age (thirteen) and lives in seclusion and subjugation of her husband for many years (Nikiema 2024: 81). The article highlights how the character's gender, age, body size, education, economic status, and cultural context shape her vulnerability, enabling her husband to easily control her. Initially conforming to heteropatriarchal norms due to her socially constructed limitations, she lacks the knowledge or desire for emancipation, even fearing her own subjectivity. However, exposure to education reconstructs her worldview, values, and identity, ultimately leading her to disrupt the norms of the restrictive system in which she had been living and transforms her into a symbol of freedom. (Nikiema 2024: 81-83)

Davis (2008; 2014: 21-27), however, has pointed out that although it is a popular approach in many fields and contexts, the application of intersectionality often remains too vague because the term itself is open-ended. While some scholars believe that the concept does not generalize but adds nuance to the discussion (Khan 2024: 27-28), they do not always provide clear methodologies. Still, other authors *have* tried to outline strategies that can help guide such studies. Matsuda (1991: 1189), for instance, has proposed "asking the other question", which can effectively be applied as an intersectional method of literary analysis. Matsuda suggests:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, 'Where are the class interests in this?' (Matsuda 1991: 1189)

This method can help uncover many aspects of a narrative, such as its absences or silences. By "asking the other question", readers can interrogate why certain aspects of identity may be left unspoken or underdeveloped within a text. For instance, in *The Great Gatsby*, a traditional literary analysis might focus on class dynamics or gender, while Matsuda's method would encourage the

reader to “ask the other question” about race, immigration, or sexuality, even if these issues are not overtly discussed in the text. Such an approach might make one think about why, for instance, characters of color are absent in this narrative about American opportunism. Other aspects of narrative that this approach can help uncover include which characters are given a voice or whose is revoked, or who remains silenced, sidelined, or marginalized, and so on.

Davis’s (2014: 21-27) attempt at providing a more specific framework builds on Matsuda’s strategy by providing a set of analytical example questions. First, one is asked to identify an example that appears to focus on gender and to provide a rationale for this interpretation. Subsequently, other differences (social identities) and their potential relevance to the example should be considered. Focusing on one of those factors then shifts the analysis to examining how and why the example engages with that particular difference. This is followed by comparing the separate perspectives and trying to see what each narrative reveals or omits (and why), and what similarities or differences emerge between the two.

Another framework to guide intersectional literary analysis created by Gill (2016: 70) is similarly guided by a list of questions:

What issues of difference or sameness are being displayed in the text or visual?

How do the issues of difference/sameness interact with each other?

In what ways does power affect the issues of difference/sameness?

In what ways do political, social, or historical contexts interact with the issues of difference/sameness? (Gill 2016: 70)

According to Gill (2016: 69-70, 78), the process begins with a thorough reading of the text, during which emotionally and politically charged language is identified. Instances that signify racial, gendered, religious, or other types of microaggressions as signs of potential discrimination are then highlighted and systematically categorized according to their relevant intersectional categories. These instances are subsequently organized and analyzed to explore the broader

implications of how different social identities intersect and shape the dynamics of power within the narrative. The whole process is informed by multiple readings of the text, both before categorizing and also during the process, in order to uncover as many of the intersectional layers of the text as possible. However, while Gill's focus is mostly on discrimination that can stem from intersectionality, Khan (2024: 12) calls for the focal point to still be characters' *experiences* with any injustice they may face. The difference between the two approaches is therefore between highlighting the discrimination itself and showing what it looks like, compared to looking at how characters handle and conceptualize any prejudice they experience.

However, these guidelines are not supposed to be taken as a strict set of steps to undertake (Gill 2016: 70). Gill (2016: 69) notes that intersectionality "resists the impulse to have a formal methodology because, as a fluid interpretative framework, it thrives on the reality of tensions existing between categories". Therefore, categorizing one's interpretations into a table, for instance, is not required but can be helpful when figuring out how to structure one's analysis.

### **1.3.1 Intersectional Narratology**

The method of analysis in this thesis draws from narratology to examine both thematic and formal tools used in representing queer intersectional identities and relationships. Although "intersectional narratology" is a relatively new term, it expands on the established traditions of feminist and postcolonial narratology by focusing on how intersecting identities are represented, constructed, and interact within narrative forms (Keen 2015: 125; Lanser 2015: 24-25; Chadwick 2017). As Lanser (2015: 36) notes, analyzing texts through the viewpoint of this approach allows for the interpretation of form "*as* textual, historical, and social content". As Keen (2015: 126) suggests, narrative techniques in intersectional narratology tend to be fluid and adaptable, reflecting the complexity of intersecting identities within a text. Building on Crenshaw's and Collins' works

on intersectionality, this method further explores “the in-between of narratives, be that in between genres, narrative style, themes, and /.../ character hardships and situations” (Khan 2024: 15-16). Although no standardized method for intersectional narratology currently exists, I have drawn on insights from various scholars to compile a set of narrative techniques and narratological tools that may be useful for such an analysis. By adapting concepts usually employed in narratological studies, I aim to integrate these frameworks with intersectional theory.

### **1.3.2 The Formal Devices**

One of the narrative devices for examining how perspectives are structured in a narrative is “focalization”. Unlike the broader and often ambiguously used terms “perspective” or “voice”, focalization clearly distinguishes between the narrator (the one who tells the story), the focalizer (the one who perceives), and the focalized object (what is perceived). This allows for a clearer differentiation between the agent who “speaks” (narrator) and the one who “sees” (focalizer). Focalization can be either internal, when the narrative is limited to a character’s perceptions, or external, when the narrator provides an outside view. (Bal 1985: 100-104) Analyzing focalization involves exploring how perspectives shape the portrayal of characters, including how intersecting identities are represented or hidden/obscured. It can also reveal which voices are privileged in the narrative and which are marginalized or absent altogether.

Space in narrative can be analyzed by examining the relationship between the location of events, the characters involved, and the types of actions that occur. A common spatial contrast is between inside and outside, where inside often symbolizes protection and outside danger, although these associations are not fixed and may be more ambiguous. Another important spatial opposition is between central locations, such as a square where characters meet and interact, and the surrounding world, where they must struggle independently. (Bal 1985: 43-44) The context,

including historical, geographical, and social factors, also plays a significant role in how characters' identities are either expressed or constrained.

The way time is conveyed through narrative form is also significant, particularly when considering intersectional identities that are partially dependent on temporal context. It can be expressed in different ways through narrative structure, for instance through sequencing events in a particular way within chapters or across separate parts of the story. The arrangement of parallel narratives can also be significant in conveying time. (Bal 1985: 38-39) Genette's (1980: 40) concept of analepsis—a flashback to a point in time different from where the story is currently at—is also relevant in this context. Another consideration is the time when the narrating takes place and the time when the events of the narration take place.

The differences between plot and story should also be explained. The plot is essentially the framework that organizes a story's events and actions, guiding how the narrative progresses from beginning to end. It “contains information concerning the reasons for and effects of the actions depicted” (Fludernik 2015: 161). Forster (1927: 130) exemplifies this by stating:

A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality – “The king died and then the queen died” is a story. But “the king died and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it (1927: 130)

Lanser (2015: 34) proposes the value of reverse or negative plotting as a tool for conducting intersectional narrative analysis, especially for cases where one plot eclipses another and where the latter gains its meaning from its connection with the former. “Negative” refers to the possible effect of the two narratives, wherein “attempts to overcome something in one narrative may be undermined by an opposing series of plot developments in the other narrative” (Burnett 2014). Such narratives derive meaning from the interplay or contrasting of plots or events in a text.

### 1.3.4 The Thematic Elements

The thematic aspects discussed in the previous subchapters, such as identity and kinship, can be conveyed through all of the above-mentioned formal narrative devices and techniques, such as focalization and time. However, other thematic elements also deserve extra attention, particularly those that influence how the story is structured. The following will explore these aspects in more detail.

Temporality, or the experience of time (Bal 1985: 103), is another key factor in understanding how intersections of identity evolve over time in narratives. It is connected to how time is expressed through form, as discussed above, but its thematic dimension also deserves separate attention. Temporality can reveal how certain identities become more relevant at different points in time. The passage of time in a narrative may shift the way characters experience something, how they gain or lose privilege or power, or as these categories shift in meaning over time. (Belmonte Ávila, Encarnación-Pinedo 2024: 3-4, 9-10) A term that is relevant in this context is Halberstam's (2005: 1) "queer time", referring to the observation that on average queer lives operate outside of normative life schedules. Events that are considered pivotal in a person's life by the cis-heterocentric mainstream—such as getting married and having children—are often experienced at a completely different pace for queer people. Processes, such as transitioning, questioning one's gender or sexuality, or having to hide one's identity can all impact the momentum of queer people's lives. (Halberstam 2005: 1-18) Halberstam uses the concept to "make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (Halberstam 2005: 4).

This connects to the concept of "reproductive futurism", defined by Edelman (2004: 3) as the cultural tendency to prioritize the future—particularly through the figure of the child—over the

present. For the cis-heterosexual majority, queerness represents a refusal to participate in the political and social agreement that centers on “fighting for the children” (Edelman 2004: 3). In this view, the Child has become a symbol that represents the continuation of society, with the future imagined as something that must be protected at all costs (Edelman 2004: 14). As a result, queer people’s lives and freedoms are often treated as secondary to the goal of preserving reproductive futurity and the social norms it represents (Edelman 2004: 21–22). The Child is used to defend and maintain heteronormativity against perceived threats from feminists, queer people, and other marginalized groups (Edelman 2004: 21). However, Edelman (2004: 17) also points out that queer people are not necessarily fully separate from this system, as they can also feel attached to familiar ideas about family and the future.

Edelman’s idea of reproductive futurism can be contrasted with the concept of “queer futurity”. The term refers to the utopian idea that new ways of living and relating are possible, just beyond the present (Muñoz 2009: 22). While Edelman focuses on how society prioritizes the future through the figure of the Child, often excluding queer lives, Muñoz (2009) imagines the future as a space of hope and possibility for queer people. He critiques Edelman’s claims for imagining “this monolithic figure of the child” as always white and presenting a vision of the future that is hostile to people of color (Muñoz 2009: 95). He argues that the future should not be allowed to be defined by normative white reproductive ideals. In fact, the dominance of this vision only makes it more urgent to advocate for a future where young people of color have opportunities to grow up and thrive. (Muñoz 2009: 95-96) According to Muñoz (2009: 91), queerness can be seen as a collective form of endurance and support, similar to the communal strength found in the Black radical tradition. For Muñoz (2009: 127), the future represents a place of endless potential where queerness can fully thrive.

A term that is also tied to both the formal and the thematic is “liminality”. It denotes something or someone existing in or in transition between the in-between spaces, both physical and symbolic. (Gadoin, Ramel 2013: 5) It can be present in or expressed through all of the narrative devices mentioned above. Those instances of liminality can then be connected with the way they help express something thematic in the narrative. For instance, the events of the narrative may move back and forth in time, situating the story simultaneously in the past, present, and future. This can be viewed in parallel with the complexity of identities that change over time or remain undefined (Khan 2024: 49), as characters in certain situations may be situated between identities, while not fully belonging to one specific group. Additionally, interpersonal relationships can also be interpreted as liminal, especially in the case of queer kinship, where defining or trying to find a specific label for the relationship can be very difficult.

Keen (2015: 125) talks about the potential of intersectional narratology in evoking empathy in readers by transcending boundaries of difference, geography, and time, eliciting shared emotions. This empathy can lead to significant outcomes, such as greater tolerance, reduced fear of the “other”, and increased altruism. Additionally, Keen (2022: 32-33) highlights the importance of narrative perspective, noting that first-person narration tends to elicit stronger empathy from readers, raising questions about the impact of third-person narration on reader engagement. Additionally, analyzing stories through an intersectional lens helps to show that various previously sidelined perspectives and narratives are worthy of serious attention and consideration as well. Davis and Lutz (2022) emphasize the role of intersectional stories as counter-narratives, which highlight diversity within cultural communities and empower marginalized voices. Chadwick (2017) suggests that this approach can also challenge traditional views of power, considering both structural forces and individual actions.

## 1.4 Methodology

My methodology for this thesis is an intersectional narratological literary analysis. The process began with reading the novel multiple times, each time highlighting and taking notes on where characters' social identities were made visible. I also applied Matsuda's method of "asking the other question" (1991) and Gill's (2016) framework for identifying power relations throughout the reading process. Instances of kinship and relationship dynamics were recorded alongside these observations. The structural features of the novel (such as narrative point of view, tense, chapter organization, and titles) were first noted down, and then later incorporated into the broader analysis. This was all executed while still working on the literature review, which helped to narrow down which concepts should be added or omitted from the text, particularly the subchapter about intersectional narratology. After compiling key narratological concepts, I drafted an analysis beginning with technical elements before moving on to thematic features. Finally, I completed an additional full rereading of the novel to ensure that no relevant details had been overlooked. The following analysis is also informed by the researcher's own positionality and potential privileges, which were reflected on throughout the writing process.

## 2. AN INTERSECTIONAL NARRATOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF QUEER KINSHIP AND IDENTITY

The plot of *Detransition, Baby* traces the lives of three characters as they navigate their relationships and identities after one of them proposes all of them to raise a child together. Ames, the biological “father” of the baby now growing inside his lover and boss, Katrina, has detransitioned from living as a trans woman and is forced to reveal his past to her as the pregnancy is announced. The news of his apparent fertility—despite six years of testosterone blockers and estrogen therapy, which doctors claimed would render him infertile (Peters 2021: 17)—leaves him reeling. Feeling overwhelmed by what this change would mean in terms of his identity, Ames invites his ex-girlfriend Reese to join them as a third parent. Reese is a trans woman and dated Ames when he was still Amy, and while they continue to care about each other deeply, their relationship became estranged after the latter’s decision to detransition. The proposal for Reese to join him and Katrina—a straight cisgender woman—offers Ames a slight sense of security, as it would mean having someone there who would at least partly understand his reservations about becoming specifically a “father”. Ames and Reese are both white Americans, while Katrina is mixed-race, born to a first-generation immigrant Chinese mother and a Brooklyn-raised Jewish father. While the novel occasionally highlights the characters’ different experiences of race, they are often backgrounded or overlooked. Additionally, the characters’ socioeconomic statuses also differ. Ames was born into a middle-class family and maintained a high income into his adulthood. Katrina and Reese, however, were born into working class families. Katrina’s family’s financial situation changed for the better while she was still living with them, which led to her studying at Dartmouth, an Ivy League university, situating her as part of the middle-class. Reese, on the other hand, did not acquire higher education, unlike Ames and Katrina, and struggles financially in the

narrative present as well (Peters 2021: 169). The interplay of these different axes thus informs the characters' evolving relationships, even when left unspoken.

It is also important to include an explanation regarding how Ames is going to be referred to in this thesis, since different pronouns are used to refer to the character at various points in the novel. Other scholars have approached talking about Ames differently. Oasvesi (2023: 1), for instance, uses she/her to refer to both Ames and Amy. Mayne (2024: 444), Gajdošíková (2023: 63), Jones (2024: 83) and Ku (2024: 107), however, use he/him to refer to Ames and she/her to refer to Amy. For the sake of clarity, this thesis is going to follow the same principle. This approach is not meant to invalidate any real person's identity or condone misgendering real people in the present with pronouns they used in the past. Such a practice would not be advisable in any real-life context but is justified here because the same practice is also applied by the author throughout the novel. The choice to use different pronouns also helps to illustrate the fluidity of identity, demonstrated through Ames and Amy, who, despite being the same character, inhabit distinct identities.

The analysis should also be prefaced with a brief explanation for bringing out the characters' various social axes in terms of an intersectional analysis. One of the main points of an intersectional analysis is that people's social identities cannot be separated from each other since they make up the person's experience as a whole, each affecting it differently (Lanser 2015: 27; Khan 2024: 27-28). However, at some points during the analysis the different facets of the characters' identities are going to be brought out, not to single them out and make it seem as if they are separate, but instead to highlight the various grey areas between all of the different experiences. The various aspects are part of the characters' everyday realities, not necessarily as different layers of identity, but as a single, complex experience of existing in the world. Their identities shape the

characters' behaviors, struggles, and choices, which is why it is important to still highlight them, even if only temporarily, for the sake of the analysis.

## 2.1 Focalization and Power

The narrative of *Detransition, Baby* is written in third person through an omniscient narrator, alternating between the present and past tenses. The present tense is used in sections set in the narrative present, which approximately spans the time of Katrina's pregnancy. The past tense is used for the many analepses utilized throughout the narrative, as well as the longer sections set some years in the past that focus mostly on Reese and Amy's relationship. The narrative alternates most between the perspectives of Ames and Reese. Notably, many analepses sections of the novel also have Amy as the focalizer. Although Amy and Ames are the same person, this choice is still significant in terms of the character and narrative overall.

There is a difference between the degree of how much each of the central characters are put into the role of the focalizer in the narrative, with Reese and Ames/Amy being in this position the most and Katrina the least. Katrina is afforded with only a few sections/paragraphs in the entire narrative (e.g. Peters 2021: 223-225). It is notable that she is also the only cis and non-white person among the three main characters. Reese continuously expresses frustration, jealousy, and unfairness toward Katrina being the biological mother to their baby. Self-deprecating exclamations that undermine her own role in their alternative family unit, such as "Yes, go ask this other woman, Katrina, to split her unborn child with a transsexual." (Peters 2021:44) and "I'm not in a position to be setting terms. You are." (Peters 2021: 230) reflect her dissatisfaction with the sense that Katrina has more power in the dynamic. Despite this, Katrina is left to the background for most of the plot. Although she is an integral part of one of the central conflicts of the narrative—how are they going to form a family to raise this baby—she almost resembles a side-character, with the

reader getting very little insight into her inner life outside of her relationship with Reese and Ames.

The limited amount of time the novel grants to Katrina as a focalizer, especially in comparison to the other two, reflects underlying power dynamics in their alternative family unit. Formally, Katrina's relative narrative marginalization parallels her role in their dynamics. While she holds decisive power over the pregnancy—as she is able to choose whether to carry it to term or whether to include Ames and Reese in the parenting—she is less central to the novel's subjective storytelling. Katrina's ability to wield power stems from several intersecting aspects of her identity. As a cisgender woman who can conceive, she occupies a privileged position that neither Ames nor Reese, both transgender, can claim. Additionally, her economic stability means that she could feasibly raise the child on her own if necessary, unlike Reese, whose working-class status limits her options. Additionally, not only is Reese unable to get pregnant because she is transgender, she would simply not be able to meet the financial requirements to have and to raise a raise a baby through other means, such as adoption or surrogate pregnancy. Katrina also benefits from familial support, having not faced rejection from her family of origin due to her gender identity. This contrasts both Ames and Reese, who experienced estrangement after coming out as trans. These factors combine to give Katrina a security that Ames and Reese, shaped by trans marginalization, do not possess.

However, Katrina's lack of previous queer experience limits her preparedness for the kind of kinship structure that Ames proposes. Although she moves largely unchallenged through cis-heteronormative society, this security is disrupted when she experiences social rejection for the first time due to her proximity to queerness. This occurs at her friend's baby shower (Peters 2021: 291-293), where her unfamiliarity with the social risks involved in coming out becomes apparent. Through Reese's focalization, it is revealed that upon hearing of Katrina's plan to coparent with Ames and Reese, "Katrina's friends' smiles have dimmed, and the creases of worry between their

eyes have deepened” (Peters 2021: 292). Witnessing this discomfort introduces her to the dynamics of marginalization that Reese and Ames have long been familiar with. Her initial resistance to the proposed shared parenthood thus reflects not simply unfamiliarity, but a deeper discomfort with the vulnerability and social risks that visible queer kinship entails.

Yet notably, the reader’s access to Katrina’s internal reactions is limited, as this scene is filtered through Reese’s focalization. This creates a particular imbalance: while Katrina wields considerable narrative and social power—especially in her ability to decide the future of the child—her emotional world remains largely obscured. The novel’s distribution of focalization, privileging Ames and Reese, thus mirrors real-world dynamics of visibility and vulnerability within marginalized communities. This narrative choice can be further paralleled with how Katrina’s racial identity operates in this context. Although her mixed-race background marks her as “other” in some spaces, in the predominantly white, middle-class setting of the baby shower it is less pertinent, as she “passes as white with white people” (Peters 2021: 38). Although the character is of mixed heritage, white characters often see her as white because she does not match their stereotypical ideas of what an Asian person looks like, having freckles and the last name “Petrajelik” (Peters 2021: 38). This is evidenced by Ames admitting that “of Katrina’s two races, he subconsciously found himself often appealing to the white one” (Peters 2021: 102). Her perceived whiteness thus affords her a degree of protection from full social rejection. Katrina’s limited role as a focalizing consciousness reduces the reader’s access to her inner life, which both protects her from narrative scrutiny and restricts her narrative presence. Drawing on intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1989; 1991) helps to see how the form of the text parallels her partial narrative invisibility and her racial passing, highlighting how power, vulnerability, and belonging are unevenly distributed among the characters.

## 2.2 Space, Embodiment, and Physicality

Excluding some analepses, the events of *Detransition, Baby* are set in Brooklyn, New York, a city known for its diversity and status as a global urban center. This setting is significant, as it fits a narrative that explores intersectionality. Within the city, the specific neighborhoods that the characters inhabit also carry meaning, reflecting their differing economic statuses. Katrina and Ames both reside in more affluent areas, Fort Greene (Peters 2021: 264) and next to Prospect Park (Peters 2021: 9), respectively. Notably, they both also live alone in their apartments, suggesting their financial independence and ability to afford comfortable living spaces. Reese lives in a comparatively poorer area, Greenpoint, in an apartment building with asbestos on its outer walls and a living space small enough that it was originally built to have only one bedroom (Peters 2021: 215-216). She shares this space with a roommate, which not only signals her financial limitations but also highlights her more immediate connection to a community.

The smaller, shared space she occupies contrasts with the relative isolation of Katrina and Ames, emphasizing the role of communal living in fostering kinship bonds. Reese's kinship with the trans community reflected in the constant presence of other trans women, notably Iris (the roommate) and Thalia (their mutual friend), is maintained within this shared space. Her immediate access to a network of support and protection contrasts with Ames' estrangement from his previous social circles. His statement that he "need[s] to be back in the trans community or at least have other trans people involved" (Peters 2021: 105) mirrors Bal's (1958: 43-44) distinction between "inside" and "outside" spaces. Being "inside" the trans community, or physically immersed in trans spaces, would offer Ames a sense of safety and belonging that he is currently lacking. While Reese is able to maintain ties with her chosen family, Ames is physically and metaphorically removed

from the community after detransitioning, emphasizing the role of space—both physical and social—in shaping relationships and intersectional experiences within the queer community.

The concept of the body as a physical space is also evident in *Detransition, Baby*, particularly when considering how the bodies of marginalized individuals are perceived and represented. Katrina's role as the only non-white character who carries the child carries profound implications, as the act of reproduction becomes intertwined with her racialized embodiment. Bodies of color, especially those of women, are often explicitly marked by their physicality (Lennon, Fischer 2024), and sexualized or racialized in ways that distinguish them from the more abstracted, non-racialized, and individualized representations of white bodies (Hill Collins 2000: 130; Chou 2021: 65-66). This othering of Katrina's body as a space of reproduction mirrors broader cultural patterns that associate people of color with their biological roles in ways that are often objectifying or stigmatizing. Katrina notices this discrepancy as well, by exclaiming, "Do you realize how often I've been that? A vessel for someone else's dreams? Sure, just let the Asian lady carry our baby! You'll be like all the other nice white couples with your adopted Asian baby" (Peters 2021: 171). Her embodiment as the biological mother is thus fraught with the complexities of race and gender, and her pregnancy further complicates the normative expectations of family and kinship. In contrast, Reese experiences an acute sense of exclusion from this embodied role due to her inability to become pregnant because she is trans. This bodily difference underscores her feeling of inadequacy and alienation from the traditional narrative of reproduction. It marks a key point of tension between her desire for family and the limitations of her body.

Reese's longing for the ability to carry a child is captured in her response to Katrina's pregnancy. When Katrina announces, "I'm the one who is pregnant," Reese is immediately hurt by the statement. Overcome with emotion, Reese blurts out, "Don't you think I would be if I could? Don't you think I wish my body could do that?" (Peters 2021: 178). This moment encapsulates the

deep pain and frustration Reese feels at being excluded from the physical process of pregnancy, a biological experience that she longs to have but cannot. Her outburst reflects the emotional and physical distance she feels from the possibility of biological motherhood, which is tied not just to her trans identity, but also to a broader cultural narrative that equates womanhood with reproduction. In this context, Reese's inability to provide a baby the space to grow in the form of her body connects the intersection of trans identity and the traditional cis-heteronormative notions of kinship. Her desire to experience pregnancy is not merely about the biological act but also about her yearning for connection, belonging, and the ability to participate in the kind of embodied kinship that Katrina's pregnancy represents.

The narrative device of space, both literal and metaphorical, can also be linked to sensory experiences in the narrative in the context of queer kinship. Space, in this case, not only defines where characters are physically located, but also emphasizes the kinship dynamics that unfold within these spaces. As the characters navigate their desires for connection and intimacy, physical touch becomes a key mechanism for bridging emotional gaps and fostering kinship. This is particularly evident in Reese's longing for connection, which is deeply rooted in the tactile and sensory. Throughout the novel, Reese yearns for the physical sensation of holding a child, a desire that is intricately tied to her sense of belonging and her own emotional fulfillment. As she reflects, "She likes to hold children. To smell a baby's hair. To soothe a crying infant and feel his little frame let go of rigid fear to settle in her arms, the weight go slack and calm so that for a moment she both gives and receives a rare peace" (Peters 2021: 178). This passage highlights how Reese's yearning for physical connection is not just a desire to care for others, but also an essential part of her own emotional reconciliation. The act of holding a child becomes a metaphor for the mutual exchange of peace and safety, symbolizing both a physical and emotional space where love and acceptance can be communicated through touch. The want to physically carry a child in her hands

can also be seen as parallel with Katrina carrying a child inside her body through pregnancy. Reese's desire to hold a child and to feel the peace of soothing an infant parallels her earlier experiences with Amy, especially during one of the times they had sex at the beginning of their relationship: "Later that night, Reese stroked her hair and whispered to her, "I'm sorry you've been in so much pain for so long"" (Peters 2021: 152). In this light, her desire to physically care for a child becomes an attempt to bridge the emotional gaps she feels in her own life, where she is often the one giving but rarely receiving.

This tension between providing and obtaining physical comfort highlights a broader theme of longing for connection and family, which transcends both biological and cultural boundaries. For Reese, yearning for a family is described as a physical sensation: "The kind of thing that people usually call a biological clock, which isn't a term that works for me, but still describes something I feel in my body" (Peters 2021: 178-179). Her rejection of the term "biological clock" emphasizes the disjunction between conventional understandings of family and reproduction (Uibo 2021: 139-142), and her own experience as a trans woman seeking kinship and connection in non-normative forms. The term invokes a biologically determinist model of womanhood that suggests that reproductive timing is natural and obligatory. Failing to fulfill this role constitutes a deviation—not only for trans women, but also for cis women who cannot or choose not to become pregnant. The narrative critiques this determinist notion of family, instead emphasizing the ways in which queer kinship is built through the physical and emotional spaces that the characters carve out for one another. In this way, space is not only a setting but also a relational construct where characters seek to create new forms of family, grounded in sensory experiences, physical touch, and mutual care.

## 2.3 Time

*Detransition, Baby* does not exactly follow a linear timeline, with chapters alternating between the past and the present. Although the exact year/s are not specified, the story mostly takes place at some point in the late 2010s or early 2020s. There are 11 chapters in total and each of them starts at a specific time in relation to when Katrina got pregnant. For most of the book, the chapters alternate between being a week or two after the conception, and then a changing number of years before the conception. For instance, chapter one is titled “One month after conception” (Peters 2021: 3) and chapter eleven, the last one, “Twelve weeks after conception” (Peters 2021: 309). The “x amount of time before/after conception” acts as a way to frame the main focus of the following chapter, despite time not remaining linear within it. However, the separate chapters also contain many shorter analepses to the past of both Reese and Ames/Amy. Glimpses into Katrina’s past, however, are only ever conveyed through analepses, where she is not the focalizer, but the focalized object. There are mainly two parallel plots being conveyed. The one told after the conception climaxes in Reese’s failed suicide attempt after finding out that Katrina is considering an abortion. The one happening years before the conception culminates in Stanley—a man from Reese’s past who she started having an affair with while still together with her girlfriend—beating up Amy. The entire narrative as a whole, with all of the timelines and plots finally reaching a single point in time, is left open-ended with the three sitting together in Katrina’s living room before her scheduled abortion.

The use of conception as a temporal framing device is particularly noteworthy given the queer nature of the text. In mainstream culture, procreation is closely tied to cis-heteronormative life trajectories. However, here this expectation is subverted within a queer context. This resonates with Halberstam’s (2005) concept of “queer time”, which emphasizes alternative temporalities

outside of cis-heteronormative milestones, like marriage and childbirth. At the same time, the characters' intense focus on parenthood suggests that the desire for continuity, legacy, familial bonds, and normalization in the eyes of mainstream society persists even within queer communities. As Nay (2015) and Uibo (2021: 20) argue, seeking familial forms that mirror normative structures can offer comfort, validation, and a sense of belonging. The narrative thus reflects the tension between resisting heteronormative structures and simultaneously finding solace in their aspects, particularly the sociocultural weight assigned to having children.

Halberstam's (2005) concept of "queer time" remains relevant in the context of the main characters' ages. All three are in their thirties, with Reese and Ames in their mid-thirties and Katrina at thirty-nine. Their ages illustrate how processes typically seen as chronological certainties are often delayed or reimagined in queer lives. This also interacts with the biological reality of aging bodies, particularly the pressures associated with the "biological clock", highlighting the tension between socially constructed life timelines and physical limitations. Temporal pressures for cis women are exemplified through Katrina's comment that "doctors call pregnancies over the age of thirty-five 'geriatric pregnancies'" (Peters 2021: 94). As Bradway argues: "In this context, time is a biological, ontological, juridical, and normative constraint on Katrina's body—and time is running out" (Bradway 2023: 19). Similarly, Reese and Iris describe themselves as "trans elders" already by their late twenties (Peters 2021: 63), reflecting the absence of visible older trans people. This aligns with a concept adjacent to queer time called "trans age" (Peters 2021: 63), rooted in trans people's specific temporal experiences. This absence of generational continuity and often lacking traditions or models to guide their lives is aptly described by Ames:

But we are a lost generation. We have no elders, no stable groups, no one to teach us to countenance pain. No matriarchs to tell the young girls to knock it off or show off their own long lives lived happily and well. Those older generations of trans women died of HIV, poverty, suicide, repression, or disappeared to pathologized medicalization and stealth lives—and that's if they were lucky enough to be white. (Peters 2021: 101)

Despite their differences in gender identity, the characters share a relationship with time that challenges normative life pacing, exposing not only societal, but also biological forces that shape their experiences of adulthood.

Muñoz's (2009) concept of "queer futurity" offers a further lens through which to understand the characters' relationships with time. Rather than viewing "delayed" or non-normative life milestones as failures to conform, Muñoz frames them as motions toward alternative possibilities and modes of living. In the narrative, the characters' struggles with questions of kinship, reproduction, and adulthood are not simply attempts to catch up to heteronormative timelines, but efforts to imagine futures that make room for their complex relationships and identities. The alternative family unit they attempt to negotiate, for example, is less about replicating traditional family structures than about building a future where queer and trans kinship can thrive outside established norms. These ideas are also reflected in Ames' ideas about building their alternative family unit: "Unless he could find a way to escape the gravity of the nuclear family, no matter what he called himself, he'd end up a father. /.../ With three of us, it'll be confusing enough to break the family thing. /.../ Together, maybe we could be a family that works" (Peters 2021: 36). In this way, the narrative resists the expected linear progression of cis-heteronormative time and queers it instead.

Foreshadowing is another important tool in the text, showing how the characters' actions lead to both destruction and the possibility of renewal. There are some early signs of Stanley's eventual violence toward Amy, such as his anger, repeated references to his cold expressions (Peters 2021: 195), him slapping Reese (Peters 2021: 57), and his and Reese's consensual yet violent sex lives (Peters 2021: 58-61). These instances signal an inevitable catastrophe that culminates with Amy getting physically assaulted by him (Peters 2021: 254). Similarly, Katrina's comment to Reese that "the way you do things ends in funerals" (Peters 2021: 232) connects the

way Reese treats her relationships to loss, referring to Amy's metaphorical "death". However, death represents more than just endings, as it also allows for new beginnings. Amy's "death" leads to the transformation, or "birth" of Ames, after all, ultimately creating the potential for new and different kinship bonds. Reese's suicide attempt at Jacob Riis Park Beach (Peters 2021: 321), a historically significant queer gathering place (Peters 2021: 324; NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project n.d.), further reflects the uncertainty and struggles of queer life. The tragic irony of the beach's name—phonetically identical to "Reese"—intensifies the emotional weight of this scene, linking a place of queer freedom to a moment of despair. The foreshadowed losses, however, do not close off the future, but again reflect Muñoz's (2009: 127) concept of queer futurity. According to it, even after loss and instability, there is hope for new forms of community, identity, and family to emerge.

The novel is full of instances of the past and present mingling with each other. The chapters are broadly divided into two, with one half being set in the past and the other in the present. In addition to other aspects, it is a way to create the illusion of a separation between Ames and Amy, even though they are parts of the same person. Despite detransitioning and living as a man for the duration of the chapters set in the present, it is evident from Ames' inner thoughts that he is not comfortable with his current gender presentation. This is apparent in his thoughts on inviting Reese to become a parent with him and Katrina: "Perhaps one way to tolerate being a father would be to have her constant presence assuring him that he was actually not one" (Peters 2021: 35). The last page of the novel turns things on their head when it refers to Reese, Katrina, and notably Ames as well, as women (Peters 2021: 337). The last sentence of the novel also uses she/her pronouns: "each in *her* own way contemplating how *her* tenuous rendition of womanhood has become dependent upon the existence of this little person" (Peters 2021: 337). The peek of Amy at the very end is initiated by Ames, which is then followed by the narrator also adopting she/her pronouns for the

character. This little snippet of Amy coming back connects the past with the present, and also hints at the future that remains unknown to the reader.

The way the chapters keep jumping back and forth in time parallels the difficulty of defining the relationships between the characters, as they are understood and experienced differently at various moments of the narrative. The constant changes in their relationships across temporal points reflect the idea that identity is not fixed but remains in a continual process of becoming (Taylor 2021: 934). This is also echoed in Ames' confession to Reese:

But if we weren't meant to be lovers, it doesn't mean that we weren't meant to be family. Every single time I remember the state of things between us, I want to cry. I thought it would fade, but it hasn't; it's just changed. If we don't try again, it's like our time together ... Not only did it end, it was like it never was. (Peters 2021: 43-44)

Ames' reflection shows how the past and present states of their relationship are not strictly separate but remain intertwined. In this way, the narrative's shifting temporality mirrors the ongoing, liminal nature of the characters' kinship bonds.

Another narrative device used to convey the passage of time is the shifting use of pronouns and names. Whenever Amy is the focalizer, she uses she/her pronouns for herself (Peters 2021: 175), even when recalling times when she was socially treated as a boy. This shows that gender is not only shaped at the time it is lived, but can also be reinterpreted later. After Amy detransitions and becomes Ames, the pronouns in the narration shift to he/him, reflecting both a change in identity and a new temporal position. This technique highlights how the character's gender expression evolves across different moments in their life. Different periods in the characters' lives according to how they were gendered are therefore marked through focalization. These differences in pronoun-use align with West and Zimmerman's (1987: 126) ideas about "doing gender", according to which it is an ongoing, continuous activity rather than a fixed state. By having pronouns change depending on who is focalizing and when, the text illustrates how gender, like

time, is experienced and narrated as fluid, not static. The contrast between the names Amy and Ames further highlights how gender transitioning and detransitioning reshape experiences of time. Ames' focalization reveals an attempt to distance himself from his past as Amy by adopting "the armor of masculinity" (Peters 2021: 15) as a form of emotional protection. Nevertheless, Amy keeps coming back to him in the narrative present, with characters like Reese's roommate Iris still referring to him as "Amy" (Peters 2021: 299). This blends past and present showing that for Ames, identity is not fixed but keeps shifting over time.

This is further exemplified in how gender and time are experienced differently by each character. In terms of gender identity, Reese's life is divided into two periods: before and after her transition. Ames, however, after detransitioning, experiences time in three stages: before transition, post-transition, and after detransition. Katrina, as a cisgender woman, does not undergo shifts in pronouns or gender expression, but her experience of pregnancy can be read as one way through which her experience of gender and temporality connect. In her case, pregnancy functions as a gendered temporal marker, linking womanhood to biological and emotional shifts across time. Her miscarriage at an earlier age and later pregnancy at thirty-nine divide her life into two phases, one characterized by dissatisfaction and loss, and the other of cautious hope. This juxtaposition is evident in her language, as she describes the end of her previous relationship and miscarriage with the word "relief" (Peters 2021: 20), but during the second pregnancy, she expresses that she is "surprised to find I'm ready to take a chance on a family" (Peters 2021: 171). The passage of time in terms of gender, either trans or cis, is simply marked differently for all three main characters.

Additionally, class differences are closely tied to how different characters' gender transition is portrayed over time. Reese's transition experience was different from Amy's, largely because Amy had financial resources that gave her greater access to gender-affirming procedures, such as laser hair removal and a nose job (Peters 2021: 196–197). The latter helped her achieve a more

traditionally feminine appearance and came to symbolize her successful transition. However, it also caused resentment in Reese, who lacked the same resources: “Reese had talked Amy into getting the surgery, even though Reese could have never afforded any facial work for herself, and her own jealousy drove her to curt imperatives on the subject. *You will get it. Stop delaying.*” (Peters 2021: 196). This physical transformation signified a fixed point in Amy’s life and timeline, solidifying her identity as a woman. However, the narrative later unsettles this stability when Stanley breaks Amy’s nose (Peters 2021: 256), an act that symbolically fractures the life that Amy had built. Even after detransitioning, Reese notes that Ames “still looks like a woman even after that pert little nose got broken” (Peters 2021: 225), suggesting that physical traces of past identities linger and present themselves across time. This image shows how class affects the pace and experience of gendered time.

The text also highlights how race influences the experience of gendered temporality. Amy’s ability to transition so smoothly was not only tied to her class privilege, but also her conformity to Eurocentric beauty standards: she was blue-eyed (Peters 2021: 41) blonde, slim, able-bodied, and her appearance was easily feminized through hormone therapy (Peters 2021: 64). Such relative ease is not shared by many others, especially trans people of color, whose racialized bodies often face greater scrutiny and systemic barriers to acceptance (Lennon, Fischer 2024). Access to the privileges Amy had—both financial and aesthetic—remains limited and distant for those who do not fit into the dominant norms. As a result, for many trans people of color, time does not move as quickly or easily through the milestones of transition and social acceptance. Instead, the experience of gendered time becomes slower, with increased obstacles, and is shaped by persistent structural inequalities. In this way, the novel uses Amy’s racial and class privileges to comment on how identity development unfolds at uneven speeds across different bodies.

## 2.4 The Significance of “The Baby” in Identity and Kinship Formation

Introduced already in the title of the novel, “the baby” is arguably the most recurring symbol in *Detransition, Baby*. While it can be taken literally as referring to the baby that Katrina is pregnant with, the child carries significantly more meaning throughout the text. The baby functions as a symbol for multiple key concepts, including queer kinship, identity, queer temporality, and trans and queer life. In addition, the title phrase “Detransition, Baby” itself can be interpreted as an invitation or even a command, hinting at the social and personal pressures surrounding detransitioning, as suggested by Lavery (2021). Beyond this, the entire narrative portrays what could be described as a form of “baby fever”, a deep yearning for family, belonging, and future possibilities, again highlighted in Lavery (2021). Thus, the figure of the baby links various aspects of the narrative, serving as a focal point for both personal desires and larger social themes.

One of the ways in which the narrative utilizes the baby is as a means for the adult characters to achieve their own goals, rather than as a fully developed character. The baby is a constant presence in the background, influencing their decisions and emotions, yet remains largely abstract and without any subjectivity. This is already evident when Ames, Katrina, and Reese meet for the first time: “both [Ames and Reese] much too stoic to ever refer directly to anything but their drinks as their unborn child slowly sucks the air from a room” (Peters 2021: 162). Although the baby drives the story forward, it is never humanized with concrete descriptions like movements or sounds. It remains clinical and distant, with Katrina only offering to go get an ultrasound with Ames (Peters 2021: 232), but this moment of supposed connection itself is not shown. The unborn child functions more as a projection of the characters’ fears, hopes, and identities than as a person with a subjectivity. In this way, the narrative highlights the baby’s status as a liminal entity that

exists and yet does not at the same time, as they are never born during the story and potentially get aborted after the end of the narrative, existing between life and non-death.

The baby's lack of narrative agency is further emphasized by the portrayal of babies as commodities or property. Private adoption agencies are described as businesses that "procure babies from faraway countries" (Peters 2021: 201), framing children as goods to be acquired. The passage is also a slightly ironic criticism of Western colonial thinking. Similarly, Amy reflects on her desire for a child in terms of ownership, admitting that she "wanted a kid who might somehow be mystically hers" (Peters 2021: 205) and recognizing the selfishness inherent in creating "a little person in your image" (Peters 2021: 205). Reese also expresses this objectification when she states, "If I want a baby, I have to take one from some other woman" (Peters 2021: 231). Although Reese is herself a woman, her position as a *trans* woman complicates her relationship to motherhood. The novel shows how social marginalization based on gender identity produces internalized feelings of inferiority, which in turn shape how Reese frames her access to motherhood: not as a right, but as a transgression. Through these examples, the narrative highlights the absence of the baby's narrative agency or subjectivity, reinforcing the child as a symbol shaped by adult desires.

Furthermore, the baby acts as a motivator of kinship and identity. In some ways, the baby's role in the narrative is more symbolic than literal, as the future of the child and the reality of raising them seem secondary to the connections they help to facilitate between Ames, Katrina, and Reese. For much of the story, the baby is relegated to the background while the entity's presence motivates the characters' interactions. In Katrina's case, the baby initially represents a way toward stability, represented by the cis-heteronormative family structure that she used to expect her own life to fit into. Over time, however, the meaning shifts and transforms into a way to form queer kinship bonds instead. Her previous miscarriage (Peters 2021: 37) had revealed gaps in her former relationship, and the baby becomes a way for her to process that loss and relinquish her old expectations. As

Katrina herself acknowledges, she had always felt like something “was missing” (Peters 2021: 293-294). This absence gets realized as the new baby.

The figure of the child is typically used in cisgender narratives to symbolize the future, as evidenced by Edelman’s (2004) treatment of reproductive futurity, where the Child represents societal continuation and cis-heteronormative progress. However, in *Detransition, Baby*, the same symbol is repurposed within a trans and queer framework, offering a significant subversion of the expectations. The baby comes to represent hope and potential within a non-normative context instead, echoing Muñoz’s (2009: 22) optimistic vision of queer futurity, signifying a new chapter for the characters’ lives. However, a connection with reproductive futurity remains, exemplified by Reese stating that “My sense of hope, my sense of future, they are both reliant on having a child. I want to see what I cherish live on” (Peters 2021: 180). Her way of seeing the world is also connected to having had many of her trans friends die (Peters 2021: 209-211). For her, this baby is a way to pay homage to those she has lost and to find some hope in the future. The narrative thereby highlights the tension between the characters’ desire to form non-normative kinship structures and the societal expectations they have internalized about what a family should look like. Bradway’s assertion that “*Detransition, Baby* deflates unfettered idealism and refuses crushing bitterness—it craves a future for trans desires to be satisfied and trans bond to be sustained, even if it knows that future may not come any time soon” (Bradway 2023: 19) seems particularly relevant here. By reclaiming the child as a symbol for queer and trans futures, the text challenges the conventional role of the child in cisgender narratives and redefines what imagining the future can look like for queer characters.

The baby also plays a pivotal role in Reese and Amy’s, and Reese and Ames’s relationship. When the two are still together as a couple in the chapters set in the past and Amy had not become Ames yet, Reese and Amy plan on adopting a child. It is in fact “the baby” from back then who

plays a role in their relationship finally breaking apart, for Amy finds out about Reese's cheating while they are at a meeting for prospective adopters (Peters 2021: 206). The baby is also what brings Reese and Ames back together, prompted by Ames inviting Reese back into his life to raise this child together. For Reese, the baby helps to not only bring back Ames, but to also return Amy to her, connecting the past with the present and future. In the final scenes of the novel, the boundary between Amy and Ames appears less rigid, signaling acceptance of the fluidity of identity.

The evolving way the characters refer to the unborn child highlights the performative and socially constructed nature of gender. The shift toward gendering the baby occurs when Reese and Katrina, while shopping for children's items, begin to refer to the baby with she/her pronouns (Peters 2021: 275). This change reflects the gradual process of assigning gender through social interaction, as earlier both had used the neutral pronoun "it" (Peters 2021: 169). In this way, gender identity is shown not to be an inherent trait, but something that is gradually constructed and assigned through repeated social interaction. This fits Butler's (1990: 141) idea of gender as performative, emerging through repeated social practices, rather than something that one is simply born with. It also echoes Butler's (1993: 232) argument that saying something as simple as "It's a girl!" initiates the process of "girling", or gendering. The gradual assignment of gender to the baby before even being born parallels two of the main characters' struggles with gender identity and belonging, for Reese as a trans woman and Ames as a detransitioner.

The gradual assignment of gender to the baby mirrors Ames's struggles with gender identity and belonging. He initially struggles to view the child as his own due to his complex feelings about parenthood and his identity after detransitioning. Upon learning of the pregnancy, Ames immediately thinks, "He should not be a father" (Peters 2021: 14), a sentiment that lingers as he later explains he would only accept parenthood if he "could be a parent without being seen as a father" (Peters 2021: 106). As Jones observes: "Ames must negotiate the vision of his parenthood

to sustain a family with a straight cisgender woman that does not inevitably force him into heteronormative fatherhood” (Jones 2024: 84). For most of the novel, he refers to the child impersonally as “the baby” or “a baby” (Peters 2021: 105), only adopting possessive pronouns like “his” or “their” (Peters 2021: 318) toward the very end. This shift in language from impersonal to possessive signals Ames’s growing acceptance of both his gender identity and his evolving approach to parenthood, reflecting Kroskrity’s (1999) view of language as a tool for identity formation. The baby thus acts as a catalyst for Ames’s process of reconciling his feelings about parenthood as a detransitioned trans woman, possibly on the verge of transitioning again.

The idea of the “baby trans” (Peters 2021: 61) appears multiple times in the narrative, representing times of vulnerability and the early stages of gender identity exploration. At the beginning of their relationship, while having sex, Amy’s emotional fragility is evident as she struggles to express herself: “Amy couldn’t stop crying or shivering... she only managed to say ‘Oooh-wee,’ and weakly held out her hand” (Peters 2021: 119). Reese’s response, “Baby, what just happened?” (Peters 2021: 119), reflects the care needed for someone navigating a transition. Just as Reese explains that her reasons for wanting to become a mother and liking children are deeply rooted in the way they see the world as new, exciting, and untainted as they clumsily go through it (Peters 2021: 178), she describes Amy in a similar way when they are still together (Peters 2021: 198). There are therefore certain parallels in having a baby and gender transitioning.

The baby also functions as a means for Reese to “become” a “real” mother. The high rates at which trans people face transphobic societal structures, violence, and suicide contribute to a scarcity of older trans folk, also discussed by the narrator of the novel (Peters 2021: 209). It is therefore very common for trans people who have been out for longer to take younger trans folk under their wing. Despite claiming Thalia—a younger trans girl—as her daughter (Peters 2021: 90), Reese continues to express a longing to “become” a mother, failing to recognize that she

already *is* one. She even admits that she has “raised a few trans daughters over the years” (Peters 2021: 89), devaluing and invalidating such bonds. The historical significance of mother-daughter relationships among the queer community in New York, particularly among trans women, is highlighted by the narrator and linked to Reese’s experiences. The narrator specifically points out the enduring importance of “the mother role” for groups of Black and Latina trans women. Thus, the baby is ultimately a way for Reese to validate her sense of motherhood and fit herself into a normative, “real” mother role.

The baby leads to the the three main characters gaining an entire kinship network, including “a mother” through whom it is shown that queer people’s families of origin will not necessarily always reject them (Weston 1991: 22-23, 117; Butler 2002: 14). This is evidenced most through Reese, who expresses immense joy over gaining “a mother to oversee her mothering” (Peters 2021: 274) in the form of Katrina’s mother, Maya. Queer kinship and queer people’s fraught relationships with their families of origin (Pearson, Wilkinson 2013; Friedman et al 2011; Waller, Sanchez 2011) often deprives them of a multi-generational support network to potentially raise children in (Bradway 2023: 19). It is therefore notable that Maya is very supportive of her daughter planning to raise her own child in an unconventional, queer coparenting arrangement, even though she herself did not have such support from her parents. Katrina’s mother’s background as a first generation Chinese immigrant who rebelled against her parents’ wishes when she married a white American Jewish man contributes considerably to her acceptance of Katrina. When Katrina tells her about the pregnancy, Maya recounts her experiences of rejection and ousting by her own parents: “Maya’s unborn child /.../ would not be welcomed into the family. The coldness and distate that Maya’s mother had shown Isaac would be shown as well to his child” (Peters 2021: 109). In this way, the baby symbolizes a potential healing of past familial traumas, enabling the creation of new, supportive connections.

## 2.5 The Liminality of Identity and Queer Kinship Bonds

The convergence of what Bilgrami (2006: 5-6) calls “subjective” and “objective” identities is practically impossible because everyone perceives people differently. Moreover, one’s internal identity does not necessarily have to match their external portrayal (Erickson-Schroth 2022: 1471). This is particularly evident through the lens of intersectionality, where diverse experiences and varying social contexts combine to form the intricate human experience (Davis, Lutz 2024: 223; Keen 2022: 98). In the novel, merging with others further complicates the idea of a singular cohesive identity. This concept is not limited to queer relationships or kinship, although it is especially pronounced among queer individuals due to the lack of strict norms and guidelines dictating their journeys through life and relationships, also alluded to by Halberstam (2005: 2). This idea is reflected in the novel, where only a few characters are not queer. As Ames says: “Maybe this is so awkward and hard and without obvious precedent because we’re trying to imagine our own solution, to reinvent something for ourselves” (Peters 2021: 337). Therefore, the fluidity and subsequent potential lack of boundaries in some queer relationships can make it challenging to maintain distinct identities.

A prime example of this is the relationship between Reese and Amy. Though they start as lovers, Reese also quickly assumes a maternal role for Amy, guiding the “baby trans” (Peters 2021: 61) (as referred to by Reese) at the beginning of their relationship. Reese later reflects on their dynamic by describing Amy as “her first trans daughter“, whom she had “raised to love Reese as well as a wife” (Peters 2021: 89). Their bond, however, mirrors a sisterly connection too, since both characters were deprived of a traditional cis-heteronormative girlhood. Notably, it manifests itself through jealousy, as visible in Reese’s internal focalization: “Girls Reese grew up with used to call their sisters the smart one or the pretty one or the artistic one. Like a gawky little sister

suddenly coming into puberty to hit a golden note, Amy had become the pretty one” (Peters 2021: 193). Such feelings of comparison likely stem from both characters navigating femininity in a culture where it is often defined by competition and external validation.

This dynamic results in a peculiar blend of familial, romantic, and sexual relationships. This mirrors a tendency among many queer folk in real life, who, according to Weston (1991: 111), wish to remain friends or family with former lovers. The maternal role Reese adopts for Amy also raises questions about desire, particularly in the absence of maternal closeness in either characters’ past. The “the urge to merge” (Weston 1991: 150) is further illustrated when Reese tells her friends, “You two shouldn’t be gossiping about me,” and they respond, “We weren’t gossiping about you, we were gossiping about Amy.” (Peters 2021: 218) This exchange highlights the mixing of roles between them, which leads to a blending of their individual identities. It ultimately stifles their individuality, echoing the way heteronormative partnerships can demand conformity to rigid roles at the cost of personal identity (Weston 1991: 152). This is reflected in Amy talking about expressing and feeling desire, remarking that “only with Reese had the two ever merged” (Peters 2021: 247). As their identities become intertwined, shaped by histories of self-doubt and marginalization, the relationship becomes unsustainable.

When the baby enters the picture, it is almost as if Ames is pulled back to a time when he was first discovering his gender identity, having to once again reckon with the fact that that he does not feel like a man. His identity is liminal: he is and is not a trans woman at the same time. Since Reese is so willing and ready to adopt the role of a mother that Ames wishes he could have, he starts living vicariously through Reese. This becomes evident when he starts obsessively researching various ways in which Reese could be more physically part of the pregnancy, such as looking for the “hormone regime required in order to induce lactation in trans women” or what medication would “double the estrogen and progesterone doses to mimic the levels of pregnancy”

(Peters 2021: 274). The act that truly symbolizes the merging of their identities is him offering to put Reese's name on the baby's birth certificate alongside Katrina's (Peters 2021: 274), as if Ames—as his true self as a trans woman—is present through Reese.

Reese and Katrina's relationship also demonstrates a merging of identities. For one, Reese compares Katrina to a "baby queer" (Peters 2021: 293), positioning herself as a mentor figure more experienced within queer culture. This dynamic is exemplified when Katrina outs Ames to their entire office and turns to Reese—the only out trans person in her life besides Ames—for emotional and practical guidance (Peters 2021, 214–215; 226). Reese's role thus becomes akin to that of a mother, offering reassurance and guidance in navigating queer social dynamics. While their relationship is not romantic or sexual, Reese's description of her feelings toward Katrina as a "mom-crush" (Peters 2021, 266) points to a closeness that is nevertheless intimate, defined by a shared yearning for domesticity and family. Contrary to how couple-relationships are usually seen in Western society, prioritizing the romantic and sexual (Roseneil, Budgeon 2004), their "partnership" (Peters 2021: 267) is differentiated and emphasized through Reese's internal focalization: "They were not a lesbian couple. They were a mom-couple" (Peters 2021: 271-272). Reese's desire to be part of Katrina's family is further underscored by her wish to be seen as Maya's daughter (Peters 2021, 274).

Liminality is therefore a central thematic narrative device in *Detransition, Baby*. Each of the main three exists in a state of in-betweenness in some ways. They all take on maternal roles at different points of the narrative, yet none of them fully inhabit or feel valid in the role of "mother". Reese ironically refers to the trio as "three failed mom-wannabes" (Peters 2021, 174). When she suggests that Katrina has come closest to being a mother due to her pregnancy, the other woman replies, "That's not motherhood" (Peters 2021, 174), pointing to pregnancy itself as a liminal state. Their liminal identities parallel the liminality of the structure of their alternative family unit, a

theme also explored by Khan (2024: 49). Their relationships resist stable categorization: they form a kind of family, but one that lacks clear boundaries or definitions. As reflected in Gadoin and Ramel (2015: 5), the liminality is mirrored through the temporal structure of the narrative as well, unfolding between past and present, with an unresolved future.

The novel also highlights tensions within the broader queer community, particularly between transgender experiences and more mainstream lesbian and gay identities. Reese, for example, expresses discomfort when she is labeled a lesbian or compared to a lesbian parent (Peters 2021: 271-272), reflecting long-standing divisions between trans women and certain lesbian communities. Historically, certain lesbian feminist groups—such as trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs—have excluded or rejected trans women from their circles. This conflict dates back to the early gay and lesbian liberation movements. (Stryker 2008) For Reese, aligning herself with these groups would feel disingenuous due to this history. The tension is further reflected during the scene where a young lesbian couple at the park witnesses Stanley’s attack on Amy but does not intervene, reinforcing the lack of solidarity that Reese and Amy fear. The scene plays out through Amy’s focalization: “The two dyke teens had scrambled up at the early shouts of the scuffle. Now watching the scene from between the bars of the fence, they traded looks of baffled disdain, far from the faces of allies, and nothing even resembling kinship” (Peters 2021: 255). The particular use of the word “kinship” here demonstrates its loaded nature, referring to both emotional and familial connection, as well as political solidarity. The narrative suggests that these historical and social divisions contribute to the breakdown of Reese and Amy’s relationship, which Reese herself at first refers to as a “lesbian relationship” (Peters 2021: 8). Instead of mutual support, what often prevails is self-preservation, emphasizing how past and present rifts continue to shape queer community dynamics.

Intercommunity tensions are also highlighted in a scene when Thalia, Reese, and Katrina, are walking down the street and the latter casually points to a poster that features a transphobic slur “tranny” on it (Peters 2021: 219). This shocks the two trans women in her presence. The scene reveals a disjuncture between Katrina’s understanding of queerness as something abstract and liberating, and the lived realities of trans women like Reese and Thalia, for whom language remains traumatic. Reese critiques queer individuals who, after achieving social and economic security, forget the marginalization that still defines many trans lives:

These fucking assholes who transition with hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars to protect them from ever hearing someone say “tranny” to them on the street, so that one day, they can write *tranny* on the streets themselves, and congratulate themselves on being so punk (Peters 2021: 220).

This disparity reflects the uneven distribution of privilege within queer communities and highlights how class and gender identity shape access to safety and social belonging. Reese’s and Thalia’s experiences as working-class trans women differs from Katrina’s as a cis woman, leading to conflicting perceptions of what queerness means.

Gatekeeping and exclusion from the queer community, and thereby queer kinship, is also relevant here. For instance, it relates to Ames’ experiences with detransitioning. After transitioning and then detransitioning, Ames loses access to the queer and trans communities that once accepted him. The trans women who had welcomed him as one of their own now refuse to recognize his new identity, exemplified when Reese says that she “doesn’t respect Ames’s current gender at all. In her heart, she doesn’t think Ames is a man” (Peters 2021: 227). They continue to regard him as a trans woman but exclude him from their circles, effectively isolating him and leaving him without a support network or family. This exclusion is foreshadowed earlier through one of Amy’s analepses where she recalls meeting William, another detransitioner who faces similar rejection from Amy’s trans friends at a club. Despite his presence being acknowledged, the women treat him with visible distance: “no one made eye contact with him. Instead, they made space for him with

an air of resigned indulgence. It was as if he were an apparition whom they all could see but no one wanted to acknowledge” (Peters 2021: 32). These examples raise questions about who has the right to grant or evoke access to the queer community or kinship, and under what terms. The text suggests that the admittance may depend on performing identity “correctly”; in this instance fitting into transnormativity (MacKinnon, Valdes 2023; Vandenbusche 2021). The ease with which it is shown to be revoked can be read as the narrative critiquing some some queer people’s exclusionary tendencies that mirror the conformist expectations of cis-heteronormativity.

It is evident in the novel that marginalized people have to constantly assert the impact of their various identities on their lives. This often leads to people becoming too preoccupied with only their own experiences, forgetting the manifold similarities they share with other marginalized people. This is essentially what “identity politics” was critiqued for. It tended to veer into, what Reese refers to as “Oppression Olympics” (Peters 2021: 171), alluding to marginalized people fighting over who is more marginalized (Meghani 2023). When Reese and Katrina first meet, they both keep mentioning their own experiences as a trans woman and a mixed-race woman respectively. When Reese continuously highlights the differences between motherhood for cis and trans women, while alluding to how the situation is for *all* women, Katrina calls her out for it by pointing out that being racially othered changes these experiences. Reese concedes that she “had not expected to be questioned on her right to victimhood as a trans woman” (Peters 2021: 177). Katrina continues to emphasize race because Reese, as part of the white majority in their American context, benefits from a normativity that marginalizes the experiences of people of color. Katrina states: “So when I say I have reservations about this [their alternative family unit], it's not just logistics; my own identity is part of it, just like yours is for you” (Peters 2021: 177-178).

Finding commonality and solidarity between experiences, however, is crucial for marginalized communities to survive (Brown 1995: 61; Crenshaw 1991: 1242; Viveros-Vigoya

2024: 65). The novel highlights instances when being discriminated against for different reasons becomes a point of connection with others. Ames, for instance, expresses feelings of camaraderie with Katrina's experience of betrayal over finding out about her ex-husband's fetishization of Asian women through his collection of Asian pornography. Besides shattering her trust in him, this also invalidated her mixed-race identity. She reflects on it as such: "It means you begin to entertain creeping suspicions that the man you married /.../ might only be with you because he fetishizes Asians—even though I have felt not quite Asian my whole life. He couldn't even fetishize me accurately" (Peters 2021: 22). Ames' inner monologue reveals that he relates to the feeling of having "someone think that his desire for me degrades or lowers him" (Peters 2021: 23). Despite their distinct experiences—his with "tranny chasers" (Peters 2021: 22) and Katrina's with "rice chasers" (Peters 2021: 23)—they share the common feeling of being dehumanized through fetishization. The novel also includes examples of positive cross-community solidarity, such as when Thalia recounts a moment when two Black women protested the mistreatment of a trans woman's body after death. Reese reflects on this act of care by thinking that "for once, other people beyond trans women—a pair of older black women who likely have concerns of their own—have cared enough to protect a dead queer trans girl's dignity" (Peters 2021: 214). These moments highlight the power of solidarity across different communities.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis examined how queer kinship and complex identities are portrayed in Torrey Peters' novel *Detransition, Baby* through the framework of intersectional narratology. While the novel has begun to attract scholarly attention, existing research has primarily focused on themes of gender and family, leaving its narrative structure—particularly in relation to intersectionality—largely unexamined. This study addressed that gap by analyzing how nonnormative queer relationships are represented, how intersecting identities shape characters' experiences and power dynamics, and how broader social forces complicate kinship formation. These aspects were approached through key concepts, such as identity, gender identity, transgender identity, detransitioning, intersectionality, and queer kinship. While intersectionality has been widely used in gender studies, it continues to be rare in literary research. The thesis is built on the existing work on intersectional narratology where the formal and thematic narrative elements are combined with an intersectional understanding of identity.

The empirical analysis demonstrates how the text challenges dominant cis-heteronormative narratives by reimagining identity and kinship through a distinctly queer lens. Identity formation is portrayed as a complex and prolonged process, shaped by the specificities of queer experience. Kinship is similarly subverted and queered, most notably through the figure of the child, a symbol traditionally tied to cis-heteronormative ideals of reproduction and social progress. The narrative reveals how normative frameworks of kinship are simultaneously resisted and, at times, yearned for. It illustrates the mixed feelings that many queer individuals have about tradition, and how that is often complicated by intersecting identities and structural barriers. The baby becomes a symbol of this tension, representing not only the hope for legacy and continuity but also the loss and lack of generational support often caused by familial rejection or social exclusion. In this way, the child

embodies both the possibility of queer futurity and the desire for recognition within mainstream society.

A connected theme that emerges is the role of the body and reproduction in shaping identity and kinship within the novel. The body is revealed to be a symbolic space where power, exclusion, and longing are negotiated. Across the characters, different experiences of embodiment reveal both shared vulnerabilities and varying forms of access to social legitimacy. Whether through pregnancy, the inability to reproduce, or complicated feelings regarding gender and parenthood, each character's relationship to their body reflects broader tensions between personal identity and societal norms. The narrative critiques the deterministic ideal of womanhood as inherently tied to reproductive capacity, instead showing how queer kinship is mainly forged through shared emotional and physical spaces the characters create together. The novel challenges the notion that motherhood or kinship must be rooted in reproductive futurism. Ultimately, the novel presents the body as a place where both the limits and possibilities of queer kinship are continually negotiated.

Another significant finding is that a singular, cohesive identity is ultimately unmaintainable. Instead, it is presented as always shifting, overlapping, and retaining elements of the past. It is evident in how the characters' roles within their relationships defy strict categorization, revealing the unstable boundaries between self and other, past and present. Both identity and queer kinship emerge as inherently liminal, existing in a state of fluctuation and influenced by intersecting social factors, spatial settings, and temporal shifts. For queer individuals in particular, the absence of clear societal norms or intergenerational models makes these categories even more difficult to define or sustain.

The role of community in shaping identity and kinship, and community *as* kinship, is another central theme in the narrative. Both physical and symbolic proximity to community are shown to provide affirmation, protection, and belonging, playing a vital role in sustaining queer

identities and relationships. At the same time, the narrative critiques exclusionary practices within queer and trans spaces that can replicate the rigid norms and hierarchies they aim to resist, like cisnormativity, racism, and classism. These dynamics are particularly evident through the unequal distribution of narrative focalization, which in some ways parallels how much power the characters have socially and how much power they hold in their relationships. The text addresses historical and ongoing tensions within queer communities, revealing how intersecting identities can lead to both inclusion and exclusion depending on one's positionality. Gatekeeping and internal hierarchies are shown to undermine much-needed camaraderie, as power struggles across identity categories sometimes cultivate competition in terms of marginalization. The narrative ultimately affirms the necessity of cross- and intra-community solidarity essential for survival and collective empowerment.

Applying an intersectional narratological approach allowed for the discovery of narrative aspects that might have been overlooked in purely thematic or character-based analyses. By examining both the characters' intersecting identities and the novel's formal structure, it became clear how the narrative form supports and mirrors the depicted complex identities and relationships. For instance, the use of nonlinear temporality and shifting focalization not only reflects queer experiences but also illustrates the liminality that pervades the text. These findings suggest that trans and queer narratives need not rely on idealized or uncritical representations of queer characters. Instead, their flaws and contradictions can illustrate the lived realities of navigating queerness within normative societal structures and one's other intersecting social identities.

In conclusion, *Detransition, Baby* portrays identity and queer kinship as inherently complex, fluid, and shaped by intersecting social and personal facets. Just as identity resists fixed definitions, queer kinship is shown to be both deeply meaningful and difficult to sustain, marked by its potential for care and solidarity, but also by its vulnerability in the absence of clear models

or generational guidance. Notably, the narrative avoids resolving its tensions through conformity to normative or assimilative ideals, and instead presents its trans characters in complex, non-idealized ways, as their decisions and contradictions are left open to interpretation and critique. One limitation of this approach is that it focused on only a few formal and narrative elements, while many others could also be explored. In terms of future research, alternative devices or techniques could be additionally examined. The narrative could also be studied using reception theory to see what techniques are utilized to elicit empathy in readers and how effective they are. Further development of intersectional narratology and its application to other queer texts could also offer valuable insight into the evolving representation of identity and queer kinship in literature.

## REFERENCES

Primary source:

Peters, Torrey. 2020. *Detransition, Baby*. United States: Penguin Random House.

Secondary sources:

- Bal, Mieke. 1985. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Belmonte Ávila, Juan Francisco and Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo. 2024. Introduction: queer time unbound. In Belmonte Ávila and Encarnación-Pinedo (eds). *Unbound Queer Time in Literature, Cinema, and Video Games*, 3-15. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bilgrami, Akeel. 2006. Notes toward the definition of ‘identity’. *Daedalus*, 135: 4, 5–14.
- Bilgrami, Akeel. 2018. Identity. In J.M. Bernstein, Adi Ophir, Ann Laura Stoler (eds). *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, 159-166. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Bose, Christine E. 2012. Intersectionality and global gender inequality. *Gender and Society*, 26, 67–72.
- Bradway, Tyler. 2023. Aesthetics and affect. In Matthew Stratton (ed). *The Routledge Companion to Politics and Literature in English*, 8-19. London: Routledge.
- Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers and Frederick Cooper. 2000. Beyond ‘identity’. *Theory and Society*, 29: 1, 1-47.
- Burnett, Colin. 2014. ICE POISON (Midi Z, 2014): Realist Transparency and Dedramatization in The Contemporary Art Film. Available at <https://colininthemovies.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/ice-poison-midi-z-2014-realist-transparency-and-dedramatization-in-the-contemporary-art-film/>, accessed March 26, 2025.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2002. Is kinship always already heterosexual? *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13: 1, 14-44.
- Butter, Susannah. 2021. Women’s prize nominated trans novelist Torrey Peters: ‘Detransitioning needs to stop being weaponised’. Available at <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/torrey-peters-transition-detransition-womens-prize-b925471.html>, accessed December 14, 2024.
- Büyükgöbüz, Mustafa. 2023. Breaking the Mold: Masculinities and Family Dynamics in *Detransition, Baby*. Available at [https://www.academia.edu/108499573/Breaking\\_the\\_Mold\\_Masculinities\\_and\\_Family\\_Dynamics\\_in\\_Detransition\\_Baby\\_B%C3%BCy%C3%BCkgebiz\\_M](https://www.academia.edu/108499573/Breaking_the_Mold_Masculinities_and_Family_Dynamics_in_Detransition_Baby_B%C3%BCy%C3%BCkgebiz_M), accessed on March 10, 2024
- Cain, Sian. 2021. Women’s prize condemns online attack on trans nominee Torrey Peters.

- Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/07/womens-prize-condemns-online-attack-on-trans-nominee-torrey-peters-detransition-baby>, accessed on March 10, 2024.
- Capdevila, Rose and Lisa Lazard. 2014. Gender, overview. In Thomas Teo (ed). *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, 763-767. New York: Springer.
- Chadwick, Rachele. 2017. Thinking intersectionally with/through narrative methodologies. *Agenda*, 31: 1, 5–16.
- Chou, Rosalind S. *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chu, Erica, Arbor Archuletta, and Joseph Liatela. 2022. Arts and culture. In Laura Erickson-Schroth (ed). *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1336-1395. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Combahee River Collective. 1977. The Combahee River Collective Statement. Available <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>, accessed October 2, 2024.
- Cosker-Rowland, Rach. 2023. The normativity of gender. *Noûs*, 58: 1, 244-270.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989: 1, 139-167.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43: 6, 1241-1299.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Field, Sophia. 2024. *Tensions of the Body: Transgender Literature and the Body in Space and Time*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Department of English, State University of New York, New York, USA.
- Davis, Kathy. 2008. Intersectionality as buzzword: a sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory*, 1: 9, 67–85.
- Davis, Kathy. 2014. Intersectionality as critical methodology. In Nina Lykke (ed). *Writing Academic Texts Differently: Intersectional Feminist Methodologies and the Playful Art of Writing*, 17-29. New York: Routledge.
- Davis, Kathy and Helma Lutz. 2022. Thinking Locally and Globally about Intersectionality. Available at <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/thinking-locally-and-globally-about-intersectionality>, accessed June 18, 2024.
- Davis, Kathy and Helma Lutz. 2024. Intersectionality as critical method: asking the other question. In Kathy Davis and Helma Lutz (eds). *The Routledge International Handbook for Intersectionality Studies*, 222-234. New York: Routledge.
- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Editorial Team of English Studies. n.d. Intersectionality in Literature & Literary Theory. Available at <https://english-studies.net/intersectionality-in-literature-literary-theory/>, accessed June 20, 2024.
- Erickson-Schroth, Laura. 2022. Glossary. In Laura Erickson-Schroth (ed). *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1462-1484. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Filipova, Lenka. 2024. Temporality and trans literature. In Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, 93-103. New York: Routledge.

- Fludernik, Monika. 2009. *An Introduction to Narratology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fludernik, Monika. 2015. *An Introduction to Narratology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge.
- Forster, Edward M. 1927. *Aspects of the Novel*. London: Edward Arnold
- Friedman, Mark S, Michael P. Marshal, Thomas E. Guadamuz, Chongyi Wei, Carolyn F. Wong, Elizabeth M. Saewyc, and Ron Stall. 2011. A meta-analysis of disparities in childhood sexual abuse, parental physical abuse, and peer victimization among sexual minority and sexual nonminority individuals. *American Journal of Public Health*, 101: 8, 1481-1494.
- Gadoin, Isabelle and Annie Ramel. 2013. Liminality – introduction. *The Hardy Review*, 15: 1, 5-10.
- Gajdošíková, Veronika. 2023. *Selected Aspects of Gender Transition in Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other and Detransition, Baby by Torrey Peters*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Faculty of Pedagogy, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic.
- Genette, Gérard. [1972] 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gill, Victoria Singh. 2016. “Everybody else gets to be normal”: using intersectionality and Ms. Marvel to challenge “normal” identity. *The ALAN Review*, 44: 1, 68-78.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso Books
- Halberstam, Jack [published as Judith]. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. Introduction: Who needs 'identity'? In Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds). *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1-17. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Hamam, Kinana. 2015. Postcolonialism and feminism: an intersectional discourse of reconstruction. Available at <http://www.postcolonialstudiesassociation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/PSA-Newsletter-15-Spring-2015-FINAL.pdf>, accessed June 20, 2024.
- Hames-García, Michael. 2011. *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hammes, Aaron. 2022. Really, truly trans and the (minor) literary discontents of authenticity. *Humanities* 2022, 11: 6, 143.
- Hammes, Aaron. 2024. Minor literature and transgender literature. In Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, 448-458. New York: Routledge.
- Hekman, Susan. 1999. Identity crises: identity, identity politics, and beyond. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 2: 1, 3–26.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Hogan, Ginny. 2021. Order and chaos, mostly chaos, in 3 debut novels. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/books/review/detransition-baby-torrey-peters.html>, accessed on March 10, 2024.
- Jones, Thea. 2024. The outlawed nipple: breastless parents and the desire to conform to normative motherhood. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 14: 2, 75-88.
- Jourdan, Mira C. and Harper B. Keenan. 2022. Our selves. In Laura Erickson-Schroth (ed). *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities*, 2nd ed, 24-85. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Keen, Suzanne. 2007. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keen, Suzanne. 2022. *Empathy and Reading: Affect, Impact, and the Co-Creating Reader*. New

- York: Routledge.
- Keen, Suzanne. Intersectional narratology in the study of narrative empathy. In Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (eds). *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*, 123-146. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Khan, Scheherazade. 2023. Intersectional literary analysis: reading between, behind, and beyond the lines. *Postcolonial Interventions*, 6: 2, 133–165.
- Kheraj, Alim. 2021. Torrey Peters on the Women’s Prize and transphobia: ‘I’d never felt that bad faith up close’. Available at <https://inews.co.uk/culture/torrey-peters-detransition-baby-transphobia-womens-prize-for-fiction-2021-944862>, accessed on February 28, 2025.
- Kirkus Reviews. 2020. *Detransition, Baby*. Available at <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/torrey-peters/detransition-baby/>, accessed on March 10, 2024.
- Kroskrity, Paul V. 1999. Identity. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 9: 1/2, 111-114.
- Ku, Chung-Hao. 2024. Nonlinearity and trans literature. In Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, 104-112. New York: Routledge.
- Lanser, Susan. Towards (a queerer and) more (feminist) narratology. In Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (eds). *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*, 23-42. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Lavery, Grace. 2021. *Detransition, Baby* by Torrey Peters review – a comedy of manners. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jan/07/detransition-baby-by-torrey-peters-review-a-comedy-of-manners>, accessed on March 10, 2024.
- Lennon, Kathleen and Clara Fischer. 2024. Feminist perspectives on the body. Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/feminist-body/>, accessed May 9, 2025.
- Long, Crispin. 2021. The insider insights of “*Detransition, Baby*”. Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-insider-insights-of-detransition-baby>, accessed on March 10, 2024.
- Lutz, Helma. 2015. Intersectionality as method. *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 2:1-2, 39-44.
- Matsuda, Mari. 1991. Beside my sister, facing the enemy: legal theory out of coalition. *Stanford Law Review*, 43: 6, 1183-1192.
- Mayne, Michael. 2024. The radical novel as trans literature. In Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, 438-447. New York: Routledge.
- McCarthy Blackston, Dylan. 2023. Introduction: transgender studies remixed. In Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston (eds). *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, 1-30. New York: Routledge.
- Meghani, Zahra. 2023. Intersectionality, intersectional standpoints, and identity politics. *Hypatia*, 38: 4, 871–95.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Nay, Yv E. 2015. ‘Happy as in queer’ – the affective paradoxes of queer families. *Sociologus*, 65: 1, 35-53.
- Nikiema, Patoimbasba. 2024. Francophone African literature and the question of interlocking identities: an intersectional approach to literary analysis. *The French Review*, 38: 2, 69-85.
- NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project. n.d. Riis Park Beach. Available at <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/beach-at-jacob-riis-park/>, accessed May 5, 2025.
- Oasvesi, Usva. 2023. *Transness and the Politics of Passing in Torrey Peters’ Detransition, Baby*.

- Unpublished BA Thesis. Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, Tampere University, Finland.
- Olivier, Joshua. 2022. Identity to affinity: a conversation with Torrey Peters. Available at <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2024/02/identity-to-affinity-a-conversation-with-torrey-peters/>, accessed December 14, 2024.
- Pearson, Jennifer, and Lindsey Wilkinson. 2013. Family relationships and adolescent well-being: are families equally protective for same-sex attracted youth? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43, 376-393.
- Pellegrini, Chiara. 2023. Temporalities beyond transition: form, genre, and contemporary trans novels. *Studies in the Novel*, 55: 4, 492-508.
- Penguin Random House. 2021. Detransition, Baby: A Novel by Torrey Peters. Available at <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/621886/detransition-baby-by-torrey-peters/>, accessed on May 5, 2025.
- Respaut, Robin, Chad Terhune and Michelle Conlin. 2022. Why detransitioners are crucial to the science of gender care. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-transyouth-outcomes/>, accessed on March 10, 2024.
- Rodríguez, Richard T. 2013. Transnational adoption and queer diasporas. In Donald E. Hall, Annamaria Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter (eds). *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, 324-332. London and New York: Routledge.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Shelley Budgeon. 2004. Cultures of intimacy and care beyond 'the family': personal life and social change in the early 21st century. *Current Sociology*, 52: 2, 135-159.
- Roulston, Chris. 2021. Queer parenting and the challenge to queer theory. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 46: 1, 117-144.
- Salaberriaa, Karmele, José Ignacio Pérez-Fernández and Esther Gómez-Gilc. 2023. Gender detransition: a critical review of the literature. *Actas Españolas de Psiquiatría*, 51: 3, 98-118.
- Segal, Lynne. 2010. Genders: deconstructed, reconstructed, still on the move. In Margaret Wetherell and Chandra T. Mohanty (eds). *The Sage Handbook of Identities*, 321-338. London: Sage.
- Sharp, Sabine. 2024. Introduction. In Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, 1-16. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Eliza. 2022. Here are the winners of the 2022 PEN America Literary Awards. Available at <https://lithub.com/here-are-the-winners-of-the-2022-pen-america-literary-awards/>, accessed December 13, 2024.
- Stone, Sandy. [1987] 2023. The empire strikes back: a posttranssexual manifesto. In Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston (eds). *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, 15-30. New York: Routledge.
- Stryker, Susan. 2004. Transgender studies: queer theory's evil twin. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10: 2, 212-215.
- Stryker, Susan. 2008. Stray thoughts on transgender feminism and the Barnard conference on women. *The Communication Review*, 11: 3, 217-218.
- Stryker, Susan. [2008] 2017. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Seal Press.
- Stryker, Susan. 2023. Foreword. In Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston. *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, x-xi. New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, Stephanie. 2014. Identity. In Thomas Teo (ed). *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, 933-936. New York: Springer.

- The New York Times. 2024. 100 Best Books of the 21st Century. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/books/best-books-21st-century.html>, accessed December 13, 2024.
- Uibo, Raili. 2021. “*And I Don’t Know Who We Really Are to Each Other*” *Queers Doing Close Relationships in Estonia*. Huddinge: Södertörn University.
- Valdes, Daniela and Kinnon MacKinnon. 2023. Take detransitioners seriously. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/detransition-transgender-nonbinary-gender-affirming-care/672745/>, accessed December 16, 2024.
- Vandenbussche, Elie. 2021. Detransition-related needs and support: a cross-sectional online survey. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 69: 9, 1602-1620.
- Vignoles, Vivian L, Seth J. Schwartz and Koen Luyckx. 2011. Introduction: toward and integrative view of identity. In Vivian L. Vignoles, Seth J. Schwartz and Koen Luyckx (eds). *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, 1-27. New York: Springer Science+Business Media.
- Viveros-Vigoya, Mara. 2024. The travels of intersectionality in Latin America: bringing the desks out onto the streets. In Kathy Davis and Helma Lutz (eds). *The Routledge International Handbook for Intersectionality Studies*, 55-68. New York: Routledge
- Waller, Martha W, Rebecca P. Sanchez. 2011. The association between same-sex romantic attractions and relationships and running away among a nationally representative sample of adolescents. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 28: 1, 475-493.
- Wesling, Meg. 2008. Why queer diaspora? *Feminist Review*, 90, 20-47.
- West, Candace and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, 1: 2, 125-151.
- Weston, Kath. 1991. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Women’s Prize 2021. Revealing the 2021 Women’s Prize longlist. Available at <https://womensprize.com/revealing-the-2021-womens-prize-longlist/>, accessed March 10, 2024.
- Wyatt, Neal and Joyce G. Saricks. 2019. *The Reader's Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Chicago: ALA Editions.

## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Mii Valgma**

**Intersectional Narratological Analysis of Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby*. Torrey Petersi romaani *Detransition, Baby* interseksionaalne narratoloogiline analüüs.**

Magistritöö

2025

Lehekülgede arv: 69

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev magistritöö uurib identiteedi ja kväärlähisuhete keerukust Torrey Petersi romaanis *Detransition, Baby*, kasutades interseksionaalse narratoloogia raamistikku. Töö eesmärk oli analüüsida mittenormatiivsete kväärlähisuhete (*queer kinship*) kujutamist, ristuvate identiteetide kujutamiseks kasutatavaid narratiivseid võtteid, tegelaste kogemuste ja identiteetide mõju üksteisevahelisele võimudünaamikale ning laiemate sotsiaalsete tegurite mõju kväärlähisuhete keerukusele.

Töö koosneb kahest peamisest osast, millele eelneb sissejuhatus, kus antakse ülevaade teose retseptioonist ning tekstist varasemalt kirjutatud akadeemilise kirjanduse põhjal selgitatakse välja uurimislünk. Sellele järgneb kirjanduse ülevaade, kus avatakse interseksionaalsuse ja kväärlähisuhete keskeid mõisteid ning kirjeldatakse interseksionaalse narratoloogia põhimõtteid ja rakendamisevõimalusi. Empiirilise analüüsi osas käsitletakse seda, kuidas erinevad interseksionaalsed identiteedid ja kväärlähisuhted teksti vormilistes ja temaatilistes narratiivielementides väljenduvad.

Analüüsist selgus, et narratiiv seab kahtluse alla paiksoolised heteronormatiivsed normid, kujutades identiteeti ja lähisuhteid läbi kvääri vaatenurga, õõnestades traditsioonilisi ideid reproduktiivsest tulevikust ja ühiskonna poolt määratud ootuseid elu lineaarsest ajalisest kulgemisest. Analüüs näitas, et identiteeti ja kväärlähisuhteid kujutatakse voolava ja muutuvana, hoidudes omavaheliste suhete konkreetsest määratlusest. Kuigi narratiiv kritiseerib normatiivseid identiteedi, vanemluse ja lähisuhete struktuure ja ootuseid, väljendatakse selle kaudu samas ka soovi ühiskondliku tunnustuse ja kuuluvuse järele. Teos rõhutab solidaarsuse ja vastastikuse tunnustamise tähtsust nii marginaliseeritud kogukondade sees kui ka nende vahel, mis on ka kväärlähisuhete kestlikkuse seisukohast hädavajalik.

Märksõnad: Interseksionaalsus, interseksionaalne narratoloogia, identiteet, kväär-kirjandus

## **Lihtlitsents**

### **Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks**

Mina, Mii Valgma,

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) enda loodud teose

Intersectional Narratological Analysis of Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby*, mille juhendaja on prof. Raili Marling,

1.1. reprodutseerimiseks säilitamise ja üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemise eesmärgil, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace-is lisamise eesmärgil kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni;

1.2. üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks Tartu Ülikooli veebikeskkonna kaudu, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace'i kaudu kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni.

2. olen teadlik, et punktis 1 nimetatud õigused jäävad alles ka autorile.

3. kinnitan, et lihtlitsentsi andmisega ei rikuta teiste isikute intellektuaalomandi ega isikuandmete kaitse seadusest tulenevaid õigusi.

Digiallkirjastatud  
Mii Valgma

Tartus, 13.05.2025

**Autorsuse kinnitus**

Kinnitan, et olen koostanud käesoleva magistritöö ise ning toonud korrekselt välja teiste autorite panuse. Töö on koostatud lähtudes Tartu Ülikooli maailma keelte ja kultuuride instituudi anglistika osakonna oma õppekava magistritöö juhendist ning on kooskõlas heade akadeemiliste tavadega.

Digialkirjastatud  
Mii Valgma

Tartus, 13.05.2025

**Lõputöö on lubatud kaitsmisele.**

Raili Marling

Tartus, 13.05.2025