

DESIRE FOR TRANS ANCESTORS

An Affective Reading of Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the relationship between the affective histories of queer and trans activism and the reading and writing of contemporary fictional trans literature is explored. The focus lies on the analysis of Jordy Rosenberg's (2018) *Confessions of the Fox*, which allows for an investigation into how trans histories can be written and read. The article emphasizes the intricate interplay between literature and history, specifically examining the tensions and pleasures that arise from balancing authenticity and fictionality. Additionally, the role of literature as a medium for expressing emotions and inspiring activism is considered. *Confessions of the Fox* tells the story of a fictional transmasculine literary scholar who discovers a mysterious manuscript that reveals the trans identity of 18th-century London's infamous thief and jailbreaker Jack Sheppard. The narrative of *Confessions of the Fox* establishes an analogy between human bodies and written texts, specifically referring to the trans body. I argue that the narrative itself approaches the body and the manuscript through the affect of desire. Drawing on the concept of textual desire, as found in Roland Barthes' (1975) *The Pleasure of the Text* and in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), the article analyzes the relationship between text and readership to trace pleasurable and ethical encounters with otherness. Overall, the article puts forward the idea to consider reading practices as a tool through which we can investigate the significance and ramifications of queer and trans histories and activism.

Keywords: trans literature, historiographic metafiction, *Confessions of the Fox*, textual desire, queer reading, trans reading, authenticity, trans literacy

Introduction

Transgender plays with time, history, and temporality in a multitude of ways that demand intentional and multiple ways of telling trans histories and narratives.

M. W. Bychowski (Devun & Tortorici 2018, 668)

As a literary scholar working on a project about contemporary fictional trans literature, I am of course intrigued by the question of what the writing and also the reading of fictional trans literature could mean for the context of affective histories of queer and trans activism. When do histories of queer and trans activism become affective? Affectivity is central to literature, since art as a form of aesthetic experience aims to affect its readers and evoke emotions. "Literary language [...]", Jane Bennett (2015, 141) points out, "engages our imaginations at a visceral level, to help us feel what cannot be seen". Writers employ language to express, communicate, and depict emotions, and literature provides a distinctive way to grasp the multiplicity and intricacy of human emotional experiences.

In this article, my focus is on examining the interplay between affectivity, story, history, historiography, and queer and trans activism. To accomplish

this, I will analyze Jordy Rosenberg's (2018) *Confessions of the Fox*, a work of historiographic metafiction¹. Through its narrative, *Confessions of the Fox* offers insights into the questions of how queer and trans histories can be written as well as on how they can be read. At a university's library yard sale, the fictional transmasculine literary scholar and narrator Dr. R. Voth finds a mysterious manuscript and suspects it to be the authentic memoir of London's 18th-century infamous thief and jailbreaker Jack Sheppard. The historical Sheppard was known for escaping from prison several times and later served as a model for numerous fictionalizations such as John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) or Bertold Brecht's character Mackie Messer in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). In *Confessions of the Fox*, however, the story of Jack Sheppard is told from a new perspective that reinterprets Sheppard as trans and explicitly focuses on the experiences of marginalized people in 18th-century London, such as sex workers and rogues as well as queer, trans, and racialized individuals.

Starting with the epigraph "Love's mysteries in souls do grow, but yet, the body is his book" (vii), two lines from John Donne's poem *The Ecstasy* (1633), the text establishes an analogy between body and book, suggesting that the body is a text which can be written and read, closely linking the bodily and the textual. However, as I will demonstrate, *Confessions of the Fox* is not just referring to any body, but to the trans body in particular. The encounter with the mysterious manuscript found by Dr. R. Voth subsequently serves as a metaphor of an encounter with a trans body, so that everything said about the manuscript or the textual body can be read as referring to the trans body and vice versa. By this, the trans body appears

1 The concept of *historiographic metafiction* was coined by literary theorist Linda Hutcheon (1988, 5) in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. She refers to historiographic metafiction as "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages".

in its textuality, making it accessible as something which is written and read. Further, the theme of encountering something mysterious, something not readily comprehensible because its identity, genre, and authorship are not clear (yet), points towards broader questions of recognition (what is this?), authenticity (is this real?), intelligibility (how do I culturally understand and classify this?) and the ethics of encounter (how do I approach this?).

With regard to these questions, I argue that *Confessions of the Fox* approaches both the manuscript as well as the trans body through the affect of desire. In general, I understand 'affective' as referring to emotional or subjectively felt aspects of behavior, experience or expression. Without engaging in an extensive debate on the theorization and differentiation of the terms 'emotions' and 'affects', my approach to analyzing *Confessions of the Fox* draws inspiration from Sara Ahmed. Ahmed (2014, 97) perceives affects "as part of what emotions do" yet maintains a critical stance towards rigid demarcations between affects and emotions. Ahmed (2004, 4) characterizes emotions as cultural and therefore dynamic forces that direct our orientation either away from or towards specific objects or individuals. In her work, she is interested in tracking "how emotions circulate between bodies" and how they "shape the very surfaces of bodies" (ibid.). Like this, Ahmed places significant emphasis on the role emotions play in defining the constitutive boundaries between individuals and their surrounding world. "[I]t is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others", Ahmed explains, "that surfaces and boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (ibid., 10).

Employing this approach, which aims to explore emotions and affects as forces moving bodies towards and away from others, in the context of literature allows me to illuminate the relational and embodied aspects of emotions and affects. Furthermore, Ahmed's (ibid., 12) perspective

acknowledges the affective impact of textual encounters due to their evocative qualities when positing that “figures of speech’ are crucial to the emotionality of texts”.

While Ahmed’s perspective is certainly valuable in emphasizing the relationality of emotions and affects, when it comes to tracing the movement of desire in the text, I remain inclined to favor the term ‘affect’. This preference stems from its ability to offer a more encompassing understanding of desire, acknowledging the complex interactions of emotions, visceral sensations, and bodily affects. Moreover, ‘affect’ underscores the intensity and immediacy of desire, capturing its preverbal, somatic, and not necessarily conscious dimensions (cf. Gould 2009, 19–20).

Despite its significance as a form of intense longing or wanting for something or someone and despite it having been a prominent subject of psychoanalysis and feminist theory, Kristyn Gorton (2007, 345) criticizes that desire is frequently neglected within discussions of affect studies. Gorton (2008, 8) points out that there have been numerous theorizations of desire where it “has been understood as both an emotion and an affect, as a drive, and as the essence of human subjectivity”. But when analyzing cultural products, Gorton (2007, 346) suggests shifting the focus from offering additional interpretations and definitions to considering “what desire does rather than what it is”.

In my analysis of *Confessions of the Fox*, I argue that the pervasive influence of the affective experience of desire is actively shaping the narrative throughout its pages. In line with Ahmed and Gorton, I aim to explore the effect of desire by understanding desire as a movement capable of both uniting and dividing, fostering intimacy, or creating distance. With this in mind, the circulation of affect between the text and its readers can be viewed as a possible form of intersubjective activism, as it has the potential

to shape bodies, forge connections, and thereby challenge hegemonic affective arrangements.

When delving into the realm of the affective within the literary field, it is essential to recognize that this article prioritizes the exploration of story over history. Specifically, when analyzing literary works, particularly those of fiction, the emphasis lies on the narrative and the art of storytelling, rather than on factual accuracy or historical authenticity. However, history and story are also intricately intertwined in multiple ways. All forms of history and historiography rely to some extent on storytelling techniques to convey their truths,² just as many historical novels use historical events and characters as the basis for their fictional narratives. Stories, however, are not bound by strict adherence to factual accuracy and may playfully blur the lines between fact and fiction. In the end, a literary text is an artistic creation that establishes a connection with its readers and engages them on an experiential and affective level.

While the focus of literary creation and analysis may differ from that of traditional historiography, the historiographic and literary narratives have more crucial points of contact when it comes to the excavation and articulation of the histories of marginalized subjects. For them to even emerge, they are faced with considerably greater challenges due to the structural gaps and epistemic invisibilities. The use of literary storytelling can help to balance these limitations of historiography. In her essay *Venus in Two Acts*, Saidiya Hartman (2008) for instance proposes the method of *critical fabulation* to serve the cause of historiography of marginalized subjects whose archives are marked by the violence of absences and

2 However, the question of the significance of narrative and narrativity in historiography encompasses a vast and contentious field which has seen much discussion and controversy. To explore the topic further, see, for example, Lorenz, Berger, and Brauch (2021).

omissions (cf. Hartman 2008; 2019). Therefore, this article also discusses whether the act of reading and writing fictional trans (hi)stories can be a form of activism, too, and if yes, how?

In the following, I will begin by employing the theoretical framework of textual desire to establish the basis for my analysis. From there, I will delve into the exploration of how the reciprocal desires between the text and the reader influence and shape the meaning, interpretation, and overall reading experience. Since *Confessions of the Fox* establishes an analogy between the text and the body, the theoretical concept of textual desire becomes a lens that not only provides insights into the literary text but also sheds light on trans corporeality. In this article, I intend to explore the circulation of desire within the literary text, examine the significance of textual desire in the realm of contemporary trans fiction, and analyze Jordy Rosenberg's approach to reading and writing trans histories, focusing specifically on his novel *Confessions of the Fox*.

Textual desires and queer and trans readings

The concept of textual desire is largely associated with poststructuralist literary theory, for example Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) as well as with the concept of *Queer Reading*, as linked to the work of US literary scholar and pioneer of queer studies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Both currents emphasize the idea that texts are not simply passive carriers of meaning, but rather active participants in shaping the desires and identities of their readers and vice versa. In this view, reading is understood as a dynamic interaction between the text, the reader, and the cultural and historical contexts in which they are situated. It is important to note that there is no unified theorizing regarding both the concept of textual desire and the method of queer reading. By drawing on Barthes' and Sedgwick's approaches, among others, I develop an understanding of textual desire

as an intimate relationship between the text and the reader, which both accounts for the reader's desire to read and also for the text's desire to be read.

Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* explores the various ways in which the reader experiences pleasure and meaning in reading and how this experience is shaped by the text itself as well as by the reader's own desires and expectations. He argues that there are two different modes of pleasure in reading: *plaisir* (pleasure) and *jouissance* (bliss). *Plaisir* refers to a pleasure that comes from reading a well-written text or the re-reading of a familiar story which Barthes characterizes as a "comfortable practice of reading" (Barthes 1975, 14; emphasis in original). *Jouissance*, on the other hand, "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language". While the reader is affirmed "in the consistency of his selfhood" by reading a *text of pleasure*, reading a *text of bliss* is a more intense, disruptive pleasure that arises from encountering something new, unknown, other and potentially unsettling which results in a certain loss of self (ibid.). In other words, one may assert that whereas a *text of pleasure* provides satisfaction to its readers, a *text of bliss* is deeply affective in a transformative sense. At the same time, however, Barthes does not assume a text to exclusively be a *text of pleasure* or a *text of bliss*; rather, a text can contain both pleasure and bliss, both the known and the unknown, with one element usually prevailing over the other. When reading, the reader encounters both pleasure and bliss which makes them a "subject split twice over, doubly perverse" because "he [sic] enjoys the consistency of his selfhood [...] and seeks its loss" (ibid.; emphasis in original).

Besides this, Barthes also discusses the corresponding idea of a *writerly* text, which is one that – in contrast to a *readerly* text³ – invites the

3 Barthes already introduces the terms *writerly* and *readerly texts* in *S/Z* (1970).

reader to participate in its creation and interpretation as its meaning is not immediately evident. Such a text allows for multiple readings and interpretations and it is the reader's engagement with the text that brings it to life. Barthes moreover assumes that texts carry erotic stimuli which captivate and seduce the reader. As a result, the reader becomes absorbed by the text and is fascinated by its mysteries, desiring to make sense of its enigmatic qualities. This "avidity for knowledge" or for "whatever furthers the solution of the riddle" is what Barthes calls *Oedipal pleasure*: "to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end" (ibid., 10–11).

Since the meaning of a text is often neither obvious nor permanently fixable, the textual desire in this case expresses itself as a desire for meaning which demands an active effort on the part of the reader. Benedikt Wolf starts from the premise of a "fundamental mysteriousness of literary texts" (Wolf 2019, 13; my translation). By drawing on French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche's (1987) *General Theory of Seduction*, Wolf understands this fundamental mysteriousness, similar to Barthes' erotic stimuli, as a situation of seduction in which the text seems to want something from the reader, while it is remaining unclear what exactly. The way, however, in which texts handle their own mysteriousness and their seductive qualities can vary significantly: some texts emphasize their own mysteriousness, while others refrain from overtly displaying it (Wolf 2019, 13). In the context of mysteriousness, the textual desire appears as a quality of the text itself which is able to draw the reader in and make them follow its path of desire. On the other hand, the reader enjoys the thrill of not (yet) knowing, compelling them to continue reading and form a relationship with the text. The reader's pleasure lies in allowing themselves to be captivated by the text while simultaneously attempting to comprehend its meaning.

However, as Wolf annotates, "the pleasure of the text is not neutral", but the themes of desire, pleasure and seduction subsequently raise questions of

gender relations (ibid., 14; my translation). Especially the literary-oriented queer studies have been concerned with the relationship between language, desire, and gender. In this context, Sedgwick's work laid the cornerstones for a method of reading known today as *Queer Reading*. In her book *Between Men*, Sedgwick emphasizes the importance of the text as a site where desire can be expressed and negotiated beyond the intention of the author or even the characters involved in the plot. Sedgwick (1985, 21) argues that desire between men in 18th and 19th-century English literature is often expressed through a variety of linguistic, stylistic, and narrative techniques within a structure of erotic triangles. She argues that these techniques constitute a kind of coded language that allows desire between men to be identified without naming it directly. Queer reading can thus be seen as a method for decoding the "erotic subtexts and shadow histories" (Kraß 2003, 22). By reading between the lines, the reader can excavate the latent queer desires embedded in the subtext.⁴ Meridith Kruse (2019, 134–136) points out that Sedgwick is "situat[ing] her reading practice in the context of hostile culture", where projecting one's own queer desires onto a text becomes essential for countering heterosexist suppression and serves as "a tool for survival and resistance".

Ján Demčišák (2012, 91), however, criticizes this approach of differentiating between a heteronormative surface and a hidden queer subtext, arguing that the failure to recognize the queer subtext reveals itself as an exclusive

4 Nevertheless, Andreas Kraß consistently emphasizes that a queer reading should not be misunderstood as a biographical method aiming to identify the author's personal (homosexual) desire in the text (Kraß 2009, 97). Instead, queer reading is a "critical reading method which deconstructs heteronormative oppositions and takes a look at the explicit and implicit spaces of desire through close reading" (Kraß 2015, 329; my translation). Thus, the practice of decoding has to be understood as *one* possible form of conducting a queer reading, whereas others would focus on how the textual structure itself challenges or 'queers' (hetero)normativity and binarily structured arrangements.

(in)ability to decode queerness. Demčišák emphasizes that the desire to read for queerness is not indicative of a quality inherent in the text itself. Rather than a textual desire (*Textbegehren*), Demčišák argues that decoding queerness reflects a reading desire (*Lesebegehren*). Disregarding the intersubjective circulation of emotions and affects and their mutually constitutive effects, Demčišák's interpretation considers desire as a trait that can be attributed either to the text or to the reader (ibid.). However, he raises the important question of "how we should actually deal with the desire to read for queerness" (ibid., 93; my translation). As a response, he suggests "being aware of one's own desire, intentionally displaying it or at least accepting it" (ibid.). Although I agree with Demčišák's perspective on the importance of acknowledging one's own desires instead of denying them, it appears that Demčišák may not fully consider the structural imbalances in (historical) texts that contribute to the need of reading for queerness, specifically in terms of who is represented and who is marginalized or absent. Based on my exploration of trans literature, I thus argue that instead of merely accepting one's desire to read for queerness, approaching literature with a sense of desire and submitting to its effects on the relationship between text and reader can prove to be a highly productive starting point for literary creation and the pleasure of reading.

With regard to the context of trans literature, however, Alexander Eastwood (2014) and Sam Holmqvist (2018) have made notable contributions to the discourse on reading practices by introducing the concept of trans reading. Their research explores the ways in which historical literary works can be read to trace a history of trans literature and grapple with the complexities of the desire for recognition. Encountering representations of trans ancestors in historical literature or documents often prompts questions about how these characters and their experiences can be interpreted (Eastwood 2014, 591; Holmqvist 2018, 187). Holmqvist (2018, 188) observes that there are many depictions in historical literature

of "experiences, expressions, and lives [...] that we would today refer to as 'trans'". Reading about these characters today, it is not uncommon for them to be claimed as either lesbian/gay or trans, depending on the desire of the reader. Holmqvist (ibid., 190) argues that claiming a character as lesbian/gay does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of also claiming them as trans. Ultimately, the terminological discussions about how to correctly identify a character point towards the inherent desire to establish a literary canon of either gay/lesbian or trans literature.

Although Eastwood (2014, 591) acknowledges that "marginalized readers crave historical representations of themselves", and affectively relate to literature in this way, he critically calls this approach a "revisionist reading strateg[y]" (ibid., 595) since it "appropriate[s] the past for present agendas" (ibid., 601–602). Due to limited findings of trans individuals in historical texts as well as to concerns about ineptly applying contemporary gender identity categories and concepts to the past, Eastwood modifies his approach to trans literature towards a practice of "resonant reading". Instead of aiming for recognition through identification, this approach directs its attention to the portrayal of relatable experiences and topics by emphasizing the importance of "similarities and affinities" (ibid., 595). Eastwood's proposition implies that it is possible to acknowledge the desire of marginalized readers to affectively connect with (metaphorical) expressions of transness without explicitly having to designate historical and literary characters as trans.

In addition to the distinction between queer and trans as identities, however, it becomes evident that queer and trans readings also diverge in terms of their analytical focus. Beyond their critique of heteronormativity, queer readings are suitable to challenge the very notion of norms and binaries and offer a subversive approach to interpreting texts. This usually involves reading texts against the grain, 'queering' them, so to speak, in

order to highlight their subversive potential. On the other hand, trans readings are not inherently queer in the sense of contesting norms. As Eastwood and Holmqvist critically discuss, trans readings rather reflect the desire to read about transness. The effort to identify and recover 'lost' trans ancestors is frequently part of this, but requires careful scrutiny. Trans readings of historical texts, however, allow to highlight the importance of both reclaiming archives and establishing subcultural canons as strategies to counteract erasure.

In the context of approaching archives from a marginalized perspective, Saidiya Hartman's works about the archive of slavery propose a method of transparently expressing personal reading desires *and* engaging them creatively. Hartman's (2008, 10–11) concept of *critical fabulation* involves a fusion of historical research and speculative fiction and addresses the gaps and systematic silences within archival records, where the lives of the enslaved merely appear as dehumanized objects or corpses. By imaginatively reconstructing the experiences of these individuals without aiming to provide closure, Hartman creates counter-histories that challenge hegemonic historical narratives and epistemologies and offers a broader comprehension of the past, including its continuities into the present. "Loss gives rise to longing", Hartman writes, "and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations" (ibid., 4). Hartman's textual desire can thus be understood as a desire for text itself, emerging from the lacuna of such texts due to power relations within historiography. Hartman's perspective makes it possible to acknowledge the desire of marginalized individuals to encounter their own reflections in history and literature and to reconceptualize this desire as a valid and imperative response to their absences. By situating her textual desire within the context of slavery, the act of reading with desire emerges as an essential form of resistance against systematic violence.

As observed, both the text and the readers bring their desires to the reading process, forming a relationship whereby they mutually affect and shape but also potentially contradict each other. Building upon Ahmed, I interpret textual desire as a dynamic force that circulates between the text and the reader. In the upcoming analysis of *Confessions of the Fox*, I will examine the various textual desires that emerge both from the text and its readership. I will specifically analyze how the desires for representation, recognition, and touch, as well as the desires for community, subversion, and resistance, are manifested in the reading of the novel. At the same time, I will explore how these desires interact and contrast with the desire to authenticate, know, and categorize. By examining these dynamics, I aim to uncover how *Confessions of the Fox* incorporates and subverts these various desires in order to challenge dominant trans narratives and contribute to a more diverse literary landscape.

Encountering a mysterious body of text

As mentioned earlier, *Confessions of the Fox* is a metafictional work that involves the reimagination and retelling of the life of Jack Sheppard, an 18th-century thief and jailbreaker from London, as a trans individual. The narrative situation of the novel is intricate and multilayered: the author Jordy Rosenberg presents his first-person narrator, Dr. R. Voth, a literary scholar in the contemporary, slightly dystopian New England, as being confronted with a mysterious manuscript: "A mashed and mildewed pile of papers, easily overlooked. And yet, a rare and perplexing find. The lost Sheppard memoir?" (x). This narrative situation of finding intriguing archival material, in turn, mirrors a situation that Rosenberg himself experienced during research. In a conversation with the writer Andrea Lawlor, Rosenberg relates that

Confessions is based in research I did on primary source documents about the 18th century's most notorious prison-break artist: a real person named **Jack Sheppard**. What I'd noticed about that archival material was that it repeatedly presented Jack as very genderqueer—he was generally described as very lithe and effeminate and impossibly sexy. [...] I wanted to run with this connection I found in the archives between gender queerness and hatred of/escape from capitalism, and sort of literalize it as an explicitly fictional—actually almost science fictional—trans origin story. (Rosenberg & Lawlor 2018; emphasis in original)

Rosenberg's desire to write about Jack Sheppard (and thus re-write the Sheppard archive) originates from his encounter with descriptions of the thief in the archive which he perceives as genderqueer. As he reads, he experiences a resonance and affinity towards Sheppard, much like the method of resonant reading suggested by Eastwood. In contrast to Eastwood, however, Rosenberg deliberately and joyfully appropriates history for his endeavor, motivated less by the need for queer survival, as expressed by Hartman and Sedgwick, than by the pleasure of engaging in queer and trans readings, resulting in the re-writing of trans history.

Like a thriller, the narrative of *Confessions of the Fox* unfolds around the mystery about the nature of the manuscript which seems not to have been read in years (xi). In a fictional preface, Dr. R. Voth introduces himself as trans ("guy by design") (xii) and as the editor of the manuscript which, according to Voth, contains the supposedly real story about the transmasculine thief and jailbreaker Jack Sheppard. Voth also confesses that he took the manuscript and went into hiding with it, where he now wants to publish it "'independently' of the Publisher's desires and control [...] with all my original footnotes" (xiii). The text presents the reader with a situation they curiously want to make sense of, and in this way, the text itself becomes the object of desire because the mystery can only be solved

by reading. The figuration of the text as the desired other is underlined when Voth tenderly caresses "the soft, eroded pages of the manuscript" (xi) while transcribing its words for publication and developing a more and more protective relationship towards it. The manuscript longs to be touched by Voth just like *Confessions of the Fox* wants to be read by the reader. In their article about the limited accessibility of transgender archival materials, K. J. Rawson (2009, 138) speaks about the importance of the "tactile experience of touching the past".⁵ Briefly touching a folio by Shakespeare made them experience a powerful emotional reaction of excitement leaving them with a feeling of satisfaction. When explicitly being invited to touch S&M toys during a "museum-like display in the Historical Society's suite commemorating the Folsom Street Fair", the author even started to imagine "being touched back" (ibid., 139). Rawson sums up that "touching artifacts is a desirable and pleasurable experience" which "is a deeply affective moment" and creates a "particular kind of relationship" (ibid., 139–140). Heather Love's work informs Rawson's understanding of the queer touch going beyond being just "laced with desire" (ibid., 140). With Love, Rawson suggests that such touch can also trigger feelings of shame through an "identification with history" of social marginality. Overall, Rawson emphasizes the importance of historical archives as places where a "meeting of desires, of touches" can take place (ibid., 139–140).

As we have seen, when Voth runs his hands over the ailing pages of the manuscript, touching the past plays a vital role in shaping the affective experience within the narrative of *Confessions of the Fox*. The physical act of discovering, reading and touching the pages is essential for the novel, as it emphasizes the significance of an immediate and sensual interaction

5 The aspect of the tactile with regard to queer histories has also been discussed by Elizabeth Freeman (2007; 2010), Heather Love (2009) and Carolyn Dinshaw (1999).

with the past. Moreover, it is the allure of the manuscript's mystery which is particularly captivating. Similar to Voth, the reader is driven to uncover the manuscript's contents, authorship, and historical validity. As proposed by Barthes and Wolf, the textual desire expresses itself as an enticing enigma, drawing the reader into a compelling journey of discovery. The reader joins Voth, who himself is unsure of how to assess the manuscript because its origin, authorship and narratee are uncertain: "The manuscript was confounding, its authenticity indeterminate" (ix). Reading immerses them in what Barthes (1975, 10) refers to as the Oedipal pleasure of "learn[ing] the origin and the end" and as Barthes and Wolf suggest, engaging with mysteries and the unknown can be a pleasurable experience.

The novel presents the reader with multiple layers of text. Besides the extradiegetic level of the fictional preface, there is the first intradiegetic narrative consisting of the mysterious manuscript's story about Jack Sheppard. Additionally, the readers also receive Voth's footnotes at another intradiegetic level, which, quite boldly, go beyond the usual brevity and content of footnotes. These footnotes, in a metafictional twist, become a narrative of their own.⁶ The act of commenting upon the manuscript via footnotes conveys the impression that Voth is reading the manuscript at the same time as the readers which creates complicity between them as a reading community. This complicity is further strengthened by addressing the readers directly and intimately ("You may not know this, but") (xii), invoking them as readers ("READER! I have some urgent news to convey") (258) and, in a digressive manner, sharing more (personal details) with them than is commonly permissible in footnotes. Like this, Voth creates a strong and emotionally intimate bond with the readers. Similarly, the manuscript and the footnotes enter a relationship between two intertwining bodies of text.

6 A similar example of excessively commenting on a fictional text, in this case a poem, can be found in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* (1962).

Footnotes are usually meant to explain, comment, or translate noteworthy aspects of a main text. Indeed, the manuscript is not easy to read as it is full of words of real or imagined 18th-century rogue slang like "quim" (5), "Muff", "Tuzzy-Muzzy" (10) or "customs-house" (30) – which ultimately all mean 'pussy'. On first impression, the footnotes, even if they consistently interrupt a linear reading flow of the manuscript, do their job by annotating unintelligible 18th-century rogue jargon and offering translation into today's language. In this sense, making the manuscript intelligible to today's readership means transferring concepts and words of the past to present understandings. Relatively quickly, however, it becomes clear that Voth does not perform this job reliably. Jess Arndt (2018) points out that his translation is a very subjective selection, since terms that are less in need of translation, such as 'sugar stick' are translated, while other terms that are much more in need of an explanation have none.⁷ Therefore, Arndt suspects "some kind of disruption/refusal at the formal level". In addition to textually appropriating the margins and exercising control over the interpretation of the text through selective translation and commentary, Voth's deliberate emphasis on explicit language for genitals and his 'unprofessional' storytelling in the footnotes can be interpreted as an intentional rejection of the act of translation itself, or, put otherwise, as a defiance of intelligibility. In this way, refusing to give any translation of a possibly unintelligible body expresses a refusal to objectify and commodify the (trans) body by willfully making it inaccessible and thereby inconsumable for the ones who are not able to read it.

7 These terms include, for example, 'mutt' (5), 'Yeoman' (6), 'Polhem Lock' (18), 'Smicket' (41), 'smish' (44) or 'snabblers' (208). Also, when Bess and Jack meet for the first time, Bess initiates a conversation in cant in order to find out if the two of them speak the same language, asking Jack "'D'you jaw the bear garden?'", to which he replies "'I do flash.'" (42). In the corresponding footnotes († and ‡), Voth only points out that the two "Speak in underworld tongues/speak cant", but does not 'translate' what they say, allowing them to keep the intimacy of the moment for themselves.

This refusal of intelligibility becomes very clear, for example, when Rosenberg's parodistic depiction of the molesting publisher Sullivan wants Voth to submit a painted illustration of Jack's genitalia (272). Sullivan is convinced that "READERS NEED TO BE ABLE TO VISUALIZE" (132; capitalization in original) and insistently requests a picture from Voth ("WHERE IS THE 'PICTURE' OF THE 'HUMAN CHIMERA' GENITALIA AS INDICATED ABOVE?") (134). His request arises from the fact that, within the manuscript narrative, Jack is examining an illustration that depicts "a *certain area* of a human Chimera" (134; italics in original). But rather than containing the expected image, the manuscript instead displays an abstract, literally unreadable page (133). Voth speculates that this page was inserted by "the original author" (134) of the manuscript, but interestingly, it bears a striking resemblance to the famous marbled page from Laurence Sterne's (1759–1767) *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.⁸ In order to be left in peace by Sullivan, Voth eventually responds to his request, but gives him a googled picture of a 'waterlogged slug' from a garden book which he photoshopped onto a "pitted and moth-eaten page" (272) to make it look 'authentic'. The picture indeed works to satisfy the publisher's voyeuristic desire to visualize non-cis genitalia: "He motherfucking loved it" (272). This joke, in turn, provides additional joy for the readers through the joint conspiracy with

8 Monika Schmitz-Emans, for example, highlights the significance of the marbled page's constitutive presence in Sterne's novel, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between the terms text and book: "a novel like *Tristram Shandy* forcefully emphasizes that there is no abstract, 'naked' text of a printed book, as there is always an element of typographic and page design staging involved" (Schmitz-Emans 2020, 96; my translation). By this, Schmitz-Emans understands the book as a body, not just a text. The same "sense for the *aesthetic-reflexive*, the *poetological* potentials of these [typographic] effects" (ibid., 99; my translation; italics in original) is thus true for Rosenberg's novel. To underline the self-reflexivity of *Confessions of the Fox*, Sterne is also referenced (107) and can be understood as an important influence on Rosenberg's work.

Voth against the 'evil' publisher. The joke, however, can simultaneously be interpreted as a sincere effort to protect trans bodies from voyeuristically being exposed, sensationalized, and objectified, thereby addressing the question of how to ethically engage with trans histories.

However, Sullivan's intentions go beyond merely visualizing non-cis genitalia and presenting them as a shocking or fascinating spectacle for a cisgender audience. As an editor working for a profit-driven company, he also seeks to authenticate the manuscript in order to make it commercially available and utilize it as a promotional tool for a new testosterone product. He needs Voth to authenticate the manuscript in order to "*take exclusive ownership of that manuscript, copyright and sell it*" as "*the earliest authentic confessional transgender memoirs in Western history*" (122; italics in original). The character Sullivan thus embodies the capitalist and cisheteronormative desire for possession, identification, classification, and essentialization. At the same time, the novel links capitalism and cisheteronormative epistemologies in a way that they cannot be understood independently of each other and portrays how they are acted out on the trans body.

Desire for community

Voth takes the relationship between himself as the narrator and the readers one step further by not only cultivating an attentive readership, but also by involving the readers in his enigmatic and potentially illicit undertakings as confidants. He shares his intimate secrets and creates a distinct division between a "*we*" (Voth and the readers) and a "*they*" (others outside of the intimate circle):

I took the manuscript because I could not help but take it once I realized it was trying to communicate something. Something just for us. And if you are reading this, then you know who I mean.

And you're like: *Don't say too much! What if this publication has fallen into the wrong hands?*

Don't worry.

Even if I were saying – *hypothetically speaking* – that this is a code, they will never be able to read it.

There are some things you can see only through tears. (xiv; italics in original; underlining mine)

Who is this *us* and who are *they*? The *us* is established as knowing and cautious and seems to be an exclusive community of insiders because the *us* is able to read the code whereas the *they* is not. Even if the text is in plain sight, there are different ways of seeing, reading, perceiving and making sense of it. Voht points out that there is a way to “see only through tears” (xiv), but with water in one's eyes, one is usually not able to see clearly. Through a filter of water, instead, one only sees a slightly distorted, estranged version of reality. Estrangement, in turn, and drawing on the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky, can be considered as “the most vital capacity of art” (Dickson 2021, 206). Estranging the perception of the everyday makes it possible to gain another perspective and see it anew (ibid.). In a similar vein, Sonny Nordmarken (2014, 41) emphasizes the significance of a perspective informed by the expression of vulnerability when stating that “perhaps speaking through my wounds can create a new way of seeing”. The estrangement here is caused by tears which come from sadness and pain. The community of insiders shares this experience. Although sadness and pain are requisite for seeing, seeing itself is experienced as pleasurable and joyful because its exclusive nature, in knowing something others don't, makes it a pleasure. This epistemic difference, as Sabine Fuchs points out, results in an erotic relationship between the knowledgeable and the text:

Exercising subcultural competencies in reading, viewing, decoding is eroticized by establishing a relationship of power and knowledge: Being able to decode something that others do not know is experienced as pleasurable. (Fuchs 2009, 154; my translation)

So, the *us* knows more than the *they*. The *us* is equipped with a queer literacy through the shared experience of marginalization, that allows it to decode the text and thereby enjoy it. *Confessions of the Fox* does refuse its legibility. But only towards the *they*. The *they*, however, only exists within the fictional world because every person who actually reads the text, every reader of the text, automatically becomes part of the exclusive community, granted this special status by reading the text. The reader is invoked as such and drawn in through affection. In this process, the reader is not only addressed and affected, but even appropriated. One cannot and maybe does not want to resist the appellation because being part of the *us* feels good and thrilling. It is a lustful submission to the text, an erotic subjectivation. By engaging in reading the text, the reader emerges not only as a reader but is made a subversive and queer subject.⁹

Creating a queer community of readers, in turn, is crucial for trans literacy, which refers to the ability to recognize and understand someone's trans identity within a shared subculture. Since “it's not only interactions with strangers that form the core of self-realisation”, there is, says Jules Joanne Gleeson (2021, 77), also another perspective which focuses instead “on trans communities, which perform the central work of reciprocal

⁹ A limitation of these remarks, however, is the fact that the readability and especially the enjoyability of the text also depends to a not inconsiderable extent on an existing knowledge of academic discourses on the part of the reader, since the footnotes are packed with references to other works, which, if not already known, also want to be read (someday). At the same time, however, the numerous references highlight the significance of intertextuality for the novel, showing that a text always exists as part of a broader context.

recognition” (ibid., 71). Trans people are encouraged, inspired, and empowered to transition by meeting other peers. Affinity-based trans communities “provide a context or ‘space’ for the articulation of new language, lifestyle developments, and culture” (ibid.). Within these spaces, it is less about passing as a man or woman through an intelligible binary performance of gender than about a space for mutual recognition as trans. The encounter within this space circulates around the perception of certain codes and signs and the conception of the other as self, as part of the same subculture. While trans individuals can be recognized, acknowledged and supported by other trans individuals, as Gleeson describes, *Confessions of the Fox*, however, mainly depicts intimate relationships between a trans individual and a person who can be understood as femme (Jack and Bess; Voth and his ex). Like this, the narrative transcends a t4t support framework and directs attention to a rich tradition of trans/butch-femme dynamics within a queer subculture. It underscores the essential role of allies and lovers in supporting and validating trans individuals, even if they may not personally identify as trans. In addition to the decoding skills of queer literacy, *Confessions of the Fox* portrays the existence and importance of trans literacy which involves recognizing, appreciating, and desiring trans individuals, while also emphasizing the indispensable role of community.

The encounter between Jack and his lover Bess serves as a poignant example to underscore this profound significance of trans literacy. When Bess, a radical PoC femme intellectual and sex worker, and Jack meet at a pub for the first time, Bess perceives him as “her boy” (41), whereupon Jack introduces himself to her for the first time with the name Jack, “*saying himself into being*” (43; italics in original). Uttering this name, however, triggers in him a sense of shame, dissociation, and alienation, yet these sensations transform into a feeling of embodiment as soon as he hears Bess say his name in turn. The recognition, the acknowledgment as well as the invocation of the other take on the meaning of an act of creation, of

a coming into the world. It is the encounter with the desired and desiring other which is mutually constituting.

However, Jack continues to experience deep insecurities when it comes to being seen by Bess, particularly when contemplating the vulnerability of a more intimate encounter that would expose his body: “But Jack didn’t know how to do this – to *stay*. More properly, to *stay Seen* [...] Show himself to her – as what?” (68; italics and capitalization in original). Despite Jack’s heightened self-consciousness regarding his genderqueer appearance which defies conventional gender categories, he discovers profound acceptance and understanding when he opens up to Bess about his insecurities, admittedly engaging in playful flirtation along the way:

Jack look’d down at himself. ‘Do you think I’m a Monster?’ He said this half-shamed but half – something Else.

If she said *no* it would be the wrong answer.

Same with *yes*.

‘Well, you’re *Something*.’

How did she know his word – his secret Word for what was behind the door in himself that he could not open? (109; italics and capitalization in original)

Jack does not have to conform to societal expectations of being either male or female because Bess is able to perceive him for who he is, acknowledging his wish to be seen in a way that aligns with his understanding of self. Coming up with an answer beyond yes or no, Bess reassuringly recognizes Jack’s difference without perceiving him as other, which ultimately allows him to feel seen. Unlike Jack, however, the other protagonist Voth confidently embraces the name of the monster when discussing it within the narrative of the footnotes. Nevertheless, Voth remains mindful of the

intention and the identity of the person who uses that term: “Relax: I’m reclaiming the term. I *like* it. I mean, when uttered in certain contexts out of certain mouths” (76; italics in original). Overall, Voth emphasizes the significance of considering who speaks, names, and discloses information when he states that “there’s a difference between a confession one wants to give, and one that is taken” (109). According to Voth, it is precisely the thoughtful approach to storytelling within the manuscript which he understands as evidence of the document’s authenticity, because it refrains from voyeuristic descriptions of Jack’s genitals and avoids revealing his deadname, among other things.

The encounter and subsequently unfolding romance between Bess and Jack is even more significant when we consider the difficulty of being desired and desirable as a trans body within a cisheteronormative society. Even in the playful context of their flirtatious exchange, Jack’s underlying fear of rejection due to his gender nonconforming appearance is expressed when he asks Bess if she considers him a monster (109). Trans activist and journalist Riki Anne Wilchins (1997, 120) points to the fact that within a cisheteronormative matrix, the trans body is not desirable because it is a body which – seen from a cis perspective – might be confusing. This confusion often leads to rejection, abjection, revulsion and potentially also physical violence. Alternatively, Sandy Stone (2006, 231) suggests that the trans body is desirable precisely because its gendered dissonances create sexual tensions which open up “entire spectra of desire”. In this sense, Jack is not only desired by Bess because he was just ‘lucky’ to meet someone with a trans fetish, but because Bess is capable to affectively comprehend how desirable he is *and* recognize his humanity.

Furthermore, in the novel, Jack’s breaking out of prison where he is thrown into as a result of his thievery is portrayed as an event that garners cheers and admiration from the crowds in London. In this context, it is not difficult

to interpret the prison cell as a metaphor for the restrictive confines of the gender binary, which Jack seeks to challenge and break free from. And it’s exactly his skillful act of escaping from confinement that makes the crowds adore him.

Paradigm shift, metalepsis and redefining authenticity

I must once again return to the enigmatic nature of the manuscript because the manuscript, too, as a textual body escapes generic classification. Initially, Voth is not sure about how to understand the manuscript and approaches it against the backdrop of common notions of textuality. He assumes that there must be one author and that the manuscript could be the authentic memoir of the real Jack Sheppard. Later on, Voth finds out that it is a collectively written text which is co-created by a multitude of unidentified authors and has been written throughout the centuries without having been claimed as one author’s intellectual property. While reading the manuscript, Voth becomes more and more suspicious of his understanding of it because he encounters omissions regarding Jack’s name of birth as well as anachronistic references. The collective authorship is considered by Voth as “the only explanation for the many generic irregularities and impossible references that populate this text” (260). After understanding that the manuscript is an unfinished textual body to which changes can be made and which is in fact deeply enriched by these additions he too adds a new, final sentence to the manuscript, turning from being a reader into a writer. As he himself becomes another co-author of the manuscript, he transgresses the boundaries between the diegeses, resulting in metalepsis.¹⁰ Thus, the manuscript turns out to be

¹⁰ Diegesis is a term used to refer to the fictional universe created by a narrative. Metalepsis, in turn, is a rhetorical figure or narrative device in which a narrative makes a self-referential intrusion by transgressing the boundaries between the

the embodiment of a *writerly* text which not only wants to be read and touched but also written and transformed.

It is also shown that Voth had to go through a paradigmatic shift in perspective first in order to approach the text. This paradigmatic shift primarily consists in affectively opening up to an understanding of the manuscript within its own terms:

I must confess that I believe my own attachment to the text clouded my ability to recognize the glaring obviousness of this collective authorship earlier. I was looking for the reflection of a single subject when I should have been looking for something else. (259)

Like this, textual desire can also take on a form of intimacy and closeness that moves the reader to identify with the text and ultimately approach it in an affective way. Voth is fascinated by the text, although, or perhaps because, he cannot make sense of it while at the same time developing an affinity toward it. However, Voth's shift in perception highlights the inherent epistemological constraints of his desire to find reflection and affirmation of his existing knowledge within the text. On the other hand, the shift in perspective has to be understood as a learning process which entails the potential for (self-)transformation, for broadening one's own horizon, if otherness and difference are respectfully encountered.

The metalepsis, the transgression of the diegetic levels, ultimately serves as a means to express the yearning for two bodies to touch and connect across disparate temporalities. Voth's captivation with the manuscript arises primarily from the revelation that the purportedly 'authentic' Jack Sheppard is actually trans. The two narratives of Sheppard and Voth,

otherwise separated narrative levels. In simpler terms, metalepsis occurs when elements from one level of a narrative enter or influence another level.

past and present, progress side by side, and the relationship between the two bodies of text develops along shared experiences, or affinities. Voth's present-day narrative is intricately linked to the manuscript from the past through the use of footnotes. These footnotes hook into the text of the manuscript, sprinkling it with small symbols, while the act of reading one body of text stimulates the writing of the other, establishing a dynamic relationship which "with the help of what is written and what is said nurtures the other's desire to write and speak for themselves" (Duval 2023, 28; my translation).

Furthermore, by interacting and touching each other, emotionally and literally, the two bodies subvert their conventional hierarchization as main and secondary text. At the same time and as a result of sharing the same pages, their mutual engagement challenges the conventional understanding of temporality, which portrays the present and the past as separate entities progressing in a linear succession. Here, instead, the present hooks into the past to convey its narrative, simultaneously highlighting the parallels and differences between the two protagonists Jack and Voth.

Through its intricate narrative structure, the novel conveys the desire for a trans ancestor. As the memoir unfolds, Voth's initial fascination with the enigmatic manuscript transforms into a desire that encompasses more than just historical recognition. It encompasses the pleasure of recognizing oneself in another and a desire to build a community across time without claiming a continuity of trans history. Simultaneously, *Confessions of the Fox* reveals a self-critical reflection of Rosenberg's and also Voth's yearning to read about trans ancestors in history. The device of self-irony is crucial for Rosenberg to make his own desire for Jack Sheppard's trans identity clear, as well as to distinguish it as his own reading desire for trans histories. This is done to challenge a potential cis-heteronormative perspective that might view Sheppard solely as a cisgender man. Thereby, the re-articulation of

authenticity and the possibility to playfully subvert authenticity within the historiographic metafictional realm is of paramount importance.

The redefinition of authenticity is initially conveyed through the ethical approach to writing trans histories (“*I consider this elegant declining-to-describe to be strong evidence of the document’s authenticity*”) (109; italics in original) and is then predominantly exemplified through the paradigm shift experienced by Voth. Regarding textuality, a normative understanding of authenticity attributes a text to one author exclusively who performs a particular role in legitimizing the purpose of that text (cf. Foucault 1979). But here, the manuscript has been written by so many authors that it is impossible to attribute singular paragraphs or sentences to one person. At the same time, it becomes evident that the unambiguous attribution of authors to texts is a crucial aspect of a capitalist paradigm which is driven by the need for commodification. Through the multiplication of authorship, the traditional notion of the author as the sole originator and creator is thoroughly deconstructed. Instead, the manuscript evolves into an object of utility rather than a mere commodity, fostering an interactive relationship based on affinity between the text and the reader. The reader potentially even becomes part of the textual body by turning from a reader into a co-writer. Authenticity is thereby redefined in the sense that the alteration of the manuscript by subsequent readers does not cause it to lose its value, but instead makes it truly salient and even “the most valuable Sheppard document ever discovered” (260). The manuscript is thus truly authentic because it is formed by and for a community and has the power to affect its readership.

Nevertheless, the topic of authorship holds further significance insofar as discussing the textuality of the manuscript can also be extended to addressing gender. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler (2004) notes that gender is created through a process of interaction and collaboration with

others, making it impossible to attribute one single author:

Moreover, one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my ‘own’ gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself). (Butler 2004, 1)

Exploring the concept of authorship in the manuscript as well as considering Butler’s insights on authorship regarding gender, *Confessions of the Fox* draws a parallel between the authorship of a text and the authorship of one’s own gender. Thereby, the conventional understanding of authorship as an individual, autonomous act is not only challenged but also critiqued as a capitalist practice. Expanding the conversation on authorship to encompass discussions on gender offers an opportunity to reveal the complex interplay of power structures and communal agency in shaping (textual) bodies. However, it is crucial to acknowledge a limitation to the deconstruction of authorship in the case of *Confessions of the Fox*. While the manuscript showcases collective authorship, Jordy Rosenberg still remains the only author of his novel published by the major publishing houses *Random House* (US/Canada) and *Atlantic* (UK). Although the extensive references to other authors and works in the footnotes could be seen as an attempt to emphasize the constitutive influence of existing literature on the creation of *Confessions of the Fox*, it is important to acknowledge that the novel’s publication is ultimately limited by the structural demands of the book market. Thus, deconstruction can be carried out within the realm of the narrated world, but outside of it, its application is limited.

Conclusions

Rosenberg's historiographic metafiction provides the space for transformative encounters between the readers and the text by affectively engaging with the unknown. Both the trans body and the mysterious manuscript do not make themselves off-handedly legible to others and the legibility of the text and the intelligibility of the body are even refused to a certain extent, especially regarding a cis readership. However, those who are willing to engage in reading are initiated and this submission can be experienced as pleasurable as it entails joining a community of queer readers. *Confessions of the Fox* emphasizes the understanding of writing and reading as collective activities which are in themselves able to form subversive communities. In addition, the willingness of readers to engage with seemingly illegible texts demonstrates that they can tolerate a significant degree of uncertainty and illegibility and still persist in reading. Possibly, this very aspect creates opportunities for new and affective modes of connection in the face of encounters of otherness. By understanding the text and the body as analogies, exploring partly illegible expressions of textuality can also be applied to exploring non-intelligible forms of gender and sexuality. This may lead to the disruption (paradigmatic shift) and recreation (metalepsis) of established norms and existing affective arrangements.

As previously explored, the inquiry regarding authenticity (is this real?) is addressed through a redefinition achieved by examining the concept of authorship. The manuscript attains its authenticity by virtue of being a collective creation and involving its readers as active participants in the process of writing. When it comes to the question of recognition (what is this?), both Voth and Jack bring in the term 'something'. The vagueness conveyed by the abstract term 'something' suggests that both Voth and Jack refuse to draw on an existing term to encapsulate their experiences. Instead,

'something' implies a transcendence of conventional epistemologies, exceeding the binaries of yes and no, fact and fiction, man or woman etc. At the same time, the term also refuses to restrict itself to newly fixed or fixable meanings. After all, the question of what 'something' truly is can only be answered by 'it' itself, provided one engages oneself in a relationship with 'it' on its own terms.

The question of intelligibility, however, is intrinsically tied to the ethics of encounter, as both grapple with how to approach and establish connections with otherness. *Confessions of the Fox's* ethical approach to reading and writing trans (his)stories can be understood as a form of activism, emphasizing the importance of engaging with literature as a means to promote social change. Mainly through the creation of the fictional manuscript and its editor Voth, *Confessions of the Fox* substantially comments on the ethics of reading, writing, editing, and publishing by proposing a considerate approach to transness.¹¹ The character Voth, despite all his flaws and talkativeness, is created by Rosenberg as an example of how to ethically engage with a text. In the course of reading, Voth examines his own approach towards the manuscript and is willing to modify it and immerse himself in a learning process when he recognizes that the lens with which he is perceiving the text is not suited. Moreover, he shields the manuscript from the prying curiosity of the publisher as well as from the capitalistic demand for authentication. Voth's ethical approach towards storytelling and publishing thus mainly consists in

¹¹ Other than that, the narrative of *Confession of the Fox* encompasses various additional aspects where ethical values and social change are addressed. This is achieved, for example, by visibilizing racism, colonial struggles, Bess' support for the decolonization of the fens, or the historicity of the police and prison industry, to name but a few. Furthermore, an underlying Marxist analysis of capitalism is expressed through a critique of commodification and exclusive ownership as well as extended by giving commodities a voice.

taking a resolute stand against voyeurism and the possible exposure of trans bodies as well as against capitalistic modes of commodification. Since the narrative implies that Voth eventually becomes a member of an activist group whose goal it is to decolonize the archive through the act of editing (261), Voth's actions can be seen as a form of literary activism, aimed at promoting a more conscientious and respectful approach to working with texts that contain marginalized perspectives and experiences.

Through the lens of textual desire, the analysis of *Confessions of the Fox* has illuminated the inherent tensions between a desire for ownership, control, and commodification on the one hand, and a desire for connection and community on the other. Due to *Confessions of the Fox's* explicit metafictional discourse on topics such as authenticity, intelligibility, the interplay between text and body and the concept of authorship, the distinction between surface and subtext, as it has been both suggested and contested by queer reading approaches, as well as the need for queer decoding appeared less pressing. However, the presence of a queer code remained important in order to avoid exposure and, at the same time, create pleasure. The narrator, Voth, claims to employ coding to communicate with his readers and to protect the text from being appropriated. Additionally, Rosenberg (& Lawlor, 2018) reinterprets and rewrites the historical figure Jack Sheppard as a trans individual based on 'decoding' descriptions of Sheppard as "lithe and effeminate and impossibly sexy". By doing this, however, Rosenberg's decoding is not another attempt to recover a historical trans character lost or erased in the archives, but a playful engagement with resonances.

Irrespective of the historical accuracy of Sheppard being trans or not, Rosenberg is able to make history accessible and tangible through the literary. This enables readers to intimately connect with the narrative on a personal and emotional level. Furthermore, the act of re-telling history makes it possible to confront and challenge dominant narratives that have

historically marginalized or erased the experiences of queer and trans communities. This re-shaping of archives serves as a powerful means to amplify queer and trans voices and reclaim a rightful place within a broader historical discourse. Although Rosenberg is writing a story, not history, his writing results in re-shaping the archive by imaginative reinterpretation.

Additionally, by captivating a diverse array of readers, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, through a compelling narrative that establishes a close and intimate connection, *Confessions of the Fox* fosters a sense of community among its readers. Another form of activism depicted in *Confessions of the Fox* therefore resides in its affective retelling of trans history which places a profound emphasis on the practice of community-building, embodying the belief that community is vital for fostering solidarity and cultivating a shared sense of belonging. The emphasis on touch which runs through the narrative, expresses the importance of the encounter. By the recognition of similarity, the experience of affinity and resonance, and the possibility of active participation in the writing process, communities across time and space can be formed.

In this sense, desire exerts a powerful influence on subject formation, shaping not only the individual sense of self ('I') and the relational dynamics between individuals ('You'), but also collective identities ('We') and distinctions from others ('They'). Desire possesses the capacity to forge connections, foster closeness and intimacy and to create or dissolve boundaries. However, the desire of others (to possess) can also engender resistance and induce an urge to evade or oppose it. In essence, *Confessions of the Fox* advocates for a profound re-articulation of desire, shifting its focus from a yearning for possession to a genuine desire for connection.

Confessions of the Fox, in short, is a text which playfully engages with the tensions between factuality and fictionality. The novel prompts us to contemplate our approach to queer and trans history and the absence of

queer evidence in archives by speculatively re-imagining the past. It also highlights the significance of trans ancestors for those living today. Why do we seek their presence? What purpose do they serve? *Confessions of the Fox* critically emphasizes that the actual existence of these individuals is not as crucial as the imagination of their existence to stimulate engagement, form connections, and build communities. As Voth's paradigm shift points out, it is not a prerequisite to confirm the historical authenticity of trans ancestors in order to envision a past, present, and future.

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