

The Real Thing: Transsexuality and Manhood in Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country*

Commenting on the medical establishment's preference for designating intersex babies as girls rather than boys, a prominent surgeon once crudely quipped, 'you can make a hole but you can't build a pole' (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 59). Such a comment confirms Marjorie Garber's assertion that in sex reassignment surgery 'there remains an implicit privileging of the phallus, a sense that 'a "real one" can't be made, but only born' (Garber 1992: 104). Garber contends that 'culture does not yet strongly support the construction of "real men"' by surgical means (Garber 1992: 104), and the dominant order's disavowal of female-to-male (FTM) transsexuality is reflected in the fact that there are few cultural representations of FTM, as opposed to MTF, transsexuals. Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country* (1992), winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Prix Fémina Etranger, traces the transition of its central character from Mary to Martin Ward and is significant both because it makes the FTM visible and because it subverts the myth that manhood is an inviolable state, or sacred country, inhabited by a privileged group of subjects: real men. However, rather than asserting the realness of the FTM, Tremain questions the very notion of the real. Inspired by queer theory's critique of an 'original and true sex' (Butler 1990: viii), this essay proposes that *Sacred Country* affirms not the authenticity of transsexual manhood but the impossibility of sexed realness, and confirms Judith Butler's contention that "'being" a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible' (Butler 1990: 19). By paralleling the experience of her transsexual protagonist with a series of male characters who struggle to reinvent themselves as men in the changing

landscape of post-war Britain, Tremain not only rescues the FTM from the status of ‘Other’ but also presents him as a typical rather than an exceptional man.¹

‘To be...’: The Desire for Embodiment

Through its representation of transsexuality, *Sacred Country* explores whether it is possible to *be* a man (or, by implication, a woman). The novel opens with six year-old Mary’s realization that ‘I am not a girl. I’m a boy’ (p. 6), an insight unconsciously prompted by the two-minute silence held in honour of George VI, whose death marks the monarch’s transition from king to queen and indirectly articulates Mary’s own desire to change sex.² This desire is also expressed through Mary’s interest in *Hamlet*: she writes an essay on the play and is offered the part of the Prince when her grandfather, Cord, proposes that they read it together one Christmas. As the role of Hamlet has often been performed by a woman, most famously by Sarah Siddons (1776) and Sarah Bernhardt (1899), but also by Asta Nielsen (1921), who portrayed Hamlet as a woman passing as a man, Mary’s identification with Shakespeare’s hero communicates her wish to change sex. Also, references to *Hamlet*, which include the novel’s second epigraph, implicitly invoke the debate ‘to be or not to be’ in the context of transsexuality.

In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), Jay Prosser notes that transsexual narratives are characterised by an investment in the materiality of sex and typically trace a ‘somatic progression toward the goal of sexed embodiment’ (Prosser 1998: 67). Initially, *Sacred Country* seems exemplary in this regard. Although she has a female body, Mary does not identify as a girl and seeks a physical form that reflects and

confirms her innate sense of maleness. As she tells her doctor, 'I'm not really a girl. I never have been ... I have always felt male' (p. 151). Mary understands transsexuality in terms of the wrong body formula and experiences a painful dissonance between her imagined and material self. She denies her menses, thinks of her breasts as 'parasites' and 'dreams of cutting out her womb and burying it in Antarctica' (p. 112; p. 227). In her letter to an agony aunt, Mary explains: 'I am a woman of twenty-one. Or rather, my body is a woman's body, but I have never felt like a woman or colluded with my body's deceit' (p. 199). She signs her letter 'Divided' from Devon (p. 200), and self-division is reiterated in the figure of Thomas Hardy, whose head and heart are buried apart and whose poetry is read by Mary's teacher and friend, Miss McRae.

Prosser points out that transsexual subjects frequently articulate their bodily alienation as discomfort with their physical casing (Prosser 1998: 68). Reflecting this, Mary's desired male body is imagined as a new skin: 'I remember the feel of my body, trying to grow its man's skin' (p. 37). Mary undertakes a process of self-fashioning and abandons dresses in favour of an aertex shirt, grey shorts and plimsolls (p. 58). In London, she throws out her female clothes. Her 'suicided skirts' symbolise her wish to rid herself of the female body that she finds so foreign and mark 'the start of her happiness' (p. 178; p. 183). Echoing Garber's contention that 'Clothes do not maketh the man, but allow him to be seen' (Garber 1992: 117), suits, jeans and jackets enable others to see Mary as she sees herself, that is, as Martin, and bring to an end her days as an invisible man.

However, changing clothes is not enough to satisfy Mary's desire for a new skin and when her body fails to change of its own accord, as she initially expects it to - 'a penis will grow out of all that is locked away inside. It needs only time' (p. 34) - she seeks medical support. Mary finally finds a sympathetic psychiatrist in Sterns, whose axolotl, a salamander that possesses the ability to change from an aquatic to an air-breathing animal, reflects his interest in shape-shifters. Working with Sterns, she begins a 'monitored metamorphosis' (p. 244), and when hormones bring on male puberty, she tells her friend Pearl, 'With the injections I'm having now, my time as Mary is going to come to an end' (p. 249). Mary starts to pass as a man and people call her 'Lad' and 'Sir' (p. 259; p. 264). Following surgery, she leaves England for America, a land renowned for its celebration of the self-made man, where Mary is accepted as 'an ordinary man, not an imaginary one' (p. 338).

While *Sacred Country* follows the pattern of transsexual narratives identified by Prosser, it digresses in one significant way. At first, Mary craves a penis in order to achieve a coherent sense of maleness. She fantasises about making love to women as a man and is jealous of the usher at Lyndsey's wedding: 'I had a stab of envy for his long, smart legs and what he carried between them' (p. 168). According to Prosser, because it is currently impossible to construct a fully functioning penis, the FTM's unfulfilled desire for this appendage is a source of profound pain and anxiety. In his essay 'A Palinode on Photography and the Transsexual Real', Prosser employs Lacanian theory to articulate the trauma associated with wounds, scars and 'an absence of parts' that 'won't allow a pre-reassignment history to disappear into the apparent reality of reassigned sex' (Prosser

1999: 85). One of Lacan's three psychic realms or orders (Real, Symbolic, Imaginary), the Real denotes plenitude and completeness: 'there is no absence in the real' (Lacan 1988: 313). However, because the Real is beyond language or 'outside symbolisation' (Lacan 1977: 388), it is 'impossible' to attain (Lacan 1988: 167) - it is 'the missed encounter' (Lacan 1981: 55) - and thus associated with trauma: the Real is 'the object of anxiety *par excellence*' (Lacan 1988: 160). Prosser proposes that missing parts mean that transsexuals fail to be 'real, that is to be real-ly sexed' (Prosser 1999: 84).

Sacred Country likewise suggests that manhood is, in Lacanian terms, the Real thing. The name that Mary takes prior to transition articulates the unspeakable trauma associated with FTM transition identified by Prosser. Mary calls herself 'Mary Martin' after her grandfather's favourite actress (p. 53), a woman famous for playing Peter Pan, although the name also invokes Mario (formerly Marie) Martino, author of the FTM autobiography *Emergence* (1977). Allusions to Peter Pan articulate both Mary's desire to become a man and her fear that she will never do so because, as an eternal boy, Peter never reaches manhood. More specifically, *Peter Pan* expresses castration anxiety, symbolised by Hook's missing hand and Peter's shadow, from which he becomes detached (Garber 1992: 178). Sterns' axolotl suggests similar concerns. Mary's attempt to make the word 'axolotl' in a game of Scrabble points to her identification with this creature that possesses the ability to shift shape (p. 315). However, again, the axolotl represents Mary's fears as well as her wishes because neoteny, a defining feature of this creature, delays sexual maturity. In other words, like Peter Pan, the axolotl never

achieves physiological maturity and its name, 'Ken' (p. 308), underlines Mary's castration anxieties through its invocation of Barbie's famously penis-less companion.

Yet, while Mary longs for a penis, Martin finally refuses one. Judith Shapiro notes that transsexuals often hold conservative views of what it means to be a man or a woman and endorse the social norms of gender (Epstein & Straub 1991: 253). Mary's stereotypical ideas about male behaviour suggest that her desire for a penis is the product of the heroic ideal of patriarchal manhood. Early on, she carries her hockey stick like a 'rifle' (p. 119), longs to join a regiment and dreams of rescuing Estelle from the asylum where she is sent after a breakdown: 'I was a knight...I put my mother on my grey charger and rode away' (p. 55). However, Mary's image of herself as a knight indicates that her notion of manhood, to which the penis is crucial, is as outdated and redundant as chivalry itself. This is an insight that Martin seems to acquire. When Sterns calls him back to England for a phalloplasty, Martin refuses to return because he has found contentment and reached 'a plateau, a level place' (p. 353). The non-phallic imagery echoes his assertion that he no longer dreams of possessing a penis. Thus, in contrast to transsexual narratives which overestimate the penis as 'the absolute insignia of maleness, the index of male identity' (Garber 1992: 97-8), *Sacred Country* insists that the penis is not the seat of male subjectivity. In short, a penis is superfluous to Martin's identity as a man.

'...or not to be': The Impossibility of Sexed Realness

However, more radical than suggesting that Martin can be a man without a member, *Sacred Country* questions the notion of sexed realness. Throughout the novel, Tremain persistently subverts the boundary between imagination or appearance and reality. For example, imaginary events have material effects and consequences. Mary dreams about saving Pearl from drowning so often that she feels exhausted: 'I'd begun to worry I wouldn't have any strength left for the real thing' (p. 132). Likewise, Estelle, has a sexual dream powerful enough to induce orgasm: 'Nothing and no one touched me, except in a dream. But the orgasm was real and I woke up in the middle of it and cried with pleasure' (p. 321). Mary's history teacher proposes that although the Round Table probably never existed, 'it existed down the centuries in people's minds, so you could say that it has the existence of a certain kind' (p. 96). Similarly, Mary's friend, Edward Harker, is so convinced that there is a rodent trapped under his hat that he removes it to look inside but finds 'nothing' there (p. 228). Conversely, what is real seems fake, fictional or illusory. Noting the stillness of his hens, Sonny wonders if they are 'decoys' and asks himself, 'is this a real sight?' (p. 162-3), and Lyndsey thinks that Queen Boadicea is 'an invented person, like Mrs Danvers' (p. 169). Returning home, Mary's brother, Timmy thinks his room looks 'just as he'd left it and yet it didn't look like his room but like a reconstruction of his room, like a film set built to deceive him' (p. 285). Walter's plans to visit the 'real' Tennessee 'with its faithful darkies and its faithful dogs' reveal a romanticised view of the Deep South that draws on racial stereotypes and denies the reality of African Americans (p. 41). Epitomising the novel's problematisation of the real, when Mary waves Harker off from London, their good-bye is frustrated by the

train's false departure, which – like the novel's deconstruction of sexual identity - engenders uncertainty about what constitutes 'the real thing' (p. 234).

In line with Butler, Tremain suggests that while 'sex poses as "the real" and the "factic"', the "real" and the "sexually factic" are phantasmic constructions – illusions of substance' (Butler 1990: 146). After surgery, Mary describes herself as 'insubstantial' (p. 293), and the 'silk scarf' that Martin uses to pad his Y-fronts recalls the 'knotted silks' that Mary associates with magic (p. 338, p. 79), suggesting that the material substance of sex is an illusion. Likewise, Timmy describes himself, as well as his mother and grandmother, as 'genetically insubstantial' (p. 283). Although Mary employs a strategic essentialism to explain her transsexuality when she asserts 'I was a boy inside' (p. 56), Walter indicates that what appears to be internal is ingested: 'I feel as if I'm full of something that isn't mine, as if I was the whale that swallowed a man' (p. 62). The absence of an essential or core self is epitomised by Estelle's story about an onion: as a young woman, she witnesses a man 'trying to find the onion after all the layers of peel. He gets to the heart of it and there is nothing' (p. 42). Estelle's name (est-elle: French for *is she*) suggests that she believes that identity is rooted in being and substance. Consequently, Estelle is terrified by the idea that the self has no centre and perpetual 'worry about the onion' causes acute mental stress (p. 59). In contrast, Mary is excited by Grandma Livia's *Dictionary of Inventions*, which suggests 'you could invent yourself' (p. 31).

Images of flight also subvert essentialism by suggesting that gender is groundless. As the novel's title indicates, Tremain employs landscape as a trope for sexual identity and Mary's transatlantic journey takes her across borders into a new country literally and metaphorically as she travels from Britain (typically personified as a woman: Britannia) to the States (often personified as a man: Uncle Sam). Like her unconventional grandmother, who had a passion for gliding and 'found life in a silent plane, held aloft by currents of air' (p. 43), Mary is a 'cloud artist' who seeks to evade borders through flight (p. 141). As a young girl, she stands on the swing, pushing 'her body out and up into the grey sky' moving 'higher and higher', fantasizing that 'she and it flew vertically above the pine' (p. 31). Mary believes that if she can make this fantasy reality 'becoming a boy would happen' (p. 31). She also imagines working 'in a factory making gliders' and is good at drawing 'helicopters' (p. 173; p. 261). Her desire for the freedom connoted by flight is likewise signified by the story she invents about Joseph Montgolfier, 'inventor of the hot-air balloon' (p. 35), her wish to be a green tennis ball 'hurled in the air' (p. 46), her love of vaulting - 'She hit the springboard hard, and flew' (p. 95) - and her (unconscious) identification with Peter Pan.

Like Butler, Tremain illustrates that gender is performative, a matter of 'doing' rather than 'being' (Butler 1990: 25). By showing that apparently natural behaviour results from practice or habit, the novel demonstrates that gender is 'a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real' (Butler 1990: viii). Mary's pet guineafowl struggles to fly because it 'never practised' (p. 32), Walter's relationship with Sandra flounders because he has no 'practice' of love (p. 62), Harker knows 'what kind of person a father

has to try to be' because of 'years of practice' with his step-children (p. 207), and Cord continues to wipe his left eye, a 'habit' he develops when ill, even once he is recovered and his eye no longer weeps (p. 223). Mary believes that if she makes the swing fly high enough to tip over the frame, completing a circle, she will become a boy and this is simply a matter of 'practice' (p. 32).

The questions asked by Dr Beales, the psychiatrist that Mary visits for sex counselling, also point to the performativity of gender: 'He asked me whether I could mend an electric fuse and whether I knew the rules of cricket' (p. 202). Mary imitates established patterns of male behaviour and her performance of masculinity indicates that manhood is constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1990: 25). For example, she drinks Guinness 'quickly, like Sonny drank it' (p. 184). The boots that Walter helps Martin choose have a similar effect to the jeans that make Mary feel 'potent' and 'bigger than she was' (p. 178): 'In them I feel tall. I swagger' (p. 344). The money that Miss McRae sends Mary illustrates that 'money makes the man': it allows her to buy a 'suit and a kipper tie' (p. 264), to have her shoes shined, give people tips, and buy women drinks. As Mary states, 'After I'd received Miss McRae's £1,000, it was much easier to behave like a man' (p. 264).

The 'like' in Mary's statement confirms Beales's assertion that while hormones and surgery will enable her to 'pass' as a man, she will never 'be' one (p. 203). Although Mary imagines that she is a boy and will grow up to be a man, her grandmother's death demonstrates that she imagines things 'wrongly' (p. 315). Mary romanticises Livia's

death in the glider: 'she dreamed of it just drifting away into a white sky, dissolving and gone' (p. 7). Thus Cord's revelation that Livia was electrocuted when the glider suddenly plummeted into pylon wires prompts Mary's realisation that the death she imagined was, like her transition to manhood, 'an impossible thing' (p. 315). The impossibility of being a man is also conveyed by the chapter titles, which do not acknowledge 'Martin' until Chapter Eighteen, near the end of the novel, even though Mary calls herself and asks others to call her 'Martin' from Chapter Four. As the switch occurs when Tremain's protagonist moves to the States and passes as an 'ordinary' man, the novel suggests, following Bishop Berkeley (the champion of immaterialism), that 'to be is to be perceived'. Furthermore, Martin's statement, 'I'm concentrating on being' (p. 340), implies that 'being' does not come naturally but requires constant effort, which calls the naturalness of being into question. The novel likewise suggests the impossibility of being a man, of inhabiting the 'I', when Martin refers to his male self in the third person, creating a split between 'I' and 'him': 'Days unfold. Martin lives them... I am him and he is me and that's all. That's enough' (p. 353). As the split between 'he' and 'me' suggests, the ideal self is unobtainable.

Through its use of the journey metaphor, a pervasive trope in transsexual narratives (Prosser 1998: 117), *Sacred Country* suggests that identity is a matter of becoming rather than being, or, to borrow terms coined by Paul Gilroy in a postcolonial context, 'routes' rather than 'roots' (Gilroy 1993). In contrast to Mary, who undertakes a 'journey of physical change and reconstruction' (p. 229), which involves a literal journey to the States, Estelle is stuck in a miserable marriage to a violent husband, Sonny

stubbornly refuses to leave the farm (p. 286), and Pete Loomis, Walter's uncle, lives in a trolley bus with no wheels, surrounded by ever-encroaching cows. The importance of movement is underlined by their tragic fate: Estelle suffers from depression, Sonny commits suicide and Pete dies of cancer. As Cord notes, 'staying in one place disfigured you' (p. 137).

However, if FTM transition is a journey, it is one without end. Mary is aware that she is engaged in a process of 'becoming' (p. 266), but tells Cord, after surgery, that becoming Martin 'isn't finished and never can be, really' (p. 313). The incompleteness of transition is mirrored in the dates that accompany chapter titles, which run chronologically from 1952 to 1980 but contain conspicuous and apparently random gaps. The missing years, which reflect Martin's missing parts, suggest that identity, like history, is always partial and incomplete. By highlighting the inevitably unfinished nature of transition, the novel abandons what Judith Halberstam terms 'the constrictive terminology of crossing', which maintains the myth of sexual difference, the belief that there is a 'natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing' (Rivkin and Ryan 1998: 760). Like the title of Kate Bornstein's play, *The Opposite Sex is Neither, Sacred Country* suggests that there is 'no "other" side, no "opposite" sex' (Halberstam 1998: 760). Preparing Mary for sex reassignment, Beales tells her, 'you will not be a man. Nor will you any longer *be* a woman' (p. 203). Sexual ambiguity is suggested by the 'capon' (p. 137), a castrated cockerel, that Cord promises to cook for Mary one Christmas and Martin's name, which invokes a 'freemartin', a genetically female calf that possesses male characteristics and exhibits masculine behaviour. Likewise, while sex

reassignment changes Mary's body geography, the absence of a penis indicates that, anatomically, the post-reassignment land Martin inhabits is a 'cunt-ry' in which he holds dual citizenship. The phantasmal character of the 'other' side is also suggested by the location in which Mary passes as Martin, Tennessee, described as an 'imaginary place' (p. 269).

The novel also questions the belief that there are two distinct sexes, that bodies are 'morphologically binary' (Butler 1990: 6), through the suggestion that Mary is as 'sexually blended, gender-bended' as Martin (Bornstein 1994: 11). Estelle describes Mary's body as 'peculiar' (p. 141), and Mary tells her doctor that she has 'in some respects' a girl's body (p. 151). Her position in bed, lying 'between' Sonny and Estelle (p. 12), signals the inbetweenness of her identity, as does the location of Beales's office: 'Middlesex' (p. 201). Mary contradicts Cord's belief that 'everything important in life is dual, like being and not being, male and female, and that there was no country in between' (p. 148) and locates herself in 'no-man's land' (p. 168). This contradicts most transsexual autobiographies, which, as Sandy Stone notes, deny 'mixture' and present (in the case of MTF transsexuality) 'unambiguous men' becoming 'unambiguous women' with 'no territory between' (Stone 1991: 286).

Sacred Country affirms sexual ambiguity as natural with subtle reminders that nature frequently defies sexual difference. Anne Fausto-Sterling notes that nature is equated with 'the real' (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 22), but she, like Bonnie B. Spanier, shows that nature is a social construct: 'When scientists look to nature, they usually bring with

them their sociopolitical beliefs about what is natural' (Spanier 1991: 330). Thus, when nature is interpreted through a heteropatriarchal lens, examples that subvert a binary sex-gender system are overlooked or ignored. Like Spanier and Fausto-Sterling, Tremain invokes myriad plants and animals that, like the freemartin, challenge the fixed and oppositional categories of male and female. When Mary gets lost in the woods, she is carrying a bucket with a picture of a starfish on it (starfish are not only hermaphrodites but also associated with metamorphosis because they begin life in a larval form). Mary first confides the secret of her transsexuality in Marguerite, her pet guineafowl (almost identical in appearance, male and female guineafowl are notoriously difficult to sex). Also, like most argyranthemums, the flower evoked by Marguerite's name (the Marguerite Daisy) is a hybrid. The naturalness of transformation itself is suggested when Mary compares herself to 'pupa' (p. 95), a life stage of insects that undergo complete metamorphosis like the 'silkworms' in her classroom (p. 36). Pearl's name, which evokes the piece of grit transformed into a gemstone inside a mollusk, underlines that change is not only natural but also valuable. Miss McRae teaches Mary that nature is 'extraordinary' and 'marvelous' (p. 29), and the wonderful plants and animals that she sees in the Natural History Museum remind her that 'we live on the planet of the unexpected' (p. 246). After a visit to the museum, Mary tells Pearl that her sex change is 'no stranger than millions of other things on earth' (p. 249).

Diversity and variation in the natural world indicates that sexual difference is a construct imposed by the medical establishment. This is exemplified by the doctor who, discovering that Mary has not started to menstruate, attempts to press her body into

conformity: he diagnoses ‘hormone deficiency’ and prescribes pills that will ‘bring on’ bleeding (pp. 151-2). Similarly, Sterns exemplifies Butler’s contention that the embodiment of norms is a ‘compulsory practice’ (Butler 1993: 231) when he ‘commands’ Martin to return for a phalloplasty on the grounds that the creation of a penis is of ‘critical importance’ (p. 352). The violence that underscores the dominant order’s regulation of the cultural norms of gender and sexual identity is underlined when Sonny sends Marguerite to be killed and when he attacks Mary, tearing open her shirt to expose her breasts.

If Martin is ambivalently sexed, this does not exclude him from the category ‘man’ in the way that Janice Raymond or J. Michael Bailey call for the exclusion of MTF transsexuals from the category ‘woman’ on the grounds that they are not ‘real’ women but men attempting to colonise a female body (Raymond 1979: 103-4) or effeminate gay men (Bailey 2003). Rather, the incoherence of Martin’s identity subverts the binary sex-gender system upheld by Raymond and Bailey’s essentialism by exemplifying Butler’s point that ‘to go from F to M, or from M to F, is not necessarily to stay within the binary frame of gender, but to engage transformation itself as the meaning of gender’ (Butler 2004: 65). Thus, if Martin is not a real or ‘true’ man (p. 203), it is because sexed realness is impossible.

Man-Maid Men

In ‘The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto’, Stone calls on transsexuals to forgo passing, that is, to become ‘posttranssexual’, and to trade social acceptability for the opportunity to construct a counterhegemonic discourse about gender by speaking

‘from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible’ (Stone 1991: 295). In contrast to Stone and ‘gender outlaws’ like Bornstein and Feinberg, who defy the binary categories of gender, Martin’s desire to pass as an ‘ordinary’ man appears to undermine the radical potential suggested by his sexual ambiguity. However, by constructing parallels between Mary/Martin and a cast of ‘man-maid men’ - characters who highlight both the construction and incoherence of gender – *Sacred Country* suggests that transsexuals are subversive because they ‘make us realize that we are all passing’ (Shapiro 1991: 257), and underline that the failure to be ‘male-y real’ is ‘universally inevitable’ (Prosser 1999: 89).

The novel follows various characters as they strive to reinvent themselves as men against a backdrop of social change: while Mary wants to be a boy rather than a girl, Timmy wants to be a vicar rather than a farmer, and Walter wants to be a country singer rather than a butcher. Mary has much in common with both men, whose vocations represent the ‘sacred’ and the ‘country’ of the novel’s title, suggesting that the story is as much theirs as hers or, rather, that Mary’s story is also their story. Just as Mary feels trapped in a female body, so Timmy and Walter are trapped in traditional male roles and identities. Both men are bound by patriarchal tradition. Sonny wants Timmy to inherit the farm and Walter’s father wants him to take over the family shop. Timmy expresses his sense of entrapment in his drawing of the 90° angle, composed of a horizontal line that represents water (as a boy, Timmy hopes to become a professional swimmer) and a vertical line that represents praise (his other passion is devotional singing). When puberty

ends his singing career and Sonny ends his swimming lessons, Timmy inserts an image of a figure trapped in the angle, bound by the words ‘No way Out’ to express his sense of suffocation (p. 211). Haunted by the founder of the family business, who bears the message ‘You are the last Loomis and you mustn’t desert the meat’ (p. 40), Walter feels similarly trapped: ‘it seemed to him that his ancestor was...pinning him down’ (p. 40). Timmy hates the farm as much as Walter hates the shop and both men eventually quit home to pursue ‘a different life’ (p. 242). The death of Sonny, who commits suicide on the farm, and the death of Ernie (Walter’s father), who bleeds to death in the shop after an accident with a meat cleaver, indicates that change is crucial to survival.

Mary and Timmy are linked by sanctity. Mary believes that she is a man as strongly as Timmy believes in God, and her faith in her maleness is equally inviolable, or sacred. For Walter, country music is also sacred - the Ryman Auditorium is ‘hallowed ground’ (p. 329) – but Mary and Walter are more closely connected by authenticity, which he pursues in country music and she (initially) believes resides in the substance of sex. Walter emphasises the authenticity of emotion expressed in his songs – ‘Hillbillies do not pretend’ (p. 66) - and stresses that his cowboy outfit is made in Tennessee and hence ‘the genuine thing’ (p. 266). Yet Walter’s pursuit of authenticity reveals that, like Mary, he can only approximate his ideal self. Walter has to learn to yodel, to make a sound ‘born in the mountains’, in Suffolk where, as Pete notes, ‘there were no mountains’ (p. 38). Furthermore, according to Richard Peterson, the authenticity of country music is a fabrication. Peterson demonstrates that the two personifications of country music, the hillbilly and the cowboy, were ‘deliberately constructed images created selectively out of

available symbolic resources and contemporary styles' and argues that these images were carefully crafted by George Hay, creator of Grand Ole Opry, to fit a commercially successful format (Peterson 1997: 68-9). Walter also demonstrates that naturalness is, as Butler argues, an illusion created by repetition (Butler 1990: 33). He learns to yodel by copying the singers he admires. The persistence of Walter's 'yodel-practice' wears out four gramophone needles as he sings along to his Slim Whitman record, which he plays 'over and over' (p. 39). The considerable effort Walter exerts to achieve the sound that his idols make 'effortlessly' reveals that naturalness is an affectation (p. 39).

Timmy and Walter are incoherently gendered figures that trouble the heteropatriarchal norms of identity and desire. Timmy's queerness is first suggested by the name of the pesticide with which Mary tries to kill him: 'Flit', a synonym for a feminine or gay man (p. 51). Gender ambiguity finds expression in his life-saving instructions, which include 'drawings of a drowning person who could have been boy or girl, child or man, it was hard to say' (p. 115). It is further suggested by Timmy's position in the middle of his angle when he reimagines his parents as the two axes: 'Estelle the vertical line with her head in the sky somewhere. Sonny the horizontal, flat as the fields, going nowhere but hopelessly on' (p. 212). When Timmy sings in the church choir, Mary notes that his 'high voice' makes him sound 'like a girl' (p. 114; p. 213), and Garber's observation that religion is often regarded as 'unmanly' (Garber 1992: 211), suggests that his role as a vicar further destabilises his gender. Endorsing this, Mary selects Reverend Geddis as a confidante on the grounds that 'he was a man who reminded me of a woman' (p. 130).

Like Mary, Walter, who is bisexual, disrupts the binary categories of both gender and sexuality. Explaining that she perceives herself as male, Mary tells the agony aunt D'Esté Defoe 'I have never been sexually attracted to a man. I do not even dream of Sean Connery' (p. 199). Mary views her desire for women as evidence of her manhood but, despite her reliance on heterosexual norms (the idea that 'real' men love women), her desire problematises the categories 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual'. While she dreams of 'pale-lipped black-eyed girls' (p. 179), she does not identify as a lesbian and ends her relationship with Georgia on these grounds: 'she could only love women who loved men, not women who loved women' (p. 225). Further, Mary/Martin's love for Pearl remains constant throughout the novel, demonstrating that sexuality is not determined by gender or sex. Walter's bisexuality likewise defies oppositional categories: he falls in love first with Sandra, then Gilbert and finally Skippy Jean Maguire, whose gender-neutral pet-name, 'Sky' (p. 330), indicates a desire to transcend the binary categories of gender that underpin compulsory heterosexuality.

Although discussing Gladys, a sexual partner, with Pete makes Walter feel 'mannish' (p. 124), the idea that heterosexuality affirms manhood is undercut by the suggestion that he is not fully a man ('-ish' meaning 'somewhat'). The insecurity of Walter's manhood is also suggested by the fact that he styles himself as a 'cowboy' (p. 265), a deeply ambivalent icon of masculinity. Whilst the cowboy is, on one hand, the archetype of American manhood, the model of heteronormative hypermasculinity that the cowboy represents is undercut by his flamboyant appearance and the homoerotic subtext of the predominantly male environment he occupies. As patriarchy typically endorses an

injunction against male display and codes self-adornment as feminine, Walter's 'snakeskin and glitter' costumes and his 'rhinestone jacket' place him in a feminine position (p. 342; p. 346). Walter is similarly feminised by his feelings, which patriarchy makes taboo in men. Gilbert advises him 'not to feel' (p. 191), and when his father dies, relations arrive to comfort his mother: 'Somehow it was she, only, who was considered to be in need of comfort and they did not try to console Walter or Pete' (p. 93). Walter, however, is attracted to the outpouring of intense emotion that characterises country music. As he explains, hillbillies 'sing what they feel' (p. 66), and his own songs are full of passionate emotion. Furthermore, like the country singers he imitates, Walter sings in a 'falsetto' voice (p. 39). The multiple and alternating sounds of the yodel give symbolic expression to the plurality and instability of Walter's identity and desire. Although Pete comments that the yodel 'was a sound born in the mountains, where a man could hear his own echo' (p. 38), the suggestion that yodeling confirms Walter's manhood is undercut by the fact that, according to Greek myth, Echo is female.

Even Sonny, who (as his name suggests) represents hegemonic masculinity, reveals the performativity of gender. Sonny is identified with America's most enduring male icon, John Wayne. His hands are 'red and hard, like the old weathered hands of John Wayne' (p. 257), and he adopts the actor's most famous phrase: 'Darn right' (p. 162). However, as Gary Wills shows, John Wayne's persona was as constructed as his emphatically (doubly) masculine name. In *John Wayne's America* (1997), Wills argues that 'Wayne was not born Wayne. He had to be invented' (Wills 1997: 15), pointing out that the actor Wayne never aspired to be a cowboy, hated horses and had to remind

himself to say ‘ain’t’ (Wills 1997: 31; 12). Wills also suggests that his famous walk was a contrivance and concludes, ‘his masculinity was a studied effect rather than something that came naturally’ (Wills 1997: 20-1). Disparities between Sonny and the screen idol confirm that manhood is ceaselessly pursued but never fully possessed: struggling with a poor memory and a loveless marriage, Sonny notes with bitterness that ‘John Wayne didn’t have holes in his past’ and ‘always had some black and white woman to kiss and to ride with into the future’ (p. 162). Estelle has just as much trouble maintaining her likeness to the actress Ava Gardner: ‘The perm was growing out of Estelle’s hair. Half of it was straight and half curly. Ava Gardner had never looked like this’ (p. 333). In this way, the novel illustrates that a subject ‘never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate’ (Butler 1993: 231).

Sonny’s identification with John Wayne, born ‘Marion Morrison’, underlines the ambivalence of his identity as a man. Sexual ambiguity is suggested by his damaged ear, likened to ‘coral’ (p. 6), a hermaphroditic organism, and Sonny (like Mary) is characterised by missing parts; he has lost part of his ear and a part of his watch that is suggestive of symbolic castration: ‘the minute hand had fallen off’ (p. 3). As Sonny represents post-war men – the war ‘damaged him, just like thousands of men had been damaged in the war’ (p. 35) – the novel suggests that neither masculinity nor maleness is a sinecure for any man. Indeed, the epigraph taken from T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘The Hollow Men’ debunks the myth that sexual identity has substance, implying instead that all men are ‘hollow’.

Contesting Otherness

While the dominant order seeks to maintain a regulatory regime of gender norms by presenting transsexuals as fakes, jokes, freaks or psychopaths, Tremain presents her FTM protagonist as an ordinary man rather than an abject 'Other'.³ Although Timmy finds the bandages that Mary uses to bind her breasts 'revolting' (p. 116) and Sonny condemns her as an 'abomination' (p. 118), this attempt to 'Other' her is undercut by parallels between them. While stressing the specificity of FTM transition, parallels between Mary and many more characters point to universal aspects of her experience, which is also suggested by the lyrics of Walter's song, 'Well, there's always something different hiding / There inside the something that you see!' (p. 220), and Cord's comment, 'We're all something else inside' (p. 313), which echoes Halbertsam's claim 'we are all transsexuals' (Rivkin & Ryan 1998: 760).

Like Mary, most of the characters in the novel have a dual self or change their identity. Harker, who believes in the transmigration of souls, believes that he was a 'nun' in a former life and undergoes a transition from confirmed bachelor to family man (p. 110). Transformation is also suggested by his name, which he shares - along with an interest in (cricket) bats - with the (feminine) young lawyer in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The 'worm' of inattention that Harker notices in himself likewise links him to Mary as worms are hermaphrodites. Sonny's name is actually 'John' (p. 234), the fortune teller Madame Cleo's real name is 'Gladys Higgins' (p. 63), Mary's lover, Georgia Dickins, is also the agony aunt 'D'Este Defoe' (p. 198), Mary sends Pearl a record by Cat Stevens, who later becomes a Muslim and changes his name to Yusuf Islam, Walter's

hero Slim Whitman was born Otis Dewey Whitman and his agent, Bentwater, has changed his surname to 'Bliss' from 'LeQuaide' (p. 305), which denotes both gender ambiguity (it combines, in French, the masculine definite article 'le' with a feminine 'e' ending) and the fluidity of identity (it sounds like 'liquid').

The duality of identity is reflected in the motif of doubleness: without glasses, Mary sees 'people become two of themselves' (p. 13), Irene's idiosyncratic spelling compels her to double consonants – 'You're becomming a strannger, Estelle' (p. 142) – and Walter forms a 'singing duo' with Sky (p. 343). The narrative form of the novel, which combines first and third person narration, is itself double and creates what Bornstein calls a transgendered style, one characterised by collage, 'a cut and paste thing' (Bornstein 1994: 193). By continually switching from third to first person narration, the instability of the narrative reflects the novel's key theme of change, which manifests itself in the lives of all characters, not just Mary: Gilbert Blakey drives a convertible, Mary and Irene (Pearl's mother) watch the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, Harker transforms willow into cricket bats, and Livia turns horsehair into Christmas tree decorations.

Parallels between Mary and men disfigured by illness not only make Mary's experience, which Harker fears 'no one...will understand' (p. 207), accessible to non-trans readers but also encourage identification and sympathy. The profound anguish that results from the disparity between Mary's material and imagined body is mirrored closely in the experience of Cord, who is disfigured by Palsy to such an extent that he no longer

recognises himself: 'His own image, in the glass of the medicine cabinet, was now an unrecognisable thing' (p. 134). As with gender dysphoria, the cause of palsy is unknown and cannot be explained by doctors. Despite this point of commonality, palsy is regarded as an illness that merits sympathy whereas transsexuality is stigmatized as a mental disorder; Mary's doctor dismisses her insistence that she is a boy as 'delusion' (p. 152), and the novel ends in 1980, the year that the American Psychiatric Association added transsexuality to its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Registered Mental Disorders*.

Pete also experiences a painful split between his internal and external selves which, like his eyes, do not align. When he meets an attractive woman in a bar, Pete knows that her gaze slides over him because his wandering eye make him 'ugly' (p. 111). Like Mary, Pete wants others to see him as he sees himself and is determined 'to bring this girl around to his way of seeing himself' (p. 112). The tumour that eats away Pete's nose also links him to Mary (and Sonny) through the motif of missing parts because the nose often represents the penis. By aligning Mary with men disfigured by illness, Tremain implicitly presents the FTM's female body as a deformity that sex reassignment can correct. Likewise, the bandages that Mary uses to bind her breasts suggest healing. Thus, in contrast to critics like Sheila Jeffries (2003), who considers FTM transsexuality a form of violence against women and views sex change operations as a mutilation of the body, Tremain presents sex reassignment as therapy rather than pathology.⁴

The novel challenges the classification of transsexuality as a mental disorder by presenting Mary alongside a number of eccentric or mentally unstable characters. Harker

writes in 'green ink' (p. 53), the colour said to characterise crank letters, and the sign advertising his business - 'Harker's Bats' (p. 15) - also calls his sanity into question ('batty' being a synonym for 'crazy'). Georgia is 'elsewhere in her mind' (p. 225) and, hemmed in by turkeys, Pete feels he is 'going mad' (p. 347). Moreover, Mary seems perfectly sane in comparison to Sonny, who believes that she is using 'deadly magic' to ruin the farm and (p. 163), in the face of all evidence to the contrary, desperately clings to the belief that Timmy will return to save it. Furthermore, Estelle is committed to a mental hospital at various points in the narrative and remains there at the novel's close. As Sonny and Estelle epitomise the dominant order's gender ideal in their likeness to John Wayne and Ava Gardner, the fact that they both go mad highlights the harm caused by a binary sex-gender system and locates pathology in heteropatriarchy rather than transsexuality.

Tremain also contests the Otherness of the FTM by presenting transsexuality as sacred. The epigraph taken from a poem by St. John of the Cross - 'I live without inhabiting Myself' - positions Mary as a holy figure by aligning the experience of alienation, that stems from the unhomeliness of her own body, with that of a saint. Her sacred status is also suggested by her adopted name, Mary Martin, which is not only the name of the actress who played Peter Pan but also that of a radical seventeenth century Roman Catholic nun. Furthermore, Mary's name invokes Christ's mother, who is central to a biblical tradition that transforms holy women into men. As Elizabeth Castelli has shown, this tradition originates in the Gospel of Thomas, where Christ insists that he will make Mary male so that she can remain among the disciples (Castelli 1991: 33).

Paralleling her transition from female to male, if Mary is first associated with Christ's mother, the 'Virgin Mary' (p. 153), she is later aligned with Christ himself. When Mary's friends Rob and Tony visit her three days after a bilateral mastectomy, Rob remarks, 'This is your resurrection, man' (p. 289). The religious idiom recalls Jan Morris's transsexual autobiography *Conundrum* (1974), which Stone describes as an 'almost religious narrative of transformation' (Stone 1991: 281). By presenting her protagonist as a sacred figure, *Tremain* implicitly challenges the view that transsexuals are 'sick' and 'sinful' (Rubin 1992: 282).

Although it opens in 1952, the year, according to D'Este Defoe, that the first sex change operation was performed (p. 200), allusions to Biblical and canonical literary texts that highlight the incoherence of gender and sexual identity offer a reminder that queer identities are not a modern phenomenon.⁵ As well as studying *Hamlet*, Mary reads *Macbeth*, another play that articulates her desire to change sex. Lady Macbeth pleads to be transformed into a man: 'unsex me here' (I, v, 42). Moreover, according to Jarold Ramsey, *Macbeth* exposes manhood as 'unfixed', 'evolving' and 'unappealable' (Ramsey 1973: 286). Manhood is rendered 'meaningless' because the play demonstrates that there is 'no intrinsic distinction, no fundamental basis of identity to be had in declaring one's male gender' (Ramsey 1973: 287; 291). The Greek café that Mary frequents in London invokes a tradition of Greek myths populated by queer figures such as Hermaphroditus (an intersex figure) and Tiresias (who changes sex). The realization that subjects who defy the binary categories of gender and sexual identity have a long history challenges the pathologisation of transsexuality as abnormal. As Mary tells

Walter, 'It's in the Talmud. In the Bible, even. It's been known since time began' (p. 268).

While Tremain contests the Otherness of the transsexual subject, she also contests the Otherness of women. Estelle is clearly dissatisfied with her status as the second sex, which limits her role to that of wife and mother. Playing *What's My Line?*, Estelle realises that 'None of the women, including me, had ever been anything. We'd never had a line. Being a mother and a wife is not a line' (p. 82). Her dream of boarding a train, 'leaving Mary behind on the platform' (p. 141), suggests a desire to escape marriage and motherhood. Estelle's aversion to weddings articulates her distaste for marriage - 'Weddings make me constipated' (p. 317) - and her concern that Pearl will abandon her career plans after marrying Timmy indicate the importance that she places on female independence. Mary is equally aware of the limited opportunities available to women and saddened by the absence of women in Livia's *Dictionary of Inventions*; significantly, the one woman listed is unmarried: 'Miss Glover' (p. 167 emphasis added). Mary is also troubled by women's subordinate social position: she resents the privileges that Timmy enjoys (Sonny longs for a son and then gives him preferential treatment) and is appalled by Lyndsey's desire to 'submit' to her fiancé, Ranulph (p. 149). However, Mary's wish to change sex is not an attempt to escape the social disadvantages of womanhood. As she tells her friend Rob, 'Nothing is wrong with being a woman. It's only that I'm not one' (p. 242). Mary and Estelle are linked by being the only two characters in the novel who speak in the first person. By giving a voice to members of two marginalised social groups that have been historically voiceless (women and transsexuals), Tremain suggests that

their struggles for social justice are connected. Although the queer deconstruction of identity has been viewed as incompatible with the feminist critique of female oppression, Tremain points to the convergence of feminist and queer politics: Mary and Estelle are both trapped by womanhood, albeit in different ways.

However, the novel suggests that it is not only women who will benefit from a queer deconstruction of heteropatriarchal gender norms. While Mary fears being 'loathed' for her transsexuality (p. 129), a regulatory framework that rewards legitimacy with social acceptance and punishes illegitimacy with social stigma affects several characters in the novel adversely. There is a suggestion that Pearl does not win the Beautiful Baby Contest because she is 'illegitimate' (p. 8), Irene struggles to find a job because she is an unmarried mother, Harker fears that Irene's pregnancy will put him among the 'outcasts' (p. 74), and Walter worries that his love for Gilbert will make him an 'outcast' too (p. 190). Tremain's critique of the boundaries that construct Otherness is therefore liberating for all subjects who defy social norms, not just transsexuals.

England and Englishness

While the 'sacred country' of the novel's title can be read as manhood, it also connotes England, which is often represented as a land of sacred sites. Reflecting this, when Estelle tries to add up everything in England, she begins with 'churches' (p. 139). Tremain's reassessment of gender and sexual identity is accompanied by a critical examination of Englishness, which confirms Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that 'a lot of the most exciting recent work around "queer" spins the term outward along

dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: all the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with the these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing, discourses, for example' (Sedgwick 1993: 8-9). The post-war period that Tremain charts witnessed major shifts in perceptions of England and Englishness. As Jeremy Paxman argues, 'the war and its immediate aftermath are the last time in living memory when the English had a clear and positive sense of themselves' (Paxman 1998: 2). Significantly, the novel opens in 1952, the year of the Suez Crisis, which marked England's decline as a dominant world power: after Suez, Margaret Blakey weeps for England and 'a greatness that was past' (p. 67), and in the States, Walter's declaration of Englishness is met with incredulity: 'You mean to tell me that England's still *there*?' (p. 304). The crisis in Englishness intersects with, and is reflected by, the crisis in gender and sexual identity depicted in the novel.

Sacred Country illustrates that, like gender and sex, Englishness is a construct. Cord, who holds an essentialist view of national identity, promulgates reductive racial, as well as national, stereotypes: 'The English are damned nifty at drill. Drill is in us, like dance is in the African. No one can say why, but it's true' (p. 261). However, contradicting Cord, the novel suggests that Englishness is invented rather than innate. While Irene compares herself to Celia Johnson, the revelation that she has 'rehearsed' (p. 73) the lines that make her sound like this 'icon of Englishness' points to the fabrication of national identity (Light 1991: 208). Similarly, reflecting Homi Bhabha's assertion that the nation is a discursive construct or narrative strategy (Bhabha 1994: 140), that nation is the product of narration, the woman with whom Walter stays when he first moves to

the States knows England primarily through ‘Jeeves stories’ (p. 302). The novel further challenges essentialism by suggesting that national identity is imaginary, an idea or state of mind. Confirming that England is, as Benedict Anderson notes, an ‘imagined community’ (1983), Walter finds the ‘solidity’ of London ‘unfamiliar’ and ‘foreign’ (p. 216). When Margaret Blakey discovers that her house is slowly falling into the sea, she moves her bedroom from the front to the back of the house so that instead of looking at the encroaching sea, she sees her ideal image of England – a pastoral idyll consisting of fields, a wood and a church spire: ‘She liked this landscape. She could imagine the rest of England spreading out and on beyond the spire. Out and on’ (p. 251). However, Sonny’s new combine harvester, plans for the trunk road and the aluminium sheds that make up Grace Loomis’s expanding empire of ‘hen factories’ suggest that the England Margaret cherishes is more imaginary than real (p. 285). The discrepancy between imagination and reality is likewise indicated by the distance between Irene and Celia Johnson: Irene identifies herself with the star of *Brief Encounter* (1945), a film about a woman who resists sexual transgression, in the very moment that she informs Harker (to whom she is not married) that she is pregnant.

Tremain also demonstrates that, like gender and sexual identity, Englishness is constructed in opposition to an ‘Other’. Watching the World Cup, Estelle states, ‘We sit in the dark and chant with the crowd: ‘England! – England! – England! And we have new enemies: their names are Pele and Jairzinho and Eusebio and de Michele and Weber and Beckenbauer’ (p. 186). However, the novel challenges a definition of Englishness that rests on the disavowal of difference. When Mary first arrives in London, she puts up

postcards of national monuments such as the Tower of London in her room but, challenging stereotypical images of England, she soon feels most at home in the Greek café: ‘it’s a strange thing, but it’s in the Greek cafe, which is called Zorba’s, that I have this strong sense of being in London and not just in it any more but becoming part of it’ (p. 182). The myth of an authentic or pure English national identity is subverted by other examples of hybridity. The American Judge Riveaux explains that his wife liked to see Shakespeare in England because ‘she liked a thing to be authentic’ (p. 351). However, the ‘larder full of ‘Cooper’s Oxford Marmalade’ that he cites as evidence that she is an ‘anglophile’ calls the notion of authenticity into question as this quintessentially English marmalade is made with oranges imported from Seville.

As well as highlighting parallels between the construction of gender and national identity, *Sacred Country* indicates that national identity is gendered. Anne McClintock argues that dominant representations of nation depend on, and institutionalise, gender difference (McClintock 1995: 353). Her observation that the nation is often metaphorically figured as a family indicates that sexuality is equally integral to dominant conceptions of nation, which is a heteropatriarchal concept (McClintock 1995: 360). Sonny and Estelle demonstrate the different roles assigned to women and men: he defends the nation (he has fought in World War II), she produces and reproduces it (she bears two children and makes a ‘Union Jack’ [p. 283]). The novel also illustrates that men are ‘contiguous with the nation as a whole’ (McClintock 1995: 355): Harker is associated with the English national sport (he makes cricket bats), Milo, Estelle’s first love, ‘was made of England’ (p. 44), and Beales’s smile is ‘like English spring sunlight’

(p. 201). As Giles and Middleton note, the idea that ‘to be English is to be an Englishman’ excludes women (Giles and Middleton 1995: 25). This is indicated by Livia’s love of gliding: she ‘liked to see England from above, neat and flat, like a map of itself’ (p. 83), suggesting that she felt distanced or separate from the nation. Likewise, Estelle loves watching American television shows and fantasises about running away to Scotland.

The novel suggests that it is not only women who are excluded from dominant conceptions of nation but also transsexuals. Tremain’s use of landscape as a trope for sexual identity indicates that bodies and nations are conflated, the borders of both being arbitrary but scrupulously patrolled and endorsed by the dominant order. Illustrating this, after a double mastectomy, the terms used to describe Mary’s body, ‘neat and flat’ (p. 288), echo those used to describe England as seen from Livia’s glider. Noting that ‘intelligible and legible bodies reflect, define and regulate the nation as a boundaried political geography’ (Boyd 2006: 420), Nan Alamilla Boyd proposes that ‘the body politic (the nation) exists for intelligible bodies’ (Boyd 2006: 431). Consequently, Mary’s queer body renders identification with England problematic: she wears a scarf patterned with ‘windmills and blue Dutchmen’ (p. 4), keeps her sweets in a tin that has ‘a picture of a Swiss chalet on it’ (pp. 14-15), imagines a former life as The Great Camillo (an Italian name), selects Hitler as an example of a good leader (p. 128), and smokes French cigarettes (p. 235). In addition, Mary moves from the country to the city, rejecting the rural landscape that is seen as synonymous with England for London, traditionally home to exiles and émigrés like Rob, her South African friend. Cord wishes that he could give

Mary 'the chance to look out and away from England into another world' (p. 137), Sterns advises Mary to leave the country and broaden her horizons - 'Remind yourself how small England is and how vast all the rest' (p. 316) - and Mary chooses self-imposed exile when she moves to the States.

However, Boyd notes that bodies reflect 'both nationalism and resistant social movements', and stresses that unintelligible bodies possess 'radical possibility' (Boyd 2006: 420-1). As queer bodies 'undermine the recognition and comradeship central to national unity' (Boyd 2006: 421), they threaten nationhood. *Sacred Country* opens with an image of a common culture - 'the nation fell silent for two minutes in honour of the dead king' (p. 3) - but immediately subverts the myth of national unity: because Sonny's watch is broken, the Ward family's silence is 'not properly synchronised with that of the nation' (p. 4). The novel offers a further critique of national unity when Estelle celebrates England's 1966 World Cup victory with fellow residents of the 'loony bin' (p. 55), implying that patriotism is a form of madness: 'all the mad of the shires and the counties are shouting and weeping their hearts dry' (p. 190). The incoherence of Mary's sexual identity indicates that transsexuality likewise poses a significant threat to national unity. As Boyd concludes, by upsetting a fixed relationship between gender, sex and sexuality, transsexual bodies 'reterritorialize national geographies' (Boyd 2006: 420).

In conclusion, even though, as Mary notes, 'Some subjects are not supposed to be debated' (p. 130), *Sacred Country* refuses to let manhood remain a sacred cow. The challenge that FTM transsexuality poses to dominant conceptions of manhood as natural,

self-evident and inviolable explains why it remains invisible or stigmatized. Transsexuality threatens the established order because it unsettles the stable ground of gender and challenges the binary categories that underpin heteropatriarchy and nationalism. By exploring what Stone calls the transsexual's 'potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities' (Stone 1991: 296), and by drawing parallels between the FTM and characters designated male at birth, Tremain challenges enduring and oppressive myths about gender and sex, most notably the belief that some bodies are more authentic or legitimate - and, consequently, that some bodies matter - more than others.

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² I refer to Tremain's central character as 'Mary' or 'Martin' in line with how s/he is identified in the novel by the chapter titles.

³ See, for example, Brian de Palm's film *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and Tom Shadyac's *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994).

⁴ See also Sheila Jeffries, 'Queer Theory and Violence Against Women' (1999).
http://sisyphe.org/article.php?id_article=1053

⁵ The view that Christine (formerly George) Jorgensen was the first person to undergo a sex change is challenged by David Ebershoff's novel *The Girl* (1995), based on the real life story of Danish painter Einar Wegener, who became a woman in 1931.