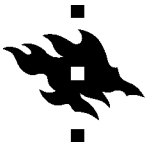


Multiplicity and Myth
Exploring Gender in Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection*
and *Triton*

Sointu Pitkänen
Master's Programme in English Studies
Department of Languages
Faculty of Arts
University of Helsinki
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<p>Tutkielma käsittelee sukupuolen kuvausta Samuel R. Delanyn romaaneissa <i>The Einstein Intersection</i> (1967) ja <i>Triton</i> (1976). Sen tavoitteena on tutkia miten romaanit haastavat käsityksiä sukupuolesta ja millä tavoin ne kuvaavat sukupuolivähemmistöjä. Näiden analyysi nojautuu osin aiempaan tutkimukseen kirjallisista ja tieteiskirjallisista sukupuolta horjauttavista keinoista ja osin teosten lähilukuun sukupuolentutkimuksellisesta näkökulmasta.</p> <p><i>The Einstein Intersection</i> on lajissaankin suhteellisen harvinainen romaani siinä, että se sisältää muunsukupuolisia henkilöitä. Vaikka heidän kuvauksestaan onkin löydettävissä joitain ongelmallisia piirteitä, selkeämmin romaanista esiin nousee erojen positiivinen korostus ja sukupuoliolotusten kyseenalaistaminen. Menneisiin myytteihin tarrautuminen näyttäytyy traagisena, ja romaani antaa ymmärtää, että ne hylätään tulevaisuudessa.</p> <p>Siinä missä <i>The Einstein Intersection</i> keskittyy erilaisuuteen ja sukupuolen moninaisuuteen, <i>Triton</i> käsittelee sukupuolen häilyvyyttä ja hankaluutta käsitteenä. Romaani käsittelee ja kritisoi sukupuolta niin kehojen, kielen, kuin yhteiskunnankin tasolla, hyödyntäen muutoksen teemaa. Perinteisen mallinen maskuliinisuus ja suhde naiseen näyttäytyy tehottomana, ja päähenkilön kohdalla sen ylläpito vaati jatkuvaa valehtelua itselleen ja muille.</p> <p><i>The Einstein Intersection</i> käsittelee erilaisuutta yhteiskunnassa, jossa sukupuolivähemmistöt ovat edelleen yhteiskunnan rajoilla, kun taas <i>Triton</i> luo yhteiskunnan, jossa erot ovat loputtomia ja keskeisiä. Molemmissa lukijat johdatetaan poikkeuksellisen sukupuolen maailmaan lähestyttävän kertojan kautta, toisessa hänen kanssaan oppien, ja toisessa oppien vastustamaan hänen ajatuksiaan. Oma yhteisö on läsnä, mutta vain muistona tai jäänteinä toisella planeetalla, tehostaen syventymistä muihin mahdollisuuksiin. Delanyn romaanit eivät ole nykynäkökulmasta ongelmattomia, mutta antavat edelleen paljon ajateltavaa.</p>		
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1. Introduction

1.1 Aims

In this thesis, I aim to examine how Samuel R. Delany deals with gender in two of his works, *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) and *Triton* (1976) and compare their different views on the subject. The nova that the two novels present are different: in the former, cultural structures have been created around a great number of intersex and nonbinary individuals, while the latter describes a society with gender equality where transitioning, including surgery, is easily accessible. While both deal with gender, they lead to different kinds of focus.

I would also like to see if any differences can be found between the novels to reflect changes that may have occurred in Delany's views of gender in the nine years between their publication. Furthermore, I wish to discover what these novels say about the role of gender in society, as well as the public and personal ways in which gender is constructed, with an emphasis on the interaction between the real and the potential.

I begin with a brief presentation of the author and the two novels, after which I give an overview of gender in science fiction, with an emphasis on androgyny. Then I proceed to examine each book in turn, focusing on the systems of gender they depict, as well as the techniques that Delany uses to deconstruct or problematize gender. I conclude my thesis with a comparison of the two and brief final remarks with suggestions for further study.

1.2 Presentation of Works

Samuel Ray Delany is a contemporary African-American author and literary critic known for his complex and thought-provoking science fiction works, which often engage with questions of race, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. He has won four Nebula Awards (one of which was for *The Einstein Intersection*) and two Hugo Awards.

The Einstein Intersection is the story of a young man named Lobey, who lives in a future society on an Earth abandoned by humans. The people who have taken over appear mostly human, although they possess a greater amount of unusual genetic mutations. These mutations have caused several major changes to society, including

a significant number of severely disabled individuals, the use of titles to differentiate between people of different capabilities, and the establishment of a three-gender-system. It soon becomes apparent that in addition to the other mutations, some people are “different”, with special, supernatural abilities, and Lobey is one of them. When Lobey’s lover, Friza, dies, following the mysterious deaths of others with special abilities, he goes on a quest to discover why it is happening and how it can be stopped. The story deals extensively with myth, as the people inhabiting Earth try to put on the guise of humanity, and all that this implies. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that it might not end in the same way as the myths it is based on.

Triton, also known as *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, also has a young man at its center, called Bron, who lives in Triton, a society where gender equality has largely been achieved and transitioning in terms of gender is not unusual. He himself comes from Mars, and has trouble adjusting to the freedom of Triton. This leads him to the drastic solution of transitioning into a woman at the end of the novel in order to fulfill his ideal of a less equal relationship between men and women.

1.3 Presentation of Terms

Throughout this thesis, I will be using some terms that are worth clarifying here.

1. “Intersex” is used to describe individuals with sexually ambiguous bodies, which cannot be easily classified as either male or female. This ambiguity can exist in a number of different areas, including hormones, chromosomes, and genitalia.
2. “Nonbinary gender” is used to describe the existence of more than two genders, as well as the phenomenon of individuals (who are often simply called “nonbinary”) identifying neither as men nor women. This is also an umbrella term for a variety of different identities and experiences.

1.4 Gender in Science Fiction

Science fiction is often defined by the way it imagines potential futures through thought experiments, and the way it can stretch the imagination of its readers. Our conception of gender is one of the features science fiction can play with, and many science fiction works have taken on the task of re-imagining gender in various

ways. However, for a long time gender was one of the exceptions to science fictional experimentation. Brian Attebery even goes as far as to claim that “Until the 1960s, gender was one of the elements most often transcribed unthinkingly into SF’s hypothetical worlds,” citing conservative (and mostly male) readers and publishers as the primary reason for a lack of adventurousness in this area (11).

What earlier writers may have lacked has been more than made up for later, especially by feminist and queer science fiction authors. In the chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* titled “Gender in Science Fiction”, Helen Merrick lists three main strategies that science fiction writers have employed to destabilize normative views of gender. The first is making apparent the assumption of men as the norm and bringing women to the foreground either by highlighting similarities between men and women or by putting a higher value on the feminine. The second is the fictional creation of societies where gender equality has been achieved, with the male and the female as “complementary halves” (242). The third and final strategy involves the use of androgyny. This can be done by either introducing intersex characters into the narrative, eliminating gender categories, or imagining nonbinary structures of multiple genders (although it seems questionable to me whether this last strategy can be called androgynous, and in fact other critics present it as completely separate from androgyny). Some possible examples of works belonging to these categories could be Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice* (2013), and Melissa Scott’s *Shadow Man* (1995) / Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2312* (2012), respectively.

Let us look more closely at this final category of androgyny, as it is the most relevant to Delany and to prevalent discussions of gender in science fiction. In his comprehensive work on science fiction and gender, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (2002), Brian Attebery has an entire chapter dedicated to it, titled “Androgyny as Difference,” where he discusses androgyny as a feminist tactic in general and as a feminist writing strategy in science fiction in particular. In this chapter, he considers arguments for and against the usefulness of this strategy as well as the ways in which it has been and can still be developed, by discussing multiple works that deal with androgyny in one way or another.

After a brief mention of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), the first novel Attebery presents is *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Attebery first describes the aspects of the book that have made it one of the most well-known novels of its kind: its

detailed description of not just an alien environment but also of an alien culture, and the examination of gender that is enabled by its androgynous characters. He then moves on to examining the two main critiques it has received: it did not take androgyny far enough, and the strategy of androgyny itself is flawed. It is interesting to note that this novel, often mentioned as the first of its kind, was in fact published two years after *The Einstein Intersection*, which also deals with intersex characters and a society with a nonbinary system of gender.

A very important point that Attebery raises about androgyny is that there is a difference between someone who is seen as an androgynous woman and someone who appears to be an androgynous man:

Put a woman in a man's suit, and you have an image of androgyny that is exotic, alluring, a little naughty, but from a patriarchal perspective, safe . . . But put a man in a woman's dress, and you have . . . an image that is comical, oversized, gross, embarrassing . . . In movies and theater, men in drag often stand for decadence and indulgence, [while w]omen in drag are trim and spunky heroines like Shakespeare's Rosalind. In each case, the sign is, or rather stands for, androgyny, but the significance is utterly altered. (94)

He then goes on to say that femininity and masculinity themselves are hierarchically placed, so that feminine men lose status while masculine women gain it:

To move from feminine to masculine is to move up the ladder of status and power. To shift from masculine to feminine is to lose both rank and purity, for femaleness is nearly always coded as something messier and darker and more dangerous, as well as weaker, than maleness. The unconscious masculine view of androgyny is an image of something taken away . . . while the feminine perspective sees Value Added. (94)

This means that androgyny is not as uncomplicated a term as it may seem, and thus not entirely unproblematic as a feminist strategy, at least without an awareness of its nuances. The same criticism that has been presented against *The Left Hand of*

Darkness also applies to popular conceptions of androgyny: androgynous characters tend to appear to be more masculine than feminine due to societal assumptions of the male as the norm.

The problems of androgyny are also discussed by Roseann Pluretti, who criticizes androgynous utopias by saying that “one must ask if androgynous futures truly eradicate present gender roles . . . feminist utopias tend to reinstate marginalization of race and sexuality and only tackle present-day sexism by eradicating men or gender entirely” (394-395). She presents feminist science fiction as an alternative, more effective way of dealing with marginalization. According to her, in feminist science fiction, difference is maintained rather than removed. That is, only the balance of power between genders is altered. Furthermore, she argues that these works are more likely also to deal with race and sexuality. The solution to the problems of gender in these works tends to be diversity through the representation of a number of genders rather than androgyny (note that her definition of androgyny thus excludes multiple-gender strategies) (395).

However, not all works dealing with androgyny are utopias. Different authors have very different takes on the feelings of those who exist between or beyond genders. I would speculate that this often depends on whether the fictional world is a fully androgynous or intersex society or the focus is on a lone individual or small group. According to Attebery, some works, like Alan Brennert’s “The Third Sex” (1989) and Delany’s short story “Aye, and Gomorrah...” (1967), present being intersex/androgynous/sexless as problematic, while others, like Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The World Wreckers* (1971) and *Darkover Landfall* (1972), “suggest androgyny as the potential end to isolation and to doubts about identity” (99). On “Aye, and Gomorrah...”, he states:

The implication is that gender itself is problematic: even new gender identities and their corresponding desires will not lead to wholeness but to further fragmentation of society and the psyche. Frelks and spacers, the story implies, are no better and no worse than homosexuals, heterosexuals, females, or males: gender is an illusion cast by desire and desire is that which, by definition, cannot be fulfilled. Delany’s version of gynandry, like Sturgeon’s, offers a strong critique of gender without proposing a solution to its dilemmas. (98)

Thus, he argues, in Delany's work, the problems of androgyny are merely reflective of the problems inherent to all of gender as a concept.

The problems of gender categories are also dealt with in another short story that Attebery discusses, Raphael Carter's "Congenital Agenesis of Gender Ideation, by K. N. Sirsi and Sandra Botkin" (1998), a fictional scientific article about individuals who cannot distinguish people classified as men and women from each other, as they perceive a much larger number of sexes. This story is notable for the way it acknowledges biological variations in sex, as well as for having been written by someone who does not identify as a man or a woman. As science fiction works dealing with androgyny often seem to forget the existence of actual intersex individuals, this story is an important addition to the canon.

Another common problem is failing to separate (biological) sex and gender (identity), as even systems of multiple genders are so often justified by being strictly connected to the same multiple sexes. In her text, "Beyond Binary Gender" (in *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*), Patricia Melzer criticizes the commonplace conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality that is still so common in popular science fiction.

Although there are still surprisingly few science fiction novels featuring nonbinary characters, and the ones that exist are not always recognized as meaningful representation, there has recently been a considerable increase in science fictional stories dealing with gender diversity, presenting alternate systems of gender. Attebery ends his chapter on androgyny by claiming that "The sign of androgyny is evolving, and with it, perhaps, something of human consciousness" (104). As our ways of imagining gender in literature evolve, so do the ways we view ourselves.

2. Nonbinary Gender in *The Einstein Intersection*

2.1. Introduction

Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) may be the first science fiction novel to include nonbinary characters, since it was published before *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which is much more often mentioned in research on gender in science fiction than Delany's novel. There are two characters in the book who belong to a third gender, and both bear some significance to the plot. In many ways, the novel was ahead of its time in terms of its conception of a third gender, but the execution is flawed and possibly limited by the reigning views of the time.

Nevertheless, the text opens itself to interesting readings of gender and even to some questioning of a strict gender hierarchy, especially in its celebration of "difference."

The general theme of difference, and the explicit description of a great number of disabled individuals in the novel has led some (such as Joanne Woiak and Hioni Karamanos) to examine the book from a disability studies viewpoint. While disability studies do not form the theoretical base of my analysis, it is nevertheless relevant also to consider such views of the categorization of difference when examining gender. In fact, the novel has received less attention by critics than some of Delany's other works, and, as far as I know, it has not been explored from a gender perspective.

I have chosen to refer to the characters Le Dorik and Le Dove with the pronoun "they" with the justification that they both bear the title (Le) that is given to nonbinary/intersex individuals in the novel and "they" is currently the most commonly used and accepted gender-neutral pronoun. Furthermore, Delany seems to be aiming for a gender-neutral impression in his own writing by avoiding gendered pronouns in descriptions of Le Dorik throughout and Le Dove after the revelation of their gender. An argument could be made for using "she" for Le Dove, as this is the pronoun used most frequently to refer to them, but as this is at least partly done so as to reflect Lobey's mistaken view of Le Dove, it does not seem to be based on their actual gender. Thus, I find that using "they" for both is the clearest and most consistent option.

In this chapter, I first examine the construction of gender in the novel and the extent to which these characters are granted personhood and humanity, then move on to consider the way tropes of surprise and deception are used with regard to both

characters, and finally compare the two characters as representatives of two opposing views of nonbinary people and ultimately two different solutions to the question of difference.

2.2. Personhood and (Non)humanity

As in most other science fiction novels that examine gender variety, the gender system of *The Einstein Intersection* is linked to sex, and justified by a significant class of intersex people, which seems to exist together with other mutations. This variety in physical features is explained to be due to the flawed way that the aliens of the story attempt to emulate humanity. That is, the large number of “non-functionals” is explained by saying that they “hadn’t adjusted to your images yet” (18). The necessity of such plot devices to justify the existence of gender categories other than “men” and “women” is interesting, considering that actual intersex people exist without any kind of special intervention. Furthermore, not all intersex individuals consider themselves nonbinary, just as most nonbinary individuals are not intersex. The novel, however, largely steers clear of questions of gender identity, so the separation of sex and gender is not explicitly discussed, and gender is completely determined by biological sex.

Thus, it is relevant to not only look at this novel as an example of nonbinary representation, but also to study the extent to which these characters can be viewed as intersex humans. While both real-life intersex individuals and the third-gender characters in this novel are sexually ambiguous, the nonbinary characters in the novel are, for instance, implied to be capable of reproducing asexually, unlike actual intersex individuals (although this also applies to women in the novel). Furthermore, although this novel creates a third gender category for intersex individuals, in fact such individuals have historically been classified as either male or female, with invasive surgery being performed on some as infants to this end. Depending on the person, they may identify as men, women, or otherwise, but in most countries, they are legally assigned either male or female at birth.¹ Depending on whether they identify with this assigned gender, they may consider themselves cis- or transgender. In this novel, neither of the two intersex characters object to the gender they have been assigned (nonbinary/third-gender/Le).

¹ More information can be found on the websites of the Intersex Society of North America or the American Psychological Association

In the world of the novel, nonbinary individuals are considered full persons and normal citizens in that Le is one of the three titles granted to people considered to be “functional” enough to earn the honor, in addition to La (female) and Lo (male). They are, however, also alien (as are all the characters in the novel). This is something that nonbinary people themselves have criticized in science fiction: most of the characters they are given to identify with are not human. This criticism is not entirely relevant for *The Einstein Intersection* in that all of its characters are nonhuman, and their strange way of emulating human culture to some extent defamiliarizes such normative structures as gender. Toward the end of the novel, it becomes obvious that the characters are limiting themselves in unnecessary ways due to the culture they inhabit and try to wear humanity like ill-fitting clothes. The implications, that culture is in some ways inherited and that continual change is absolutely necessary, are liberating, but the very fact that the characters are essentially alien can limit the novel’s potential for inspiring change.

Despite Le being a valid title for a person, there are early hints that such individuals are not considered completely equal to others in Lobey’s village society. Lobey recalls how, during a debate about whether Friza (whose status is in question because she is mute) should be granted the title “La” or not, another child made a joke about the possibility of her being called “Le Friza”. The elders ignored the joke, and Lobey comments on this in his description by saying, “Everybody ignores a Le anyway” (50). Moreover, he describes how this remark offended Friza so much that she threw a pebble at the boy who made the joke. Lobey also remarks in his description of himself that there was “a rash of hermaphrodites” around the time when he was born (36), with the word “rash” carrying unpleasant connotations and thus suggesting that this development is not considered a positive one, at least by him. Moreover, the only Le person mentioned in the village, Le Dorik, works in the kage where all the “non-functionals” (severely disabled) individuals are kept. Thus, even though they are themselves a titled person in the society of the novel, Le Dorik is connected to those who have not been granted such titles and is usually confined to the kage because of their work.

This prejudice that is shown toward nonbinary individuals seems like something that has been inherited from human perceptions of gender, rather than being inherent in these beings themselves. At one point in the novel, Lobey thinks, “I’ve often wondered why we didn’t invent a more compatible method of

reproduction to go along with our own three way I-guess-you'd-call-it-sexual division. Just lazy" (249). Gender and reproduction thus become another part of how the characters of this novel have without question assumed a culture that is not compatible with the reality of their existence. While this novel ignores the existence of intersex people among humans, it could thus be read as commenting on the strangeness of culturally ignoring their existence by subscribing to a strict, supposedly sexually determined gender binary.

2.3. Revelations of Gender: Betrayal, Deception, and Surprise

Themes of surprise and deception are linked to the gender disclosure of both Le Dorik and Le Dove. It is revealed that Lobey and Le Dorik used to have a sexual relationship and have had a child (who lives in the kage), and that this relationship ended with Lobey's discovery of Le Dorik's sex, after which Lobey stopped seeing them. Le Dorik, we discover, also had a relationship (and a child) with Friza, who never found out, but Le Dorik supposes she might have reacted differently.

"Actually," Dorik said, "I was always sort of sad you never came around. We used to have fun. I'm glad Friza didn't feel the way you did. We used to—"

"—to do a lot of things, Dorik. Yeah, I know. Look, nobody bothered to tell me you weren't a girl till I was fourteen, Dorik. If I hurt you, I'm sorry."

"You did. But I'm not. Nobody ever did get round to telling Friza I wasn't a boy. Which I'm sort of glad of. I don't think she would have taken it the same way you did, even so." (150)

Lobey talks about their past relationship with resentment, clearly feeling deceived into having a relationship with them, not knowing that they are Le. When Le Dorik offers to show something to him, Lobey calls over his shoulder, "You're pretty good at showing people things in the dark, aren't you? That's how you're different, huh?" (156). He even returns to this later, replying to something Le Dorik says with, "And you're going to show me how? . . . In the dark?" (160). Thus, although earlier he refers to other people not telling, and even apologizes for any hurt

caused, Lobey clearly also views Le Dorik as having been in some way intentionally deceptive.

As for his current feelings toward Le Dorik, Lobey says, “I feel something towards you very close to hate” (160). Whether this anger is justified or not is not clear, although Le Dorik’s comment supposing Friza would not have had a problem with their real gender indicates that Lobey’s reaction might not be universal. Nevertheless, this resembles the way that transgender people are often accused of deceiving their partners, if they do not immediately disclose their transgender status to said partners, who are usually assumed to not be accepting of it. Interestingly enough, the difference in Lobey’s and Friza’s (assumed) reactions also shows a clear gender divide, as the man is more horrified with the possibility of having sex with someone who is not a woman than the woman is by the possibility of sleeping with someone who is not a man. Although the description of Lobey’s response may thus conjure up cultural images of both gay panic and transphobic men, who have sex with transgender women, the situation is different, because Le Dorik is neither a man nor a woman and neither transgender nor gay.

As for Le Dove, their gender is kept secret not only from Lobey, but also from the readers. Le Dove’s gender thus becomes not just a character detail, but also part of a plot twist. This twist is only made possible by the way the text actively misleads readers into believing that Le Dove is a woman, which in turn sets them up for feelings of surprise similar to the ones Lobey experiences. Unlike Le Dorik, who is largely not referred to by any pronouns at all, Le Dove is referred to as “she” due to Lobey’s misunderstanding, but also as a way of keeping readers in the dark. Lobey immediately assumes that Le Dove is a woman, describing the picture on the first billboard he sees as showing “the face of a young woman” (293), and later refers to Le Dove on a billboard as a “white-haired woman” (329). This misunderstanding goes on as others ignore his questions. When he asks Batt, another herder, about the advertisement, he and the others laugh: “‘The *Dove!*’ he howled, shaking the hair back from his shoulders. ‘He wants to know who the Dove is!’ and the rest of them laughed too” (294). They, however, do not refer to Le Dove by anything but their name, and the billboards, too, say, “The Dove says” (293, 297, 329), rather than “she says.” When Lobey questions Pistol, a man he meets on the way, he disagrees with

Lobey's statement that "She's La Dove, isn't she?" (302), but does not provide him with the correct title.

He looked surprised. 'The Lo, La, and Le is confusing here. No.' He scraped the rind with his front teeth and spun it away. 'Diamond and dung. I gather it worked in your town like it did in mine. Lo and La and Le titles reserved for potent normals and eventually bestowed on potent functionals?'

'That's the way it is.'

'Was. It was that way in Branning-at-sea. It's not the way it is now.' (302)

While this in hindsight functions as a clue that Le Dove is in fact not a woman, it can just as well be read as Pistol's objection to any use of these titles in normal conversation. This detail of worldbuilding is something Delany uses to his advantage in order to keep Le Dove's gender a secret, since it means that others do not use titles to refer to them. Pistol further explains that "there are about five families that control everything . . . They, along with fifteen or twenty celebrities, like Le Dove, take Lo or La when you address them in person" (304). Le Dove is once again referred to as simply "the Dove," but the titles mentioned by Pistol do not even include "Le," thus misleading both Lobey and the audience. Later, when Lobey refers to Le Dove as "her" (362), Spider does not correct him, but himself only refers to them as "the Dove." After the disclosure of their gender, Le Dove is referred to in much the same way as Le Dorik, simply by name rather than through a pronoun (although they are not referred to repeatedly so as to corroborate that this is as intentional as in Le Dorik's case).

Le Dove's revelation is not met with as much resentment from Lobey as that of Le Dorik, but it is nevertheless clearly presented as shocking and frightening to him. When Le Dove says, "No Lobey . . . Who told you that, Lobey? Who told you that? I'm Le Dove," Lobey backs away with his sword raised (394). There is no further revelation, and Le Dove has not been deceptive in any way, since the mistake is made by Lobey's assumption and other characters' reluctance to correct it. Still, it prompts him to react in a hostile way, which suggests that the revelation of being nonbinary/intersex is in itself somehow threatening (especially coming once again from someone Lobey has felt some attraction to). It is interesting that being intersex and/or nonbinary is such a shock in a society where it is considered normal and

standardized. Then again, we must take into account the fact that Lo Lobey is a village boy, who seems naive and old-fashioned, and whose reactions thus may not be understood as universal.

The most positive possible interpretation of this twist is that it leads readers to question their assumptions of other people's gender. The changing descriptions of Le Dove's gender could be seen as part of a subversive destabilizing strategy like the ones Marion Gymnich describes:

The notion of the performative nature of both sex and gender can be staged in literary texts by means of subversive strategies ranging from cross-dressing to mistaken identities and sexual transformations. In fact, fictional characters seem to be an ideal site for exploring the possibilities of constructing even radically different gendered identities and for questioning the notion that sex is a stable category. (513-514)

In fact, the confusion related to Le Dove's gender could function as a way to add confusion and ambiguity to the structured gender system of the novel. Even the addition of a third gender category cannot eliminate the social and performative nature of gender. Although the novel does not quite take the next step to transcending gender categories, it does seem to suggest that these categories are not as clear-cut as they seem.

On the more negative end of the scale, in the context of Lobey's horrified reaction, this twist takes on some of the features of what Danielle Seid calls "the [transgender] reveal," which according to her, commonly "stages a denaturalization of widespread assumptions about gender and sex . . . but . . . typically does so in a manner that regulates and corrects gender noncompliance, narratively reinscribing a binary gender system as 'natural' and desirable" (177). However, as Le Dove seems to identify with their assigned gender, the disclosure of their gender does not take on the unpleasant feature often seen in depictions of transgender people, involving the demonstration of how their body shockingly diverges from the accepted norm of that gender (Seid 177). Also, unlike a standard "reveal," where everyone already knows the gender identity of the character and merely finds out that their assigned gender was different, Lobey has been mistaken about both. In some ways this is more akin to the dramatic tradition of mistaken gender resulting in people falling in love with

socially unacceptable partners, an interpretation which points to the original view of this gender confusion as potentially subversive.

The third, and possibly most interesting, interpretation relates to the general concealment of difference in Branning-at-sea, on which Woiak and Karamanos state:

The hunchback articulates the complex intersection between disability and class, in which many members of prominent families are nonfunctional and therefore all citizens are pressured to keep difference a “private matter”. . . Inhabitants of Branning-at-sea deliberately conflate sameness with equality. People who have impairments or extraordinary talents face pressure to pass as normal, in the name of social harmony. Difference is shamed. (29)

Thus, Lobey’s misunderstanding could be seen as being actively upheld by the others’ discomfort in acknowledging anything that is different. In a village society, those who are different may be singled out and separated from the others either physically or through social rank, whereas in the city, they may live public lives, as Le Dove does, but only by hiding their difference to the best of their ability.

2.4. The Role of Difference

2.4.1 Nonbinary Characters as Unloveable and Tragic

Le Dorik is mainly a tragic figure: the people they have loved either hate them or are dead, and they themselves die fairly early on in order to further the main character’s development. Le Dorik is a kind of sage, who gives Lobey advice and chides him for his immaturity (“You’re too self-centered, Lobey. I hope you grow up” [160]), and mentor characters often die. Of course, tragic death is also an unfortunate trope linked to queer and transgender characters, since this originally was the only way to get portrayals of such characters published². Thematically, the treatment of Le Dorik can simplistically be seen to suggest that the future of people who are different lies in death, that only in Heaven can they find happiness and freedom. However, a more precise reading would suggest that the future of the novel’s entire society lies *beyond* death, beyond the limiting myths of human society, as their true form, unlike that of humans, is incorporeal.

² This is also known as the “bury your gays”-trope, Delany himself is gay and undoubtedly aware of its existence

Nevertheless, Le Dorik's significance as a character may be hard to justify. Their appearance in the novel is at least seemingly brief and ineffectual. Although their death is at first mourned by Lobey, who plays music on his machete in mourning, this sorrow is quickly forgotten. Le Dorik is hardly mentioned at all in the final part of the novel, in which Le Dove takes on the part of the cryptic nonbinary character. Furthermore, Le Dorik hardly develops or even speaks in the novel, and their death and short-lived resurrection largely functions as a way for Lobey to realize the unstable nature of death for his people. Although Le Dorik is listed among the "different" characters who have special abilities, theirs is the only one that is not described. They are set up as Lobey's traveling companion, only to be killed before their destiny can be fulfilled, thus setting up a pattern where myths and destinies are demolished and altered. What Le Dorik is, then, is not necessarily as much an individual as a catalyst. Perhaps most importantly, they are the first in the novel to make a journey that others may later replicate, a journey from darkness to light.

In Lobey's descriptions of him, Le Dorik is continually associated with darkness. They appear at first as just a "voice from the dark" (148), and they only leave this darkness after their death, in their final walk with Lobey. When combined with Lobey's remarks about Le Dorik showing him things in the dark, this association takes on several meanings. Le Dorik is mysterious, perhaps even frightening to Lobey, and exists in his own, separate world even before his demise. In an allusion to Christian ideas of salvation, only through the darkness of death does Le Dorik reach the light. Their brief resurrection begins as Lobey hears them "come on through the shadow" (157), an expression that seems to refer back to the biblical "shadow of death" (Psalms 23:4). Furthermore, Lobey remembers how Le Dorik "walked through dawn and gorse, curled on a stone under new sunlight" (167). In fact, George A. von Glahn refers in his article on the novel to Le Dorik's walk with Lobey as "a parody of the Biblical resurrection appearances of Christ" (116), and there are indeed some Christ-like qualities in the self-sacrificing Le Dorik, who dies, is resurrected, and then potentially rises to another plane of existence. These scenes are not however entirely biblical, since death does not truly exist in this world. As Green-eye, another Christ-figure in the novel, says, "There is no death, only love" (242). This is later referred to by Lobey, who says, "There is no death. Only music" (259).

In addition to the symbolic association created through descriptions of darkness, Le Dorik is explicitly associated with pain and the horrors of death. The first time Le Dorik appears in the novel, they are burying a body, described in unpleasant terms as a “bloated, rubbery corpse” (153). Their job evidently is bleak, and even involves mercy killings.

Le Dorik was probably inside now, putting out food, doctoring where doctoring would do some good, killing when there was some person beyond doctoring. So much sadness and horror penned up there; it was hard to remember they were people. . . Yes, they were people. But this is not the first time I had wondered what it feels like to keep such people – Le Dorik? (75-76)

Le Dorik lives an isolated life that is dedicated to taking care of the occupants of the kage, and although they have had (at least) two lovers, neither are current, and one clearly harbors resentment for them. They do a hard and thankless job and die without love or glory. They do not complain, seemingly considering this their duty, and only worry about training a follower before they leave for their intended journey with Lobey. In their brief resurrection, they lie next to Lobey as it grows dark, seemingly having forgiven him for his resentment. It is no wonder that comparisons to Christ come to mind in response to such a saintly character.

Lobey may not be as forgiving, but perhaps not all love is lost. Despite his anger, Lobey’s final description of Le Dorik is beautiful, even magical, as he says, “I remember a moment of gold light along the arm and back curved toward me before I slept” (161). In addition to proving the existence of the already dead Le Dorik next to him, this image portrays Le Dorik in a gentle light. There is a brief moment of life and light for this character shrouded in darkness and death, and a brief moment of recognition by Lobey, although the ultimate fate of Le Dorik is left ambiguous. Their body is discovered back in the kage, “behind the wire in a net of shadow, circled with their lights, face down at the grave’s edge” (166), imprisoned by darkness, but surrounded by light. Whether the shadow or the light has won is left open.

2.4.2 Nonbinary Characters as Irresistible and Transformative

Le Dove, on the other hand, is a figure of youth, life, beauty, and adoration. They are essentially a superstar. After seeing them for the first time in an advertisement, Lobey describes Le Dove, “a young woman with cotton white hair, a childish smile, her shoulders shrugged. She had a small chin, and green eyes that looked widened by some pleasant surprise. Her lips were slightly opened over small, shadowed teeth” (293). This description not only transmits the idea that they are beautiful, but also makes readers connect them, with their attractive and posed expressions, with real-world celebrities participating in advertising campaigns. On another billboard, Le Dove is “winking” and has an “insouciant expression” (297), and this posed lightness and playfulness is also evident when he sees them in real life. As Lobey says, “Her mouth seemed used to emotions, mostly laughter I guessed. Her hair was riotous and bright as Little Jon’s” (371). Indeed, Le Dove appears always to be full of joy, whether there is “contralto laughter spilling her words” (371) or “she” begins to “laugh without making any sound” (374). In contrast to Le Dorik, who is constantly linked to darkness, Le Dove seems surrounded by light. For instance, Lobey notes how “blades of light struck me from her dress” (380). Unlike Le Dorik, who lives in the dark, apart from normal society, Le Dove thrives in the limelight of celebrity.

Le Dove is linked to silver by hair color, dress, and Lobey’s remarks, such as “I look for my dark girl and find you silver” (380). Silver evokes both glamour and bright light as well as an odd blend of youth (as a metal often worn by young women) and age (as the hair color of elderly people). Lobey’s remark implies beauty, but also potentially designates Le Dove as only second best. That they are attractive, however, is unquestionable, as Lobey states, “She made you feel very good when she talked” (373) and “With the Dove in front of me it was a little difficult to look at anyone else” (373-374). They are immediately viewed as “pretty” (371), and even Friza is only “almost as beautiful” (378) as Le Dove. They are very aware of their own attractiveness, describing themselves as “the good/bad wild thing whom everyone wants, wants to be like” (328). Whereas Le Dorik is rejected, Le Dove is desired by all.

This attractiveness is very relevant to what they do, as Le Dove is also the central figure in an advertising campaign to get people to have more sex and mix up the gene pool. It is no coincidence that the leading figure in a campaign to increase

variation in the population is themselves in some way different, and that this sex symbol themselves is intersex. The novel seems to suggest that as someone who is neither a man nor a woman, Le Dove has a universal appeal, although they are very much described in heterosexual feminine terms: “I’m the one whom men search out seeding to seeding. I’m the one whom all the women style their hair after, raise and lower their hems and necklines as mine rise and lower” (382). This universal appeal is also related to their special skill, by which they can make themselves appear to be anyone their companion may desire. This potential for multiplicity and ambiguity makes it very interesting that Le Dove is portrayed as femininely-coded as they are.

In the mythology of the story, Le Dove is “Helen of Troy, Starr Anthim, Mario Montez, Jean Harlow” (362). All of these people are in one way or another celebrities, figures of glamour and attraction. They are also all women, except for Mario Montez, who was a drag queen and thus also appeared as a figure of femininity in his work. It is worth considering why Le Dove is in this way made such a womanly figure, despite the focus on the shocking disclosure of their sex. This evident gendering of Le Dove as a woman enables a similar comparison to transgender women as the one explored in relation to Le Dorik, but also begs the question whether the kind of irresistibility they represent is simply so femininely coded in the American culture of the time that Le Dove also must be feminine in order to represent it. The Mario Montez reference seems especially relevant if we consider Attebery’s words that “In movies and theater, men in drag often stand for decadence and indulgence” (94), and his general view that when it comes to androgyny, femininity is generally viewed more negatively than masculinity. In some ways, the mention of Montez also functions as a hint that there may be more to Le Dove’s gender than Lobey assumes, but it still implies a female performance rather than a person who views themselves as neither a man nor a woman. Since personal gender identity is understandably not explored in a work as early as this one, it is left to the reader’s imagination what Le Dove may think of their own gender. Considering that their response to Lobey’s rejection is “Lobey, we’re not human!” (394), Le Dove may think that as nonhuman creatures they should be entirely beyond such constructions.

Le Dove seems at first to function as a figure of the future where difference becomes the norm, as someone who is different but still seeks to transform society for the survival of all. However, a deeper look proves them less so, because the true

future suggested by the text seems to lie in death, in entirely shedding human form, however varied it may become, for something entirely different. Thus the roles are reversed: the darkness-dwelling, dead Le Dorik, who has gone through death to transcend the human form, is much more hopeful than the bright and beautiful Dove whose solution to the tired mask of humanity is to struggle to fit by any means. Von Glahn describes Le Dove in the following terms: “The lure – advertising, the transmission medium for the controlling illusions of white culture, is saturated by her sexual presence in many forms. . . She is a version of Jean Harlow/Helen of Troy for Lobey, and it is fitting that in his Orpheus role of descending into hell to bring back Friza, he comes closest to the absolute control of death at The Pearl nightclub where Dove presides” (129). Le Dove represents the mainstream culture that rules over all the rest, thus creating the illusion of a uniform society.

This supports the larger theme of change and infinite differences that is present in other aspects of the novel. Conformity is not the way forward, as Woiak and Karamanos argue:

in contrast to SF works that depict “accessible futures” where people overcome, or function in spite of, impairments, *The Einstein Intersection* features characters who utilize their “otherness” as change agents. . . Lobey’s personal evolution toward understanding how being “different” is contingent and mutable allows him to reject the patterns of the old myths and the “rules” of being human (30). Instead of achieving a “cure” for his impairments or “integration” into existing social systems, Lobey’s heroism, as Spider explains, stems from his engagement with the “wonderful, fearful” processes of personal and social transformation. (25)

Although their analysis largely focuses on disability, this argument could be expanded to include other types of difference in the novel, such as gender. While Le Dove chooses conformity, allowing them to preside over those who are visibly different, Le Dorik has chosen a life among these people. In the end, both solutions are unsatisfactory. Neither integration nor separation is enough, and it is only in endless change, beyond existing structures, that those who are different may truly flourish.

2.5. Concluding Remarks

While this thesis may suggest that a disembodied, posthuman, and postdeath future is inevitable for the characters of *The Einstein Intersection*, the actual ending of the book is left open. What this future, if realized, would mean for gender is also unclear. The creatures of the novel are described by the computer system PHAEDRA as “Psychic manifestations – multisexed and incorporeal” (398), and it is hard to know if their disembodied future would need any system of gender at all. At the very least, a system dictated by biological sex and physical features is apparently useless. In one of the journal entries that are quoted in the novel, Delany says, “Endings to be useful must be inconclusive” (368). *The Einstein Intersection* ends without its protagonist fulfilling any prophesy or resolving his quest, leaving us as readers free to consider multiple potential conclusions to the new myth it presents. In the end, the book poses questions about myths and prejudices, and about transforming them, but gives no solutions. After all, we cannot simply transcend our bodies to become incorporeal beings beyond the baggage of bodies and identities. The best we can do is alter our definitions of humanity and its rules to include the variation that already exists.

3. Gender Transformations and Ambiguities in *Triton*

3.1. Introduction

Triton (1976) is a novel about the experiences of a man (and later woman) named Bron on Triton, one of Neptune's moons, where he has moved from his culturally more conservative home planet Mars. On Triton, there is much freedom in terms of acceptable living arrangements and types of families, and sex reassignment surgery (SRS) is easily available. Relationships of all kinds are common and accepted, and gender equality has been reached. Bron struggles to be satisfied by all this freedom, as he searches for the one thing it cannot offer: a historically standard, but by this time in the future unheard-of relationship, where the woman is subordinate to the man. He finally decides to make what he considers to be the ultimate sacrifice and becomes his own ideal woman, only to discover that she cannot find a man like himself to be with, and even if she could, she cannot (according to her own image of a perfect woman) overtly express her desires to get what she wants.

In many ways, *Triton* is very progressive: it shows identity as fluid and includes transgender characters. In Tritonian society, people have the right to complete self-determination in terms of gender, and there is social equality between genders. The novel even acknowledges the existence of multiple sexes. Lamenting the pervasiveness of strictly binary mainstream views of gender in science fiction, Patricia Melzer lists *Triton* as one of the exceptions, saying that "Samuel Delany destabilizes the naturalized correlation between sex, gender, and sexuality in *Triton* (1976) by adding a number of genders and also through the trope of socially accepted transsexuality" (222). However, all the characters in the novel (except for a few minor characters of indeterminate gender) are nevertheless portrayed as either men or women, with only two sets of pronouns available. This is perhaps not surprising in a book published in 1976, but it feels strangely conventional for a radical future society from a contemporary point of view. It is interesting to note that in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), published eight years after *Triton*, Delany experiments with a society that has a different pronoun system.

In terms of its general attitude toward identity *Triton* demonstrates a shift from normativity to plurality. This is already indicated in the novel's subtitle "An Ambiguous Heterotopia," which is a reference to the subtitle of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, "An Ambiguous Utopia." Gender is only one aspect of the larger

concept of identity, which in this novel is not discovered by characters as much as it is actively created and recreated. There is even occasionally room to be in between identities, in the process of becoming something else. Moreover, transformation does not only go in one direction, as decisions can be changed, and changes reversed.

The fluid nature of identity in the novel has been noted, among others, by Guy Davidson, who states that “In *Triton*, plasticity of identities and desires is also a central feature of the future world that Delany renders” (101) as well as by Edward K. Chan, who maintains that “There really is no nostalgia in *Triton* for an integrated self or an identity that can be traced to or directly defined by an essential core” (194). Both Davidson and Chan link this fluidity of identity to capitalist consumption. Davidson claims that “*Triton* thus suggests a hyper-bolic extension of contemporary consumer capitalism, in which, it has been claimed, the notion of a core self has been discarded as postmodern subjects deliriously shop for new identities” (102). This seems to be in part in reference to Chan, who argues that the fracturing of an essential identity is not utopian, but “what it really does is convert identity to surface, subjecting racial and gender markers to an economy of consumption rather than a system of self- or social identification” (194). Davidson’s and Chan’s readings provide valuable insight into the dynamics of identity in the novel, even though I do not think identity and consumerism can always be so straightforwardly linked. What I am mostly interested in, however, is how the novel uses its dynamic portrayal of identity to engage with questions of what role gender occupies, how it is constructed, and what potential there is for change.

In this chapter, I first discuss the use of transformation as a feminist trope, then explore the extent of ambiguity in descriptions of bodies. After this I move on to language as a tool for both destabilizing and reinforcing gender boundaries, examine how Delany critiques the myth of traditional masculinity through Bron’s deceptions, and finally consider potential readings of nonbinary gender in the novel.

3.2 Transformation as a Tool in Feminist Criticism

In her discussion of literary techniques used to destabilize gender, Marion Gymnich mentions “sexual transformations” (513), using Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* as an example. Although, according to her, “the sexual metamorphosis of the protagonist is mainly a vehicle for drawing the readers’ attention to the contrasts between male and female gender roles,” *Orlando* “at least *imagines* the possibility of

an instability of the category sex – and the social and personal consequences of such an instability” (514). The metamorphosis seen in *Triton* has similar uses, although the destabilization of sexual categories is much more deliberate. More recent work on the novel tends to focus on the destabilizing effect of Bron’s transformation, but it is just as relevant to take into account the first function mentioned by Gymnich with regard to *Orlando*, that is, the criticism of traditional gender roles.

Much like Orlando, Bron takes note of the behavior that is no longer acceptable once she becomes a woman. These self-imposed regulations tend to be ones that limit her freedom or lead her to accept discomfort in order to satisfy men. When Bron wants to argue with Lawrence after her transition, for example, she remembers that “a real woman had to relinquish certain rights. Wasn’t that . . . the one thing that, from her life before, she now, honestly knew?” (4941)³ Later, when she is annoyed at her boss, Philip, she recalls this thought, “*All men have some rights*” (5006). In Bron’s view, there is a hierarchy of needs, in which men are above women, or at least should be, but until she becomes a woman, she is not forced to confront what this means for women. This inherited obsession with the idea of being a “real woman” ultimately proves harmful to her.

Unlike the transformation of Orlando, Bron’s is brought about by him-/herself, adding a layer of tragic irony: she is dissatisfied as a woman, mostly because as a man she believed that women should put the satisfaction of men above their own. Bron’s counselor tells her, “you are a woman created by a man—specifically by the man you were” (5296). Given Bron’s idea of women, this is an unhappy state of existence. Slowly she discovers that the way she has programmed herself to behave is incompatible with the reality she lives in. When she starts performing more poorly at work, she considers that “she must be ready for her work to mean less to her than before; but that was supposed to happen only at the materialization of the proper man—though nothing like that man had come anywhere near materializing” (5072). The sacrifice she has made is unnecessary because the only man she knows who might want a woman like her is the man she once was herself. Furthermore, even if she could encounter such a man, she realizes that it would be impossible for her to signal her interest. This is a clever demonstration of the way that expectations of female behavior are often paradoxical and impossible to

³ Kindle location numbers are used in lieu of page numbers to refer to the locations of quotes in the novel.

fulfill. She desperately notes that although she knew what men needed “she had no way to show she knew, because any indication of knowledge denied that knowledge’s existence in her” (5551). A perfect woman in Bron’s view exists for men but can also show no interest in them. She should know what men know, but cannot, because she should be fundamentally different from a man.

The self-imposed nature of Bron’s transformation also means that unlike those observed in *Orlando*, the limitations Bron notes are not dictated by her current society, but by the dated ideals of her past self. Wendy Pearson comments on this in her analysis of the novel, by claiming:

Bron is very much a misfit in the polymorphously fluid social ordering that is Triton’s version of heterotopia. Instead, he harks back to an era – one that never existed on Triton at all and is very much a nostalgic fantasy on his part – when men were men and women were there to worship and admire them . . . In other words, what Bron wants is what virtually every heterosexual male is assumed to want (especially when the novel was written), making his desires seem, to the contemporary reader, indistinguishable from those of the “average Joe.” (461-462)

The references in the novel to the time when it was written function to make readers realize that Bron’s destructive ideals are the same ones they are surrounded by as well as to mirror the way their own ones are similarly rooted in an imagined past. This is also apparent in the way that Bron speaks to her counselor about the past that was Delany’s present:

“It’s so strange, the way we picture the past in a place full of injustice, inequity, disease, and confusion, yet still, somehow, things were . . . simpler. Sometimes I wish we did live in the past. Sometimes I wish men were all strong and women were all weak, even if you did it by not picking them up and cuddling them enough when they were babies, or not giving them strong female figures to identify with psychologically and socially; because, somehow, it would be simpler that way just to justify . . .” But she could not say what it would justify. Also, she could not remember ever thinking those thoughts before, even as a child. She

wondered why she said she had. Thinking it now, it seemed bizarre, uncomfortable, unnatural. (5349)

The past Bron remembers is Delany's present at the time of writing the novel, but also the past that all ideological conservatives recall: a simpler place that probably never existed exactly as it is remembered. The kind of relationship that Bron wants can only be justified in such a past, but of course as a woman such thoughts are tantamount to wanting to restrict one's own rights. Bron has made him-/herself into a woman whose wishes make no sense in her environment. In one of her dreams, she encounters her past, male, self, and says in a rage, "I shall destroy you—as you destroyed me" (5798). The male Bron has ensured that Bron the woman can never be truly fulfilled.

At the same time as the novel shows the changes Bron feels herself going through as a woman, a lot of her dissatisfaction is in fact linked to what does not change. At one point she complains, "But I just don't feel like a woman. I mean all the time, every minute, a complete and whole woman. Of course, when I think about it, or some guy makes a pass at me, then I remember. But most of the time I just feel like an ordinary, normal ...", to which her counselor replies, "When you were a man, were you aware of being a man every second of the day? What makes you think that most women feel like women every—" (5256). Gender has some significance even on Triton, but it is not all that any person is. Bron's response, "But I don't want to be like most women—" is in line with her aforementioned obsession with being a "real" woman. This kind of woman is mostly constructed in relation to, or more specifically in opposition to men, and her main role in life is to be a woman. Most of all, this woman is a myth rather than reality.

Thus Bron's transformation functions in multiple ways, presenting a criticism of traditional gender roles, just as it simultaneously shows the justifications for them through an estranged lens. Womanhood is not an unambiguous concept, but what is clear is that when it is defined by men like Bron, tragedy ensues.

3.3 Gender and the Body

The novel trespasses borders in a very tangible way as the realm of normal bodies is stretched and the division between male and female bodies is at times

blurred. This is a natural continuation of the bodily diversity that Delany included *The Einstein Intersection* in terms of gender with the inclusion intersex characters, and more broadly with disabled characters. In *Triton*, ambiguities of sex are not limited to a single minority group but are commonly seen and discussed. Close to the beginning of the novel, Bron notices someone whom he first mistakes for a man but then sees is “a woman—or a castrate with chest scars” (339). This is only the first of many shifts. Right from the start, gender is shown to be something that is not immediately apparent, and bodies are full of ambiguities.

These ambiguities allow *Triton* to question many of the connections that are routinely made between gender and biology, and the way they are linked to stereotypical differences between sexes. For example, the similarities between male and female bodies that nowadays are usually considered medical facts are mentioned. Before his operation, Bron is told that “Topologically, men and women are identical. Some things are just larger and more developed in one than the other and positioned differently” (4725). In addition, some biological differences are shown to have been naturally decreased in a more equal society, such as the strength and height differences between men and women. Bron’s counselor explains to her that “the evening-out in the social valuation between men and women . . . is certainly the easiest explanation of the fact that today men and women seem to be equals in size and physical strength” (5341). Thus, it is suggested that what seems natural can also be culturally constructed.

Furthermore, in *Triton*, some traditionally female tasks, like breastfeeding, can be done by men, with the help of medicine. Bron’s boss, Philip, does this for his family: “Periodically, when a new child was expected at Philip’s commune, out on the Ring, the breast would enlarge (three pills every lunch-time: two little white ones and one large red), and Philip would take of two or three days a week wet-leave” (1845). This also shows an increased freedom in terms of the types of bodies that are allowed to exist within male and female categories. When Bron becomes a woman, Philip even admires how much better-looking her breasts are in comparison to his stretched-out one, saying, “I can’t get over those tits! I’m green with jealousy! . . . I have to make do with one; and then it’s just up and down like a leaky balloon” (5002). There is self-irony in his statement, rather than shame. There is space to move between female and male attributes, as he does (albeit only with his breast),

and female and male breasts, usually so starkly separated despite their similarities, are here considered equal.

The novel also acknowledges that biological sex does not determine gender identity, as most male-to-female SRS is done on people who in fact feel like women. Bron's operation shows that to some extent the process can include the possibility of changing gender identity/psychological gender in addition to physical attributes and hormones, but this is said not to be the norm.

There are some limits to change, however. As Davidson (like Pearson 473) notes, there is not full fluidity, even in this novel (107), as Bron is told by his counselor:

By the same token, being a woman is also a complicated genetic interface. It means having that body of yours from birth, and growing up in the world, learning to do whatever you do—psychological counseling in my case, or metalogics in yours—with and within that body. That body has to be yours, and yours all your life. In that sense, you never will be a 'complete' woman. (5280)

This is a strangely essentialist view for a novel that presents such a seemingly liberated society. There is an implied range from partial to complete woman or man, but it may not be freely navigated. The older technician at the clinic asks Bron, "What kind of a woman do you want to be? Or rather, how much of a woman" (4666), thus implying that some physical changes will make her more of a woman than others. The views of his counselor could potentially be explained by her coming from Mars, and even the older technician is corrected by his female counterpart on occasion. It is also important to note that the society of the novel is not a utopia and the characters in it have different opinions, all of which the novel as a whole may not argue for.

Pearson's take on this also goes some way to explaining how essentialism and fluidity can coexist in the same novel:

The underlying sense of selfhood exhibited by Alfred, Spike, Lawrence, and so on is not, however, contradictory to a type of lucid play with these markers of identity and is, perhaps, one of the profoundly heterotopian

moments in the novel; its apparent acceptance of postmodern and constructivist positions seems not to be in consonance with its recognition that there may still be something profoundly essential about one's desires and, indeed, one's sense of self. . . .the reader's encounters with members of Tritonian society reinforce the notion that, essential sense of sexual orientation or not, many more options are available, including the option to change. (473)

As discussed in the previous section, the self-image of women is not entirely governed by womanhood, and the same notion can be applied to men. Thus, according to Pearson, fluidity and stability can coexist to some extent, as a sense of self is not necessarily negated by changing identities.

Interestingly, transitioning is implied to actually be more common among people who come from elsewhere than Triton. Bron's doctor correctly guesses that she is from Mars, like most of their clients: "Still, somehow life under our particular system doesn't generate that many serious sexually dissatisfied types. Though, if you've come here, I suspect you're the type who's pretty fed up with people telling you what type you aren't or are" (4665). The fact that surgery is much more popular with people from Mars or Earth potentially implies that individuals who come from a society with less of a cultural difference between genders and more freedom of gender expression are less likely to want to (physically) transition. This is an interesting take on a discussion that is still ongoing about the cultural nature of gender and its relation to physicality.

Triton thus expands the range of bodies that can be allowed within the borders of specific genders and to some extent separates gender identity from sex. While there may be some limits to change even on Triton, these limits may not exist forever.

3.4 Gender and Language

In *Triton*, gender is also explored and blurred through language. Gendered terms are discussed and transformed, changes in pronouns and titles both confuse and

show the complexities of gender, and readerly assumptions are questioned through changes in conventions.

On Triton, individuals in law-enforcement are called “enforcement-girls,” a twist on the masculine “policeman” that readers are familiar with. This leads to statements like, “So come on, let a girl do his job...” (said by a man) and “I mean you take the job because you want to be a girl—and what do you end up? A garbage man!” (1283)) that play with gendered language. This is an effective strategy for drawing attention to the absurdity of gendered terms in contemporary culture that easily go unnoticed. Another example of this is the use of other words for “man-made.” Bron attributes the decline in the use of “man-made” on Earth and Mars to one of the two women presidents that Mars has had, Brian Sanders, who apparently used “boy-made” instead. On the moons, another variation seems to be in use: Lobey’s love interest, the Spike, who grew up on Ganymede (one of Neptune’s moons) and lives on Triton, is heard using “girl-made object” (3269). These two approaches to gendered language seem to reflect the differences between Mars and the moons that can be seen elsewhere in the novel. It is interesting to note that when Bron gives his speech of male superiority, he calls the war a “man-made” social crisis (4574). Thus, as the novel progresses, his vocabulary becomes just as outdated as his thoughts.

The novel also mentions the gendered word “mankind.” Bron recalls that this was what humanity used to be called and says, “I remember reading once that some women objected to that as too exclusive. Basically, though, it wasn’t exclusive enough! Lawrence, regardless of the human race, what gives the species the only value it has are men, and particularly those men who can do what I did” (4899). Here Delany takes a feminist statement and has his protagonist criticize it, but takes it far enough to clarify that Bron’s opinion is nonsense. One might expect that now that Bron is a woman, she may be bringing up the term “mankind” as a silly word of the past, much in the amazed way that other past concepts are discussed. Instead, she not only says that it is a valid term, but she argues that it should be even more exclusive, and that humanity should be equated with men, that only men have value. This view existed at the time Delany wrote the novel, and still does, but is rarely expressed so directly. Bron’s rant is thus simultaneously the tragic speech of a woman negating her own value and an opportunity to reveal the ideas that exist behind certain gendered terms.

Pronouns are another linguistic aspect of gender that is problematized. Bron is very conscious of the pronouns that are and should be used to refer to different characters. The significance of Delany's language use, including pronouns, has also been examined by Chan:

Another moment that demonstrates Delany's linguistic sensitivity is when Sam confesses his past identity to Bron: "Bron suddenly didn't feel like talking any more, unsure why. But Sam, apparently comfortable with Bron's moody silences, settled back into his (her? No, "his." That's what the public channels suggested at any rate) seat and looked out the window". As our narrative stand-in, Bron performs our readerly disruptions for us. (196)

Bron also corrects himself later when talking about police, saying, "the e-girls ... eh, e-men" (1415), yet another example of the "readerly disruptions" that Chan discusses.

The way that readers gender characters on the basis of names is also disrupted in the novel, as it is explained that "Male and female names out here, of course, didn't mean too much. Anyone might have just about any name—like Freddie and Flossie—especially among second, third, and fourth generation citizens" (875). Freddie and Flossie are mentioned as they are both men, and yet one of them has a name that is considered female. Because of this their genders are unclear when they are first introduced in the story, and this confusion potentially makes readers warier of immediately gendering other characters. Another example is the name of the (female) ex-president of Mars, Brian Sanders. Naming conventions are also altered to reinforce the idea of a more equal society, as on the moons last names are chosen by the children themselves, "On Earth last names still, by and large, passed down paternally. On Mars, they could pass either paternally or maternally" (1466). Mars has a more equal society than Earth, but the moons have done away with certain structures altogether, thus giving the most social freedom to their citizens.

The ways in which Bron is addressed are just as significant as the pronouns given to others. At the clinic, Bron is addressed as "Ms. Helstrom" (4857), and when he tries to correct the doctor with "I am male," he is told, "But you want to be female . . . We believe in getting started right away, especially with the easy things" (4655). What appears to be a considerate tactic is immediately questioned by Bron, from whose point of view he cannot possibly be a "Ms" as he is male. Furthermore,

he does not identify as a woman at this point, so a practice that makes sense for a transgender woman does not necessarily feel appropriate for him. Having revealed this, that he does not feel like a woman and would also like that changed, he is referred to as a “gentleman” (4794), and he makes note of “the restoration of his gender” (4804). Right before they begin the operation, Bron is called Ms. Helstrom again. This linguistic flexibility makes the clinic into a mutable midway point of transformation, not only in terms of the literal changing of bodies, but also on the social level of public presentation and perception. Bron’s gender can be changed and “restored” in moments by words alone, although the narrator refers to Bron as “him” throughout this passage. Gender is thus on the social level vulnerable and malleable, while simultaneously remaining more stable on the side of identity which the narration represents. This short passage thus shows the conflict between the gender of narration and the gender of address and draws attention to the numerous and sometimes inharmonious ways in which gender can be experienced.

From here on, the narration follows suit as soon as Bron has gone through the operation, as the first “her” appears right after the paragraph break during which Bron’s transformation occurs. A simple reason for the change in narrative pronoun is the transformation of her body, but it seems more likely that the reason lies in the re-fixation treatment that is done to Bron in order to make him feel like a woman. As the text is mostly focalized through Bron, the pronouns change as Bron begins to think of herself as a woman. Thus, gender is destabilized even on the level of identity.

This change is not altogether harmonious, however, although the people around Bron are generally accepting, as the possibility of blunders in language use is soon demonstrated. For example, Lawrence reacts to Bron’s transformation with, “Really, you’re going to have to do some explaining, young ... young lady!” (4887) The hesitation before “lady” makes apparent the shift that must occur in Lawrence’s mind. Later, at work, Bron wonders if she has been called by the wrong pronoun: “I didn’t hear the pronoun, but if I had and it was ‘he,’ I’d kill him” (5021). This is simultaneously an honest representation of the problem of how transgender individuals are misgendered, and a way of drawing attention to the troubles of gendered language, while demonstrating Bron’s heightened awareness of her own gender.

Throughout, the novel engages with the ways in which gender and other identities are constructed. In literature, one of the most immediate ways of making

readers experience this is through linguistic interruptions. This can be done by highlighting the plethora of invisible and automatic associations that are formed with traditionally gendered words.

3.5 The Deceptive Myth of Masculinity

Not only does the novel present its readers with a future society that no longer subscribes to most traditional gender roles, it also demonstrates the ways in which the assumptions that fuel these roles can only survive when they are actively maintained through deception and bias. This is most clearly shown in the ways that Bron maintains his identity as a heterosexual man. Throughout the novel, Bron is revealed to be either consciously or unconsciously deceptive, and his memory of events is often unreliable. Such deception usually serves to present him in a more favorable light, or to bolster his beliefs. One of the major ways this deception occurs is in support of his view of himself as a real man and women as fundamentally different and inferior.

After Bron gets the Spike's friend fired, mostly because of being embarrassed of her not reciprocating his interest in her (she is a lesbian), he pretends not to know how that could have happened, despite his evident role in it. What is more, he tells the Spike that he does not even want to know: "I know I didn't like your Miriamme friend! I know I didn't want to work with her. I got her kicked out of her job this morning. I don't know how any of those things came about. And I don't want to know. But I don't regret it, one bit! I maybe have—for a minute—but I don't now. And I don't want to" (2175). His actions, irrational and driven by his ego, cannot be rationalized, so he must instead pretend that what happened was beyond his control, and his dislike for her a matter of personality rather than wounded pride. Events like this do not fit into the image he slowly develops of male distance and rationality, so he must forget them. That image is also one he creates in part to avoid facing his own egotism.

Bron's long speech to Lawrence about his theory of straight male exceptionalism also relies heavily on altered facts. He claims, for example, to have gone to the restaurant on Terra with the Spike specifically because she wanted to. He even goes as far as to say that "she was on her ear to try it out" (4539), as opposed to the truth of the place having been suggested by his friend Sam as a good place to take

her. Bron then goes on to say that she kept trying to impress the restaurant staff, and only cared about bowing “to the proper fashion” and “making the right impression” (4539), when in fact he was the one fretting over the correct clothes, manners, and what to order. This pattern of transferring what he himself does onto her continues when he criticizes her for talking too much and not listening to him, even calling her a “crazed bitch” (4569). This is actually something that she has at this point called him out on doing in her break-up letter, claiming, “I was amused/angered at your insistence in talking about yourself all the time and at your amusement-to-anger that I should ever want to talk about me” (4059). His alternate version of events fits in with his image of women as much more frivolous and selfish than men, while reality seems to support an opposite view.

Similarly, Bron’s behavior during the attack on *Triton* is much less impressive than the way he later imagines and describes it. This is also noted by Pearson, who says that “Bron exaggerates his experiences of the gravity fluctuation into a tale of heroism in which he rescues his boss, Audri, her coop mates, and their children” (461). It is questionable whether his actions actually save anyone, as the attack ends before he can evacuate anyone to safety, and they are all instructed to return to the homes they left moments before. Many of the actions Bron describes as cunning and intentional, such as him infiltrating a crowd of mumblers⁴ to get past the blockade, are in fact brought about by chance. Furthermore, the noble motivations he later ascribes to his so-called heroism are nowhere nearly as apparent in the description of the events, where he seems more concerned with saving himself than with saving anyone else. He describes his actions saying, “I’m not saying it took a *lot* of ingenuity; but it took some. And in a time of social crisis somebody’s got to have that kind of ingenuity, if just to protect the species, the women, the children—yes, even the aged” (4559). This self-important speech to Lawrence is especially ridiculous considering that Lawrence was in fact the one who worried and wanted to go check on the people in the women’s co-op while Bron “felt uncomfortable” (4340).

Bron’s most ironic lie comes when he tells Audri that the Spike was “just completely dishonest” (5682) as she makes up an entire false story about how she became a woman because the Spike was a lesbian. “She simply has no concept of

4 Members of a religious order who walk in groups, mumbling with their eyes closed.

what's real and what's fantasy" (5693), says Bron in order to keep up her own fantasy, her own "amazing fiction" of control (5705). Even when she realizes that it was foolish to lie, and wonders why, she lies to herself, thinking, "I never lied when I was a man" (5808). The only way Bron can exist without despair is to maintain the lie that her actions had purpose, and that she as a man, and therefore all men, are more honest and noble than women.

Thus Bron's lies function together with the above-mentioned illusion of the imagined past to show the mythical nature of masculinity, and by extension, femininity. He must lie if he is to believe that he is both a "real" man and a good person, in order to not reveal that traditional masculinity and gender roles are harmful. Not only is Bron's image of masculinity false, it is also self-serving. Without a society like ours to maintain the lie, Bron has to perform it himself.

3.6 Hints of Nonbinary Complexity

One of the possibilities that the receptionist at the clinic lists when Bron asks what sex he looks like is that he "might have begun as a woman, been changed to male, and now want to be changed to—something else. That can be difficult" (4642). In this ambiguous "something else" lies a world of possibility that is not fully explored in the novel but is only implied to exist in moments like this one. Earlier in the novel, the Spike refers to "the division we use out here of humanity into forty or fifty basic sexes" (2074), but this division is not described in detail, and does not seem socially relevant. It comes up again when Bron's counselor contrasts the ancient superstition of children needing two parents with "our current superstition . . . that a child should have available at least five close adult attachments . . . preferably with five different sexes" (5332-5333). This may be the only time in the novel in which any other sexes than male and female are shown to be socially recognized and differentiated between. Although it is necessary to recognize that Bron comes from a more conservative planet and thus probably has a limited point of view, none of the other characters refer to anyone as anything but a woman or a man, as far as I can tell.

This tentative ambiguity is perhaps best exemplified by the scene in the clinic where Bron is educated about the way chromosomes work. When he explains testicular feminization to Bron, the older clinic technician says, "The situation between the X and Y makes it logically moot whether we consider the man an

incomplete woman or the woman an incomplete man” (4706). This is a description of an indeterminate sex, and yet the hypothetical person is imagined as someone who merely falls short of either binary category. They are implied to exist in the middle, but the middle has no name.

Ultimately, *Triton* creates a world in which genders other than men and women are made possible, but not portrayed. If this novel were to be written today, the situation may be different. However, as the novel engages much more with the myths of what it is to be a man or a woman through its protagonist than it does with lived gender identities, this is not necessarily a flaw.

3.7 Concluding Remarks

Triton deals with gender and sex from a number of angles: what they are in the collective imagination, how they are maintained, how they are connected to bodies on a material level and to language on a cultural one. Although the novel does not introduce us to nonbinary characters like *The Einstein Intersection*, it does contain the implication of their existence. The characters in *Triton* are in constant flux, and yet maintain something of themselves. It is these notions of multiplicity and change that I would like to briefly develop here.

In her overview of gender in science fiction, Helen Merrick claims that “in works such as Delany’s *Triton* (1976) the notion of social manifestations of gender are multiple and diffused to the extent that they become meaningless . . . In these scenarios, the socially mediated relation between sex and gender is dissolved into multiplicity and meaninglessness” (249). I would argue that although this proliferation of multiple gender expressions and ambiguities potentially *changes* the meaning of gender in society, it does not make it *meaningless*. Many critics have engaged with the freedom and multiplicity of identity portrayed in *Triton* as frivolous, meaningless, or even suspicious. This is often done in response to others who deem it a straightforwardly utopian feminist work. I however would argue that there is a sincerity and a sense of personal significance in many of the identities that are discussed in the story.

This does not mean that there are no commercial, aesthetic, or playful components to these transformations and negotiations of identity, because there clearly are. However, there is no need to make such a clear-cut distinction between meaning and play. Furthermore, just as gender means different things to people in

contemporary society, so it does to the characters in *Triton*. The wonderful thing about Delany is that even the characters who act as voices of reason are not always in agreement. Change does not make something meaningless, and in fact the change itself can become very meaningful.

In the end, the most comforting words in the novel come from Sam, who tells Bron, “Even if it’s hard where you are now—and I know it can be—you’re still changing, still moving. Eventually, even from here, you’ll get to somewhere else” (5505). The society portrayed in *Triton* is not perfect, but there is something hopeful about the idea of constant reinvention that it presents.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Comparing the Works

Delany is interested in individuals who live in between identities and on the outskirts of society, and this shows in both works, but in different ways. In *The Einstein Intersection*, the characters based on these individuals are outsiders or considered unusual in some way, whereas, in *Triton*, Delany moves the outsiders of his society into the center of the novel's society and makes his ordinary-1970s-man the one person who cannot fit in. Both novels are interested in difference and what happens when those differences are made more visible in society, but Delany takes this idea further in *Triton*, where difference is the norm, and a single culturally desirable identity no longer exists. Through this concept of difference, both *Triton* and *The Einstein Intersection* endorse ideas of plurality, as conceptions of "average" and "normal" are shown to be ideologically formed and mythical. As Delany himself has said, *The Einstein Intersection* deals with myth, but in a way so does *Triton*, with the myth of gender.

While both novels explore gender, they do it from different angles. This means that they tend to be least interested in the area that the other novel covers. *The Einstein Intersection* does not engage with the possibility of being transgender that is central to *Triton* and *Triton* only hints at the possibility of nonbinary gender that is presented in *The Einstein Intersection*. These focuses have potentially been influenced by the times the two novels were written in, with the 1970s as a time when transgender rights were gaining visibility and SRS was becoming more accessible, while the 1960s were influenced by the popularization of androgyny. If *The Einstein Intersection* ends by suggesting a world in which gender may be transcended, *Triton* vaguely resembles the society such transcendence may create, only it is human and very much embodied. Bodies cannot be escaped, but they can be altered, and new meanings can be ascribed to them. It could even be argued that in his expansion of the category of acceptable gendered bodies in *Triton*, Delany develops in terms of gender what he set in motion in terms of disability in *The Einstein Intersection*.

The protagonists of both novels grapple with views of gender in their own way, and Delany seems to deliberately have made them less enlightened than some of the other characters. This has possibly been done with the goal of them being

easier reader surrogates, who the readers can learn along with, as is the case with Lobey, or perhaps learn to disagree with, as with Bron.

It is also significant to note that the characters in one novel are human and in the other are not. *Triton* can be read as a potential future for us in a way that *The Einstein Intersection* cannot. At the same time, the nonhuman perspective of *The Einstein Intersection* is useful for examining our culture through an extremely distant and distorted lens. Notions of normality that we take for granted are easier to question when seen from an estranged point of view. Furthermore, in a society where most of their culture is imported from elsewhere, it is easier to perceive gender as merely one part of a strange network of meanings that have been assigned to describe the indescribable experience of existence. In *Triton*, a similar, if lesser, effect is achieved by the distance of time, but the characters have a better understanding of human culture. While this makes the novel's perspective less radically estranged, it also enables direct references to and comments on the culture of contemporary readers. Critique of current gender structures can thus be more explicit, even as they are harder to escape than in *The Einstein Intersection*.

At the same time, *Triton* takes the exploration of potential cultures further, by showing multiple societies on different planets, with different degrees of liberation. This enables Delany to have characters react to different prevailing views of gender much more than in *The Einstein Intersection*. While the society on Mars is more old-fashioned and conservative than the society on Triton, it might have seemed progressive to American readers in the 1970s and maybe even now (for example by the fact that prostitution is legal on Mars, and that Martians have had two female presidents). While many novels may present the present-day culture of their readers as old-fashioned, fewer do so with the more progressive aspirations of their time. The liberal ideas of his time, Delany seems to suggest, are not as radical as they seem.

While both novels consider the problems of identity and difference, neither of them present clear and uncomplicated solutions. Such solutions, Delany suggests, we must work out for ourselves. These questions are just as relevant now as they were when the novels were written, and as the number of possible identities keeps growing, it can be comforting to read works which neither celebrate nor vilify difference, where it can be both artificially created and an absolute fact of life.

4.2 Final Remarks

The Einstein Intersection and *Triton* are works that went beyond the popular gender conceptions of their times and still yield meaningful analyses of gender. The complexity and frequent ambiguity of gender is explored meaningfully, and although Delany does not give clear solutions, he seems to imply that a greater freedom of expression and acceptance of difference can be beneficial, or at least imaginable. Gender is one of the central myths of Western society, and it is impossible to approach our views of ourselves without considering the considerable role it plays.

These two novels are not the only works of Delany's that deal with gender, and this study could easily be expanded to encompass more of them. A wider study could even be made by tracking the motif of gender throughout all his works. As a contemporary author, he has lived through a great number of changes in the views of gender and sexuality, and it might be interesting to see to what extent they have influenced his writing throughout his career.

While *The Einstein Intersection* and *Triton* are still relevant today, they have not completely escaped the biases of their times. For example, neither of them includes significant nonbinary representation that is not linked to also being intersex. It would be interesting to compare science fiction from this era that deals with gender diversity to some more contemporary works in the genre (such as *Ancillary Justice*, *Shadow Man*, *2312*, or a compilation of short stories) to see if any progress has been made.

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