# ‘How to Become a Rock’: Non-Human Metaphors as Trans Paranarratives

**Bio**

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**Abstract**

Non-human metaphors, including animal metaphors, are widely used to evoke trans experiences, but the blooming flowers and hatching butterflies are often reduced to mere tropes or clichés. This article investigates what a narrative approach to these non-human metaphors can offer us to reconceptualize trans existence. I employ Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens’s concept of the ‘paranarrative,’ which allows us to look at metaphors as creating an additional narrative layer where aspects of the main narrative can be deepened, nuanced, or even contested. In two case studies, I unearth hidden sides of trans experience evoked through non-human metaphors on a paranarrative level. In Marieke Lucas Rijneveld’s novel *Mijn lieve gunsteling*, animal metaphors ranging from otters to birds bring to the surface a view of transness not limited to gender, but one that entails feelings of isolation and even uncontrollable desires. The metaphors in the novel *Wormmaan* by Mariken Heitman likewise raise attention to the connectedness between human, plants, and matter that society has tried to contain in limiting categorizations, such as gender divisions. By broadening the scope of trans as an embodied experience across various boundaries, this article calls for an expansive approach to trans narratology that reaches beyond gender towards the variety of affects that trans is capable of exposing.

**Keywords**: trans narratology, non-human, metaphor, paranarrative

## Introduction

It is no coincidence that the main character of the 2022 trans romcom *Anything’s Possible* (Porter) is fascinated by the animal world. The teenager can project into it a part of her experience as a trans girl that she has yet to find somewhere else. A special significance is attached to the marsh harrier, a species of prey birds of which some male birds develop a female feather color when they get older. Even though the marsh harrier is a less common example, it could be included in a list of what Evelyn Deshane has found to be “analogies often used to represent transgender people: the cocoon and blooming butterfly, the phoenix being reborn from the ashes” (118). Even trans narratologist Jay Prosser speaks of a trans person’s old body “to be discarded like a snake’s skin on Burou’s operating table” (99). Other examples can be found in comparisons with other forms of life: the sign for “transgender” in American Sign Language “roughly looks like a flower closing on the chest” (Chen 82). What we could call “natural” imagery is so commonplace in popular trans representations that we often gloss over its implications and perhaps even possibilities for narrating trans experiences. This article lays bare

the limits of reductionist images, as well as the potential of more complex, narratively developed figurations. Specifically, I will investigate what we can gain if we approach recurring imagery and networks of metaphors as constructing narratives.

Most of the metaphors above occur only once in a story, and, very often, they describe a specific moment of bodily transformation, e.g. gender affirmation surgery. From budding butterflies to blooming flowers, the most common metaphors for trans experiences portray a strikingly visible, unidirectional, and singular metamorphosis. However, they tell us nothing about the invisible experience of being trans, of fluid, subtle, or multiple subsequent transformations. One cannot capture a whole spectrum of gender experiences in one image without reducing it to a single, concrete event. Moreover, these simple "natural" figures often serve a sole purpose of "naturalizing" and legitimizing trans identity. Consequently, it is suggested that a true and final self is "revealed" through transformation, which in itself upholds a split between self and body. A larger complexity arises when metaphors reoccur in different shapes, resisting a unified reading, and when an interplay of different metaphors in a narrative shows us various, contradictory layers of experience. This is not a matter of distinguishing "good" images from "bad" ones. The examples above, in fact, already hold much more narrative potential than can be expressed in a single utterance. If the metaphor of a snake shedding its skin reoccurred at different points in the narrative, it would take on weight: there would be a deeper engagement with what it feels like to be (like) a snake, and a recognition of the fact that a snake sheds its skin more than once during its lifetime could point towards a more continuous experience of being trans. As readers, we can of course always build on these simple metaphors and develop them into narratives, as I just did in the example of the snake. Then, we are taking part in the creative narrative construction of metaphors that can expand trans imaginaries.

The study of metaphors is not new to trans narratology. If anything, research on the spatio-temporal journey metaphor (cf. Prosser, Aizura) can even be considered the foundation of trans narratology. These scholars highlight the various journeys trans people might undertake beyond a dominant, progressive medicolegal gender transition. Non-linear, achronological, or distorted journeys can shift the focus towards more fluid, hesitant, or layered gender identifications that do not follow a straightforward path. While these spatio-temporal dimensions have taught us much about the various trajectories trans people might undertake, they tell us little about momentary, embodied, and sensory experiences of being trans. If we want to create awareness for trans life in all its variety, we need to look beyond a seemingly all-encompassing, large-scale journey metaphor toward the overshadowed, everyday, fleeting diversity in experiences. Someone on a fluctuating journey between the paths of female and male expressions or identifications might use this spatio-temporal metaphor to indicate feeling at home in both of these genders, while another person might use the same journey metaphor to express a search for a neutral balance between two gender poles. "Natural" imagery is at least as common in trans narratives as journey metaphors but remains understudied up till now. By expanding our field of vision towards these metaphors as well, we might be able to account for a larger array of possible gender experiences beyond spatio-temporal movements.

In what follows, I will consider the narrative development of non-human metaphors as what Biebuyck and Martens call "paranarratives," an additional layer of narrativity beyond the main narrative (65). Drawing on their insights, I investigate what kind of paranarratives on trans experiences arise from non-human metaphors. To do so, two novels will be discussed, focusing first on animal metaphors and then on metaphors drawing from the worlds of plants and matter. By doing so, I do not mean to reinforce existing species hierarchies, but I simply take into

account that humans are generally assumed to have more in common with animals than with other forms of being. Each of the two case studies discussed already centers a different "natural" domain: while Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's novel *Mijn lieve gunsteling* features almost exclusively animal metaphors, Mariken Heitman's novel *Wormmaan* focusses on plants and matter.[1] Before I delve into these novels, I will clarify how we can combine Biebuyck and Martens's theory on paranarratives with David Herman's notion of "allegorical laddering" for the purpose of a trans narratology that does not solely focus on gender, but on how trans life takes shape in connection to other forms of being. As such, this article aims to highlight what non-human imagery can teach us about the various ways in which trans life can be narrativized and imagined.

**Trans Paranarratives**

My approach to non-human metaphors ties in with several scholars working at the crossroads of trans studies and animal studies, posthumanism, and ecocriticism. For instance, the field of ecocriticism (cf. Buell, Morton) has already laid the foundations for studying literary, ecological imaginaries, i.e. the relations between various forms of existence, by calling into question certain dichotomies, such as between "nature"[2] and "culture," "human" and "non-human," "animate" and "inanimate," etc. As a subfield, feminist ecocriticism (cf. Vakoch), in particular, looks more specifically at the hierarchical formation of gender and subordination of women in relation to these dichotomies. Queer approaches to ecology (cf. Seymour) furthermore pay attention to normative hierarchies of sexuality and gender.

The often interdisciplinary study of trans ecologies overlaps and intersects with these projects in important ways but specifically studies how trans social realities and "trans formations are connected to and made possible by relationships among humans and nonhuman animals" (Weaver, "Trans Species" 253), and by extension other nonhuman forms of life and matter. Sometimes, non-human life is used as a model or metaphor to introduce novel conceptualizations of trans affect or embodiment. This happens in trans studies scholar Eva Hayward's article "More Lessons From a Starfish." She describes the limits of dominant metaphors for trans experience, such as the container metaphor of a gendered mind being trapped in a "wrong" body, and she offers the metaphor of a starfish as an alternative. Starfish can grow back broken-off rays, and this allows Hayward to reimagine gender affirmation surgery not as castration or amputation, but as something (re)generative, producing "the conditions of physical and psychical regrowth" (72).

These alternative perspectives offered by non-human imagery also point to interspecies relationships as formative for trans existence. One example of this is Hayward's work on Premarin, a form of estrogen used by trans women which was derived from the urine of pregnant mares ("Spider city sex" 228). Harlan Weaver has also written about his pitbull-like dog and the safety it provides him in public, allowing for a freer gender expression ("Becoming Kind" 689). In other words, these embodied interspecies connections create the conditions for specific forms of trans life to emerge. Transness thus quite literally consists of interspecies bonds. As such, the metaphors used in the novels I discuss go beyond throwing a new light on trans experiences, as any other metaphor might do. Non-human metaphors specifically highlight the embodied communality between different forms of life that is constitutive of trans life in the first place.

However, these interconnections that underpin trans life and our understanding of the world are not so easily imaginable. This is where literary narratives can help us, as they often function to convey complex phenomena through concrete characters, events, and imagery. In his

book *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene*, Marco Caracciolo similarly argues that "narrative has the tools to perform such work of translation," by which he means "strategies, at the level of plot dynamics, character, consciousness representation, and metaphor, that mirror or integrate contemporary science in order to unsettle the primacy of the human-scale world" (12). To find out how non-human figures can be beneficial in reconceptualizing trans experiences, we first need to take a closer look at how metaphors function on a narrative level, more specifically as paranarrative. In a following step, I will combine the insights from trans ecology with this paranarrative approach to formulate a definition of trans narratology centering on trans affects and experiences that figure in narrative techniques (like imagery) we do not always associate with gender.

Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens offer us a useful framework to approach metaphors from a narrative perspective. They consider "the network of metaphors and other figures of speech in a literary text as an additional layer of narrativity" (65). This additional layer is what they call a "paranarrative," which stands in contrast with a main narrative they call the "epinarrative." Figurativity, to them, entails an expansion of the narrative scope, allowing for actions, time-spaces, or themes to gain depth. Moreover, this paranarrative does not always support the meanings produced in the epinarrative, but "rhetorical figures (in particular figurativity) rearrange elements of narratives" (Martens et al. 170). This rearrangement problematizes a unified analysis: it can "disrupt the narrative course of action" or "create new motivational structures" (170). As such, by contrasting the epinarrative with the paranarrative level, we can unearth hidden layers of narrative able to convey more complex phenomena. As will become clear in my analyses, this complexity is especially desired to unearth hidden trans experiences that too often disappear in a trans master-narrative of (medical) transition.

To some extent, the idea of a paranarrative level is similar to what David Herman calls "allegorical laddering" in which "the event-sequence in a source narrative functions as a template for interpreting the events of one or more target narrative(s)" (280). He discusses this strategy to distinguish between events that happen in the perceptible storyworld of individual characters and those impossible to grasp through human timescales or perception, "phenomena that exceed the size limits of the lifeworld" (292). In this way, Herman demonstrates how extended metaphors allow us to imagine what would otherwise be impossible to grasp. However, instead of just pointing out one allegorical level—or paranarrative, if you will—on top of the level of literal events, Herman argues that multiple allegorical levels can be distinguished in narratives to grapple with the most abstract phenomena. Animal metaphors can, for instance, be only a first step to say something about events in the larger natural world. Likewise, the "natural" metaphors in the case studies presented in this article do not only deepen our perspective on the main character's experiences, but they are in their turn allegories for larger structures, such as gender relations and species hierarchies. While Herman's approach helps us to unpack various allegorical layers, he does not seem to take into account the possibility of these layers also *contesting* the meanings produced in the layer of literal events. What if the main character's experiences cannot easily or straightforwardly be aligned with the figures used throughout the narrative? A combination of both approaches—allegorical laddering on multiple levels and paranarrative disruptions of the course of events—seems the most fruitful for taking into account various narratives or figurations of transness, as well as the possibility that layers of figuration cannot be (easily) aligned. To a certain extent, unpacking this misalignment is interpretative work, as imagery never has a single, straightforward meaning. However, especially works of fiction with an expansive imagery in the language of the text provide a complexity of layers to

uncover. This is why I will look at two case studies that are especially rich in their use of metaphors.

As already suggested above, the study of non-human metaphors can highlight the interconnections of trans life and the context in which that life emerges. This links a trans narratology not only to its traditional companions of queer and feminist narratology, but also to econarratology and unnatural narratology, or even various narratologies that question categories and hierarchies of being. Already in early formulations of trans studies, we find the idea that "proximity, movement, and symbiosis with or between other organisms and the environment" can be seen as "a style of relationality that threatens the borders of bodies and identities" (Crawford 133). This calls for a more expansive definition of "trans," not limited to questions or borders of gender. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore introduced such a definition in their editorial introduction to the WSQ special issue *Trans-* in 2008. In that essay, they stress the "interrelatedness and mutual inextricability of various 'trans-' phenomena" (12). They open up the field of trans studies with the question:

> How might we begin to link "trans-" to other suffixes that target bodily zones or functions other than those addressed by -gender, and thus begin to articulate what might be called a general "somatechnics," or analytics of embodied difference? (14)

With this article, I argue that also trans narratology would benefit from such a wide-reaching approach. Rather than drawing the boundaries of an entirely new field, we can draw from already developed tools to analyze the narrative structures of embodied difference. As such, what we might call "trans narratives" do not always explicitly deal with gender, but gender might figure in other kinds of movements, such as between the traditional boundaries of human and non-human. Narratives that decenter human experiences, for instance, hold possibilities for critiquing species/animacy hierarchies that lie at the base of various inequalities. For this, I argue, we need to be attentive to additional narrative layers, such as imagery evoked in paranarratives. As a result, an intersectional potential is revealed in which "trans" can function as a connector between otherwise distinct narrative fields.

To point out which paranarratives on trans experiences are evoked through non-human metaphors, I have made an inventory of all metaphors involving animals (in *Mijn lieve gunsteling*) or plants and matter (in *Wormmaan*) as either the source or target domain. Only the ones reoccurring most often and those related to gender experiences or relations will be discussed below. First of all, a distinction will be made between human and non-human source domains. Even in the most common non-human metaphors for trans experiences, for instance when gender transition is compared to a caterpillar becoming a butterfly, the metaphor juxtaposes conceptual information: not only are we invited to view gender transition as a kind of hatching but also vice-versa. Biebuyck and Martens specifically pay attention to metaphors that do not form perfect blends. While they go as far as to claim that literary metaphors are more "overtly incongruous" (60), a more nuanced perspective could be that some metaphors—whether literary or not—form better blends than others. It is exactly in this undefined space of blending and blurring boundaries, in which human and non-human characteristics flow over into each other in both directions without a clear dividing line, that the potential of something new, beyond traditional distinctions, can be revealed. The naturalizing effect of common metaphors is surpassed, as boundaries begin to blur. I will thus pay attention to the blending effects of metaphors. In the second step of the analysis, I will look at the interplay of the most prominent metaphors and examine how the paranarrative that they create together relates to the epinarrative. Finally, this will help me to point out what the different allegorical layers in the end tell us about

the various trans imaginaries conveyed in the novels. I hope this effort can be used further as a toolbox to uncover complex embodied trans experiences that can only be evoked through layered, metaphorical paranarratives.

**Children with Antlers**

The first case study, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's novel *Mijn lieve gunsteling* (trans. *My Dear Favorite*), is a *Lolita*-like apology in which a middle-aged veterinarian named Kurt narrates his growing obsession with the pubescent child—"The Favorite"—of one of his clients. Kurt is the sole narrator of the story and, after having been persecuted, he tries to legitimize his increasingly gruesome acts of molestation. He reports on the events from his unreliable perspective and suggests that his own trauma of molestation by his own mother caused him to long back to that "sizzling and turbulent valley" (294) of puberty in which nothing is set in stone yet. He consistently addresses the child in the you-form, interprets their movements and actions according to his logic, and even reports on what the child would have said in indirect speech. While the reader cannot escape Kurt's unreliable perspective in the epinarrative, I will show how the paranarrative adds a layer of meaning that escapes the narrator's grasp and gives the reader insight into some of the child's affects, especially those linked to their questions on gender.

This paranarrative takes shape via the numerous animal metaphors in the novel. For the pederastic narrator, they seem like part of his plan to justify his desires and actions. For instance, by highlighting the dynamics of predators and prey, he pretends as if his actions were a result of instinct rather than conscious, willful choices. This animalistic imagery and logic seems to stem from his experience as a veterinarian working on farms. However, this reading does not do justice to the interaction between multifaceted metaphors. Instead, the child seems to share Kurt's fascination with the animal world, but, even from Kurt's perspective, the metaphors escape his straightforward interpretation. In fact, the most prominent animal metaphors are either (supposedly) introduced by the child—and thus stem from their (reported) imagination—or are given new meanings by them, which Kurt does not always fully understand. At most, he recognizes that the child is "shimmering" between "a child and a woman" and between "a girl and a dear boy" (359), and that this shimmering between gender and age categories is linked to their identification with specific animals. Thus, while the epinarrative reads as a legitimation of child molestation from the perspective of an unreliable narrator, the paranarrative level gives the reader insight in the child's experience of shimmering. As such, the animal metaphors are not simply part of the apology, but also function to open up spectra of experience that one loses when growing up and one is narrowed down to more specific identities. Four metaphors, specifically, are developed throughout the whole novel. I will discuss these below, by looking at their direction (from animal to human or vice versa) and development and by focusing on their paranarrative interaction with the epinarrative. As a result, an interplay of trans affects and experiences, such as various forms of masculinity, loneliness, and power, become visible.

A first observation is that the metaphors in the novel almost exclusively draw from an animalistic source domain with human life as the target domain. In other words, human characters are described in animalistic terms or identify with certain animals. The first three metaphors I will discuss are used by the Favorite to convey certain desires, identifications, and experiences, pointing at bodily characteristics as well as capabilities. One of them is an identification with birds. From the beginning of the novel, the child imagines becoming "the bird" (35), an elusive figure used by the child to express a desire to fly away and escape distressing family circumstances. As the novel progresses, the bird metaphor is develops further

and takes on new meanings for the child. They begin to be scared of these bird-like affects and see themselves as a strong bird of prey with an unstoppable desire, which might even devour The Frog (a metaphor that seems to portray boyhood, cf. below). Others, however, read the child's identification with birds as a sign of their brokenness, turning them into an easy "prey" (52) for Kurt, or a sensitive character with "broken wings" (92) in need of help in the eyes of Kurt's wife. The adult characters in the epinarrative thus try to narrow down the potential of the bird, taking away its strength, danger, and multiplicity of meaning that are alluded to on a paranarrative level.

A second animal metaphor seems to have a more straightforward meaning. At first, this animal metaphor is only used for a specific boy, namely the one who gave the Favorite their first kiss. The child calls him The Frog, and, as if it is a proper name, the word is continuously capitalized. Quickly, however, the nominator is broadened towards all boys around the child's age and, later, even seems to signify "boyhood" in general. The narrator, for instance, tells us: "you were mumbling something about The Frog, that The Frog could pee standing up" (121). Even though the child has a great fascination for this bodily act, The Frog seems to allude to something more than simply cis male embodiment. Every so often, the narrator witnesses the child momentarily becoming The Frog, after which he reports: "I saw that you were free from exile for a moment" (281). The Frog thus stands for a certain feeling of liberation, the unnamable taking shape and no longer being locked up inside the child. While there is no explicit reference to fairytales, it is easy to read The Frog as a not-yet prince. It is no coincidence that the child first imagines becoming The Frog after their first kiss with a boy. As such, the animal holds a promise of future transformation, but it is important to note that the child only desires being a Frog, a not-yet prince. There remains something undefined within this figure, an elusive capacity for change that might or might not be realized in (un)expected ways.

A metaphor somewhat similar to The Frog is the metaphor of the otter. While The Frog refers to a more straightforward, visible masculinity, the otter suggests a hidden masculinity. When the figure is introduced, we learn that, after an otter's death, the animal is sometimes dissected to lay bare the penis bone. By the length of the bone, one can determine the otter's age. After the Favorite hears this, they imagine themselves as the otter, waiting to be dissected in order for their masculinity to be revealed. Later, another layer is added to this metaphorical figure. The Favorite explains to Kurt that otters have gone extinct in the Netherlands because they would often get run over by cars. This also makes the child, who identifies with this animal, one of the only ones of their kind. They are not able to recognize their experience or embodiment in others and feel different than everyone else. In the extinction of the otter, they might recognize not only the hidden gender experience that wants to come out, but also affects of loneliness and estrangement that come with being a young trans person who does not know anyone else with this experience. As such, trans existence is not narrowed down to a single story of visible, bodily transformation, since the extinct otter shows us a different side of trans experiences.

The last metaphor taking up a central position in the novel is "antlers." This example stands out in comparison to the others because this metaphor is introduced by Kurt and communicated to the child. He uses it as a euphemism for a penis. The child, who has an obsession with male genitals, is now invited to look at their desire as a desire for antlers. Realizing how a deer's antlers grow from small pedicles into dangerous weapons as the animal ages, Kurt draws a distinction between the innocent "boy's antlers" the Favorite knows from male peers or angel statues, and his own sexual organ that poses a threat to the child and which he regularly refers to as his "murderer's antlers." The metaphor of the antlers makes clear how a penis is not only seen as part of a male body, but also as a weapon or means of protection that

holds the promise of gaining even more power when one grows up. This is further emphasized by the Favorite's conclusion that "children with antlers get stolen less easily" (346). As a result, the child's desire for male genitals or masculinity is not simply a question of identity or embodiment. Boyhood or masculinity would also allow the child a sense of safety, power, and control. These affects surface in the paranarrative and escape Kurt's reductionary interpretation as a figure for male genitalia.

An even more layered interpretation is possible if we look at the interaction of all these metaphors. I already mentioned that the child imagines the bird killing and devouring The Frog, and that this allows the child to become The Frog. This makes the bird a less than innocent character, as it seems to stand for a frightening, uncontrollable desire for boyhood or masculinity. In turn, The Frog and the otter can be seen as different forms of masculinity, as images of a desired (cis) boyhood and a lonely, hidden trans masculinity respectively. Adding the antlers to the sum, the idea of masculinity as a weapon or means of protection throws yet another light on the child's trans feelings. Yet, there remains something opaque to all of the metaphors. Just like the narrator, readers are left to wonder: "what did you mean by becoming The Frog?" (48). While Kurt wants to reduce these images to a single epinarrative of him instinctively being drawn to a vulnerable animal, the various expansive and evocative metaphors paint a much more complex picture on a paranarrative level. The metaphors make an alternative reading of the novel possible that has less to do with Kurt's experiences, and more with the child's quest for a (gender) identity outside of the norm. These expansive and evocative metaphors move against any attempt to reduce the child's trans experience simply to a desire to be a boy, or transition to manhood in adulthood. Through the metaphorical paranarrative, we are given perspectives on trans affects that are lost in dominant narratives of unidirectional, physical transformation.

**Like a Seedling**

In the second case study, *Wormmaan*, the novel's chapters alternate between two parallel storylines, which we could see as two different epinarratives. Each of them revolves around a main character who does not fit in the gender norms of their respective societies. In the first storyline, the protagonist Elke quits her job as a seed breeder to focus on her plan of rewilding a domesticated pea species, which consists of returning the plant to its "wild," hermaphrodite capacities. With this rewilding, she hopes to rewild the whole society, including herself. Domestication, according to her, has not only put constraints on what we call "nature" but has also imposed norms and categorizations onto humans. Elke, who struggles to live up to norms of femininity and does not want to be seen as a man either, takes on the project of liberating herself from gendered constraints not by changing herself, but by rewilding her surroundings and thus restoring a certain affective force that has been restrained by domestication.

The second storyline revolves around a protagonist Ra during the Neolithic Revolution period. Having roamed the steppe as a nomad, she settles down in one of the first agricultural communities. Upon arrival, she immediately witnesses the results of this domestication on the society's gender norms: with a body roughed up from life on the steppe, the community reads her as a man, but this is later questioned. Through negotiations about her gender, this society explicitly draws the gendered dividing lines that were not there before, and Ra stands out as someone who cannot be easily positioned in these categories. Not fully aware of this, Ra becomes the leader of a domestication plan. Eventually, she leads part of the community toward an island where they will cultivate peas, not realizing that, through this process, they will

simultaneously cultivate themselves. The two storylines both draw an opposite movement: in the case of Elke from domestication to rewilding, and in the case of Ra from "wildness" to domestication. Since the novel starts and ends with Elke's storyline, her rewilding seems to take the upper hand, with Ra's story functioning as a counternarrative. As such, the central motive of the novel is the belief that escaping domestication means an escape from the limitations of gender.

However, under the surface of these unidirectional plot developments a larger complexity lurks. On a metaphorical level, human, plant, and matter are in continuous interaction from the start of the novel, shaping one another's existence regardless of attempts at rewilding or domestication. In most cases, these metaphors portray the non-human as having human-like characteristics, otherwise known as anthropomorphizing. We read metaphors like the earth's "balding skin" (Heitman 5) or a plant "barters with soil fungi" (254). Not only is human imagery used to make sense of non-human behavior; even more important is the interaction between various life forms that is made tangible by the imagery. There are "stars that glowed as ripe grains of wheat" (128), and the steppe transforms humans as her "dust fills the pits in one's face, her wind etches serious wrinkles, sharpens soft jawlines" (39). As Elke observers: "one transforms under the gaze of others" (59). With gender as a central theme of the novel, we are reminded here of the insights from trans ecology, namely that gendered existence and trans life always take shape in and through a specific context. The recognizable, embodied affects, of a glowing ripeness or sharpening jawlines, allow these boundary crossings to become tangible.

It is in particular in terms of sex and gender that the commonality among, and interaction between, various forms of being acquire meaning. For instance, the cultivation of the pea species central in both storylines revolves around stripping it of its hermaphrodite capacities. This removal of the plant's ability to self-reproduce and the division in "female" and "male" parts is portrayed as very similar to human gendering. Elke witnesses this on her job as a seed breeder: "the female flowers each covered by glass bonnets to prevent accidental fertilization, the male ones simply amputated" (9). Just like that, the potential for hermaphroditism and self-fertilization is taken away, but never fully, as accidents might still happen. There is thus still an untamable capacity lurking, and this is the force that Elke aims to uncover. The character herself feels limited by gender expectations: she is unable and refuses to conform to societal norms of femininity and does not identify as male either. She feels uncomfortable being seen as a man, as if this imposes another kind of limitation. There are affects or aspects of this experience that simply cannot be captured by these nominators. Instead, she searches for her own lost potential, which we could call a trans potential restrained by gender logics, through attempts at restoring this potential in the pea species.

Being trans, the novel suggests, goes hand in hand with critically rethinking our bonds with other forms of life. Elke might have taken up a rather naïve project of "restoring" or rewilding the so-called "natural" variation, in gender and otherwise, that humans have tried to nip in the bud since the Neolithic Revolution. But the metaphors powerfully highlight how one process cannot happen without the other. Elke puts it like this: "This is not about identity, at most about the dismantling of it. This is about how one becomes a rock, of irrefutable form" (226). The rock, here, implies not a passiveness or loss of qualities. Instead, it frees up the limitations imposed by human identities and lies there, strong and unyielding for domesticating forces. The affect of being rock-like is here presented as a more appropriate metaphor for Elke's trans experience. While Elke only seems to achieve this dismantling of identity in the very end, and Ra is on her way to domestication, the paranarrative shows us that, in fact, both human and

non-human have always been and will always be the result of their context and their mutual influence, as well as figures full of excess sensations that escape any encapsulation. As such, through non-human metaphors, not only are Elke and Ra's trans experiences suggested to be more capacious than what is supposedly left after domestication, but on a higher level, we are shown how domestication has put constraints on everything on earth. Here, the paranarrative teaches us that a trans journey is never only a transition from one gender identification or embodiment to another but goes hand in hand with much larger reconfigurations. Trans life always takes shape in connection to the surroundings.

**Conclusion**

Both of these case studies reveal a deeper level of experience on a paranarrative level. What cannot be explicitly narrativized or put into words, an undercurrent of excess affects refusing to be caught by all too simple nominators, is alluded to through non-human metaphors. In *Mijn lieve gunsteling*, I have pointed out affective experiences like a frightening desire symbolized by the bird, the longing for an unattainable power that is evoked through The Frog, feelings of isolation and loneliness as an extinct otter, and the idea of control that is suggested by the antlers. Simply stating that the child felt like a boy would be an enormous reduction of the expansive terrain that transness can be. The novel *Wormmaan*, likewise, takes up the fight against a reduction or domestication of what is there more broadly called "wildness." For Elke, the process of rewilding not only reveals a larger gendered potential than what is allowed within society's constraints, but the process also requires a certain level of symbiosis with other forms of existence; it requires becoming a rock.

As such, these novels are, in fact, not so much about gender as they are about a liberation of what society attempts to tame. Trans*gender* experiences are simply a locus where a certain potential is revealed, but this excess force or desire is inherent to all humans or forms of existence. I would like this article to be a call to consider subjects and imagery that are not always straightforwardly presented as "trans." Maybe narratives about rocks, plants, animals, or supernatural figures might actually give us more insight into various expressions of trans capacity than more outspoken trans narrativizations.

This article can thus be seen as a call to expand the narratives, figures, and objects of study in trans narratology, as well as our methods through which we analyze them. Instead of assuming that, by now, we should all know what "trans" means and we should start to look at their narratives, we might ask: what more can "trans" mean and which narratives allow us new trans imaginations? I have suggested using the concept of "paranarrative" to highlight additional experiences that can broaden the scope of "trans" beyond the more explicit layer of the epinarrative. Next to this concept, narratology still offers us a wide array of tools to reach beyond, within, through, and beside gender, highlighting how a narrative approach opens up perspectives for trans life, as well as indicating what trans knowledge can mean for our understanding of larger structures. Trans narratology has only just taken the first step, not in becoming whole, but in becoming, hopefully, too much.

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[1] Both of the novels are originally written in Dutch and not yet published in an English translation. All translations, including the titles, will be my own.

[2] As Timothy Morton teaches us, our attachment to the concept of "nature" stands in the way of truly rethinking ecology. However, solely for the purpose of indicating and studying specific imagery—what I call "natural" or "non-human" metaphors—I will still hold on to the term in this article. Quotation marks will be used in an attempt to problematize the evident use of terms like "nature" or "wildness."