Trans-Forming Unmapped Bodies: The Importance of Names in Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*

Aubrey Malinis, Simon Fraser University

In "The Question of Social Transformation," Judith Butler cites Gloria Anzaldúa, who identifies herself as a non-unitary subject (227). As Butler explains, Anzaldúa's "capacity to mediate between worlds" demands we "stay at the edge of what we know" because it is precisely "through that risk and openness to another way of knowing and living in the world [that we can] expand our capacity to imagine the human" (228). In other words, Anzaldúa claims a subjectivity invested in continuously questioning epistemological knowledge. For Anzaldúa, the point of undertaking multiple subjectivities is to "work in *coalitions* across differences" (228, emphasis mine), because trans-formation—forming a subjectivity that crosses differences—makes possible more bodies. Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) is invested in this trans-formation because it is vested in transgender subjectivity.

As Susan Stryker identifies, our normative knowledge is incomplete, and it is obvious through our use of normative language. Stryker is a transgender woman, and she likens her subjectivity to Frankenstein's monster: "The monster problematizes gender partly through its failure as a viable subject in the visual field; though referred to as 'he,' it thus offers a feminine, and potentially feminist, resistance to definition by a phallicized scopophilia" (241). Here, Stryker explains that her femme, transgender subjectivity cannot be captured by the masculine language attempting to name her embodied existence. To counter such reduction, Stryker *continues* to cite such normative language—however, "[t]his citation [only] becomes a subversive resistance when, through a *provisional* use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy" (241, emphasis mine). That is, Stryker employs the very same normative language delimiting her, because it is precisely through *her* appropriation—her non-normative embodiment—of the very word, that its signification changes. To combine Stryker's and Anzaldúa's arguments, a provisional use of language is made possible by coalitions across differences,

because it is through this mediation that we acquire new significations of normative language.

This matters because, returning to Butler, I want to problematize normative reality. When citing "real" or "reality," I mean what bodies exist, what bodies are allowed to exist, and what bodies are considered possible. According to Butler, norms govern what is real: the norm "allows for certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear in the domain of the social" ("Chapter 2" 42)—or the domain of the real. To connect this with Stryker, the norm depends on scopophilic discernment of the body, and language to rationalize this discernment. Oftentimes, language fails because its scope of meaning is narrow.

As I will complicate later through the character of Sam, unlike Butler, I distinguish *recognition* from *legibility* because recognition simply means bringing a body (by naming and identifying) into existence. Legibility, on the other hand, rationalizes that existence through normative meanings. However, because normative meaning is very narrow, the only way to question it is by maintaining the unintelligibility of non-normative bodies. The point, then, is not to be made legible by the parameters of normative meaning, but to be recognized—named, labeled, seen—by normative language in order to destabilize the very word that attempts to find cohesion in a body that does not, will not, and should not conform to "normal."

The problem with the norm, in addition to its narrow meaning, is, according to Butler who cites Jürgen Habermas, the belief that these norms are common, or universal ("Chapter 10" 220). This universality is expressed, Habermas argues, through "the everyday use of language" because it is through language that we "reach an understanding with one another about something in the world" (qtd. in "Chapter 10" 220). As Butler identifies, it is "the presumption of a *common* set of idealizations [that] gives our action order […], as well as what we take account of as we seek to order ourselves in relation to one another" (220, emphasis mine). We recognize and name each other through, seemingly, universal parameters to create meaning we can collectively understand. The problem is we do not, and we cannot create universal meaning.

So, to clarify, in my reading of Sam's subject formation, I am using Stryker's provisional use (appropriation) of normative language to problematize the very same names attempting to rationalize his body. The point is that this language cannot rationalize Sam—but, instead, through the collaborative recognition of

Miel, Sam's mother, and Aracely, their differing signification of normative language offers Sam a lexicon with more malleable meaning.

If there is no value in universal reality, the most important way to make real more bodies, then, is to accept multiple significations. To do so is to work collaboratively—across differences—in creating "a new legitimating *lexicon* for the gender [that is, bodily] complexity that we have always been living" (Butler "Chapter 10" 219, emphasis mine). Working collaboratively means challenging the certainty of our normative knowledge by engaging in *un*common realities. This means relying on the instability of language. So, to articulate non-normative bodies is to surrender to language's evolving signification. In Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*, I see that the co-construction of Sam's transgender subjectivity depends on Miel's, his mother's, and Aracely's recognition, which is languaged through coalitions of uncommon, re-signified language. McLemore uses the notion of "unmapped" and "unmappable" bodies to argue that bringing Sam's non-normative body into realness depends on such namelessness because it compels him to use his new, collating lexicon to recognize and language (i.e., name) his unmapped body.

As McLemore makes obvious, Sam is the moon. What follows in the novel, then, is the mapping of Sam's body, which parallels the historical mapping of the moon. There are two facts about the moon pertinent to Sam's own mapping and embodied experience of reality.

First, the moon's landscape was mistakenly mapped: early astronomers identified large, dark spots on the moon's surface; in 1645, Dutch astronomer Michael van Langren named these spots "'maria'—the Latin words for seas" ("Maria"). This name is responsible for "the widely-held view that the marks were oceans on the lunar surface" ("Maria"). However, in 1892, William Pickering contested this view, insisting that, because the moon essentially has no atmosphere, water would evaporate immediately, debunking the existence of lunar oceans ("Totally Dry Moon"). Despite this discovery, van Langren's "maria" persist to name these sea-less spots.

Second, the moon has two sides: the "near" side and the "far" side (Woods). Because "the moon is tidally locked to the earth" (Keller qtd. in Woods) and, therefore, "completes one full rotation on its axis in the time to orbit the Earth" (Woods), we can only see the near side of the moon. This means we can only map one side of the moon—our understanding of the moon is not complete, no matter how we name it.

Sam's mapping (i.e., naming), and thus subjectivity, begins when his town "christened" him Moon (McLemore 5)—already, there is instability here: they language him with a name containing a history of mistaken and mis-recognized landscapes and a perpetually unknowable underside. Compounded with the fact that he is transgender, Sam exists as an inherently trans-formative subject because he exists across the normative differences of the cisgender binary, and between being known and unknown. By christening him Moon, the town does not christen Sam with a name, but with un-mappability; Sam cannot be rationalized.

For this reason, Sam is named by many languages because he is constantly re-formed by the very flux he resides in. Here, I broadly define language as not necessarily a dialect, but any words used to convey meaning. But, beginning with a dialect, Sam recognizes himself as a *bacha posh*—a girl "[d]ressed as a boy" (McLemore 35) for families that do not have sons. Although it is Sam who recognizes himself as such, he was given this language by his grandmother. *Bacha posh* is a name offering to make intelligible his contradicting desire to be a boy, and his grandmother's desire for him to wear "[n]ot a boy's kurta, but the sunrise colours and scrolled patterns of a girl's salwar kameez. A dupatta draped over hair longer than he ever wanted to grow it" (198).

However, *bacha posh* is not wholly accurate, so Sam is continuously given names in an attempt to rationalize his non-normative body: "[e]ven with muscle filling him out, he didn't have the hard angles to his face or the wide spread to his hands to keep [townspeople] from calling him *feminine*" (McLemore 114, emphasis mine). Sam is "feminine" because, at the insistence of the Bonner Sisters, Sam is a "girl"— a naming consolidated by a birth certificate (114) and their consequential use of "she" and "her" pronouns. Here, like the moon, Sam's embodiment is composed of many dark spots read and named inaccurately by those who perceive him, not only because their knowledge of Sam is incomplete, but because Sam is constructed through normative, likewise incomplete, gendered meaning. To read this through Stryker, Sam problematizes this gendered language and normative conceptualizations of gender, because though referred to as "she," Sam cannot be contained—and he resists being contained—within definition by a feminized scopophilia.

Moon, *bacha posh*, and girl, affirming Butler, impose onto Sam's transgender body a narrow grid of legibility. The problem with these names, however, is precisely the narrowness of legibility. Though Sam is named, these names fail him because they insist upon reducing Sam into individual categories: Sam is unintelligible (Moon), or he is a girl dressed as a boy (*bacha posh*), or he is a girl. It is through this

giving of many names that the town attempts to reach an understanding with one another about who Sam is. However, because the presumption of a common set of idealizations is problematic, there is no such agreement to the construction of Sam's subjectivity. Sam's many names prove this, but it is through this languaging that the town seeks to give order to Sam's transgender embodiment, "[a]s though the truth of his body was any of their business, as though they had a right to consider how he lived an affront to them" (McLemore 117). As though the only possible way for Sam to exist is to be made legible through the rigidity of their incomplete, cisgender-normative language—to be made common because to be common is to be normative and universally understood.

But Sam's body is a coalition crossing the differences of "boy," "girl," "Moon" and "*bacha posh*." For Sam to truly be recognizable, he must remain unintelligible because the present lexicon attempting to define him fails. As Anzaldúa claims, to stay on the edge of what is known is to "expand our capacity to imagine the human" ("Chapter 10" 228)—it is to expand our capacity to *signify* the human. To be recognized, then is to interact and collate "Moon," "*bacha posh,*" and "girl." Sam does so. As a result, he renders himself recognizable.

Sam is not passive in all of this naming: Sam rejects some significations and accepts others. Using Stryker's words, "through a *provisional* use of language, [Sam] verbally declare[s] the unnaturalness of [his] claim to the subject positions [he] nevertheless occup[ies]" (241, emphasis mine). That is, Sam takes pieces from Moon, *bacha posh*, and girl, appropriating their signification to map himself—and this is necessarily Sam's responsibility because, like the real moon, only he has access to his perpetually hidden, perpetually unknowable "far side." He has the most complete knowledge of himself, and so, it is up to him to "figure out what kind of life [he] want[s]" (McLemore 107)—it is up to him to construct a lexicon that captures his existence. He is not alone in this construction: he collaborates with Miel, his mother, and Aracely. Though it is not they who name Sam, they do articulate new significations that compel Sam to use his new, collating lexicon to name himself.

Although I have condemned the Bonner Sisters and the townspeople for inaccurately naming Sam and appointing themselves with the authority to rationalize Sam's transgender body, I differentiate their intrusive languaging from "bonds of community where recognition becomes possible" ("Chapter 10" 216)—from the bonds of community Sam has built with Miel, Aracely, and his mother. They differ because where the former impose a rigid grid of legibility, Sam's community shows him "how contemporary notions of reality can be

questioned, and new modes of reality instituted" ("Chapter 10" 217)—how normative significations of his name can be questioned, and new signification of his names instituted.

To emphasize the importance of this collaborative effort to name Sam, I begin with Miel because her re-signification of Moon facilitates Sam's autonomous mapping. This is what I mean: "[w]ithout [Miel], [Sam] had been nameless. He had not been Samir or Sam. He had been no one" (McLemore 5). He was not named, and he could not name himself. Considering Moon, Miel echoes the same sentiment about Sam's body: "[Sam] was a moon […] He was a world *unmapped*, a planet of valleys and vapor seas" (182, emphasis mine)—however, instead of naming him as the townspeople do, Miel insists that "no one but he had a right to name" himself (182). Miel plays a vital role in Sam's own naming because, rather than finding a name to rationalize Sam's transgender embodiment, "[Miel had] learned him, but left room for the way he was still learning himself" and "[s]he knew the shape of him, every place that was shadow and every place that reflected light, without deciding he was hers to name" (266). In other words, though Miel recognizes that Sam has many dark, unintelligible spots, she does not attempt to name his spots maria nor attempt to elucidate his unknowable far side by gridding valleys and vapor seas that may or may not exist. Instead, "she saw him as something different than anyone else did" (13): "[n]o matter what their bodies had in common, she and Sam were not the same" (182) because "she understood that with his clothes off, he was the same as he was with them on" (13). Miel gives Sam the onus to name himself because she does not attempt to rationalize his transgender or "unknowable" body by naming him with the very same normative language that fails him. Instead, Miel recognizes that Sam's gender cannot be defined by a feminized scopophilia—there is no correlation between gendered body parts and sex categories (no correlation between Sam's body and girlhood). Miel, then, offers Sam autonomy in his body's unmappability: Sam can decide—can name—the body he inhabits because it has no prior gender, no prior signification, no prior name. Miel collapses any connections his body has with normative ideas of girlhood. Instead, as the unmappable Moon, he is nameless—and rather than "Moon" exposing him to the naming of others, Miel insists that "Moon" privileges him with the autonomy to name himself.

And Sam does attempt to name himself: as mentioned, Sam chose to be called a *bacha posh* because he insists on the specifically *boy* construction of this subjectivity. He chose *bacha posh* because there is some accuracy in this name: he "wanted to live as a boy" (McLemore 107)—but, "[h]e wanted to be a boy who grew into a

man, and for there to be space in the world for him" (208). Though "*bacha posh* were words that did not belong to him" (95) because they do not capture his desire to persist as a boy, they are words articulating a possibility in which he can trans-form his assigned-female body into a self-identified boy body. *Bacha posh* grants him the possibility to "stay this way" (207).

Sam's mother aids him in this conclusion: in his childhood, Sam claims that "there needed to be a man of the house and that [he was] going to be that man" (McLemore 205). Sam "declare[d he was] going to be a whole new person so there was a son taking care of his mother" (205). Sam used his mother to facilitate "a lie he told himself to pretend he was like the girls whose mothers and fathers dressed [them] as boys" (208). But his mother recognized, before Sam did, that it was more than that: "[w]hen [he] wanted to live as a boy, [his mother] knew how hard it was to stay in the same place" (107) where he was called Samira—she knew that *bacha posh* was a temporary, transitional naming that would lead to a more permanent self-identification. Sam's mother, when he chose to be a *bacha posh*, "wanted [him] to have the life [he] wanted" (107)—she wanted Sam to be a whole new person, in a whole new place, with a whole new name. So, when Sam later declares that he "wanted to stay this way" (207), his mother consolidates this decision with "a surer, quicker nod […] taking [his] hesitation and making it into something clean and finished" (207). Through a provisional use of *bacha posh*, Sam re-signifies this name by constructing it to mean a "girl" dressed as a boy who stays a boy. Sam appropriates its traditional signification by adding permanency to this otherwise temporary practice, and his mother validates this re-signification by giving him space in the world to continue living as a boy.

Using Miel's contribution, Sam destabilizes the name "girl": he simultaneously disconnects himself from it and re-signifies its meaning. This is a re-signifying made possible by Aracely's own confession because the possibility "that Aracely might understand what he could not say […] planted in him a want, new and raw, […] to live a life different from the one he was born into" (McLemore 105). Sam was never a girl—never Samira. Samira is a separate entity from Sam, merely a "girl his mother imagined when he was born" (250). Samira is Sam's far side: she is "his shadow" (250)—she "lived in places he could not map" (250) onto his own body. "Girl" is a name Sam could never know because Samira exists—as his mother's imagination, a shadow—in a transitory phase existing "out of the corner of Sam's eye" (250), or outside of Sam. Sam can never intimately know Samira because Sam cannot map her on the "part of him he bound down with [an] undershirt, or his hips, [which were] a little wider in a way that didn't show

through jeans" (60), or on "what he did or did not have pressing against the center seam of his jeans" (266). This body "was his body. It was his to name" (250), not Samira's. Though his body has breasts, wide hips, soft facial features, and lacks a penis, these body parts do not signify "girl," because Sam's gender cannot be defined by a feminized scopophilia.

Disconnected from Samira and "girl," Sam emerges with the certain declaration that "I'm a boy […] and I always have been" (McLemore 252). Much like Aracely "gave herself a name" (102) when she emerged from the water "a woman, finished and grown" (102), emerging as a boy, perhaps not finished, but with finality, Sam gives himself a name: "*he would be Samir*, the sum of the blood his mother had given him and the man he was becoming" (265, emphasis mine). Here, Sam re-signifies "girl" because he subsumes these gendered body parts into "boy"; he affirms Miel and rejects any correlation between his body and feminized body parts. Here, he declares that "there was no distance, no contradiction between the body he had and a boy called Samir" (183). Undertaking the collaborating names Moon, *bacha posh*, and girl means, then, to be a boy called Samir. Samir means permanently remaining unmappable by normative names and normative meaning. It means, instead, permanently claiming masculinity by re-signifying masculine embodiment—it is to claim boyhood, not in spite of, but through his non-normative embodiment.

Through the chapter titles, McLemore materially affirms Sam's quest to re-signify his imposed naming. As McLemore elucidates in the chapter "Lake of Autumn," each chapter title is the English translation of the lunar seas' Latin names—for example, *mare nubium* and *lacus autumni* mean Sea of Clouds and Lake of Autumn, respectively (McLemore 11). These are names given to the sealess spots identified on the moon—these names, then (like *bacha posh,* Moon, and girl) impose a grid of meaning that is likewise contested and reconsitituted by the chapters they name. Utilized as chapter titles, these names create a framework—a body—onto which Sam's narrative gives meaning. That is, these chapter titles do not make sense until *after* the chapter has been read—these names' signification depends on what Sam does and experiences in the narrative. In this case, naming importantly precedes meaning, giving Sam the chance to, likewise, signify the mapping of the book. The chapter "Sea of Nectar" best illustrates what I mean.

Without the content of the chapter, "Sea of Nectar" does not mean much. "Nectar" does allude to fruit, implying harvest or blossoming or fruitfulness—but, without context (without Sam's narrative to provide meaning), "Sea of

Nectar" offers an insubstantial suggestion of meaning. With, and because of Sam's narrative, "Sea of Nectar" obtains signification: this is the chapter in which Sam names himself Samir. This chapter is where "the rest of him was in what he chose" (McLemore 266, and it is only then that "Sea of Nectar" begins to make sense. Following the allusion to blossoming and fruitfulness, Sam substantiates such implications when he, in this very chapter, declares that "when he said his name" he is declaring "the sum of the blood his mother had given him and the man he was becoming" (265)—he is declaring the fruit blossoming from the labour he conducted to give meaning to his own name: the articulation of his own truth. In so doing, Sam likewise gives meaning to the name that titles this chapter. Through these chapter titles, McLemore offers the literal, physical copy of the book as a meta-body for Sam, whose chapter names only gain meaning after Sam offers his narrative—his truth—as signification.

The point of this analysis is to insist upon preserving unintelligibility—unmappability—because it is precisely through the "irrationality" of such radical embodiment that normative constructions of bodies are questioned. Trans-formation—trans subjectivity formed across the difference of the cisgender binary, and across the differences of recognition—is valuable and necessary in our capacity to imagine the human. I do not wish to objectify trans bodies and suggest that they are a means to improve our knowledge about the world, but I do suggest that, as Sam does, working collaboratively with subjects having realties *un*common to our own is a necessary risk and openness to another way of knowing and living in the world. I also suggest that, although recognition has the capacity to harm non-normative bodies, it also has the equal capacity to institute new modes of reality. This is evidenced by Sam, a transgender subject brought into and kept in existence by a community prioritizing recognition over legibility. This matters because, by prioritizing recognition over legibility, Sam's community renounces any authority to rationalize his body. Instead, they afford Sam the privilege to autonomously articulate the truth of his own body. Working collaboratively, then, means relying on *un*common realities to expose the instability and inadequacy of our normative knowledge—we neither experience nor perceive the world universally, so, necessarily, we do not create universal significations of language. Thus, instead of rationalizing the discrepancy between our meanings, and, more importantly, the discrepancies between bodies and normative names, it is more productive, non-violent, compassionate, and loving to surrender to such discrepancies. To surrender to language's evolving signification. To allow non-

normative bodies to be unmapped, because it means allowing non-normative bodies to be arbiters of their own body's mappings.

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to the class of ENGL417W for all the feedback and editing—but, especially to Professor Nicky Didicher, who has seen (and has helped me revise) this essay the most.