Gender Performativity and Societal Boundaries: an Analysis of *NW* and *How to be Both* Through the Lens of Judith Butler’s Theory

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Abstract

This thesis provides an analysis of *NW* by Zadie Smith and *How to be Both* by Ali Smith through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Three aspects of this theory are examined: the biological sex versus gender distinction, gender performativity and sexuality. The thesis examines the way in which the characters in the novels present themselves, how they behave, and the choices they make. This includes how characters choose to dress themselves, whether they choose to have children, which gender they present themselves as and the kind of relationships they choose to get into. This thesis emphasizes the way that societal boundaries and expectations play a role in the way the characters perform their gender and sexuality. The conclusion of the thesis provides a comparison between the way that both novels reflect Judith Butler’s theory and how the characters differ in their interaction with gender, sexuality and the boundaries and norms of their societies. In *NW*, the themes of sex, gender, and sexuality are described more explicitly. Characters are very aware of societal boundaries and expectations. In *How to be Both*, the themes of sex, gender and sexuality are less explicit. Characters are content with the way they live their lives and they are less concerned with the expectations of society.

Keywords:

Judith Butler, Performativity, *How to be Both*, *NW*, Biological Sex, Gender, Sexuality, Societal boundaries.
# Table of Contents

Abstract............................................................................................................................................ 3

Keywords:........................................................................................................................................ 3

Introduction....................................................................................................................................... 5

Chapter 1: Judith Butler - Sex, Gender and Sexuality ................................................................. 8

1.1 Sex versus Gender...................................................................................................................... 8

1.2 Gender performativity............................................................................................................... 9

1.3 Gender and Sexuality .............................................................................................................. 13

1.4 Conclusion chapter 1............................................................................................................... 14

Chapter 2: Judith Butler and Zadie Smith’s NW ....................................................................... 15

2.1 Sex versus Gender in NW ...................................................................................................... 15

2.2 Gender performativity in NW ................................................................................................. 17

2.3 Sexuality in NW ...................................................................................................................... 20

2.4 Conclusion Chapter 2........................................................................................................... 22

Chapter 3: Judith Butler and Ali Smith’s How to be Both ....................................................... 23

3.1 Sex versus Gender in How to be Both .................................................................................... 23

3.2 Gender performativity in How to be Both ............................................................................. 24

3.3 Sexuality in How to be Both ................................................................................................. 27

3.4 Conclusion Chapter 3........................................................................................................... 32

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 33

Sources ........................................................................................................................................... 37
**Introduction**

In 2019, feminist issues of gender equality are very relevant. Within politics more and more sexist voices are emerging. Politicians with anti-feminist sentiments are gaining in popularity, like Thierry Baudet, a Dutch right-wing politician, or are president of the USA, like Donald Trump. In the media female scientists are being attacked and questioned (Filipovic) and there is a major presence of misogynist groups online (Zuckerberg). Feminism is not only a relevant social issue, but also an issue that is relevant in literature. Feminist literary criticism is a means of examining feminist issues within literature written today.

Feminism as a political movement began in the nineteenth century. The first-wave feminists fought for the political rights of women. Their central issue was voting rights for women. Feminism as a social equality movement became more prevalent with the second-wave feminists in the 1960s. It was not until this social feminist movement that a discipline of feminist literary criticism was founded. That is not to say that before the 1960s female writers were not concerned with feminist issues in literature. Since the Middle Ages women have been writing about feminist issues in literature even though they were not called ‘feminist’ at the time. Christine the Pizan “was the first woman in Europe to write professionally as well as prolifically” (Gilbert and Gubar 13). From as early as the late-fourteenth century she was seen as “a proto-feminist figure of extraordinary power and significance” (Gilbert and Gubar 13). She was a “key participant in the ongoing querelle des femmes (debate over the nature of women)” (Gilbert and Gubar 13). After Christine de Pizan many more female writers wrote about (pre-)feminist issues such as female education, like Mary Astell, female writers, like Virginia Woolf, and gender, like Donna Harraway. These (pre-)feminist writers paved the way for writers such as Judith Butler, who has been called “one of the most challenging, influential and refreshing thinkers of our time” (Reddy 115).
Central to feminism is the issue of gender. This does not only concern gender equality; questions about the nature of gender are also part of the feminist discussion. One feminist who questions the nature of gender is Judith Butler. Butler’s work “impact[s] and influence[s] different fields of inquiry, including and especially gender and sexuality studies, feminist and queer theory, cultural studies and, to some extent the humanities academy as a whole” (Reddy 115). In this thesis I will focus on her works on gender performativity. The concept of performativity was first introduced in her book *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990. Butler’s theory of gender performativity provides an answer to the question: How is gender constructed? Judith Butler’s theory of performativity has been linked to literature in the past. Scholars have gone back to texts written before *Gender Trouble* was first published and have applied her theory to those texts. Gretchen Busl examined *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes through the lens of performativity (2017) and Mehdi Amiri and Sara Khoshkam examined gender performativity in a selection of plays by William Shakespeare (2017). Scholars have also analysed texts written after *Gender Trouble* was published to see how the theory of gender performativity has influenced those texts. Nurul Noor and Arbaayah Ali Termizi examined how the concept of performativity is present in contemporary Malaysian writing (2017) and Beatriz Pérez Zapara wrote an article on performativity in *NW* by Zadie Smith (2014).

In this thesis I will examine how Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is reflected in the gender identity and expression of the characters in *How to be Both* and *NW*. I will focus on Butler’s theory of performativity, the theory will be used as a coherent one. *How to be Both* and *NW* are well suited for examining gender performativity because their characters seem to experiment with their gender expression and gender identity. In both novels the genders of the main characters are not conventional. The characters seem to go beyond the boundaries of the expected and accepted gender performance of their cultures. As argued
before, gender performativity has been previously linked to *NW*, but never in comparison to another novel. Relatively little literature has been written on *How to be Both* and the topic of performativity. In order to analyse the presence of Butler’s theory in *NW* and *How to be Both*, the first chapter will give a theoretical overview of the theory of gender performativity. The following two chapters will provide an analysis of *NW* and *How to be Both* through the lens of Butler’s theory of gender performativity. These chapters together will provide an answer to the following research question: how is Judith Butler’s theory of performativity reflected in *How to be Both* by Ali Smith and *NW* by Zadie Smith by the characters that are central to the novels and is there a difference in the reflection of Butler’s theory in the two novels?

The first chapter, on gender performativity, will start with the sex versus gender distinction as it is present in Butler’s theory. In order to get a clear understanding of Butler’s idea of gender, it is important to know how her idea of gender is related to that of biological sex. The chapter will then go on to explain what is meant by ‘gender as performance’ and finally it will briefly touch upon sexuality and how it intersects with the gender performativity theory. These three ideas of sex versus gender, gender performativity and sexuality will then be used to analyse *How to be Both* and *NW*. In the second and third chapters I will analyse the characters’ identity, focussing on behaviour, how they choose to present themselves to other people, and the choices they make in life. This includes the way they choose to dress themselves, which gender they present themselves as, choosing to get pregnant or not and choosing what sort of relationship to get into. When looking at these aspects of characters’ identities I will focus on if and how their identities are influenced by their environment, the culture they live in and the people around them. Finally, the conclusion will provide an answer to the research question by combining and comparing the findings of the last two chapters.
Chapter 1: Judith Butler - Sex, Gender and Sexuality

In this chapter I will explain Judith Butler’s theory and ideas concerning sex, gender, and sexuality. The chapter starts with Butler’s view concerning the sex versus gender distinction. I will then explain the theory of gender performativity and briefly touch upon the intersection between gender performativity and sexuality. The explanations of these three themes together form a general overview of Judith Butler’s ideas on the topic of gender. I will use Butler’s theory and ideas as a coherent theoretical framework for my analysis of How to be Both and NW.

1.1 Sex versus Gender

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is a theory about the concept of gender, but what do we mean when we say ‘gender’? Gender as a category is often linked to sex, either as separate from or as a continuation of biological sex. Within feminism, the debate about the sex versus gender distinction most often surrounds the topic of essentialism. It is a debate about the question: “is there any property or set of properties that all women share?” (Stone 141).

Some theorists consider the relation between sex and gender to be an essentialist one. These essentialists argue that a person born as biologically female has something inherently ‘female’ or ‘feminine’ and someone born as biologically male has something inherently ‘male’ or ‘masculine’. This also means that all people born as female share some universal ‘female’ or ‘feminine’ essence and all people born as male share something universally ‘male’ or ‘masculine’. Other theorists do not consider the relation between sex and gender to be an essentialist one. They argue that there is no such thing as a ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ essence that all people with the same sex share. People are born with a certain biological sex, but their gender is constructed by their environment and throughout someone’s life (Stone 142). Judith Butler is also non-essentialist; but, her philosophy is a radical form of gender non-essentialism. She goes beyond the sex versus gender distinction as many other non-essentialist theorists have conceptualised it before.
Unlike other non-essentialists, Judith Butler does not believe in two separate meaningful categories of sex and gender. Instead, gender is socially and culturally constructed, she adds:

If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is replaced by social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces ‘sex’ (...).

(Butler 5)

According to Butler’s theory there are no separate meaningful categories of biological sex and a socially or culturally constructed gender. If sex does not inform someone’s gender and sex does not have some inherent cultural or social meaning, like non-essentialists believe, then no meaning is attached to sex. This does not mean that Butler does not acknowledge that there are certain biological differences between the sexes. For instance, it cannot be disputed that people with different sexes look different. It does mean that the meaning attached to those biological differences is taken over by the meaning of a constructed gender. Butler writes that “gender is the social significance that sex assumes within a given culture” (Butler 5). The social and cultural meaning that we attach to biological differences is what we call ‘gender’. This means that the category of biological sex becomes socially and culturally meaningless.

1.2 Gender performativity

In the fragment above, Judith Butler clearly explains that she does not believe in sex and gender as two separate meaningful categories. The meaning of a constructed gender takes over the meaning of biological sex. Her theory of performativity outlines how she believes gender is constructed. The theory of gender performativity builds on the idea that gender is not a stable category or identity, only the illusion of a stable identity is created. This illusion is created
through acts, “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 519). These acts do not only constitute the meaning of someone’s gender; they also form the performance or enactment of someone’s gender identity (Butler 521). That is to say, not all acts performed by someone add new meaning to their gender identity. Some acts only show and reinforce the meaning that was already created through previous acts. Through the repetition of these performed acts the illusion of a stable gender identity is created. This is the sense in which gender is performative. The acts performed by a certain person make up the meaning of that person’s gender identity.

Even though the acts performed by individuals form the illusion of their gender identity, these individuals do not have a radical\(^1\) say over or influence on their gender identity, it is “never fully self-styled” (Butler 521). Not all acts that contribute to someone’s gender identity are deliberate and conscious acts that influence gender identity in a straightforward way, nor do these acts stand on their own. They are always imbedded in the historical and cultural context. Judith Butler draws a comparison between ‘doing’ one’s gender and taking part in a play (Butler 526). Every play has a script and most plays are put on multiple times throughout time. An example of this theory would be a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. *Romeo and Juliet* is a play with a script that has been performed countless times since it was first published in 1597. Each production of the play has provided its own interpretation and every actor brings something different to the role they play. Still, there are boundaries that interpretations cannot cross. If the play is altered too much it is no longer recognisable as an interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*. The same rules apply to performing one’s gender. There is a certain script that is historically and culturally created and situated. Everyone plays a part in the play that is the gender performance of their culture, but they have to stay within the boundaries of the given

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\(^1\) ‘Radical’ in the philosophical sense of the word. Individuals do not have total control over their gender identity without external influence.
script. The acts that people perform, or not perform, are influenced by the boundaries of a given society (Butler 527).

Gender performance is situated within a certain historical and cultural context. The historical and cultural context of an individual’s gender performance adds meaning to their gender identity and therefore influences their gender performance. An individual’s gender is not a blank slate when they come into the world. Everyone is always situated within a certain script that marks the boundaries of an individual’s possible gender performance. In an interview with Vasu Reddy, Judith Butler explains that “there are norms into which we are born - gendered, racial, national - that decide what kind of subject we can be”. Every time someone acts according to those norms, by “occupying and inhabiting those deciding norms, in incorporating and performing them” that individual is “revis[ing] their power” (Reddy 117). The norms are reinforced and given power by the people who perform their gender in accordance to those norms. These norms are different in every cultural context, expectations of how one should perform their gender differs per culture. This script of cultural context comes with punishment that serves to reinforce the given script:

As a corporeal field of cultural play, gender is a basically innovative affair, although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations. Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (Butler 531)
This excerpt draws attention to two key elements of gender that are important within the theory of gender performativity: 1) gender is not a stable identity, it is rather “what is put on … daily and incessantly”; and 2) there is nothing natural about gender, the “continuous act is mistaken for a natural … given” (Butler 531).

The illusion of a stable gender identity is created because gender is performed “daily and incessantly” which means that gendered acts are performed continuously, giving the impression that there is a stable identity which is the source of these acts somewhere in people’s minds, bodies or personalities. The total of acts performed by an individual during a certain period of time may seem coherent; all acts add to an idea or picture of who that person is. The person ‘doing’ gender is also not aware that their gender identity is a created illusion (Butler 522). Because there is a certain coherence within the gender performance of an individual it is easy to assume that it stems from some stable or core identity that informs all acts. According to Butler, however, there is no stable gender identity from which all gendered acts stem; this is just an illusion that is created. There is no ‘gender’ before the acts that somehow informs a person’s gender performance (Butler 522). The illusion that there is somehow something natural about gender stems from the fact that in a given culture people perform their genders within the same script. All individuals from a given society perform their gender within the same cultural and historical context. Therefore, the illusion of a shared inherent and natural essence is created. Butler states that “sex [and] gender … are historical products which have become conjoined and reified as natural over time” (Butler 525). In reality, according to Butler, it is just the “strict punishment” that makes people perform their gender in a similar manner. The cultural boundaries of a certain script can change over time, but they tend to change rather slowly, adding to the illusion that there is some part of gender that stay stable over time. Hence, people think that there is something natural about gender.
1.3 Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sexuality are closely linked. This is not just because we think about sexuality in terms of what gender a person is attracted to. Sexuality is also linked to gender in everyday life, which we see when we examine homophobia for example:

Homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abjected gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men “feminine” or calling lesbians “masculine”, and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender (“no longer being a real or proper man” or “no longer being a real or proper woman”), it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender. (Butler 27)

This excerpt outlines how people’s sexualities are linked to their genders. Part of performing your gender in the ‘right’ or ‘normal’ way is having a sexuality that is seen as ‘normal’. The act of someone’s sexuality adds meaning to their gender. In another article, “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, Butler writes about the “theoretical apparatus” that she mentions in this excerpt. She writes that “to guarantee the reproduction of a given culture, various requirements … have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage” (Butler 524). This can be seen as a “compulsory” system in which “heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed … through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions” (Butler 524). It is a compulsory system because people are born within a certain system. Their culture determines what is seen as ‘normal’ and they have no say over what is perceived as within the norm. The culture determines how people are ‘supposed’ to act and what their sexuality is ‘supposed’ to be. Just like people are born within
an existing gendered script, they are born with a cultural expectation of sexuality. Both gender and sexuality are to some extent controlled through “social constraints, taboos, prohibitions and threats of punishment, [these] operate in the ritualized repetition of norms” (Butler 21). Within a certain cultural context, the same norms are applied and adhered to over time. Individuals within that society perform the same accepted genders and sexualities, thus reinforcing these as the norm within that culture.

1.4 Conclusion chapter 1

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity concerns the issues of sex, gender and sexuality. Gender is linked to sex within Butler’s theory because the meaning that gender takes on replaces the meaning of biological gender. This meaning that a certain person’s gender takes on through performative acts replaces that of the person’s biological sex and renders the category of biological sex meaningless. Gender is determined inside the boundaries of a cultural script which comes with reward and punishment. It is people’s acts that determine the meaning of their gender identity, but it is not the people themselves that solely determine their gender identity. Butler summarizes this when she writes: “performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms” (Butler 22).

Sexuality is also linked to Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Just like gender identity is influenced by “compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms”, so is sexual identity. In the following chapters these issues related to the theory of gender performativity will be used to analyse How to be Both and NW. In both novels characters deal with struggles of gender and sexuality that defy the norms set by their culture. I will analyse the identities of the characters in these novels by examining the choices they make, their behaviour and the ways they choose to portray themselves to other people. This means the way they choose to dress, which gender they choose to present themselves as or the choice of having children or not.
Chapter 2: Judith Butler and Zadie Smith’s NW

The previous chapter provided an overview of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. This chapter and the next will use Butler’s theory to analyse a novel in which characters deal with different forms of gender performances and the societal and cultural expectations that come with gender and sexuality. Chapter 2 will focus on NW by Zadie Smith. I will examine the characters through a close reading of the novel, with an emphasis on their behaviour, the choices they make and the way they choose to present themselves to the people around them.

NW is a novel set in twenty-first century London. The novel centres around four characters: Leah, Natalie, Felix and Nathan. In this thesis I will focus my analysis on Leah and Natalie. The novel follows these characters as they move away from their past at their childhood council estate. All characters are faced with decisions that will determine their lives and those of the people around them. NW shows how four characters from the same background end up living four totally different lives. Natalie and Leah end up married, Natalie has a successful career, Felix meets an untimely end and Nathan lives in a park.

2.1 Sex versus Gender in NW

Part of Judith Butler’s theory concerns the sex versus gender distinction. According to Butler, biological sex does not inform one’s gender; there is no essentialist relation between sex and gender. Gender is socially, culturally and historically constructed and takes over the meaning of sex, making sex a meaningless category. The characters in NW have a different view on the sex versus gender distinction. They do refer to ‘sex’ as something that adds meaning to the choices people make and the way they behave. In some of the cases when they refer to ‘sex’ they actually mean ‘gender’. These are for instance the moments that they talk about something that has cultural rather than biological significance. In other instances in the novel the characters do actually refer to ‘sex’ or biology as informing someone’s behaviour. This shows
that the characters in NW see both sex and gender as meaningful categories, but also that they hold an essentialist view of gender.

The issues of the sex versus gender distinction becomes relevant in NW in chapter 8, when Leah talks about her colleagues. Leah Hanwell’s job is described as a job for women, “five women work [there], their backs to each other. Further down the hall, the rumour of a man – Leah has never seen him” (Smith 31). Leah’s work is seen as requiring “empathy, and so it attracts women, for women are the empathetic sex” (Smith 31). This is not Leah’s opinion but that “of Adina George, Team Leader” (Smith 31). Adina talks about ‘sex’, but it is unclear whether she sees empathy as something universally female and as part of someone’s biology.

‘Women as the empathetic sex’ can also refer to the cultural expectation that women should be empathetic. Later in the chapter Leah also refers to ‘sex’. She sees “a room full of women laughing. Some shared knowledge of their sex to which Leah is not party” (Smith 35). Leah uses the term ‘sex’ but she refers to something that has to do with gender. Assuming that all the women in that room including Leah are born female, then anything that is shared within that sex should be universal to all women. If her colleagues are laughing about something that has to do with being biologically female, then Leah should be able to understand it as well. When Leah talks about ‘some shared knowledge’ ‘to which she is not party’ she refers to something cultural. This has to do with the cultural or societal norms of being a woman that she does not understand or adhere to.

The scene at Leah’s workplace reveals how people use the word ‘sex’ in everyday life. People use ‘sex’ even when they talk about something that has to do with cultural or societal norms, the script of gender performance. Later in the novel, Leah is called by Nathan and he threatens her. During this moment in the novel a clear reference is made to biology as informing people’s behaviour. Michael, Leah’s husband, is angry about the phone call Leah received and “[he] is very happy in his anger” (Smith 79). He explains that “a wife’s honour must be
defended. It is a primal thing” (Smith 79). In this passage in the novel, Michael expresses an essentialist view on the sex versus gender distinction. He thinks that his biological sex makes him want to defend his wife’s honour. He believes this to be a universal ‘male’ characteristic. Michael even goes as far as to suggest that it is a universal quality in all males, human or animal. He references a documentary he saw about great apes (Smith 79). Butler would say that it is a cultural characteristic, not something ‘primal’, to want to defend one’s wife. The documentary that Michael watched is part of the cultural script in which he performs his gender. His acts are influenced by what he sees on television and he believes them to be primal because they are presented to him in that way.

2.2 Gender performativity in NW

Judith Butler argues that gender identity, or rather the illusion of gender identity, is created through acts. All acts are performed within a certain cultural, societal and historical script. People are influenced by their surroundings and the norms of their culture mark the boundaries of an accepted gender performance. This phenomenon is reflected in NW. Characters are aware of how a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’ should behave and what choices they are supposed to make.

An important topic concerning gender performance within NW is pregnancy. Both female characters in the novel, Leah and Natalie, feel the societal pressure of wanting to have children. In a passage titled “conspiracy” the impact of societal norms surrounding pregnancy on Leah and Natalie can be read:

Natalie Blake and Leah Hanwell were of the belief that people were willing them to reproduce. Relatives, strangers on the street, people on television, everyone. In fact the conspiracy went deeper than Hanwell imagined. Blake was a double agent. She had no intention of being made ridiculous by failing to do whatever was expected of her. For her, it was only a question of timing. (Smith 268)
This excerpt can be seen an example of what Judith Butler would interpret as the cultural context of gender performance that presents itself as a kind of script for the gender performances of individuals. Everybody in Leah and Natalie’s society, twenty-first century London, is part of the same script of gender performance, in which it is desirable for married women to reproduce. The acts of the people around them reinforce the gendered expectations of wanting children. Leah and Natalie feel the societal expectations everywhere. In the excerpt above it is made clear that Leah believes that Natalie also does not want children, but Natalie is unable to resist the expectations of her surroundings. Natalie’s compliance with what is expected of her as a woman adds even more meaning to the cultural expectations of wanting children as a woman. She perpetuates the cultural script of gender performance by choosing to have children.

Leah does manage to resist the societal norms but not without effort. She pretends to want to get pregnant, but she is secretly taking Natalie’s old contraceptive pills even though her husband Michael believes that “[they]’ve been trying for a year” (Smith 328). Beatriz Zapata wrote an article on performativity in NW; on the topic of Leah and her identity she writes: “the fact that Leah masks both her sexuality and her non-desire for motherhood excludes any defiance. Yet, Leah’s narrative lays bare the persistence of essentialism and the repression of homosexual desires in favour of compulsory heterosexuality”2 (Zapata 90). Leah hides her defiance against the cultural script of gender performance. Her defiance is marked throughout the novel by the number 37. There are multiple chapters 37 in NW. The first chapter 37 explains the significance of the number. It was introduced to Leah by a girl she once loved. The second chapter 37 details Leah’s third abortion. Her first abortion was “back when she was nineteen … with a kind ex-lover” (Smith 58) and the second pregnancy was before she married Michael, “two months into their relationship” (Smith 23). This was the second pregnancy she

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2 Leah’s struggles with sexuality will be touched on in the next section, 2.3 Sexuality in NW
terminated. With her third abortion she is alone “with an old credit card from college”, this is necessary because “anything else will show up on the joined account” (Smith 58). These three abortions show how the acceptability of having an abortion changes. The first time she is in college and she has no shame over getting an abortion. Leah and her ex-lover were not very concerned about the abortion; “the thing that interested them most was the workings of anaesthetic” (Smith 58). The second abortion is mentioned very briefly. Leah does not seem to feel any shame or concern over the second abortion. It is the third abortion that makes her “ashamed before an imagined nobody who isn’t real and yet monitors our thoughts” (Smith 59). She quickly “reprimands herself” this is “the sort of thing normal women think” (Smith 59). When she was in college or just got into a new relationship it was more excepted to have an abortion. It is only when she is married and people expect her to have children that she feels like she has to hide her abortion. Leah is very much aware of what is expected of her. She is aware that she is crossing the boundaries of the cultural script for her gender performance when she has her third abortion.

Unlike Leah, who resists the societal pressure of having kids, Natalie does choose to become a mother. The narrator of NW comments that Natalie decided to have kids because she “had no intention of being made ridiculous by failing to do whatever was expected of her” (Smith 321). Natalie struggles with her own identity and the expectations of society. She wonders “whether she herself [has] any personality at all or was in truth only the accumulation and reflection of all the things she has read in books and seen on television” (Smith 185). These things that Natalie struggles with are all part of the cultural context in which one does their gender according to Butler. Natalie is very aware of this cultural context and how it influences her and her choices. When she gets pregnant it brings “only more broken images from the great mass cultural detritus she [takes] in every day on a number of different devices, some hand-held, some not. To behave in accordance with these images bored her. To deviate from them
filled her with old anxiety” (Smith 269). The difference between the struggles of Leah and Natalie is that Leah knows who she is and who she wants to be. Natalie does not know who she is and is forced to follow what the cultural context ascribes to her. For instance, when Leah confesses to Natalie that “[she is] the only person [she] can be all of [her]self with”. Natalie realises that “reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms Blake having no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone” (Smith 208). Leah’s identity goes against what people expect of her and therefore she has to act out her authentic gender performance in secret. For Natalie, all the different parts that make up her identity feel fake to her. They feel like a drag performance:

But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least authentic. (Smith 278)

She does not know what her own identity is anymore. Natalie feels like she is putting on an inauthentic drag show with all the different parts that make up her identity. She is too busy ‘doing’ or performing her different identities in accordance to what other people want her to do. She has no authentic identity left that she can recognise as herself.

2.3 Sexuality in NW

As argued before, the characters in NW struggle with what is expected of them by society and the people around them. They struggle with their gender identities, choosing to have kids or not, and their identities in general. Natalie feels like she is constantly putting on a drag show, but Leah also seems to struggle with her sexuality. At the beginning of the novel the reader is introduced to the relationship between Leah and her husband Michael. Leah describes her relationship with Michael as “when they met … the physical attraction was immediate and overwhelming. This is still the case” (Smith 22). The reader soon learns that Leah is not only
attracted to men. The chapters 37, as argued before, reveal her previous romance with a woman. She also reveals the significance of the number 37. The significance is explained to Leah when she is “lying in bed next to a girl she loved, years ago, discussing the number 37. … The girl had a theory that 37 has a magic about it, we’re compelled towards it. … The imagined houses found in cinema, fiction, painting and poetry – almost always 37” (Smith 42). In NW the chapters 37 also show what Leah is ‘compelled towards’: this girl that she loved, her abortions and also the girl that robbed her in the second chapter of the novel. Things that Leah is ‘compelled’ towards are not the things that fall within the norms of society. She is expected to marry a man and have a child, but through the chapters 37 the reader learns that Leah is attracted to women and that she has secretly been preventing herself from getting pregnant.

The girl that told Leah about the ‘magic’ of the number 37 is not the only girl that reveals something about Leah’s sexuality. When in the beginning of the novel Leah is robbed by a girl named Shar, Leah becomes obsessed with her. She discusses Shar with her husband, but “[her] husband can’t understand [her] preoccupation. Of course, he is missing a vital piece of information” (Smith 22). What this information is is never made explicit in the novel. The context of the quote suggests that this information might refer to Leah’s secret attraction to the girl. Leah dreams that she runs away with Shar to become “outlaws” (Smith 86). The last chapter 37 also features Shar. Leah has dropped off a camera to get the pictures developed, but when she comes to pick them up she gets pictures of Shar. The ones she gets are “unmistakable. Shar laughing at whoever is taking the picture, pressing herself against a door, holding a little bottle of something”. Leah says that “these aren’t [hers], [she doesn’t] want these” (Smith 94-95). Leah struggles with both her gender and her sexuality. The things she is ‘compelled towards’ are the things that go beyond the boundaries of what is accepted in her cultural context. She does defy the script that is placed upon her by society, but only in secret.
2.4 Conclusion Chapter 2

*NW* can be analysed through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. The characters in the novel seem to reflect certain parts of her theory. The characters in *NW* do have a different view on the sex versus gender distinction. Where Judith Butler argues that biological sex is not a meaningful category with its meaning being replaced with gender; the characters in *NW* do see sex as a meaningful category. It could be argued that because certain gender performances are continuously perpetuated that the characters feel like certain characteristics are a natural part of being born ‘male’ or ‘female’. They wrongly assume that because certain gender performances are continuously performed and have been performed continuously over time that they are somehow natural or inherent. The characters in *NW* do struggle with this cultural and societal reinforcement of certain gender performances. Leah struggles against the cultural norms related to her gender, but she does so in secret. Natalie is unable to go against cultural norms and in the process of keeping up with what is expected of her she loses her own authentic identity. Leah’s struggles with cultural norms are not only related to gender; she also seems to have repressed her homosexual desires. The next chapter will discuss how Judith Butler’s theory is reflected in *How to be Both* by Ali Smith.
Chapter 3: Judith Butler and Ali Smith’s *How to be Both*

In the previous chapter, *NW* was analysed through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. In this chapter I will analyse *How to be Both* by Ali Smith in the same manner. The analysis will focus on how the main characters in *How to be Both*, George and Franscesco, deal with their gender and sexuality. Franscesco is an Italian painter from the fifteenth century who really existed. Franscesco was born as a girl but has to pretend to be a man in order to be able to become a painter. George is a 16-year-old boyish girl living in the twenty-first century. Both characters have their own part in the novel. Depending on which edition you read, either Franscesco’s story is first or George’s is. Their stories are connected in multiple ways. George goes to visit one of Franscesco’s paintings in Italy with her mother and she becomes fascinated with the painter. After Franscesco’s death his ghost returns to the twenty-first century and is forced to follow George around. In this chapter I will examine how George and Franscesco deal with their gender performance and their sexuality and how they are affected by the expectations of society.

3.1 Sex versus Gender in *How to be Both*

The categories of biological sex and gender are central themes in *NW*. As argued before, the characters in *NW* do think about biological sex as a meaningful category, whereas Judith Butler does not. The characters do not only refer to strictly biological traits as having to do with sex they also attribute cultural significances to the category of biological sex. In *How to be Both* the words ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ are never mentioned, but within the novel the categories do have a major presence. Franscesco and George both have a name, or choose to be called by a name, that is not necessarily associated with the sex they were born as. Both were born as ‘female’ but the names they choose for themselves are most often associated with being ‘male’. In this chapter I will refer to George with female pronouns, she/her, and Franscesco with male pronouns, he/him. This is also how they are referred to in the novel.
Francesco uses his gender performance to break free from the limits that the Italian society of the 1460s places on women. He is a talented painter; this is obvious to his parents from a young age. After his mother dies, Francesco’s father wants to provide him with real training from a professional painter. He says that “[he] can get [Francesco] a job and schooling” (Smith 183) but “[Francesco]’ll have to wear [his] brothers’ clothes” (Smith 185). His father tells him that “if [he] find[s] [Francesco] a training, [he] best be, or become one of them, “[his] brothers” (Smith 185). This is necessary because “nobody will take you for such a training wearing the clothes of a woman” (Smith 185). This instance shows how, in society, the category of gender is what carries meaning and how the category of biological sex is rendered meaningless. The society that Francesco was born into does not allow women to become professional painters; they can only do so by becoming a nun. Francesco was born ‘female’ and should therefore not be able to receive the proper training to become a painter. Francesco cannot change his biological sex, but he is able to perform a masculine gender and present himself as a man. This means that the actual requirement to become a painter is to be of the masculine gender not the male sex. In this case biological sex does not carry any cultural meaning because with the biological sex of ‘female’ but with the gender performance of a man Francesco is able to get training to become a painter.

3.2 Gender performativity in How to be Both

In NW, the reader is confronted with two characters, Leah and Natalie, who struggle with staying inside the accepted boundaries of their society. They do what is expected of them and they keep the parts of themselves that do not conform to the norms hidden away. In How to be Both the reader meets two characters that have a different approach to identity and the norms of society. Both of them are not afraid to go beyond the norms. Francesco even uses the expectations of society to his advantage.
George is a character that lends herself well to discussing the topic of gender. When the reader is first introduced to George, either in the first part of the novel or the second part depending on which edition you read, her gender is unclear. The reader only learns that George is a girl when she and her parents debate whether she should be “Ms Moan” or “Miss Moan” (Smith 18). George’s gender ambivalence is emphasized when Francesco first encounters her. Francesco sees George and thinks that she is “a boy in front of a painting” (Smith 163) and when George turns around, Francesco thinks that “he looks very like a girl. It is often like this at this age” (Smith 199). It is only when George “made … [an] apology, very polite and in the unbroken undisguised voice of what can only be a girl” that Francesco realizes that “this boy is a girl” (Smith 213). Sonya Andermahr attributes George’s gender ambivalence to the “both/and aesthetic that structures the whole novel” (253). The text “def[ies] binary logic” (Andermahr 251). George does not have to be either a boy or a girl. She can be both boy and girl at the same time. George’s gender performance is also emphasized in her meetings with Mrs. Rock, her therapist. Mrs. Rock always refers to George as “Georgia” (Smith 62, 115, 154). She is the only person in the novel that calls George ‘Georgia’. It is significant that her therapist chooses to call her Georgia and not George. George has a therapist because her mother recently passed away and George is dealing with the loss. Mrs. Rock is there to help her mourn in a way that is seen as ‘acceptable’ or in a way that is accepted by the people around her. Mrs. Rock as a therapist is someone who helps people behave in a way that people can recognise as healthy or normal. Her calling George ‘Georgia’ can be seen as a reflection of what would be considered normal behaviour or a normal gender performance. Throughout the novel no explicit mention of society’s expectations is made in regard to George’s gender performance. George just lives her life the way she is. The sessions with Mrs. Rock are the only times that the views of society are reflected in the narrative.
Francesco lives in a society that is very different from that of George. Especially the norms and values of their cultures are very different. This is explicitly stated by George’s mother when they go to Italy to see one of Francesco’s paintings. George’s mother tells George about how different cultures and times have different standards of what is considered beautiful. She tells George that “it might just be that [their] eyes are more used to finding some parts of the room more beautiful than the others, because of what [they] … expect beauty to be. It might be [their] standards rather than [that of the people in the time that the room was painted]” (Smith 51). George lives in a society where she can do what she wants to do and be who she wants to be. George’s gender performance is ambivalent, but this is never explicitly mentioned in the novel. The reader only figures out that her gender performance is ambivalent because of the way George acts and the things she does. In the novel there is no passage that explicitly goes into George’s gender, why she chooses to go by George or why she looks like a boy who looks like a girl.

Gender is a more explicit theme in Francesco’s part of the novel. Francesco being a painter means that he cannot present himself as a woman. The reader learns this from Francesco’s part of the novel but also through that of George. When George is in Italy she asks her mother about the room that was partly painted by Francesco: “Do you think any women artists did any of it?” (Smith 94). Her mother “tells George how there are a few renaissance painters they know about who happen to have been women, but not very many, a negligible percentage” (Smith 94). According to Francesco this is because “girls got less attention when it came to colours and pictures, which meant the loss of many a good painter out of nothing but blind habit” (Smith 281). In an article on How to be Both by Sonya Andermahr, Francesco is described as “a transgender man. Francesco has many love affairs with women and is attuned to sexual ambiguity in others” (253). This might be a statement that is too simplistic to describe
Francesco’s gender identity\(^3\); especially if the both/and aesthetics that were previously mentioned are taken into consideration. Francesco presents himself as male to the outside world, but it is never explicitly mentioned what Francesco thinks about himself. He might still identify as a woman disguising herself as a man. Francesco is willing to disguise himself as a man in order to become a painter. He does not only disguise himself, but he becomes, like his father said, ‘one of his brothers’. He becomes a man to the rest of the world. In his part of the novel he is always addressed as male: his father treats him like a son, saying later on in the novel that Francesco is “[his] own man at last” (Smith 286). One of the ways in which Francesco performs his gender is by “binding [his] chest with linen … not too difficult being slim and boylike then” (Smith 201).

3.3 Sexuality in *How to be Both*

Just like gender, sexuality is a recurring theme in *How to be Both*. George and Francesco both seem to have relationships that go outside the boundaries of conventional ideas about sexuality. Early on in the novel, George expresses one of these conventional or stereotypical ideas. When George, Henry and their mother go to Italy to look at Francesco’s painting, Henry remarks that he thinks the room is “really pretty”. George immediately thinks that “Henry is gay. He must be” (Smith 43). This is the only instance in the novel that these sorts of stereotypical ideas are explicitly present. The reader is confronted with different expressions of sexuality and the ways these expressions are accepted through the characters in the novel.

George’s sexuality is like her gender performance in the sense that it is never explicitly mentioned. That does not mean that her sexuality does not play a part in the novel. At the beginning of George’s part, she develops a special bond with Helena Fisker, or H as George calls her. It is never mentioned what the two girls are to each other. They do not seem to have

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\(^{3}\) The topic of Francesco’s sexuality will return in the next section; 3.3 Sexuality in *How to be Both*
a definition themselves, but both in George’s and Francesco’s part of the novel the reader gets some clues that the two girls might be more than just friends. They share a special bond from the moment they meet each other, which is in a high school bathroom. When George goes to the bathroom some girls from her school follow her and make a recording of her “urinating” (Smith 64). This is a thing girls do at Helena and George’s high school. Helena walks into the bathroom to save George from the girls. Helena is able to help George because “most people in the school were pretty respectful of Helena Fisker” (Smith 65). Helena “reached her hand over the tops of those little girls’ heads and plucked the phone out of the main girl’s hand” (Smith 65-66). George is not actually sure if the girls deleted the video and she thinks to herself that if the video still exists then “it meant there was a recording of her somewhere and in it she was looking straight over their heads into the eyes of Helena Fisker” (Smith 67). This is significant because George feels as if there would be something special about that moment when she is looking into Helena’s eyes.

After this initial meeting George and H form a very close bond. From George’s perspective the reader can read how much impact their relationship has on George. One day “when H goes home at eleven George literally feels it, the house becomes duller, as if all the light in it has stalled in the dim part that happens before a lightbulb has properly warmed up” (Smith 77). Helena literally lights up George’s life. This could just be because they have a very close friendship, but it seems like George feels more for H than just friendship. When Francesco sees the girls together, he remarks that “there’s a kin between them and their hearts are high with it” (Smith 308). It is not only from George’s perspective that the reader gets clues that there might be more between George and H than just friendship. Helena downloads some songs for George, songs that they write new lyrics to in order to learn their schoolwork. This by itself is not significant, but the songs that Helena chooses to write new lyrics to are. These songs are: “I will always want you” (Smith 112), “Crazy Little Thing Called Love”, “Brown-
Eyed Girl” and “You’re the One that I want” (Smith 144). It seems like Helena does have feelings for George and she is trying to tell her something through her choice of love songs for their schoolwork. There is also a passage in the novel in which George thinks that H might kiss her. Helena “leans towards George as if to kiss her on the mouth, yes, that close, so close that George for a second or two is breathing H’s breath. But she doesn’t kiss George” (Smith 122). The two girls do face a difficult obstacle in their relationship: H is forced to move to Denmark because of her father’s work. The two girls do keep in contact. H regularly texts George and George “knew they were about the something real between them” (Smith 143) but she never replies to H’s texts. When George does finally reply, H writes back: “It’s good to hear your voice” (Smith 145). That text “pierced whatever was between the outside world and George’s chest. In other words, George literally felt something” (Smith 145). A page later George “sensed … both that love was coming for her and the nothing she could do about it” (Smith 146). All these clues from the novel form the idea that there is something between Helena Fisker and George that goes beyond a platonic friendship.

Francesco also has an interesting relationship with sexuality. He has a very ambiguous sexuality. Throughout the novel Francesco has sexual relationships with both men and women, contrary to what Sonya Andermahr argues in the article about the both/and aesthetics of How to be Both mentioned earlier. His experience with sexuality starts when his friend Barto who takes him to “the house of pleasure” (Smith 201). The first time Francesco goes to the house of pleasure he draws one of the girls who works there. Afterwards, he lets her sleep but when he wakes up, he wakes up “to find [he] was in her arms and most content and warm, it was most pleasant” (Smith 229). The next time Francesco goes to the pleasure house with Barto a different girl asks him to draw her. This time after he has drawn the girl, she “kissed [him] full on the mouth when [he] didn’t expect it and had never expected such a thing to happen with any tongue ever” (Smith 229). She taught Francesco “the rudiments of the art of love and let
[him] practice back on her generously” (Smith 230). Later when Francesco meets a working man on the street, he “put [his] mouth to him and play[s] [him]: like the muse Euterpe plays her wooden flute” (Smith 241). The Falcon, the man overseeing the wall Francesco is painting for the Duke, discovers that Francesco was born female when he “drop[s] his hand to [Francesco’s] breeches to take hold of [him] where something or nothing should be”. Afterwards he remarks that “it’s not at all what [he] expected after the dishevelled state of [his] maid when [Francesco] came to [his] house that day” (Smith 253). Francesco has sexual relationships with people of both sexes. He does not seem to make a difference between the two. The quote by Andermahr, that states that Francesco is “a transgender man” and “has many love affairs with women” (253), is an example of how gender is linked to sexuality. Andermahr seems to assume that there is a correlation between Francesco’s gender identity, which she describes as a ‘transgender man’, and his sexual relationships, which she describes as being with women. In the same article she writes about the both/and aesthetics of How to be Both. I would argue that these both/and aesthetics also describe Francesco’s gender identity and sexuality. Like George’s, Francesco’s gender identity is ambiguous and so is his sexuality; he has sexual relationships with both men and women.

The sexual relationships that Francesco has with different people are uncomplicated and there are no strings attached. There is a non-sexual relationship in Francesco’s life that is more complicated: his relationship with Barto. They meet when Francesco is still young. Francesco is out fishing when Barto walks past. Barto later reveals that “it was [Francesco’s] feet being bare on the path as [he] walked that he was most taken with” (Smith 205). After this first meeting their friendship blossoms. It is only when they are older that their relationship starts to become complicated. For Francesco the friendship between him and Barto was always platonic, but when Barto finds out that Francesco is actually a woman Francesco understands
that for Barto their friendship might have been more than just platonic. The conversation Francesco has with Barto after Barto finds out is what sparks this understanding for Francesco:

> How can we be friends now? He said. How can we ever not be friends? I said. You know I marry in the summer, he said. That you marry makes no difference to me, I said and this is the last thing I said that day to him cause he looked at me then with eyes like little wounds in his head and I understood: that he loved me, and that our friendship had been tenable on the condition that he could never have me, that I was never to be had, and that someone else, anyone else, saying out loud to him what I was, other than painter, broke this condition, since those words in themselves mean the inevitability, the being had. (Smith 237)

In the character of Barto the reader can see the societal expectations of Francesco’s society. Barto cannot act on his feelings for Francesco because everyone around them believes that Francesco is a man and homosexuality is not accepted. Even though Barto still marries that summer his feelings for Francesco do not seem to go away. After Francesco’s father dies he is plagued with nightmares. In an attempt to rid him of his nightmares Barto suggests that Francesco should drink water of remembering and water of forgetting, something he makes up as a way to help Francesco. In reality it is just water that he has poured form a random jug, but Barto still wants Francesco to try. After Francesco drinks the water of forgetting he pretends to have forgotten who he is. He scares Barto a lot, who says that “for a minute there … [his] world ended” (Smith 289). For Barto, Francesco is his whole world which suggests that he might still see Francesco as more than a friend. Francesco also admits that he still thinks that Barto feels more than just friendship. He says:

> I know his frustration: I’ve always known it: it is almost as old as our friendship: the walled-up power, the dismay in the air round him like when
a storm is unable to break. But as ever out of kindness he pretends to me to be feeling something else. (Smith 311)

This frustration that Francesco is talking about refers to Barto’s feelings for Francesco that he keeps hidden away for the sake of his marriage and his friendship with Francesco who does not seem to feel the same way about Barto.

3.4 Conclusion Chapter 3

Like NW, How to be Both reflects certain parts of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and the ideas that come with that theory. In How to be Both the reader can see how society treats gender as a meaningful category and how sex is rendered meaningless. In society it is ultimately Francesco’s gender performance that determines how he is treated, not his biological sex. Francesco and George both show how gender performance shapes the way people see you. George chooses to go by a name that is commonly associated with being male and at first Francesco thinks that she is a boy. Francesco’s gender performance is what shapes his life, as without his ‘masculine’ gender performance he would not be able to be a painter.

Both George and Francesco are ambivalent when it comes to gender. In George’s case her gender is never explicitly mentioned. In Francesco’s case it is unclear whether Francesco still feels like a woman pretending to be a man or if he would at this point identify as ‘male’. Not only the gender performances of these characters are ambivalent; so are their sexualities. George has a relationship with Helena Fisker that is hard to identify as either a platonic friendship or a romantic relationship. Francesco does not discriminate between different genders when it comes to his sexual relationships. He has multiple sexual relationship with women, for example in the pleasure house, but he also has sexual relationships with men, for example, the workerman he meets on the street. His friendship with Barto is complicated, not only by Francesco’s gender performance, but also because of the one-sided feelings that are present in their friendship.
Conclusion

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity outlines a social process in which the illusion of a gender identity is created and biological sex is rendered culturally meaningless. People perform their gender within a script that is historically, culturally and socially determined. This script adds meaning to people’s gender performances and it provides boundaries that people cannot cross. An individual that does go beyond those boundaries is perceived as not ‘normal’; or going outside of the accepted norms. This theory of gender performativity is reflected in the novels NW by Zadie Smith and How to be Both by Ali Smith. In both novels characters perform a certain gender within the cultural script of their societies. Even though both novels can be said to reflect Butler’s theory they are different in the way that they reflect this theory. In NW characters seem more explicitly aware of societal boundaries and expectations. In How to be Both characters are less concerned about societal boundaries and expectations.

The biological sex versus gender distinction is the first issue which the characters in the novels approach differently. In NW the characters are more explicitly concerned with their gender performances and the way that biological sex might inform that performance. The characters do explicitly mention the category of sex and some are under the impression that their biological sex informs their behaviour. This can be seen as a gender essentialist view. The characters also refer to ‘sex’ as a meaningful category when they talk about things which have cultural significance. In those instances, it is unclear whether the characters believe that these character traits are informed by biological sex or whether they actually mean ‘gender’ but say ‘sex’. The characters in How to be Both are less explicitly concerned about their gender performances or their biological sex. It is only because Francesco was born female and wants to be a painter that the category of biological sex becomes an issue. Within the narrative the reader is able to see that Francesco is not determined by his sex, as it is his masculine gender
performance that carries meaning and determines his life. Within George’s part of the novel the category of biological sex does not seem to be an issue and it is never explicitly mentioned.

The historical, cultural and social context that make up the script in which people perform their gender is a more prominent issue in *NW*. The character in *NW* struggle with what is expected of them. Both Leah and Natalie feel like they have to conform to certain norms; they have to get pregnant, or pretend to want to get pregnant, and stay in a happy heterosexual marriage. They have desires that go beyond the boundaries of what their society would consider ‘normal’. Both characters hide away these desires and try to perform their genders in a way that the people around them can accept. The characters in *How to be Both* are less determined by the script of their societies. George lives her life the way she wants to and she does not seem to be concerned about her gender performance. The reader only knows about her gender ambivalence through what other characters think and say about her. The reader only learns that George looks like a boy when Francesco first sees her and thinks that she is a boy. George herself is not concerned with how she looks or how other people perceive her. The only thing that gives the reader a clue about the expectations of society is the character of Mrs. Rock who insists on calling George ‘Georgia’. Francesco’s gender performance is a more explicit theme in the novel. Francesco’s gender performance is a necessity for him to become a painter. The reader does not know, however, how Francesco feels about his own gender performance. He never states whether he feels like a woman pretending to be a man or whether he has really adopted the masculine gender and has started to feel like a man.

Sexuality and the expectations of society are, like gender performance, explicit issues in *NW*. Leah is married to a man, but the chapters 37 in the novel reveal her obsession with Shar, the girl who robbed her, and her previous lesbian relationship. Gender performance and sexuality are both explicit themes in *NW*, unlike in *How to be Both*, in which both themes are not made explicit. George has a special relationship with Helena Fisker even though it is never
stated what the two girls are to each other. The reader gets a variety of clues that suggest that the two girls might feel more for each other than just friendship. Francesco has a very ambivalent sexuality which is complicated by his gender performance. He has sexual relationships with both men and women, and a male best friend who is in love with him. *NW* and *How to be Both* differ in the way they portray the characters’ experience of their sexuality just like the characters differ in their experience with their gender performances. In *NW* the characters are very much concerned with staying inside the boundaries of what is considered the norm in their society, with both their gender performances and their sexualities. The parts of themselves that do go outside of those boundaries are repressed or kept hidden away. In *How to be Both*, Francesco and George have no problems with who they are or who they like. They live their lives and they never make an explicit issue of either their gender performance or their sexuality. They are not concerned with how they will be perceived or judged by others. The cultural expectations are shown through the character of Barto, who cannot act on his feelings for Francesco because of the boundaries of accepted sexuality in his society.

A lot can be examined when it comes to the characters in both *NW* and *How to be Both*. The characters have interesting identities and they all choose different paths when it comes to dealing with these identities and their social context. More research could be done about these novels. Only a few academic articles on *NW* and *How to be Both* can be found, like the articles by Zapata and Andermahr mentioned in this thesis. In this thesis I have focussed on the way in which gender identity and sexuality can be analysed through the lens of Judith Butler’s ideas of performativity. However, gender and sexuality are not the only parts of identity that seem to have a performative nature in these novels. Class, ethnicity and the way the characters deal with the loss of loved ones, for example, would be interesting topics to examine through the lens of performativity. The views of Judith Butler are also not the only views on performativity. I have focussed on her ideas about performativity, but future research could examine different
views on performativity in relation to NW and How to be Both. Gender and sexuality could also be examined from a different angle: looking at How to be Both from a transgender studies perspective, for example, could be a very interesting way of looking at these characters’ interaction with gender. I briefly touched on Sonya Andermahr’s view of Francesco as a ‘transgender man’. A good starting point for this topic would be Butler’s book Undoing Gender (2004) in which she writes about the topic of being transgender. There are also characters that I could not touch on in this thesis which would make interesting topics for further research. The character of Felix in NW or George’s parents in How to be Both are characters that would lend themself well to being analysed. Within the novels there are also relationships that this thesis did not discuss which would be interesting to analyse. These are relationships like the one that George’s mother has with a woman named Lisa Goliard, or the relationships that Natalie has with people she meets online. There is so much more to examine within these novels. With regard to Judith Butler’s theory, however, it is the boundaries set by society and the character’s attitudes toward these boundaries that set NW and How to be Both apart.
Sources


