7. “We Exist, We Are Human, We Are Everywhere among You”

A Conclusion

In the special issue of *Chrysalis, ‘Intersex Awakening’* guest editors Cheryl Chase and Martha Coventry write:

“When we first came together, we were still too filled with shame to allow our pictures to be published, or in many cases even our real names. Now, we are finding our pride and finding the strength to show our faces. [...] we have complemented this issue with a gallery of pictures of us. Pictures of our childhoods, of our lives today, and of the joyful changes that breaking silence has made possible for us. These pictures are our gift to ourselves and to our intersexual brothers/sisters and their parents who have not yet begun their healing journey. And to the world, to declare that we exist, we are human, we are everywhere among you.” (Chase and Coventry 1997/98: 4)

Narratives that renegotiate intersex lives, intersex experiences, and the cultural meaning of the category of intersex from an intersex person’s perspective have the power to challenge hegemonic medico-cultural narratives, to reject the definitions and terms through which intersex was and is understood, and to provide the conditions for a resignification of intersex. The intersex movement that began in the early 1990s has worked to give intersex a face, in fact many different faces, and has been gradually replacing dehumanized, depersonalized images and narratives of intersex subjects with personal accounts and representations. The strategy of providing intersex narratives with visual signifiers of humanness, intended to challenge the “conditions of intelligibility [...] by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love” (Butler 2001: 621), has been a significant strategy of resistance in the intersex movement. Personal accounts and other texts written by intersex individuals and activists, which have appeared in newsletters, magazines, articles, collections of

essays, and guidelines for medical practitioners, parents and allies, are often accompanied by pictures of the narrators, mostly photographs that show them in a private context, which are meant to represent intersex persons as 'ordinary people,' as human beings. This strategy allows intersex individuals, in particular those who were subjected to nonconsensual, forced medical treatment, to reclaim their subjecthood and agency, to reinscribe themselves into history, into culture, to declare their existence, and their humanity. In fact, the intersex movement's recent declaration that intersex rights are human rights both implies and requires the recognition of intersex individuals as humans, as intelligible subjects. This means that since the early 1990s, the starting point of the shifts and processes of the resignification of the category of intersex, until today, processes that enable the conditions of intersex intelligibility must have taken place.

The autobiographical, literary, and visual cultural narratives about intersex that I analyzed in this book have effected, both individually and collectively, some to a greater extent and some to a lesser extent, significant processes of resignification and contestation of the category of intersex, through chronological and achronological, cross-referential, intersecting, interrelated movements. I have argued that the narratives offer different ways and strategies through which intersex becomes an intelligible category, how these different narratives provide, or at times constrain or prohibit, the conditions of intelligibility for (their) intersex subjects. Intersex intelligibility needs to be understood as always contextual and individual, but also as relating to an existing framework of norms and practices that govern the conditions of intelligibility of gender and sexed embodiment, and hence of intersex. Intersex intelligibility is a question of survival, a survival that takes place on several, interrelated levels: as a survival in a physical, bodily sense, as a survival on a cultural and linguistic level, and also as a survival in economic terms.

Intersex intelligibility can mean many different things. A clear indication of the unintelligibility of intersex is an attempted 'normalization,' which is considered as a requirement for producing an intelligible subject; this involves a gender assignment of an intersex subject as male or female, and the medical construction of a sexed body that is supposed to conform to this gender assignment according to prevailing cultural norms. Any narrative that rejects or challenges these processes of 'normalization' opens up the possibility for intersex to become intelligible. More specifically, an intersex protagonist or character can become intelligible *as intersex* when they do not have to undergo nonconsensual medical treatment to alter their bodies, when they are allowed to keep/have their intersex corporeality and at the same time to identify as the gender that they feel they are (male, female, both, neither, genderqueer, intersex, etc.), when they do not have their self-identified gender questioned by others on basis of their intersex corporeality, when they question and challenge the 'normalizing' procedures they were subjected to, when they reject the normative gender assignment that others made for them, when they become visible, audible, readable, and in a

variety of other ways. Intersex individuals do not automatically compromise their sense of sexed and gendered selves when they reject to "willingly and gladly inhabit a space of resistant unintelligibility" (Holmes 2008: 16). I want to point once more to Morgan Holmes' contention that "the point is not to live perpetually where it is troubling to deal with the body, but to get to a place where there can be some breathing room for difference" (Holmes 2008: 15f).

In my work, I have investigated the narrative spaces that open up some "breathing room for difference," offered by the specific narratives under consideration, and the narratives' accomplishments regarding the development of new paradigms of intersex intelligibility. OII USA director Hida Viloria writes:

> "When our minds don't have a way to categorize new information, we'll either invent something or just try to ignore it. [...] I lacked the language to define myself to the outer world, but I *did* have ways that I secretly identified in the privacy of my own mind. And to my surprise, some of the intersex folks I've met over the years had the very same ones! Back when we were all roaming around a presumably male/female-only world, without a publicly recognized label, we sometimes thought of ourselves as 'mutants' or 'aliens.' These terms were obviously inaccurate and a huge exaggeration [...]. But this is what happens when you live in a culture where being you is socially unacceptable and unacknowledged: you become something else." (Viloria 2014)

Viloria's comment on the ways intersex people have always sought to find new terms for themselves in order to become recognizable in some way, to themselves in the first place, have sought, to put it in Butler's words, "to live with and against the constructions – or norms – that help to form" them (Butler, in Williams 2014), demonstrates that there have always existed counter-narratives to hegemonic narratives, whether they have existed in the "privacy of [one's] own mind," within a small group of other intersex persons, or within an intersex and/or queer community, or in larger social contexts. The refusal to accept categorizations made and vocabularies defined by others in accordance with prevailing social norms, Butler argues, "opens the way for a more radical form of self-determination, one that happens in solidarity with others who are undergoing a similar struggle" (Butler, in Williams 2014). This refusal, and the simultaneous development of other constructions and terms for intersex subjectivities, thus can create points of reference for other intersex individuals or an intersex collective, and takes place in reference to other cultural movements with a similar trajectory, for instance the queer movement, as Viloria points out (Viloria 2014). Viloria comments that "way before the LGBTQIA community existed, we [queers] still had our own names for ourselves, in addition to the ones thrust upon us" (Viloria 2014). Viloria's assertion points to a multiplicity of narratives that exist and have always existed parallel and in intricate interrelations to each other.

Iain Morland has likewise argued that there exists not one "correct story of intersex," where older intersex narratives are simply replaced by new ones, but rather a "plurality of [intersex] narratives" which is constituted through processes of interdependencies and intertextual references (Morland 2009: 193). Hence, the shifts in intersex narratives that have occurred since the early 1990s cannot be understood as processes of supersession of narratives, but as cross-referential movements of resignification of the category of intersex, through which hegemonic knowledge about intersex is not simply abandoned and replaced by new knowledge that is 'more right' or 'more accurate' or 'more ethical,' but through which hegemonic knowledge is scrutinized, challenged, and integrated into new forms of knowledge about intersex. The autobiographical, literary, and visual cultural narratives I analyzed in my study are inextricably involved in the production of such a 'narrative plurality.' These narratives and their representations of intersex reaffirm each other at times, are at times contradictory, but always acknowledge other existing narratives to which they relate and which they renegotiate.

The ways in which the intersex narratives under consideration provide, or constrain, the conditions of intersex intelligibility are diverse, as already pointed out. The early, short first-person accounts of intersex experiences started from the perceived need to speak out against the violence of medical practices the intersex narrators were subjected to. While this move also implies intersex persons' need of new narratives about themselves, the development of new narratives rather came as a result of the response to hegemonic narratives. These early intersex narratives positioned themselves in a clear relation to existing intersex narratives, i.e. medical narratives that prevailed and had become the dominant narratives about intersex, not only within medical discourses but within the cultural imagination of intersex. Thus, the new intersex narratives that relied on autobiographical, personal knowledge rather than on scientific knowledge still referenced the medical constructions and terminology of intersex for their own renegotiations of the category.

This becomes perhaps most obvious in their reclaiming and reappropriation of the term 'intersex' itself, which originally was and still continues to be a medical term. The fact that the medical term was not simply replaced by another, different term through autobiographical and activist intersex narratives demonstrates that a resignification of a hegemonic term is possible, and moreover, that different meanings of the term can coexist. These different meanings might challenge each other, contradict each other, or also reaffirm each other to some extent; yet, they always exist in interrelations to each other. Intersex individuals' and activists' reappropriation of 'intersex' ends, of course, not with the resignification of the medical term. Inherent in their narratives is not only a criticism of and a refusal to accept hegemonic medical definitions and constructions; their narratives have sought to affect, and have indeed affected, medical treatment practices, in particular the 'normalizing' procedures and the violation of intersex individuals' bodily and

emotional integrity and their right of self-determination. Thus, the early intersex first-person narratives have not only effected discursive shifts, but can be considered as practical interventions into hegemonic practices that literally sought and seek to inscribe norms of sexed embodiment and gender into intersex bodies. The challenge of medical practices, which was in fact the primary motivation for raising intersex voices, and the challenge of terminology and definitions are hence inextricably linked.

The length of the first autobiographical intersex narratives that emerged in the 1990s, which rarely exceeded two or three pages, can be read as signifying the lack of words and terms available to intersex individuals for their own representations at that time. The texts' frequent references to medical terminology and medical practices did not only result from the narrators' intentions to criticize the medical treatment protocol of intersex, but from the unrecognizability of intersex itself. The narratives themselves point to the unavailability of words; the titles often contain an explicit comment on this unavailability: "Is Growing Up in Silence Better than Growing Up Different?" (Holmes 1997/98), "Finding the Words" (Coventry 1997/98), "Silence = Death" (Alexander 1997/98), and "Learning to Speak at 36" (Carden 1995), among others, hint both at the (threat of) unintelligibility that results from the silence about, or the unspeakability of intersex, and at the processes of developing new terms in order to speak their intersex realities. The narrative strategy of simultaneously stating the absence of vocabularies and concepts for representing personal, human stories of intersex experience, and reinscribing oneself into cultural discourse, produces in consequence a very specific kind of narratives that bear traces of the norms they reference and entail their narrators' emergence as speakable, linguistically recognizable, and hence intelligible subjects.

The fact that book-length intersex autobiographies are still rare, and that the only published modern intersex memoir in North America to date has only appeared in 2008, is an indicator for this lack of cultural and linguistic representation. In *Intersex (For Lack of a Better Word)* Thea Hillman seeks to find answers to the question, "what is intersex?" in a "search for self in a world obsessed with normal" (*Intersex* back cover). Her narrative endeavor is positioned in a context where the intersex movement had been active for about 15 years, where activist challenges to medical treatment practices showed first effects, and where activism began to articulate their demands in terms of human rights issues. Hillman's narrative thus provides (self-) critical reflections on the intersex movement and the shifts in paradigms of intersex discourses from a perspective that comes from within the movement itself. This shift in perspective, in that the intersex movement scrutinizes its own practices of intersex representations and of establishing the conditions of intersex intelligibility, hence creates an introspective narrative that both reaffirms and challenges the newly emerged personal and activist intersex narratives. Hillman's narrative interrelates and renegotiates other cultural and medical texts about intersex; for example, it

interrogates the intersex representation of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex* not only on a content level, but also the conditions of the production of the novel and its reproduction of hegemonic knowledge about intersex through strategies of ignoring or silencing real intersex persons' voices. *Intersex* builds on several narrative strategies employed, as well as on the knowledge produced by earlier intersex first-person narratives, which in the process of narration are transformed and integrated into Hillman's introspective. Hillman's conclusion of her memoir with the insight that the processes of creating the conditions of (her) intelligibility as an intersex subject need to be constantly interrogated, reevaluated, and reestablished and are necessarily a collective endeavor makes it clear that 'intersex' was, is, and will always be a contested category, that no individual narrative can claim absolute truth about intersex, but rather that different intersex narratives have to be conceived as coexistent and inextricably interrelated.

Eugenides' *Middlesex* and Winter's novel *Annabel* picked up the theme of intersex at two distinct moments within the shifts of discourses of intersex. *Middlesex* was published in 2002 – Eugenides states having worked on the novel for nine years, which has the writing process coincide with the beginning and the early development of the intersex movement – and contains various intertextual references to specific intersex narratives and discourses, including medical texts, mythology, and accounts from *Hermaphrodites with Attitude*. Eugenides claims that he was inspired by Herculine Barbin's memoir (who lived 1838–1868), and wanted to write his novel to represent what, in his opinion, was missing from Barbin's account, namely details about her_his intersex corporeality on the one hand, and insights into her_his emotions on the other hand (Goldstein 2003). *Middlesex* is a fictional literary text that is informed by, and renegotiates different narratives on intersex, which themselves underwent processes of renegotiation and transformation. The juxtaposing of different genres (scientific texts, articles, memoirs, mythology, etc.) in the novel effects a multilayered narrative that reimagines intersex between phantasm and medical reality.

Annabel, too, integrates and renegotiates medical discourses, mythology, contemporary discourses on gender and sexed embodiment, and autobiographical narratives into its own intersex narrative. Published in 2010, it provides a more recent literary commentary on the category of intersex in the cultural imagination. Both *Middlesex* and *Annabel* temporally displace their starting points, the births of their respective intersex protagonists, to the 1960s. This temporal displacement enables literary reevaluations of the ways in which intersex was recognized and dealt with 40-50 years prior to the time of writing/publication, which are put into perspective in the light of contemporary intersex representations. Despite the two novels' similar intertextual references, they ways in which these texts are renegotiated, and integrated into the novels' production of the conditions of intelligibility for their intersex characters are quite different. I argued that fictional texts have possibilities

of reimagining intersex that non-fictional texts do not have. I also discussed the questions of whether authors have a moral obligation to write a particular story of intersex, and whether an intersex story has the obligation to be subversive. I concluded my analysis of the literary representations of intersex with the observation that both novels offer, to some extent, conditions of intelligibility for their intersex characters. While *Middlesex* seems to choose a closure by 'normalizing' its intersex character along heteronormative notions of gender, in order to render him_her intelligible in the narrative and for the mainstream readers, *Annabel* allows its intersex character to refuse his_her normative gender assignment and to live in a nonconformatively sexed body. However, a clear-cut resolution of intersex differences in terms of a subversive/assimilationist dichotomy is problematized by the narratives' various strategies of representation. Yet, it is arguable that *Annabel*'s narrative closure might have been influenced not only by more recent debates of intersex persons demanding their human rights and the right of self-determination about their sexed and gendered modes of being, but also by contemporary cultural discourses on queer and trans issues, and by increasing media representations of genderqueer and gender nonconforming subjects.

My analysis of intersex representations in popular visual culture, exemplified by four episodes of primetime medical drama series, has demonstrated that despite similar points of departure, themes, and intertextual references, intersex representations in the cultural imagination are far from homogenous. I have argued for a certain degree of ethical responsibility on the part of the writers and producers of mainstream television programs for the ideological messages their narratives convey. Whether the series' narratives offer or prohibit their intersex characters' intelligibility as intersex, whether their representations of intersex are ethically acceptable or problematic, depends crucially on their narrative and visual representational strategies and the ways in which specific intersex narratives are intersected with other discourses in the episode. All episodes reference, in some way and to some extent, different intersex narratives, in particular medical texts, and juxtapose them to normative cultural ideas of gender and sexed embodiment. A direct comparison between the *Chicago Hope* and the *Emergency Room* episodes, which first aired in 1996 and 1998, respectively, reveals that while certain narratives and discourses were available at the time, from which their narratives could have drawn, only the narrative of *Chicago Hope* renegotiates intersex activists' criticism of aspects of medical treatment, and hence shows a level of (self-) reflexivity. As a result, the narrative is much more differentiated and closes with the parental acceptance of the intersex child. In contrast, *Emergency Room*'s narrative perpetuates harmful ideas of intersex bodies and intersex persons, hence reaffirming hegemonic medical narratives about intersex, which makes its intersex representation, as I argued, while acceptable for the mainstream, ethically irresponsible.

A similar contrast can be ascertained when comparing the intersex narratives of *House*'s and *Grey's Anatomy*'s episodes, which both aired in 2006. The *House* episode closely interrelates its representation of intersex with discourses about normative femininity. I have argued that the episode's narrative and, in particular, its visual representational strategies perpetuate highly problematic ideas of female-identified intersex individuals, which results in narrative violence, which translates in actual violence against girls/women whose bodies do not conform to cultural norms of femaleness, also called intersex misogyny. I argued why this intersex misogynist representation cannot be accounted for in terms of irony and self-reflexivity. In comparison, *Grey's Anatomy*'s intersex representation clearly shows a renegotiation of the criticism of traditional medical treatment protocols, and provides a metatextual ethical commentary on medico-cultural 'normalization' practices. The episode's narrative strategies provide the conditions for the intersex character to become intelligible, as intersex, and allows for her self-determination regarding her sexed embodiment and gender identity. The narrative's closure consists in defying a definite closure of the intersex character's self-definition, which offers the option of several possibilities – possibilities that will be up to the character, and not defined by and within the narrative itself. In comparing all four episodes, what can be ascertained is that a linear, chronological development of popular cultural intersex representations, from ostensible 'ethically unacceptable' to more differentiated, 'acceptable' representations did not take place. Rather, the differences in intersex representations demonstrate popular culture's prevailing investment in normative resolutions of perceived gender and sexed 'difference' and the reaffirmation of the status quo, but also that resistance to these normative conceptualizations has always been possible. As a result, different intersex narratives coexist within popular culture, and coexist with other discourses about intersex.

In closing my final evaluation of my findings regarding the shifting paradigms of autobiographical, literary, and visual cultural intersex narratives between 1993 and 2014, I want to come back to the premise from which I started my analysis, namely the claim that these narratives produce new knowledge about or paradigms for understanding intersex, and thus effect processes of resignification of intersex in the cultural imagination. I combine my considerations here with the question of whether we are moving toward a 'post-intersex' moment. In his afterword to *Critical Intersex*, Robert McRuer asserts that the "spaces of intersexual futurity [...] are populous, even if the figures we will encounter there are, as Jacques Derrida might put it, not always or not yet recognizable. [...] for Derrida, this always-anticipated figure 'exceeds any determinism.' [...] The unforeseeable freedom that will arrive in a future-to-come, in other words, depends upon a relinquishment of determinism, which in turn allows us to risk welcoming the unexpected" (McRuer 2009: 245). McRuer goes on arguing that intersex activism and cultural studies work on intersex have consistently worked toward 'exceeding determinism,' where in the context of medico-cultural 'normali-

zation' practices, 'determine' comes to signify both "to ascertain by investigation" and "to cause to come to a resolution" (Cheryl Chase, quoted in McRuer 2009: 246).

I argue that the autobiographical, literary, and visual cultural narratives about intersex discussed here, together with the many other existing intersex narratives and discourses, resist determinism, in that their different intersex representations, their various ways of providing the conditions for intersex bodies to become recognizable, and intersex subjects to become intelligible, effect constantly shifting processes of resignification of the category of 'intersex.' Hence, these intersex narratives, as a cultural body of work on intersex, renegotiate determinism on a metanarrative level. They also renegotiate determinism, in the two senses defined by Chase, within their narrative confines, yet always in interrelation with other cultural points of reference. In these processes, they arrive at different conclusions, which might reaffirm, challenge, or disrupt each other. Even when a narrative seems to arrive at a closure by establishing a seemingly coherent, or intelligible subject position for their intersex narrator, protagonist or character, this closure always needs to be considered in its historico-cultural contingency, which makes it susceptible to potential renegotiations and (temporal) shifts in meaning.

In consideration of the ongoing, continually shifting processes of the resignification of intersex, but also in the light of the human rights violations against intersex individuals that still take place, it seems difficult to imagine that we will arrive at a 'post-intersex' moment in the near future. Iain Morland contends that "intersex treatment in the present should always be considered, paradoxically, in the light of what may come after it" (Morland, quoted in McRuer 2009: 246), referring to the severe consequences for intersex individuals who are/were subjected to 'normalizing' treatments. Resistance to determinism needs to be effected in and through critical interventions into hegemonic – particularly medical and activist – narratives and practices; these interventions can take place on several levels and in many different ways. Every time an intersex individual survives, finds a mode of living that resists an assimilation to norms and still enables the individual to be recognized according to their sense of gendered self, against the odds, it is a moment of resistance. This survival is always directed toward a livable future. In fact, the "intersex future-to-come," as McRuer argues, does not only involve the exceeding of determinism, but the simultaneous "welcoming 'what may come after'" (McRuer 2009: 246).

I want to conclude my thesis with asserting the power of resistance of intersex, its potential to disrupt normative ways of thinking about sexed embodiment, and of gender, in, by and through diverse narratives that allow not only for a 'breathing room for difference,' but challenge and change the conditions for livable lives for gender nonconforming individuals in more fundamental ways. Morgen Holmes asks us to

"consider adopting as a positive identifier/sign the 'ambi' in the 'ambiguous' character of intersex, and the *inter*sex as interjection, as interlocutor, and as many simultaneous interstices (of embodiment, gender, inter-subjectivity, interdependent deferral of meaning, etc.). It is an *inter* I aim to use to disrupt the male/female sex binary upon which the (hetero)sexual difference model is built [...]. [...] 'Intersex' then, is not a final term, nor the most appropriate term, but a powerful term whose historical, social and political import remains *critical* as a tool for interrogating heteronormative and bionormative presuppositions about proper embodiment." (Holmes 2009: 7)

I strongly agree with her claim that intersex is an intervention in normative ideas, and in 'normalization' practices. I end my work with expressing my wish for more of these (narrative) intersex interventions, narratives that will focus in the future, hopefully, on the intersections of intersex with other aspects of intersex persons' lived realities.