Anne Klomberg*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2155-0066

https://doi.org/10.32798/dlk.1505

Looking Different(ly): Staring and Performativity in the Construction of Adolescent Embodied Outsiderhood Based on *Scars Like Wings* by Erin Stewart

Abstract:

This article explores how staring informs the textual construction of adolescents' embodied outsiderhood, that is, the position of being perceived as outside the centre of particular norms. Since staring is an automatic response to an unexpected sight, the act can reveal which embodiments are deemed to diverge from presupposed norms. These norms are conceptualised as dwellings or circles – spaces that can either be inhabited or not – to illustrate the spatial implications of being considered an outsider. An analysis of Erin Stewart's young adult novel *Scars Like Wings* (2019) demonstrates the stigmatising effects of staring on the protagonist's embodied experience and how this shapes her sense of belonging. Examining the specific normative ideas underlying these acts of staring reveals how the protagonist's age, gender, and (dis)ability intersect to establish her outsiderhood. Reflecting on the performativity of the norms may shed light on their constructed nature, opening up space for a more diversified perspective on embodied performances of adolescence.

Key words:

adolescence, embodiment, Erin Stewart, normativity, outsiderhood, performativity, *Scars like Wings*, staring

Patrzeć inaczej. Gapienie się i performatywność w konstrukcji wyobcowania nastoletnich ciał na przykładzie powieści *Blizny jak skrzydła* Erin Stewart

Abstrakt:

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób gapienie się wpływa na tekstową konstrukcję ucieleśnionego wyobcowania nastolatków i nastolatek, czyli

* Anne Klomberg – MA, prepares a doctoral dissertation at Tilburg University (the Netherlands). Her research interests include alterity studies, age studies, and young adult fiction. Contact: a.n.klomberg@tilburguniversity.edu.

pozycji bycia postrzeganą jako jednostka funkcjonująca poza dominującymi normami. Gapienie się jest odruchową reakcją na coś, czego nie spodziewaliśmy się zobaczyć, co może ujawnić, które ciała są postrzegane jako odbiegające od przyjętych norm. Autorka konceptualizuje normy jako przestrzenie lub kręgi, zamieszkane lub nie, aby zilustrować przestrzenne następstwa społecznego wyobcowania. Analiza powieści młodzieżowej Erin Stewart *Blizny jak skrzydła* (2019) ukazuje stygmatyzujący wpływ gapienia się na cielesne doświadczenie i poczucie przynależności bohaterki. Badanie normatywnych idei leżących u podstaw gapienia się pokazuje, w jaki sposób wiek, płeć i (nie)pełnosprawność protagonistki wyznaczają granice jej wyobcowania. Refleksja nad performatywnością norm pozwala ująć je jako konstrukt, otwierając przestrzeń dla bardziej zróżnicowanego spojrzenia na cielesne odgrywanie dojrzewania.

Słowa kluczowe:
dorastanie, cielesność, Erin Stewart, normatywność, wyobcowanie, performatywność, *Blizny jak skrzydła*, gapienie się

Introduction

Appearances matter. We often judge a book by its cover, as the saying goes. Even when we try not to, our first impressions (and perhaps also further interactions) are often shaped by how something or someone appears to us. This applies not only to books (and many other things) but also to people. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) notes, "[w]hat you look like, rather than who you are, often determines how people respond to you" (p. 34). She explores the social dynamics of staring, arguing that acts of staring initiate a (brief) relationship between starers and starees (those being stared at), generating meaning. Appearance is central to these dynamics. Our embodiment – that is, the reality of the body in which we exist – plays a crucial role in how we look at others and how we are seen. These images, in turn, can influence the interactions we have with others. Sara Ahmed (2000) explains how some bodies are more readily perceived as being out of place in certain spaces compared to other bodies. These judgements rely on a visual assessment of bodies in relation to one another, where one type is considered "in-place" (p. 46) while another, by contrast, is not. Bodies deemed out of place may feel too uncomfortable to remain in a space, or they may even be explicitly expelled.

One mechanism for establishing the relative otherness of bodies is staring (Garland-Thomson, 2009). Staring is a visual process rooted in embodied differences as perceived by the beholder(s). Though not necessarily

ill-intentioned, its effect can be to relegate stareable bodies to the margins, thereby demarcating and safeguarding certain spaces of belonging. Consider the following introductory example from Erin Stewart's (2019) young adult novel *Scars Like Wings*, which serves as the case study for this article. The 16-year-old narrator, Ava Lee, has been severely burned in a house fire that killed her parents and her cousin. She now lives with her aunt and uncle. The scars on Ava's face and hands create an unexpected sight, drawing stares wherever she goes. This significantly affects her sense of self and her experience of space. In this example, Ava has just been dropped off for her first day back at high school, when another girl arrives at the curb behind her, and the following scene unfolds:

> She stops midstride when she sees me, eyes wide, like she's paralyzed. I look down at the phone in my hand, releasing her, and the girl power walks into the building, her quick footsteps disappearing into Crossroads High. For a second, I almost run too – back to the car, back to my room, back to my out-of-sight existence (p. 19).

The passage illustrates the spatial implications of staring for both the starer and staree. The unnamed girl is so unsettled by Ava's embodiment that she physically stops moving, making any form of interaction (such as a greeting) seem impossible. When the stare breaks, she hastens towards the relative safety of the school building. For Ava, however, no such refuge exists. The girl's silent judgment signals to Ava that she does not belong there, a realisation Ava reflects on shortly afterward: "As if my face doesn't draw enough attention to the fact that I. Do. Not. Belong" (p. 19). The incident leaves Ava feeling distinctly out of place.

Drawing upon Garland-Thomson's (2009) theory of staring and Ahmed's (2000) work on strange encounters, I examine how visual assessments of embodied differences affect adolescents' perceived *outsiderhood*, meaning their positioning as outside the centre of particular norms. In the following section, I elaborate on the concept of outsiderhood, arguing that adolescents are inherently positioned as outsiders due to the societal privileging of adulthood. I also outline the significance of embodiment and the effects of staring in connection with this outsiderhood. Next, I demonstrate how acts of staring in *Scars Like Wings* both reveal and reinforce Ava's outsiderhood, discussing the implications for her experience of space and her sense of self. Finally, I explore how Ava and her friends interrogate some of the normative assumptions underlying staring encounters by framing adolescence as a 'doing' in a sense that resonates

with Judith Butler's (1990/1999) concept of performativity. Recognising the constructed nature of such norms may ultimately contribute to a more inclusive understanding of embodied differences.

Adolescent Outsiderhood

Matters of belonging remain relevant throughout our lives but become especially pronounced during adolescence. A common conceptualisation of adolescence holds that young adults are in the process of developing their identities, forging relationships, and negotiating their place within society and its governing systems (McCallum, 1999; Seelinger Trites, 2000). In this sense, adolescents are effectively seeking spaces of belonging. These processes are especially intriguing given the ambivalent position that they occupy in society. Adolescence is often viewed as a preparatory phase, guiding young people toward the presumed goal of adulthood (Waller, 2009). This idea is frequently reflected in young adult literature. Roberta Seelinger Trites (2014) observes that young adult novels, unlike other literary forms, often convey to their readership that the subject position they currently hold is transient. She states that "teenaged characters demonstrate to teen readers that the only true form of empowerment comes from growing up and leaving adolescence behind" (p. 1). In such narratives, young adults are encouraged to change and become adults. This underlying message reinforces adulthood as the norm, while marginalising adolescence itself. Maria Nikolajeva (2010) describes this power imbalance between adults and younger age groups using the term 'aetonormativity' (the Latin prefix *aeto-* refers to age). Aetonormativity denotes a societal privileging of adulthood, which is granted higher status and more power than other age groups. The only way for adolescents to attain this status and power is to reach adulthood. As long as they are perceived as not-yet-adults, adolescents remain outsiders to the prevailing adult normativity (Seelinger Trites, 2000, 2014).

In other words, adolescents may be seen as not (yet) inhabiting the norm of adulthood. According to Ahmed (2017), norms can sometimes function like rooms or dwellings, granting (easy) access to some bodies while excluding others. Failing to inhabit a certain norm "can be experienced as not dwelling so easily where you reside" (p. 115). Ahmed's metaphor resonates with Dave Elder-Vass's (2012) concept of 'norm circles,' which refers to a "group of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm" (p. 22). Similar to Ahmed's notion of norms as dwellings, norm circles are inherently spatial, defined by the distinction between an inside and an outside. Those within the

circle tend to conform to or uphold a particular norm as opposed to those who are (deemed to be) outside the circle. In my view, the notion of outsiderhood involves a similar spatial understanding of normativity, aligning with Ahmed's and Elder-Vass's conceptualisations of norms as sites that can be inhabited or not. This perspective underscores how such positioning shapes one's sense of self and the spaces where one feels (un)comfortable residing.

Moreover, outsiderhood can be reinforced by the intersection of various embodied factors. The term intersectionality was originally used by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to explain how the intersections of race and gender compound the disadvantages faced by Black women. According to Seelinger Trites (2018), "all childhood experience is always already intersectional" (p. 31) due to societal aetonormativity. Young adults' age positions them as outsiders to adult norms, but the interaction of age with other aspects of their embodiment may intensify their outsider position. In Ava's case, her apparent deviance is not solely a result of her scars but stems from the intersection of her age, gender, and (dis)ability. Being a teenager, a girl, and a burn survivor collectively shapes Ava's embodied experiences.

The materiality of the body plays a key role in constructing outsiderhood, belonging, and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. In the example from the introduction, Ava feels judged based on her embodiment. The girl's staring suggests to Ava that her appearance is shockingly different, reinforcing her belief that she does not quite belong in that space, unlike the unnamed girl. As Ahmed (2000) asserts, "some-bodies are more recognisable as strangers than other bodies precisely because they are already read and valued in the demarcation of social spaces" (p. 30). She characterises this process as a strange encounter, a meeting that designates one body as more out of place than another based on their relative embodiments. Strange encounters depend on a visual assessment of difference, involving "ways of *seeing the difference* between familiar and strange others as they are represented to the subject [emphasis added]" (p. 24).

Staring is a process that differentiates between familiar and strange bodies. It is a physiological (and often involuntary) response to an unexpected sight: "Disturbances in the visual status quo literally catch our eye, drawing us into a staring relationship with a startling sight" (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 13). Indeed, in the excerpt, the girl's evaluation of Ava's embodied differences is distinctly visual. She seemingly cannot help but stare at Ava, who represents a novelty in her visual landscape. Staring, in this sense, functions as a mechanism to delineate the inside and outside of a norm. It operates at the thresholds of norms-as-rooms and along the boundaries of norm circles, distinguishing the expected and familiar from the unusual and deviant. As

a result, staring encounters can demarcate spaces of (non-)belonging. While the unnamed girl does not explicitly expel Ava from the school grounds, her behaviour makes Ava feel almost too uncomfortable to remain there. Ava's embodiment apparently fails to inhabit the norms (Ahmed, 2017) that might otherwise allow her to pass unnoticed. When embodied differences are perceived as too disruptive (by either the starer or the staree), they can contribute to the demarcation of social spaces.

In addition to its spatial consequences, staring can also impact starees' sense of self, as it involves stigma. Lerita Coleman Brown (2013) defines stigma as a social construct meant "to designate some human differences as discrediting" (p. 149). It is a judgment of value, ranking certain embodied features as superior or inferior to others. For Ava, the relentless staring directed at her scars communicates that her embodiment is considered as inferior. This is evident when she reflects on her peers: "Their stares tell me I'm different, sure, but they reveal an even deeper truth: I'm less" (Stewart, 2019, p. 28). Staring, in this sense, can convey an assessment of value with profound consequences for Ava's self-perception. Drawing on Butler's concept of performativity, I explore how Ava's conflicted sense of self is, to some extent, contingent on her (perceived) inability to perform (female) adolescence in the ways expected of her by society. Performativity allows us to consider the repetitive and constructed nature of such norms, opening space to imagine different ways of 'doing' adolescence.

A case in point, Stewart's young adult novel *Scars Like Wings* illustrates how staring constructs Ava's outsiderhood, complicating her sense of self and belonging. In the following sections, I first briefly discuss how Ava's stareability depends on the context in which the encounter takes place. Then, I explore how being seen – and, consequently, being touched – differently than others affects Ava's self-image and her sense of belonging. To conclude this section, I reflect on how Ava manages to reclaim a space of belonging and a part of her identity through a positive re-evaluation of an overlooked element of her embodiment: her voice.

A New Reality

Not all bodies elicit equally stareable sights. Exactly which body catches one's eye depends as much on the starer's body as on the staree's. After all, what seems unfamiliar to some might be familiar to others – similarly, the circumstances in which staring encounters take place matter, as Garland-Thomson (2009) observes that "people become more or less stareable depending on the

context" (p. 7). A scene from the opening chapter of *Scars Like Wings* demonstrates how thin the boundaries between such contexts can be, as Ava's body shifts from inconspicuous to stareable within the span of a hospital hallway. Ava is walking down the hallway after her monthly doctor's appointment in the burn unit of the hospital. Lost in thought, she is not paying much attention to where she is going until she suddenly hears a child scream. Ava recounts: "I don't even realize I've wandered into the regular hospital atrium until a little girl clinging to her mother's skinny jeans emits a high-pitched scream. Her chubby little finger points at me. At my face" (Stewart, 2019, p. 6). The girl finds Ava's embodiment not only unusual but even frightening. In response, Ava quickly removes herself from the general atrium, retreating to wait "inside the *safety* of the burn unit, where people are used to faces like mine [emphasis added]" (pp. 6–7). In this specific part of the hospital, people with burn scars represent the norm, offering Ava relative anonymity and safety. She can more easily inhabit this space than the general hospital atrium, where her embodiment becomes stareable due to its divergence.

As the introductory example already hinted, high school is another context where Ava's body becomes highly stareable. This setting makes Ava wish she could disappear from view: "I force my head higher, but what I really want is to crawl into one of these lockers to *escape* all the eyes [emphasis added]" (Stewart, 2019, p. 28). Note how the verb 'escape' implies a spatial dimension. Staring may not only demarcate spaces in terms of exclusion, but other people's stares also 'capture' Ava, locking her into a position she constantly tries to evade. Essentially, their stares keep reminding Ava of how she looks, forcing her to see herself primarily through the eyes of others. Being looked at with fear, horror, disgust, or confusion (among other emotions) profoundly shapes Ava's self-image, to the point where she believes she is not fully human, "[s]omething to be looked at, not talked to" (p. 28). Ava is denied subjectivity, meaning that she is not quite perceived as an independent agent or even as a person in her own right. The little girl screaming and pointing at Ava's face in the hospital atrium is one of the encounters that prompts Ava to reflect on her embodiment as 'abnormal,' as she comments after the incident: "*Normal* people don't terrorize small children […]. I'm a *monster* [emphases added]" (p. 7).

The comparison Ava makes is revealing, especially considering the historical associations between disability and monstrosity. Richard Godden and Asa Simon Mittman (2019) highlight the "pernicious history of defining people with distinctly non-normative bodies or non-normative cognitions as monsters" (p. 18). The monster embodies otherness, deviance, and the extraordinary, while also signifying danger. As Garland-Thomson (1997) notes, "that

ubiquitous icon of physical anomaly, the monster, exemplifies culture's preoccupation with the threat of the different body" (p. 36). The little girl's screams convey to Ava that her embodiment is perceived as so other it provokes fear, simultaneously alienating and dehumanising Ava.

Hands and faces are particularly significant focal points for staring in this context, as these body parts often play a key role in interpersonal communication. Garland-Thomson (2009) notes that:

> Certain bodily sites inherently draw more attention than others because they are thick with cultural meaning. Our faces, for example, are the first territory our eyes inhabit when we encounter another. Our hands, as well, are places of recognition telling us whom we are approaching (p. 95).

Arguably, hands and faces can serve as cues to one's identity. Faces are an integral part of who we are, expressing our emotions and often functioning as a primary means of communication. Hands are frequently used to establish contact with others through gestures or physical touch. Consider, for instance, the customs of waving or shaking hands upon greeting someone. In turn, the ways our hands and faces are perceived by others might significantly influence interpersonal communication.

Particularly, the ways bodies are seen affect how they are touched. Ahmed (2000) argues that strange encounters are not solely visual but also tactile: "[…] just as some others are 'seen' and recognised as stranger than other others […], so too some skins are touched as stranger than other skins" (p. 49). She perceives the skin as a boundary that not only separates bodies but also invites reflection on how specific modes of being touched by others inform the designation of certain bodies as stranger bodies: "[…] different ways of touching allow for different configurations of bodily and social space" (p. 49).

For instance, when a stack of papers is being handed out in class, Ava recounts how the boy tasked with giving her a paper "hesitates, holding the sheets tentatively, like he's offering a bunny carcass to a rabid dog" (Stewart, 2019, p. 30). Ava's body is approached with caution, even apprehension. She then reaches for her copy with her left hand, which looks rather unusual after the fire – her fingers have fused together, and her big toe has been transplanted onto her hand in lieu of her thumb. Upon seeing this, the boy lets out a "squeaking, strangulated sound" (p. 30), prompting Ava to quickly withdraw her hand. In a criticism of her own embodiment, Ava refers to her hand as her "Frankenhand" (p. 30), evoking the image of Frankenstein's monster. She extends the metaphor, reflecting on how her thumb looks out of place "because

it belongs on [her] foot and not here in the open, freaking out the villagers" (p. 30). The boy tosses the paper at Ava, "recoiling quickly," leaving her to "pick up the paper from the floor, trying to ignore [the boy's] wide-eyed glances that make [her] feel distinctly *subhuman* [emphasis added]" (p. 30).

The scene illustrates how Ava's body is paradoxically touched through the refusal to touch her. The boy's reluctance to come closer to her marks Ava's body as unapproachable – a perception that arises only within his immediate proximity to her. Garland-Thomson (1997) argues that disabled bodies might be perceived as a threat because of their unpredictability: Ava's body is implied to be dangerous and possibly out of control, linked to "a rabid dog" (Stewart, 2019, p. 30). Normative conceptualisations of how bodies should look and function inform the meanings assigned to Ava's body in a process of stigmatisation (Coleman Brown, 2013; Garland-Thomson, 1997). The unusual shape of Ava's hand is stigmatised, considered inferior in both appearance and function to regularly shaped hands. This stigma discourages the boy from simply handing her the paper and thus disrupts his interaction with Ava. Even though Ava is physically capable of accepting the paper with her left hand, she is never given the chance. Instead, the boy throws it toward her, denying Ava's body its functionality. This denial of her embodiment leaves Ava feeling dehumanised, further reinforcing her self-perception as monstrous.

One place in high school that holds particular significance in relation to Ava's self-perception is the auditorium. Ever since she was little, Ava has loved performing in plays and musicals: "The stage was [her] second home. A place [she] felt safe. Alive. Confident" (Stewart, 2019, p. 91). Before the fire, theatres were spaces where Ava felt she belonged – offering safety, assurance, and the freedom to be herself. Now, she feels shut out. When Ava decides to attend drama club at Crossroads High, the eyes turning in her direction fill her with fear, as she interprets: "The news of my attendance spreads quickly, judging by the not-so-covert head turns rolling like a wave through the crowd: *Alert! Alert! Drama crisis! The Burned Girl is here. In* our *theater* [emphases in original]" (p. 92). Ava's presence is framed as a moment of panic, an intrusion, reinforcing her status as an outsider. The auditorium becomes a room of unease, and the realisation leaves Ava feeling unanchored: "I guess the fire claimed both my homes" (p. 92).

Despite the stares and discomfort, Ava continues to take part in drama club as a crew member, painting props and backdrops. One day, she finds herself alone in the theatre with her newfound friends, Asad and Piper. They encourage her to sing, which eventually inspires Ava to perform in the school's annual musical production. Ava has been reluctant to return to the stage

because of her appearance. Drawing on the relentless staring she experiences, she anticipates the audience's reactions: "This face does not belong under a spotlight, unless the goal is to scare small children" (Stewart, 2019, p. 83). While her imagined audience may fear the metaphorical monster, Ava fears even more the spectacle of being made into one.

Ava's simultaneous anxiety and desire to return to the stage touches upon a paradox at the heart of staring: "[w]e both need and dread the intense recognition that staring accords us" (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 59). This paradox stems from the idea that "[b]eing seen is recognition, a validation of our existence" (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 59). Ava loathes being stared at for what the stares reveal about her appearance, yet she still longs to be seen. Through her performance in the school musical, Ava discovers that her voice remains unchanged from before the fire. It is a part of her embodiment she had lost sight of, having been so preoccupied with the more visible aspects of her appearance. Her voice enables Ava to reclaim the stage as a space of belonging, and, in doing so, to restore a part of her identity she thought the fire had taken. When she steps on stage, Ava chooses to be seen and demands that her voice be heard, demonstrating that there is more to her than just her physical appearance. In that moment, she is no longer the reluctant object of other people's stares but instead becomes the subject, deliberately opting for the spotlight.

A New Normal

In the analysis above, I focused on the effects of staring on Ava's embodied experiences, arguing that her sense of outsiderhood is largely shaped through the eyes of others. Staring encounters involve not only the body of the staree but also that of the starer. Andy Jackson (2019), in his work on encounters with disability in poetry, concludes that "otherness cannot be contained in one body or person, and some poems, affirming this, stare back" (p. 22). Staring back shifts the focus from the disabled body to those doing the staring, the bodies against which deviance is measured. In doing so, it may draw attention to the norms that allow those bodies to remain inconspicuous in such encounters.

The next section focuses on the norms that instigate and regulate staring encounters in *Scars Like Wings*, aiming to illuminate the underlying ideas that construct Ava's outsiderhood. I understand a norm as "a situation or type of behaviour that is expected and considered to be typical" ("Norm," n.d.). Here, I draw on Elder-Vass's (2012) concept of norm circles as a group of people that "have the causal power to produce a tendency in individuals to follow

standardised practices" (pp. 22–23). Norm circles promote particular standards, which may or may not be embraced by those perceived as existing outside them. As previously noted, norm circles can be understood as a spatial concept. Their implied boundaries offer a framework for examining what occurs when inside and outside intersect. I argue that these boundary lines are where adolescents' sense of outsiderhood is potentially established.

Ava's outsiderhood is specifically shaped by the intersections of normative assumptions about adolescence, girlhood, and (dis)ability. Expectations about what kinds of embodiments are deemed acceptable for teenage girls at Crossroads High become clear when Ava overhears a conversation on her first day at school. While spending her lunchbreak in the quiet of the school's theatre room, she listens from behind the curtain as three girls come in and gather in front of the vanity to touch up their makeup and talk about her. One of the girls says: "I'm not being mean, you guys. It was shocking. Not like I'd say it to her face or anything, but can you imagine going to high school looking like *that*? [emphasis in original]" (Stewart, 2019, p. 37). Another girl replies that she recently stayed home because of a pimple and adds: "If I looked like that, I'd crawl into a hole and never come out" (p. 37). For these girls, Ava's embodiment is judged against an ideal of female adolescence that prioritises flawless beauty, a standard she apparently fails to meet. The second girl also reveals rigid views about the social spaces reserved for those who deviate from this standard, implying that embodiments like Ava's seemingly have no place in society (or at least in the micro-society of Crossroads High).

Ava's reaction to the girls' conversation reveals how she holds similar normative ideas about teenage femininity. After the girls leave, Ava reflects: "Those girls have no idea that I used to be a *normal* girl with friends, and eyeliner in a pencil bag, who reapplied lip gloss between classes and covered [her] sun-induced freckles with foundation [emphasis added]" (Stewart, 2019, p. 40). Ava's notion of 'normal' teenage girlhood relies heavily on the use of beauty products, much like the three girls who entered the theatre room armed with their "arsenal of eyeliner and concealer" (p. 37). Earlier in the novel, Ava underscores the seemingly self-evident malleability of teenage beauty when contemplating her own aversion to mirrors: "Normal sixteen-year-olds look in mirrors. *Is my lipstick on straight? Is my hair doing that swoopy thing in the front?* Their reflections reassure them, and if they don't like what they see, they fix it [emphasis in original]" (p. 7). Both Ava and the girls seem to form a kind of norm circle that upholds the value of material intervention to achieve beauty. Beauty, and its pursuit, operates as a norm, an expectation that informs female adolescents' embodied experience, one that Ava feels unable to fulfil. The

discrepancy between Ava's embodied inability to conform to these material representations of adolescence and her persistent belief in the validity of those norms complicates her sense of self as a teenage girl.

The example above echoes Judith Butler's (1990/1999) argument on gender performativity. The scholar asserts that "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (p. 33). Butler's concept of performativity is inspired by Louis Althusser's (1968/1970) notion of interpellation, which denotes the process by which individuals are called into certain subject positions, roles, and identities through ideology (see also Bunch, 2013). Butler (1993/2011) understands interpellation as a performative act, "precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject" (p. 82). Genders are called into being through the act of pronouncing bodies as such. Consider an ultrasound, where the identity of an unborn baby shifts from an indeterminate 'it' to being declared a 'she' or a 'he.' This act can be understood as initiating the process of interpellation, calling the unborn child into a normative gender framework. Our understandings of gender are produced by subsequent, repeated acts that continually reinforce the ways in which it is conceptualised. As Anna Szorenyi (2022) explains:

> Butler argues that we reproduce gender not only through repeated ways of speaking, but also of doing. We dress in certain ways, do certain exercises at the gym, use particular body language, visit particular kinds of medical specialists, and so on. Through such repetitions, gender is reinforced, layer by layer, until it seems inescapable.

When certain norms become strongly anchored to conceptualisations of gender, we may foreground those aspects while overlooking others. Over time, this can result in a rather narrow understanding of gender. Such developments tend to exclude embodiments that do not align with these limited representations. The bodies of the three girls in the theatre room easily inhabit the norms governing female use of makeup, which Ava finds troubling. However, the required repetitiveness of performances in constructing gender norms also implies that it is an ongoing process, subject to eventual change: "if we stop doing [gender norms], or do them differently, we participate in changing their meaning" (Szorenyi, 2022). After all, norms are not set in stone – they can be interrogated, challenged, and ultimately subverted. In this sense, the concept of performativity highlights the constructed nature of norms.

I argue that Butler's theory of gender performativity can also be applied to adolescence. Seelinger Trites (2018) proposes that the concept of performativity

is particularly relevant to adolescence, "since it is during the second decade of life that many people become more self-conscious about needing to perform – or rejecting the performance of – socially prescribed gender roles" (p. 7). This idea can be extended to age-related roles. Adolescence is typically constructed as a series of rites of passage, or performances, that prepare adolescents for adulthood. These performances are generally gendered, with boys and girls experiencing and enacting adolescence in potentially different ways.

Conventional conceptualisations of adolescence dictate the types of behaviour most commonly expected from adolescents. In the following example, Ava and her friend Piper reflect on what it means to act as an adolescent. Both girls are acutely aware that their physical appearances do not quite fit the stereotypical ideas of female adolescence that seem to prevail in their high school. Driven by normative ideologies surrounding age, gender, and (dis)ability, staring encounters can be understood as non-verbal acts of interpellation, marking Ava and Piper (who is in a wheelchair after a car accident) as outsiders. At one point, Ava feels that it might be easier to just disengage from social life entirely and retreat to the isolated safety of her bedroom: "Life is just easier without constantly being reminded of what I am" (Stewart, 2019, p. 79). She shares this thought with Piper, who then asks Ava the following questions:

> 'Okay, pop quiz,' […] 'In the last two weeks, did you battle with inadequacy and self-loathing?' 'Check.' 'Did you feel like everyone in the school was talking about you and staring at you?' 'Check.' 'And did you compare yourself to others and always come up short?' 'Check.' […] 'Congratulations! You're a *normal teenager*' [emphasis added] (pp. 79–80).

Piper lists some conventional assumptions about adolescence, such as insecurity, dependence on peers for affirmation, and a certain degree of self-centredness. When Ava ticks all the boxes, Piper pronounces her a "normal" teenager in a speech act that can be seen as performative. In other words, she explicitly interpellates Ava as a typical adolescent, reinforcing her identity within the framework of normative adolescence.

Piper presents adolescence as a 'doing,' specifically as a kind of battle with oneself and with the opinions of others. When Piper and Ava attend a party at a classmate's house, they stand on the edge of the dancefloor, and Ava asks her friend: "Are we *doing* it? Are we *normal* teenagers yet? [emphasis added]," and Piper replies: "Let's see… standing awkwardly against a wall at a party. We're on our way!" (p. 223). In both scenes – Piper's pop quiz and the house party – adolescence is depicted as a transformative performance. Ava's questions

suggest that 'doing' acts of adolescence can quickly turn into 'being' teenagers. By framing their adolescent experience this way, Piper and Ava effectively shift the focus away from what they are currently unable to do (like walking upright or applying makeup) to what they are already doing. In doing so, they emphasise the similarities they share with other adolescents rather than their perceived differences.

Abbye Meyer (2022) recognises adolescence and disability as intricately connected experiences, observing how "[m]uch like adolescents, disabled people – at least during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – are forced to consider and reconsider self-definition, especially in relation to peers and larger institutions" (p. 5). Ava's new embodied materiality complicates her ability to perform (gendered) adolescence in ways that once felt natural to her. Together with Piper, Ava renegotiates these embodied performances of adolescence. This process aligns with the advice their guidance counsellor, Dr. Layne, gives them: "You can't change what happened to you, but you can take control of your story. Your lives have changed. My goal is to help you find a new normal" (Stewart, 2019, p. 52). Contemplating what it means to be an adolescent and exploring the various ways adolescence can be performed helps Ava and Piper in their efforts to find a new normal and create more comfortable spaces for themselves in the process.

Conclusion

Embodied outsiderhood is particularly relevant to adolescence. This stage of life is not only highly embodied due to the significant bodily changes it often entails, but also because the material body plays a crucial role in typical adolescent processes of identity formation and negotiating one's place in society. Ahmed's (2000) work on strange encounters illustrates how certain bodies are more readily perceived as out of place in specific spaces. Staring, as an involuntary response to the unfamiliar (Garland-Thomson, 2009), functions as a means through which these differences are marked, exposing embodiments that deviate from presupposed norms.

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate how staring can reinforce a position of outsiderhood, carving out spaces of (non-)belonging by excluding certain embodiments more than others. Serving as a case in point, Erin Stewart's young adult novel *Scars Like Wings* demonstrates how persistent acts of staring stigmatise Ava's embodiment, making her feel inferior to her peers and out of place in many of the spaces she inhabits. Normative ideas about age,

gender, and (dis)ability that underlie these staring encounters intersect to construct adolescence as a beauty-oriented performance, one that Ava now fails to enact. However, as Coleman Brown (2013) asserts, "Many stigmatized people regain their identity through redefining normality and realizing that it is acceptable to be who they are" (p. 155). Recognising the performative nature of gendered adolescence allows Ava and Piper to explore other, equally valid, ways of 'doing' adolescence.

References

Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality.* Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life.* Duke University Press.

Althusser, L. (1970). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (Ben Brewster, Trans.). Monthly Review. (Original work published 1968).

Bunch, M. (2013). The unbecoming subject of sex: Performativity, interpellation, and the politics of queer theory. *Feminist Theory*, *14*(1), 39 –55. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112468569.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble.* Routledge. (Original work published 1990).

Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter.* Routledge (Original work published 1993).

Coleman Brown, L. (2013). Stigma: An enigma demystified. In Lennard J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 147–160). Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1*(8), 139–167.

Elder-Vass, D. (2012). Norm circles. In D. Elder-Vass (Ed.), *The reality of social construction* (pp. 15–34). Cambridge University Press.

Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature.* Columbia University Press.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2009). *Staring: How we look*. Oxford University Press.

Godden, R. H., & Mittman, A. S. (2019). Embodied difference: Monstrosity, disability, and the posthuman. In R. H. Godden & A. S. Mittman (Eds.), *Monstrosity, disability, and the posthuman in the medieval and early modern world* (pp. 3–31). Palgrave MacMillan.

Jackson, A. (2019). Staring at the Other: Seeing defects in recent Australian poems. *Critical Disability Discourses*, *9*, 2–24.

McCallum, R. (1999). *Ideologies of identity in adolescent fiction: The dialogic construction of subjectivity.* Garland.

Meyer, A. (2022). *From wallflowers to bulletproof families.* University Press of Mississippi.

Nikolajeva, M. (2010). *Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers*. Routledge.

Norm. (n.d.). In Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved August 8, 2024, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/norm.

Stewart, E. (2019). *Scars like wings*. Simon and Schuster.

Seelinger Trites, R. (2000). *Disturbing the universe: Power and repression in adolescent literature*. University of Iowa Press.

Seelinger Trites, R. (2014). *Literary conceptualizations of growth: Metaphor and cognition in adolescent literature*. John Benjamins.

Seelinger Trites, R. (2018). *Twenty-first-century feminisms in children's and adolescent literature*. University Press of Mississippi.

Szorenyi, A. (2022, October 19). *Judith Butler: Their philosophy of gender explained*. The Conversation. Retrieved May 7, 2024, from https://theconversation.com/judith-butler-their-philosophy-of-gender-explained-192166.

Waller, A. (2009). *Constructing adolescence in fantastic realism*. Routledge.