

# “A very well-tailored person suit”<sup>1</sup> Hannibal Lecter as Genderqueer American Gothic Cannibal

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The character Hannibal Lecter has continued to captivate popular imagination since his introduction in Thomas Harris’ 1981 novel *Red Dragon*. In addition to the three subsequent novels, Dr. Lecter has featured as the central character in five film adaptations and a television series. The 1991 film *Silence of the Lambs* was the first in its genre (horror) to win an Academy Award for Best Picture, and is only the third in the history of the Awards to win across the five major categories (Picture, Screenplay, Director, Leading Actor and Actress) (Fernandez “Silence of the Lambs”). Anthony Hopkins’ iconic portrayal of the character is pervasive: certain lines from the film, with his signature, singularly spine-chilling delivery, remain embedded in the cultural imagination so much so that even people who have not seen the film might understand references made to it. His “Good evening, Clarice,” and of course the infamous “A census taker one tried to test me; I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti,” (Demme) in combination with Hopkins’ ad-libbed mouth noise, are oft-repeated and parodied. The fear we feel when we look upon that iconic leather face-mask is rivaled only by the intrigue, excitement, fascination, and even attraction that comes with only the best known of cultural signs. But why do we continue to be fascinated with this cannibalistic serial killer? How has he managed to remain so culturally relevant?

The following essay has two aims: first, using the texts mentioned above, to establish a reading of Hannibal Lecter as a genderqueer subject; and second, to situate these texts in the American Gothic tradition, which I view as a particularly useful literary framework from which to create queer theoretical readings. It is my contention that Kristeva’s theory of the abject, in addition to Braidotti’s theorisation of the nomadic subject, as applied to a human being, creates the

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<sup>1</sup> (Fuller 2013)  
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ideological space necessary for gender non-conforming (here, specifically genderqueer) identities. Kristeva's theory, as a literary one, is more applicable to a text in the horror genre, whereas Braidotti's sociological theory more or less enables the application of Kristeva's literary theory of the abject to a human, nomadic subject. That is to say, one situates the other, and they play off one another well in order to enable the genderqueer space I argue Hannibal Lecter inhabits. Lecter displays a number of normatively gendered characteristics which fall into both masculine and feminine categories, thus preventing (at least as I contend) anyone seeking to label his gender using definitive, static terms.

The second portion of this essay will be devoted to an investigation of Dr. Hannibal Lecter's criminality, and the ways in which his specific crimes relate to his abjection. The fact that he often chooses his victims from amongst his psychiatric patients, taken in combination with his murder and cannibalism, and the displaying of their bodies in theatrical/artistic tableaux, speaks to Lecter's inability to appropriately create distance between Self and Other. Lecter's undecidable gender identity and performance, as well as his queer sexuality, all play important roles in his ability to lure, manipulate, charm, deceive, murder and cannibalize his victims, all without drawing speculation from the authorities. The concept of liminality, or the state of being in-between, is one which unites the different forms of queerness I have attributed to Hannibal, and is a central tenant of literary Gothicism. Alongside Kristeva's theory of the abject, which I view as a logical extension of liminality, I will use Halberstam's book *Skin Shows*, a chapter of which is about the uniquely American Gothic context of the film *Silence of the Lambs*, and Messent's application of Gothic literary tropes to the Lecter novels. I will also use pieces of Kilgour's 1998 article and 1990 book, on cannibalism and anthropology, which Messent used extensively and which offers a unique view of cannibalism as metaphor. Finally, I draw informally from documentaries on such notable murderer/cannibals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Jeffrey Dahmer, Armin Meiwes, Albert Fish, and Issei Sagawa, as well as a few more general documentaries about cannibalism, in order to try and decipher Hannibal's motives for eating his victims apart from my own theoretical understandings of his actions.

Beginning with an expansion of my understanding of the terms gender identity and gender performance so as to situate my point of view with respect to other queer theorists, I will then outline some particularly noteworthy aspects of Lecter's gender identity and performance, both in normatively feminine and normatively masculine iterations. Following this, I will give some further details

on both Kristeva's and Braidotti's theories to provide full background for my argument. I will then provide a synthesis section where I bring the theories of the abject and nomadic subjectivity to bear on specifically Hannibal Lecter's gender identity and performance. The final sections will explore the unique applicability of his performances and multiform identity to both the American Gothic as a genre, and to Lecter's cannibalism. I explore of the significance of cannibalism to Lecter's criminality, balancing Harris', to my mind, unacceptable "explanation" in *Hannibal Rising*, with Kilgour's work on the anthropological significance of metaphorical versus literal cannibalism. This section will also refer to several documentaries about noted, nonfictional cannibalistic serial killers, as listed above. Lecter is in all ways above, beyond, and outside of societal norms, which I see as inextricably linked to the Gothic, abjection, and the gender-related queerness which I will discuss below. By uniting these subject matters in this essay, I hope to further ground my arguments in the texts themselves and place them in a legible literary (as opposed to simply queer theoretical or sociological) context.

### Toward a (Personal) Definition of Gender Performance and Gender Identity

The twinned concepts of gender identity and gender performance are particularly important to this study insofar as they are both bodily and mental/psychological frames of reference. As Braidotti writes, gender cannot be separated from the body, and by doing so one might risk making one's argument ungrounded and ahistorical (Braidotti *Nomadic Subjects*). I see this in direct accordance with Butler's understanding of gender, specifically as she writes in the final chapter of her 1993 *Bodies that Matter*, "Critically Queer". It becomes important to, by the same token, avoid placing *too much* emphasis on the body as the site of gender, because to do so would discount or render illegible, transgender identities, both binary and not. Because this paper is one which deals so heavily with queerness, both in terms of gender and in terms of sexuality, I am exceedingly wary of statements like Braidotti's which seem, on face value, to reify essentialist dialogue which appear to cite biology as destiny and which locate masculinity and femininity as monolithic, static forms of gender between which there may be no interplay. In reality, though, the context of Braidotti's arguments assuage my fears

of an essentialist bogeyman: she argues passionately and eloquently for a new, nomadic subjectivity which is at once intensely embodied and definitively fluid, and while she is very specific about the kind of queerness her theories enable, she is clear that her ideas and queer theory are not mutually exclusive.

Speaking from a perspective formulated by studying a number of gender theories, I would define gender identity as something which is necessarily a composite of mental/emotional/psychological processes as assumed by an embodied subject. In general, this identity would be either aligned with the so-called “biological” sex assigned at birth (cisgender), or not (transgender). I very strongly favour the concept of the term transgender as an umbrella, encompassing a wide variety of gender identifications that are generally considered non-normative<sup>2</sup>. I regard gender identity as something which is closely related to the body, but also to the way we *think* our bodies. As such, gender identity is a fluid subject which hinges upon (or has the capacity to do so) a variety of temporal, spatial, contextual, cultural, etc. factors. Gender identity far exceeds the binary constraints that are generally imposed upon it; instead, there are those which select or cherry-pick behaviours and ideas assigned to normative (cis)genders and combine them to create something new. My reading of Hannibal Lecter as a gender non-conforming subject places him in this transitory space.

I use gender performance here directly in reference to Butler’s understanding of it as a series of repeated acts which shore up a normative, and as such, binary, reading of gender (Butler “Performative Acts”). In order to subvert gender which conforms to the male-masculine/female-feminine binary, one must first acknowledge that those norms exist, and that any play between them does not eliminate, but in fact reifies, their existence (Butler *Undoing Gender*). In this instance, I disagree with Bersani’s reading of Butler, which seems to insinuate that Butler’s theory discounts or erases the presence or validity of transgender identities. I would classify this as a paranoid reading because Bersani fears, above all else, the dissolution of LGBTQQIAP identities into what he views as a queer muddle of palatable, normalized homogeneity. My own views on the use of queer align more closely with Butler’s, though I do not discount Bersani’s concern: “queer” can and should be its own category of gender, desire, relationality,

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of transgender identities would be genderqueer, non-binary, genderfluid, agender, pangender, etc. etc.

subjectivity, etc.: queer is best understood as neither synonymous with “gay” nor as an umbrella term. Rather it is, as poet Brandon Wint writes, “...escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like and pursue it” (Wint, qtd. in Slenker).

Boundaries remain important and difference remains intact in my utility of the term “queer”. In order to grow, there must be fertile soil; the veritable rainbow of transgender identities need the mucky binary identities *and* the fertilizer of constructed, constraining societal norms in order to flower (become visible). To break the mould, there must first be a mould to break. Further, I see gender performance, like gender identity, as something which is embodied, but is not entirely defined by the body. Gender performance as a broad category becomes the way gender identity is made visible or legible to others, and can be played out through body language and postures, modes of dress, vocal intonations/speech patterns, personal style and taste (in food, art, decorations, etc.), interpersonal interactions, interests and hobbies, etc. etc.

Further, there is no such thing as an entirely masculine or entirely feminine gender identity. Inasmuch as gender performance is a conscious play we enact (or a form of drag, to invoke Butler), a subject can choose to “stack” their performance in a certain way, to appear in a hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine (or even hyper-queer) way. Of course, we perform these genders within our own geographical, cultural, religious, ethnic, socio-economic, etc. contexts, so there is no monolithic “correct” femininity or masculinity. In this, I find Connell and Messerschmidt’s theorisation of hegemonic masculinity as historically dynamic, extremely important: while certain traits are generally coded masculine, such as physical strength or toughness, and as such shore up a hegemonic form of masculinity, this form is not immutable or immune to historical social changes. I believe gender identity and gender performance are ultimately even less rigid, and that they ultimately allow for a great deal of heterogeneity in terms of self-conception – meaning, for example, that an AFAB<sup>3</sup> person who self-identifies as cisgender might perform certain masculine traits and still be cisgender. What’s more, a transgender person might come out as such and feel no need to transition using hormone therapy or surgery, and might not even alter their appearance in

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<sup>3</sup> “Assigned Female at Birth”

any way – that does not make their gender identity less valid or less trans. The same would apply to a genderqueer person: they still inhabit their bodies in a society which privileges legible, cisgender identities (and, for that matter, bigender trans identities<sup>4</sup>), but they choose or accept that their gender identity is some combination of multiple performances. I see no reason to police gender identity or to limit it to outward performance or legibility, because what matters is self-conception. I think of Hannibal Lecter no differently simply because he is fictional: conversations about his gender identity should not be reduced to observations about his gender performance but should instead seek to combine elements of his performance and his own self-conceptions regarding his gender identity.

### Lecter as Hybrid Masculinity? Or Something More?

Harris does not give us Hannibal Lecter's gender identity, nor does Lecter ever engage in any self-reflection related to gender: the reader is given to understand precious little about him from his own point of view, so anything written about him is, by necessity, extrapolation. It is my contention, however, based upon my application of Braidotti's theorisation of the nomadic subject and Kristeva's understanding of abjection to the character, that Hannibal Lecter can be read as someone who plays with the idea of the gender binary with knowing *jouissance*. What is most fascinating about Lecter's gender performance is that he remains in-between and one never quite feels comfortable positively assigning him to a cisgender identity. That is to say, Lecter does not conform to the hegemonic masculine standards of the time in which he was created<sup>5</sup>, though he does exhibit some qualities which might place him in a generally masculine standing. Rather, Lecter fits more closely with Demetriou's hybrid masculinity, which further historicizes Connell and Messerschmidt's hegemonic masculinity by viewing it as

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<sup>4</sup> Bigender is used here in reference to 'normatively'-gendered or passing trans people, who go from one gender to another and generally (though obviously not in all cases) do so with the aid of hormone replacement therapy or cosmetic surgery. There is nothing wrong with bigender trans identities, the same way there is nothing wrong with cisgender identities – as both represent a societal norm per se, it is important to name them and study them critically. That is my intent in using the term, borrowed from Lane, here. (more on Lane shortly)

<sup>5</sup> *Red Dragon* was first published in 1981.

a subject position which can and does change with a variety of societal and local factors, and often absorbs qualities of marginalised masculinities. Interestingly, certain gendered traits about Lecter change concurrently with what is considered as hegemonic masculinity.

When Harris first wrote about Hannibal Lecter, he was the mysterious, godly form of (nearly) hegemonic masculinity popularized in crime dramas. Lecter was written as a kind of noir antagonist, behind bars but nonetheless threatening for it, dark and sleek rather than tall or showy. He is smart and physically strong, and to an extent, the reader is meant to be attracted to him; morbid curiosity and sexual desire in equal measure. To place him in a more directly historical standpoint, we are meant to feel about Lecter as Americans in the decades leading up to *Red Dragon* felt about, for example, Albert Fish<sup>6</sup>, Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, or Ted Bundy. He is the powerful, hegemonic male that defies limitations and labels outside 'human' (and even that, in Hannibal's case, is up for debate in the narrative).

As the years progressed, Hannibal changed slightly. *Silence of the Lambs*, the film adaptation of the second novel in the series, saw the beginning of Anthony Hopkins' iconic portrayal of the character. With this, many readers *saw* Hannibal for the first time,<sup>7</sup> and this looking served to humanize him slightly. I do not deny that we are meant to be very afraid of Hopkins' Lecter, but I do believe that adding the dimension of sight to the character removed a certain piece of his mystique. Further, the film features a great many close-ups on Hopkins/Lecter's eyes, as if to remind us not only that he is human and experiences emotions just like any member of the audience (presumably anyway), but that he is the one in power because he is the one who holds the gaze. Even though we are the ones watching the film, and by Mulvey's logic the ones in possession of the objectifying gaze, we still feel uncomfortable under Lecter's icy blue, unblinking stare. Finally, Hopkins' Lecter was viewed by contemporary American film-goes as quite effete given his European descent, taken in combination with his

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<sup>6</sup> Though he was active around the time of the Depression rather than mid-20<sup>th</sup> century like the other serial killers listed, Fish is among the few that were immortalised for the cannibalization of his victims, a trait which ties him inexorably to Lecter.

<sup>7</sup> That is if we, like a great deal of fans of the series insist, forget all about the 1986 Michael Mann film *Manhunter*, a film adaptation of the novel *Red Dragon*. The film has regained some popularity among hard-core fans in recent years but continues to receive very mixed reviews.

appreciation of a number of feminine-coded objects and interests (enumerated in a more detailed fashion below). Because of these factors, Lecter's masculinity is a slightly modified hegemonic masculinity, one wherein physical prowess matters less than intellectual cunning and mastery.

Fast-forward about twenty-five years to Bryan Fuller's revolutionary television series *Hannibal* (2013-2015), which is set just before the events of *Red Dragon* (1981) and features Danish actor/sex symbol Mads Mikkelsen in the titular role. If we continue through with my argument that Hannibal Lecter is representative of evolving hegemonic masculinity, then this new masculinity is the most contentious yet. Dr. Lecter is, as I said, a suave aesthete, with carefully parted and gelled hair, and an incredible variety of three-piece windowpane plaid suits. Rather than being conventionally attractive, Mikkelsen's Lecter is interesting looking, with a facial structure that looks as though it was carved out of granite or marble, and a knack for brief, almost imperceptible micro-facial expressions. The character, as iterated by Fuller, contains elements of a number of gay stereotypes: he cooks well and often, he is well-dressed and groomed, he hosts lavish dinner parties, he has an immense appreciation for opera and classical music, etc. Plus, this new Lecter is more or less canonically bisexual, as the television series features him in various kinds of sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women. But *Hannibal* still contains the deadly masculine strength and murderous intent that he was written with in the source material – the difference is that now viewers get to actually *see* the crimes for which he was incarcerated in *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs*.

I find Demetriou's concept of hybrid masculinities useful in this context insofar as I see Lecter combining traits of hegemonic masculinity with traits of marginalized gay masculinities, but I nonetheless believe that Lecter has reflected a distinct change in the type of masculinity favored in specifically American society. In this age of neoliberal individualism, we have also seen the rise and flourishing of LGBT narratives to the extent that, at least in the primary market to which the television series *Hannibal* was designed to appeal, they are almost a *preferred* type of narrative over the heteronormative template to which Lecter used to be confined. This is related to the growth of neoliberalism in that one of its key tenants is a rise in the belief in the importance of individual freedoms and choices, which is crucial to contemporary iterations of American LGBT and feminist movements. The new hegemonic masculinity is one which has room for sexualities apart from heterosexuality and room for more fluidity of gender than



might have been the case even five or ten years ago. The sensitive, well-dressed man “in touch with his feminine side” is exemplary of the masculinity which has, in recent years, dethroned the muscular, combative, chivalrous masculinity of years past in the arena of hegemony.

But even this form of hybridized masculinity seems inadequate to describe Lecter, as his feminine traits serve to add gendered dimension to the character and balance his hybridized masculine ones. He has a weakness for fine material items like wine, food, and clothing, and takes joy from living in pampered luxury. He dresses himself and others (Clarice in *Hannibal*, 1999) with care and an eye for lavish materials. His handwriting is small, neat, and elegant, and he often writes letters (to Clarice, to Will, even to Dolarhyde)<sup>8</sup>. His penchant for hosting extravagant dinner parties blends maternal nurturing sentiment with a markedly masculine drive for power gleaned from feeding his murder victims to a high society crowd without their knowledge or consent<sup>9</sup>. He is unfailingly polite, as “discourtesy is unspeakably ugly” to him (Harris *Hannibal* 102), and in fact he chooses his victims from amongst those he feels have been rude to him, spawning the chilling and delightful line “Whenever feasible one should always try to eat the rude” (Fuller 2013). He is the picture of composure and is often described by Clarice as having a dancer-like grace and poise (Harris). He speaks quietly, in measured tones<sup>10</sup>, and only very seldom yells (but one has the distinct feeling that even this slip is calculated). He enjoys classical music and opera, and plays as well as composes pieces for piano, harpsichord and Theremin.

## Non-Binary Gender: Bodily Becoming, Nomadic Subjectivity, and Abjection

Based on the evidence above, it becomes clear that an entirely separate, non-binary approach to gender is needed in reference to Hannibal Lecter. Simply

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<sup>8</sup> Using the books as reference points here – 1999 for Clarice Starling and 1981 for Will Graham and Francis Dolarhyde.

<sup>9</sup> More on cannibalism to follow.

<sup>10</sup> Though no definitive study exists on this point, linguist/psychologist Adelaide Haas published a paper in 1979 which features a collection of evidence and stereotypes to do with varying speech patterns and intonations between men and women. Notably, Lecter seems to speak in a more feminine than masculine way.

splitting his behaviours into either masculine or feminine subject positions seems trite, overly-limiting, and contrived; rather, Lecter merits something above and beyond (or perhaps, in between, beneath, or around) a binary conception of gender. I have found that, through a combination of literary, feminist, and specifically transgender theories, space can be created for a gender identity in transit like the one Hannibal Lecter embodies.

“Becoming” as a physical, mental, and emotional process is heavily emphasized throughout the source material for a variety of characters (Dolarhyde in *Red Dragon*, Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*, both Will Graham and Randall Tier in the television series *Hannibal*<sup>11</sup>), and this idea should be extended to Lecter as well. With the addition in 2006 of the novel *Hannibal Rising*, which Harris himself was reluctant to write and publish (Simpson *Making Murder*), more weight is laid upon the concept of personal origin as explanation: readers and moviegoers were no longer content to simply witness the monster on the screen; they had to know exactly how he *became* a cannibalistic serial killer (as if such a thing had a linear explanation). Thus Lecter was provided with a beginning to place neatly before his “middle,” which we had already been given in the form of the three preceding novels and four film adaptations. This trend toward historicity, however reluctant on the part of Harris himself, lends credence to my understanding of Hannibal as a nomadic subject in a constant state of Becoming, (Braidotti; Deleuze and Guattari)<sup>12</sup> with neither end nor any need for a stopping point or goal.

Braidotti’s nomadic subject carries “home” on her back and creates room for comfort in each new space to which she travels. Lecter has no home: having been ousted at a very young age from Lecter castle by the encroaching front of the second World War, Lecter never knew anything but nomadism. Moving from Lithuania, to the French countryside, to Paris, back to Lithuania, back to Paris, to the United States, to Florence – and on and on – Lecter leaves traces of himself behind but does not settle. The nomadic subject is identified by where they have

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<sup>11</sup> 1981, 1988 and 2013, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> My understanding of nomadic Becoming has emerged from Braidotti, whose own work on nomadic subjectivity is highly indebted to Deleuze and Guattari. In this matter I draw principally from chapter 9 of *Nomadic Subjects* (2011), which is devoted entirely to the idea of Becoming, and seems to most heavily be influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s 1987 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

been and, eventually, where they will go. “Our desires are that which evades us, in the very act of propelling us forth, leaving as the only indicator of who we are, the traces of where we have already been, that is to say, of what we have already ceased to be. Identity is a retrospective notion” (Braidotti 40). As a literal representation of this idea, in *Hannibal* (560), Harris says that the police remain a “comfortable two faces behind” the one which Hannibal has most recently constructed. Lecter sheds homes, faces, and, I contend, greatly varied gender performances which are indicative of a nonconforming or queer gender identity. Applying the concept of nomadic subjectivity to the character enables us to understand the different genders he performs, from the savagely powerful, murderous monster who bites people’s faces; to the suave, suited dandy-esque aesthete.

It is important to note, however, that “nomadism... is not fluidity without borders, but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries” (Braidotti 66). Lecter knows that the boundaries between male-ness and female-ness, as well as between masculinity and femininity, are mutable and infinitely changeable, open to interpretation. The porousness of certain boundaries calls into play Kristeva’s concept of abjection, which is a conscious blending of or movement among several subject positions or object categories. Abjection is simultaneous masculinity and femininity, enabling a movement across and outside of the gender binary, the same way a person labelled abject moves through and above (and beneath) society. Lecter masquerades as human, a (more than/less than) human abjection who is the “essential if not initial boundary of biological and psychic individualism,” (Kristeva 101) or, as Hannibal’s psychiatrist Bedelia DuMaurier says so well, Hannibal is wearing a “well-tailored person suit” (Fuller 2013). In order to ground the nomadic subject or the abject human in historical (and as such accountable) terms, it is necessary to bring in more body-based theories, keeping in mind that essentialism or “body as destiny” dialogues have the capacity to be entirely limiting. In welcome opposition to this, transgender theorist Riki Lane uses the theory of bodily becoming as a way of opening up the bigender view of what it means to be a trans person, writing instead that it would be more beneficial to look at being trans as a constant process of self-reinvention rather than a set, linear progression from point A to point B (Lane). Lane also asserts that it makes more scientific, “empirical” sense to view assigned sex as biologically diverse, rather than biologically dichotomous. This reading helps to validate my contention that Lecter be read as genderqueer, without further

definition aside from gender non-conforming in certain ways. Simply, Lane's theories about biological diversity are helpful "especially when they stress nonlinearity, contingency, self-organization, open-endedness, and becoming. Mobilizing a reading of biology as open-ended and creative supports a perspective that sees sex and gender diversity as a continuum, rather than a dichotomy..." (Lane 137). This continuum-based conception of sex and gender<sup>13</sup>, both performance and identity, links excellently with Braidotti's nomadic subject, who moves from place to place and is identified retrospectively, Kristeva's theory of abjection, and the joyful non-fixity (to borrow Braidotti's term) of moving amongst boundaries.

### American Gothic: Liminality and Expressions of Contemporary Social Anxieties

Moving amongst boundaries calls to mind the concept of liminality, one of the defining characteristics of Gothic literature. Liminality can be defined as a state of being in between two clearly-defined mental, cultural, or literal spaces. Originated as an anthropological term used in reference to a person's passage from one state of being to another via a ritualistic practice (a wedding, for example), liminality has since been used with increasing frequency in both literary and queer theories. In Victorian ghost stories, which are sometimes used as examples of a Gothic subgenre, the ghost can be used as a metaphor for societal anxieties by virtue of its unreality, but also because it exists in a liminal space between the realms of the living and the dead. Braidotti's nomadic subject, to which I have referred in preceding sections, would be an example of someone who exists in liminal spaces and has the capacity to consciously move between categories of being with ease. Liminality can also be connected to abjection and to the conflicting simultaneity of certain states or experiences, such as fear and seduction, wrath and love, empathy and vengeance. Lecter is constantly moving between/among, creating spaces for himself somewhere in the middle, on the fringe, or straddling multiple

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<sup>13</sup> Though the argument can and is frequently made that even a continuum or spectrum is too limited when the conversation turns to gender identity. My current personal favourite is the "gender as a constellation or universe" comparison. For the purposes of this paper, we will stick to continuum.

extremes of gender, morality, or emotion. Liminality, abjection, and nomadism, observed from the outside, breed uncertainty, which in turn breeds fear. Lecter is and remains frightening because he is unpredictable, whimsical, and constantly in motion.

There has been no deficit of scholarly work which seeks to define the Gothic as a literary tradition, genre, or mode though it is, like other literary theories, dynamic depending on cultural and spatiotemporal context. As such, Irish Gothic written in the height of popularity of literary Gothicism (generally, the 18<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), is characterized by slightly different themes than are American Gothic texts. One of the main tenets attributed to Gothicism and, to an extent, horror literature in general, is that it serves as a way for societies to vent contemporary anxieties without naming them outright. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, for example, served as a metaphorical representation of a number of Victorian fears about the perceived loss of morality due to the decline of religion and development of rationalist scientific and philosophical thought concurrent with the Industrial Revolution (Halberstam *Skin Shows*). These fears were not exclusive by any means to Irish, British, or continental European Gothic texts, but they can certainly be read as significantly located within those specific traditions. The American Gothic, as it specifically relates to Harris' texts, can be characterised by xenophobia, homophobia/misogyny and trans-misogyny, and anxieties about the ever-increasing presence of surveillance technology. Texts such as the Hannibal Lecter novels and their film and television adaptations illustrate these fears, which are in no way specific to American society, but which are nonetheless an integral part of what it means to be American in both a pre- and post-9/11 society.<sup>14</sup> Lecter is an embodiment of everything Americans fear: he is Eastern European (too geographically close to the Middle East for comfort), his gender and sexuality are undecidable, he is a cannibalistic serial killer, and, worst of all, he blends in with "normal" American people and escapes detection for years despite working right under the nose of the sacred FBI. He can be anywhere at any time, he is "the devil [in the details], he is smoke" (Fuller 2013).

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<sup>14</sup> Halberstam's text was published in 1995, 6 years before 9/11, and only one of Harris's novels is published after 2001. But a significant number of the filmic/television adaptations are *post-9/11*, thus setting up an interesting comparison. I believe that, as a catalyst for so much fear in American (and global) society, 9/11 remains an extremely significant event to consider when one is studying the literary representation of both societal and personal fears and anxieties.

In my own observation, Americans like to place their fears in something they can easily see, from Muslims in traditional garb to “failed transvestites” like Buffalo Bill: blame is easily placed when one is able to visually identify the so-called “guilty” party. What makes Lecter so frightening is that he is not easy to see.

Harris’s Gothic Lecter novels serve to vent American homophobia, misogyny and trans-misogyny (in addition to, more generally, transphobia). In general, I agree with Halberstam’s assertion that Demme’s 1991 film adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs* “clearly represents ... sexism and punishes actions motivated by [it]” (Halberstam 4). In my opinion, the film does an excellent job building Clarice Starling into the feminist hero she deserves to be, and part of the film’s success should be attributed to the way viewers of all genders are encouraged to empathise with her, including or perhaps especially her treatment of those who would limit her based on her femaleness. But I diverge with Halberstam where he refers to the film’s ability to adequately depict and punish acts of homophobia and argue that this is a problem throughout each of the novels and their subsequent film adaptations. In fact, in addition to the blatant homophobic language in *Hannibal* (book published in 1999, film in 2001) it is arguable that the punishment of specifically misogynistic behaviours is inadequate in the other books and films. For example, in the novel and film *Hannibal*, Deputy Assistant Attorney General (US Department of Justice) Paul Krendler refers to Hannibal repeatedly as a “queer” (here purposefully invoking “queer” as a slur for “gay”) in conversation with Clarice Starling, and directs countless degrading, objectifying comments toward her both to her face and behind her back. In a scene meant to convey a sick kind of poetic justice, Lecter and Starling cook and consume Krendler’s brain while the man is still alive – and continuing to refer to Starling in a derogatory manner<sup>15</sup>. In a series wherein the titular character is known for killing and eating those who he considers rude, this is probably the best possible outcome for a man like Krendler. But it does not exactly feel like Starling “won,” or that she was in any way successful in shutting down Krendler’s horrible behaviour: it was Hannibal who hunted him down and killed him *for* her, she’s merely a non-consenting (drugged) observer. In *Silence*

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<sup>15</sup> In the film, Starling does not eat any of the dish prepared for her. The ending of the film differs vastly from the ending of the novel – in the film, Lecter escapes the FBI and leaves Starling behind to face professional and personal ruin; in the book, the two escape together and travel the world as a married couple.

of *the Lambs* (1991), viewers saw Starling verbally snapping back at her abusers and physically outdoing them in her training at the FBI academy; in *Hannibal*, (2001) she fights to remain conscious and barely does more than glare at Krendler and Lecter. (It should be noted again how different the ending scenes of the novel and film are, but the dinner scene remains uncomfortable and degrading for Starling in both.) As such, it would seem that Starling lost some of her autonomy and that Harris, for whatever reason, failed to continue his trend of punishing characters who engaged in misogynistic behaviours.

The trans-misogyny and transphobia in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is perhaps more obvious, but less easy to put into words. It is never actually made clear how Buffalo Bill feels about his own gender – should I refer to the character using she/her pronouns? Is this really a transgender character, or just a “failed transvestite” as the narrative insists? Who am I or anyone else to police whether a character is gender-deviant *enough* to be considered transgender? Nothing is clear about Buffalo Bill, but I do believe that this is a discriminatory, falsified caricature of someone who is (whatever else one might say about them) probably not cisgender. It is difficult to know whether to explain away any gender-related gaffs using the old, unsatisfying “it was a different time/we have more words to explain different genders than ever before,” or to be more severe and call out everyone involved on their intolerance, discrimination, and ignorance. There is no easy conclusion, but the fact that no one is adequately punished for treating Buffalo Bill exceedingly poorly because of his gender deviance<sup>16</sup> seems clear.

The third plot point which makes the Lecter tetralogy uniquely Gothic is their expression of anxieties about the growing ubiquity of surveillance technology. This 21<sup>st</sup> century anxiety about who is watching whom and for what purpose is correlative to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century discomfort over increasing industrialisation and the replacement of human workers by machines. Though the 2001 film adaptation of *Hannibal* failed in many respects to deliver an adequate sequel to the legendary *Silence*, the cinematography does an excellent job emphasizing what had been a largely underplayed plot point in the novel: surveillance. For example, the film’s opening sequence is a supercut of various anonymous surveillance clips from Florence (one of the story’s main settings) in black and

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, BB didn’t exactly go about his transition in a healthy, legal, or sane way. But the number of rude “transvestite” comments remains inexcusable.

white, undercut by the aria section of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" performed on piano<sup>17</sup> and combined with pieces of static feedback and garbled recorded dialogue (Scott 2001). A flock of pigeons, which feature heavily in the sequence, crowd together to form an eerie portrait of Lecter's face, which then fades into a shot of Starling sleeping in the back of an FBI van. The result is a stylish, suspenseful opening, and the motif of black and white surveillance footage combined with static and garbled electronic feedback is carried throughout the film and score. The film was released in February of 2001, 7 months before the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, but one nonetheless feels the relevance of the surveillance-related fears as a kind of foreshadowing for today's obsessive paranoia in reaction to international terrorism and racial tensions<sup>18</sup>. Insofar as they serve as a mirror to reflect contemporary social/cultural fears, Harris's Lecter novels can be read as a form of American Gothic.

### Literature Meets Anthropology: Kilgour & Messent on Cannibalism as Metaphor

Cannibalism has, particularly recently, become a field of some interest in contemporary anthropological study. Theorists such as Maggie Kilgour speculate as to whether cannibalism might be a metaphor rather than a literal practice, used by certain communities to assert dominance over others, and that "[a]nthropology itself, in its use of cannibalism, is then 'a prime example of... 'colonial discourse': the strategies through which imperialism justifies its own desire to absorb others by projecting that desire onto a demonised 'other'" (239-40). This, in part, explains the popular attraction to Hannibal Lecter as a character, because he is the embodiment of that demonised other. Lecter, then, becomes "...a literally cannibal ego... the most exaggerated version of the modern Hobbesian individual, governed only by will and appetite, detached from the world and other humans, whom he sees only as objects for his own consumption" (Kilgour 248).

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<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, the same piece of classical music Lecter is listening to when he murders the prison guard in *Silence of the Lambs*, creating an effective parallelism between the two films.

<sup>18</sup> Especially considering that the main factor for Starling's fall from grace at the FBI is her killing, in the line of duty and well within rights, of a Black woman whom she had been trying to apprehend. This activated a number of race-related arguments and tensions which were given much more weight in the novel and largely glossed over in the film.



Lecter is almost akin to a tasteful parody of Kilgour's theories about cannibalism not being an actual practice. While the metaphorical nature of Lecter's cannibalism should be explored (and will be very shortly), it is imperative that we do not forget that Lecter is literally a cannibal. He provides a wonderful foil for the pictures of savage, starving, brutal cannibals we conjure at the mention of the word (though of course for all his pomp he is still a vicious, powerful serial killer). He is very careful about what he puts into his body, and artfully prepares his meals so as to create elegant tableaux which entertain and delight, whether he is dining solo or hosting a dinner party. He has a very particular "taste," which he cultivated for years growing up in the French countryside and, later, Paris and Florence: he is the epitome of high class sophistication in all areas of life, but particularly with regards to the culinary. That he chooses to eat people is part of his identity and stems at least in part from the traumatizing event in his past wherein his younger sister Mischa was murdered and cannibalized by Nazi soldiers; he feels that he was unable to save Mischa, though they were both just children at the time. He adopts the soldiers' cannibalistic methods in order to enact a more fitting revenge when he later seeks out and murders them. The continued cannibalism throughout his adult life might be a product of pathology more than anything else, as if by repeating or reliving the traumatic event he might one day change the course of the past and regain his precious sister.

Lecter's cannibalism thus has some interesting psychoanalytic implications, which only get deeper with his seduction of and subsequent pair-bonding with Clarice Starling. The two engage in a bizarrely communal rite when together they consume the brain of Paul Krendler, the government official who was almost singlehandedly responsible for bringing down Starling's FBI career and, further, "typifies aggressive male sexuality and its relationship to institutional power..." (Messent 26). Kilgour describes the rite of communion as one which is cannibalistic in essence,

a banquet at which host and guest can come together without one subsuming the other, and both can eat and be eaten... the individual bodies of the members of the community are identified with the corporate body of the church, which in turn is identified with the individual body of the sacrificed Christ. (Kilgour *From Communion* 79-80).

By according this scene such important narrative weight, Harris has appropriated this Catholic ritual, which can be understood as merely metaphorically

cannibalistic, to one which is made strange or uncanny by the horrific presence of literal cannibalism.

Later that same evening, Clarice suggests to Hannibal that his preoccupation with Mischa stems from an unresolved issue wherein he felt forced to give up his place at his mother's breast to make room for Mischa. Kilgour explains breastfeeding as a metaphorical form of cannibalism as such: "The individual's original existence... is thus described as a cannibalistic experience of fluid boundaries between self and world, who are joined in a symbiotic oneness" (244). Clarice goes on to encourage Hannibal to taste a drop of champagne from her exposed nipple, "re-creat[ing] for Lecter that original form of (cannibal) satisfaction...translat[ing] Freudian theory to literal practice" (Messent 27-8). Thus the line between metaphorical and literal cannibalism continues to be blurred, even more complicated by the addition of sexuality.

The question of why Lecter cannibalizes his victims is not one which can be answered in a singular manner. First is the answer which follows most logically from my argument to this point: that Lecter has a queer sense of self, the literal/corporeal manifestation of which is the act of cannibalism. That is to say, he bridges the gap between Self and Other in a literal sense by *eating* other people, by taking a bite of them and merging his Self with theirs by way of consumption. His personal emphasis on aestheticism and love for theatricality explains his trademark of creating elegant, if gruesome, tableaux with the leftovers of his victims. Second is the answer which seems to be the generally-accepted one, as it is repeated often throughout the television series: that Lecter sees the rude people he murders and eats as no better than pigs who deserve whatever he does to them (Fuller 2014). One might cobble together a third answer from viewing the lives of nonfictional serial killers and cannibals. Albert Fish, who cannibalized young children in the era roughly around the Great Depression, said he did so out of a desire to save them from lives of unavoidable sin (Borowski *Albert Fish*). Jeffrey Dahmer cannibalized young men in an effort to keep them with him forever<sup>19</sup>, a sentiment echoed by Armin Meiwes<sup>20</sup> and Issei Sagawa<sup>21</sup>. Fourth is the unsatisfactory answer Harris gives in *Hannibal Rising*,

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<sup>19</sup> Paraphrased from the infamous 1994 Stone Phillips interview with Dahmer on the NBC programme *Dateline*.

<sup>20</sup> See the 2007 documentary *Interview with a Cannibal*, cited below.

<sup>21</sup> See the 2007 documentary *The Cannibal That Walked Free*, cited below.

which seems to be that Lecter continues to cannibalize his victims as a way to somehow “fix” the fact that he unwittingly ate his sister Mischa as a child. I find this answer reductive and uninteresting and believe that it raises more questions than it answers. I think in the end, the question is ultimately a combination of things and largely undecidable, a trait which the motives of his criminality shares with his sexuality and gender identity.

## Conclusion

Using a variety of literary and sociological theories, this essay has sought to perform a queer reading of Hannibal Lecter’s various expressions of monstrosity. In order to more concretely express this idea, I started by defining both gender performance and gender identity, identifying the dynamic nature of both, and cited a few examples of the ways in which Lecter embodies, subverts, or combines characteristics of both hegemonic and hybrid masculinities, in combination with certain feminine traits. I argued that self-conception is more important than labelling or policing based on outward appearance alone and examined the ways in which Lecter might conceive of his own gender identity. I contend that Kristeva’s theory of abjection (a literary theory meant to be applied first and foremost to texts within the horror genre), when looked at alongside Braidotti’s sociological theory of the nomadic subject, creates the transitory space necessary for a character such as Hannibal, who expresses multiple gender identities and performances. Both the nomadic subject and the abject person moves between borders effortlessly, but always with conscious understanding of the “non-fixity” of the boundaries, such as those between male and female, masculine and feminine, Self and Other, etc. In order to root my arguments in the body as well as the mind, I used transgender theorist Lane’s concept of “trans as bodily becoming,” a radical way of looking at being a transgender person that seeks to move away from binaries and dichotomies in favour of a new gender and bodily diversity.

Following this, I engaged in an analysis of the novels, films, and television series as particularly American Gothic, inasmuch as they express contemporary social anxieties, and engage with various pivotal Gothic tropes. The Gothic is a particularly useful literary framework from which to perform queer readings due to its ability to express the unspeakable and its reliance upon such an influential

concept as liminality. The final section was devoted to an examination of Lecter's cannibalism and its fascinatingly Freudian implications. As a character which has undergone various transformations since his first appearance in 1981, Hannibal Lecter is a perfect foil for a variety of social changes which have taken place in the intervening decades. The term genderqueer best fits Hannibal as it denies the temptation of rigid classification and instead allows for a freer, less limiting, interpretation that the doctor himself, who so willingly plays with the boundaries between good and evil or life and death, might perhaps appreciate.

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