

Imagining Gender(s) in Contemporary Canadian and American Short Fiction

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Abstract

The article problematizes queer and trans representations in contemporary Canadian and American short fiction from the perspective of the gender of the individuals nonconforming to the cis-normative. The analysis observes how gender, gender-fluidity and queerness are imagined in contemporary fiction, and how these representations can be traced to the historically established perceptions of the patriarchal binary model of genders, as well as how they diverge from it. The concluding remarks invite a polemic on how contemporary discourse on gender stands in contrast with the performed genders in marginalized queer and trans communities, and how they are affected by the capitalist impulse to commodify supposed authenticity of expression into fetishized forms preferred by the dominant heteronormative narratives. The selection of stories encompasses works of anglophone authors published between 2014 and 2018.

Keywords: queer, transgender, gender, performativity, sexuality, hegemonic femininity, masculinity

Introduction

Premised on the idea that the misogyny implicit in the discourse around sexual difference, and, subsequently, around non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations define the otherness of queer and trans individuals, the article examines the representations of queerness and the

trans subculture in a selection of contemporary American and Canadian short fiction, exploring the manner in which aberrations from the compulsory and normative relation between sex, gender and sexuality produce the grounds for socio-political marginalization. These works include Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season" (2014), Rosemary Campbell's "Probabilities" (2014), Nino Cipri's "The Shape of My Name" (2015), Andrew MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband" (2015), An Owomoyela's "Three Points Masculine" (2016), Charlie Jane Anders' "Don't Press Charges and I Won't Sue" (2017) and Innocent Chizaram Ilo's "Of Warps and Wefts" (2018). Through a close reading of the literary works defining gender and non-heterosexual sexual identities, we explore the conceptions of femininity and masculinity, and their respective performatives, as underlying the exclusion of individuals from socio-cultural, economic and political spaces.

Sexual Difference and Gender

In *Rereading Heterosexuality*, Rachel Carrol underscores the heteronormative as the invisible norm that standardizes the socio-cultural, economic and political discourses (1). Institutionalized through practices, the cis-normative defines the scope and boundaries of sexual identities, and regulates performativity against the background of the established hierarchy of genders, presupposing the immanent connection between biology and gender. As Ina Goel notes in "Beyond the Gender Binary," this is done by means of "medicalization of sex at birth" (77), and subsequently, by the "socialization of the genitalia according to the 'indicators of gender identification in society'" (77). The perception of gender is regulated by the heteronormative in the contexts of physical (bodily) autonomy, reproductive norms, marriage and family through performatives which prescribe the scope and boundaries of private and public agency. As Carrol explains, the heteronormative "depends on 'homosexuality' in order to sustain its own identity – or rather the fiction of its own identity" (6). Furthermore, in "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," Rosemary Hennessy observes that "complex indeterminate relations" (33) of socio-cultural practices affect not only the socio-cultural

positioning of an individual with the view of the normative, but also the “economic division of labor and wealth” (33). In “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” Robert Caserio et al. explain that the queer individual is characterized by unbelonging (819) in the context of heteronormativity, observed as “the figure of nonproductivity” (822), since their expression of sexuality – the rejection or perceived perversion of the masculine prerogative of hegemony, cannot contribute to the social organization. In addition, David L. Wallace and Jonathan Alexander point out that the Western culture is permeated by heteronormativity (793) not only in the context of the social domain of power, but also “as a rhetorical domain of power” (794), which divides individuals into the categories of the privileged and unprivileged, positioning heterosexuality as the norm, as well as the “venue of intimacy and basic social organization” (794). To elucidate the connection between gender and the power dynamics in the socio-economic spheres, we consider it useful to look more closely at Judith Butler’s arguments in *Undoing Gender*.

Butler examines the body not only as the source of private and personal “mortality, vulnerability, agency” (*Undoing Gender* 21), but also as “a social phenomenon in the public sphere” (21), which is formed and marked by society according to its overt or covert norms as a resource. Butler defines the norm as implicit in social practices, operating as the “standard of *normalization*” (41), defining the production of the desired social effect. As she suggests, the norm “governs intelligibility” (42) of social practices and actions by standardizing the contexts of social interactions. Concurrently with defining the desirable, the norm also regulates the definition of that which is *outside* by retaining a stable connection between the socially acceptable or unacceptable. Sexual difference, manifested in the insistence on the binary division into the male and female gender, is observed by Butler through the restrictive discourse as performing the “regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (43). In other words, the norm establishes the exclusivity of the historically normalized socio-economic patterns which establish the dominant status of one gender over another. Moreover, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler deconstructs sexual *difference* as a discursive practice and

a socio-cultural regulatory mechanism. Butler's claim that sex is "normative" (*Bodies that Matter* 1), but only in as much as it presents the ideal in the form of "a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs" (1), further suggests that the category of sex imposes the hierarchical division between the dominant and the subordinate gender. The power of normative sex resides in its ability to "demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls" (2), but the norm itself is never fully achieved, since its materialization in the individual body resides in the process of identification with the ideal, or against that which the ideal proscribes – in the performative "not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2). The normative being an artifice, the individual's identification with the idea of the ideal, as well as the "repudiation which produces a domain of abjection" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 3), constitutes the performative.

Queer, Trans and Transgressive

Due to the discursive nature and the immanent arbitrariness of meanings assigned to sex historically, the hierarchical binarity of sex necessitates the repetitive enactment through performativity (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 95), since it is *in* the negotiation between the desired and prohibited that its power is solidified. As an act, identification with gender places the individual in an immediate relation to that which is abject – proscribed by the regulatory ideal. The prohibition "secures the impenetrability of the masculine" (*Bodies that Matter* 51), or rather ensures that the historically established characteristics of masculinity encompassed by the concept of male gender are not transgressed, with a view to ensuring the power dynamics. Butler explains this prohibition as "a kind of panic, a panic over becoming 'like' her, effeminized" (*Bodies that Matter* 51) and the fear of taboos of "stray penetration" (51), which imply the instability of positions between the dominant masculine that penetrates and the subordinate feminine, and the potential for sexual practice that does not necessarily involve the materialization of the phallic signifier in the form of the penis as dominant, or in versions of the abject

that involve masculine penetration of the masculine, among other. In the context of Butler's definition of sexuality as "a mode of being disposed toward others" (*Undoing Gender* 33), it becomes clear that the matter of sexual orientation is not merely a distinct aberration from the normalized social norm regulating gender power dynamics, but a subversion of an entire ideological establishment of the normative, an "[undermining of] the phallic assurance over its own exclusive rights" (*Bodies that Matter* 51).

For that reason, the interpretative key for the analysis of the selection of short stories includes the insight offered by Katie Horowitz's research of drag culture in "The Trouble with 'Queerness': Drag and the Making of Two Cultures," which is largely premised on the argument that "there are many distinct, frictional, and even oppositional cultural practices that constitute the various identity categories subsumed under (and often eclipsed by) the queer banner" (304). The conclusions counter the heteronormative assumption that all identities differing from the heterosexual matrix could be pigeonholed. However, her study specifically reveals the heteronormative base in performing trans identities. In recent decades, individuals whose sexual orientation differs from heterosexual have been collectively labeled, in an affirmative sense, as a community, subculture, but also as the counter public (Davidson 18). In *Queer Commodities: Contemporary US Fiction, Consumer Capitalism, and Gay and Lesbian Subcultures*, Guy Davidson refers to queer fiction as subcultural, emphasizing the post-liberation gay and lesbian culture "aimed at a gay and lesbian audience" (31) as "a key manifestation of the commodification of the queer world that intensified after 1970" (31). Davidson's study proposes that "it is difficult, if not impossible, to locate any historical moment in which gay and lesbian identities and desires may be meaningfully disentangled from commodification" (2). Thus, Davidson argues against the claim that it is capitalism that imposes the heteronormative as such, and subsequently homophobia, since the need for the production of workers is already traditionally regulated by it in the form of the nuclear family (2). Davidson's view is that contemporary queer identity is shaped by the commodification of its features due to the capitalist interest to fracture and expand markets (6). The promotion of

“polymorphous” or “promiscuous” desire” (Davidson 6), associated with the transgressive margins and homosexual identities, represents an expansion of the market. It is Davidson’s observation that the celebration of the commodification of queerness produces queer identities by means of exemplification and subsequent identification that provides a useful interpretative angle for the performance of gender explored by Horowitz. Her study of drag, as “the connective tissue between the political and the performative” (Horowitz 305) – kinging and queening as modes of performance by transmen and transwomen, provides the specificities of perceptions of masculinity and femininity from the position of the clearly marginalized identities sourced in heteronormativity.

Horowitz conceptualizes the female gender as one with “relative historical stability” (320), and especially in terms of its purposefulness in achieving “patriarchal and heterosexist ends” (320) in creating the division of power between the sexes. The woman is defined through a number of roles which involve distinct subordinate performatives and produce specific effects in social practices. Women’s bodies are regulated by the heteronormative in terms of their autonomy and physical appearance; therefore, the manner of dress and comportment are reflective of the socio-cultural norms. The gender roles assigned to women, especially those pertaining to the domestic space (daughter, wife and mother), dictate the framework of the identities available to women. They are located in the range between the socio-culturally heteronormative conforming identities, and the non-conforming ones, that is, the transgressive identities defined outside of the scope of the nuclear family, and thereby in the marginal spaces. The concept of femininity – complementing heterosexual masculinity – features as defining and crucial in the construction of the gender identity ascribed to the ideal of the heterosexual cis-woman. What is historically implied by the concept, and naturalized through social practices, stands in opposition to masculinity as the dominant characteristic of the ideal heterosexual cis-man. Clearly, heteronormative discourses propagate these concepts as inherent in sexual difference and normalize them through socialization based on gender. Jeffrey Weeks’ observation of the paradoxical resilience of sexual and gender categories and the heteronormative production of

transgressive identities could lead us in the direction of interpreting queerness as a counter-effect or a contraindication of the regulating norms in society. In that sense, sexuality and the building of identities in social interaction based on sexual disposition appear to be almost rebellious acts against an imposed rule, which further implies that sexual orientation is a matter of choice – social, cultural or even political, rather than a biological disposition regardless of sexual difference. However, the heteronormative does not create *other* sexualities, but rather labels them, through its discourses, as transgressive. Casey Charles suggests that “[queers] not only present a continual threat to a heterosexual inside that defines itself in relation to an ostracized outside,” but that, “inside has also historically dictated the nature of queer subjectivity itself” (196).

Drag, as a performance of gender, operates within the heteronormative in its enactment of the discursive creation of gender. In its subjective renditions of a spectrum of values assigned to genders by the heteronormative, the experimentation can both maintain the stereotypical constructs of gender and expose its artifice. In queening, which involves biological men assuming female identities, Horowitz particularly notices the fixedness of ideas about the feminine and hegemonic femininity as paradoxically insisting on “upper-class subjectivity” (307) and “the invisibility of real-world social structures to reinforce the illusion of their own celebrity” (308). In queening, “the hegemony of celebrity and glamour . . . effaces categories of difference like race and sexuality” (308), but insists on the fantasy of superiority, dominance and distance between the audience and the queen. As Horowitz points out, the aspect of sexuality in queening is abstract, “aimless and objectless” (308), as its appeal is concentrated in the aesthetic appeal and “a visual lexicon of sexual desire (skimpy costumes, explicit banter, suggestive dance moves)” (309), merely suggesting the potential of the (heterosexual) sexual act and fantasy. Commenting on the “queens’ proclivity for dominant forms of femininity” (309), she describes the created queen identities as characterized by “a default heterosexuality” (309). The female persona – the queen’s identity – is based on the aesthetic taste of the heterosexual cis-man, and simulates an experience that is difficult to categorize within the applied and emulated heteronormative discourse. The author suggests

that, by “casting themselves as uniquely skilled service providers” (Horowitz 307), queens bypass the expected dependence on the generosity of the audience. However, the mere illusion of the performed hegemonic femininity, and the adherence to the oversexualization of the feminine according to the desire implied by the socially unrestrained heterosexuality, suggests that, in their marketing of the drag-identity, they depend on the commodification of the body that simulates the heteronormative commodification of the woman. In a manner, the drag identity endorses the commodification of the feminine from the (still) privileged position of the biological male who can take off this identity at will. Kinging, the practice of biological women assuming male identities, can be contrasted to queening in its fluid understanding of masculinity, or its impossibility to achieve the same effect as queening. Whereas the queens’ hegemonic femininity is manifested as the norm of the “straight, white, wealthy, able bodied, and, regardless of domestic and career choices, unambiguously female in appearance” (Horowitz 306), kings additionally express masculinities deviating from the hegemonic norm, such as “androgyny, homosexuality, and disability . . . and ‘marginalized’ . . . those intersecting with minoritarian racial, class, and ethnic identities” (307). Unlike queens, kings show “willingness to submit to the audience’s demands,” which “is consistent with the non-hegemonic forms” (307). The contrast between the two practices, or subcultures, resonates with the heteronormative positioning of the cis-genders. The questions that arise from Horowitz’s observations of the arts of queening and kinging reflect Weeks’ claim about the pervasive and persistent nature of sexual and gender categories even in subcultures that reject them. Queening replicates the heteronormative pattern of female objectification in the commodification and the exploitation of the fantasy of the female body. On the other hand, the kings’ assumption that by the creation of the male identity the power of the heteronormative is usurped falls short since the created masculinity necessitates modification in order to be commodified.

Contemporary Queer Representations in Short Fiction

McNulty's "Monsoon Season" begins with Jess, "[lying] bloated and raw on bed six in a shared ward of Phuket International Hospital" (1). With bloody stitches and a stent in her newly-installed vagina (2), Jess is suffering the postoperative pains of gender reassignment surgery, wondering if the doctor has "just split her body apart, or sewn her back together" (2). In the process of recovery, and the final stages of transitioning, Jess contemplates the transactional nature of her romantic relationships in the context of the female identity she has built: "Despite years of vitamins, hormones, lipo-, hippo-, and laser therapy, Jess had never held a lover. . . . Men who'd fuck anything in a short skirt, yes. She was their shape-shifting Queen Street tranny. Fuckable. Transgressive. Freak. Subject, object, verb. No agreement" (McNulty 3). This identity is based on the emulation of stereotypical femininity – the desirable form of physical beauty – in biological and transgender women. Jess' hormone-infused body necessitates layers of concealer and makeup to achieve the desired appearance, yet it is concurrently the pinnacle of medicine in its capacity to hold the Neo-Vagina (13) – "[moist], elastic, hairless . . . the benchmarks" (12) of her surgeon's profession. However, the existence of "a glamorous new entrance after a lifetime of exits" (13) simultaneously awakens excitement and doubt in Jess for "[she] was the penis in a one-act play. Had a penis personality. . . . Female or male?" (12). The internal conflict between the homosexual male and trans identity, and the new, technically heterosexual, identity is intensified by her mother's rejection of her female appearance (McNulty 19), and the overt contempt she encounters in her former trans community. It is the envy of the mother at the youth and beauty of her trans daughter that acknowledges Jess' female identity, which ironically underscores the heteronormative standard of desirability necessary for recognition. The protagonist's father leaves her mother for a younger, and it may be assumed, more attractive woman, and now Jess is precisely the commodity that is sought by the heterosexual male. The protagonist's homosexuality is the grounds for the initial expulsion from the familial space by the father, and the process of transitioning into a woman is followed by the self-expulsion to the

margins as Jess' first experience as a recovered and transitioned woman, two months after the surgery, is on Queen Street, where she, as implied, potentially seeks a sexual partner. McNulty's story highlights the heteronormative view of women and the misogyny underlying the perception of the female gender and womanhood, defined from the (still) privileged position of the cis-male. The process of Jess' transition, from its beginnings to the postoperative contemplations about the nature of the new organ, reveals that homosexuality does not inherently repudiate the heteronormative, but rather that it internalizes it. The transgender woman's appeal goes beyond the faulty biological model, as it can be enhanced and adapted in such a manner that pleases the eye and the male organ. Neo-Vaginas become faces whose size, shape and lips are designed to provide a service, and represent not only an accessory, but a resource.

Campbells' "Probabilities" portrays the tension between the heteronormative and the sexual identity of the protagonist, from his early twenties up until his forties, who practices his (homo)sexuality in the enclosed space of a park. This space where "[men] go . . . at night to be with other men" (170), is where he returns to remember the experienced, and otherwise lacking, intimacy, in anticipation of death:

For a few short summer weeks in St. John's it is warm enough to be out at night and the darkness welcomes them, hides all the things that matter in their daytimes: the color of their hair and the clothes they wear to work, the scar on their cheek and the place they are from. These things don't matter in the park because they slip into the shadows with the men, disappear into the grass and the trees next to the statues where the men gather at night. (Campbell 170)

"Probabilities" gives an account of homophobia directed at the gay man who is first violently forced to leave his small town as his sexuality is exposed. Later, as a university professor, Jeff separates his (secret) private and professional life in occasionally *performing* his homosexual identity in the enclosure of the park, which is where he contracts HIV. After several years of abstaining from the practice, in a moment of recklessness spurred by alcohol, Jeff ventures into the park and engages in a sexual encounter with a stranger whose distinct voice and pronunciation he recognizes as typical of his hometown. Shockingly, a few weeks later, he

recognizes it while calling out his students' names for class attendance. Understanding his responsibility in informing the young man about the diagnosis and the probabilities of an infection, Jeff is torn by guilt and fear for his position at the university. The young student is incidentally the son of the homophobic man whose presence allowed Jeff to identify his sexuality, but whose violence placed him in the hospital and drove him out of town. On the one hand, Jeff cannot allow himself to openly ask the young man about the encounter at the park – out of shame, but also fear. However, he observes him as his own mirror image, anticipating that the homophobia he must have experienced from his father would lead him into the direction of internalizing negative attitudes about homosexuality and shame, and into unsafe sexual behavior in the darkness of the park. With his sister, Jeff patiently visits the park, and, sitting on a bench, they wait for the student to appear.

Cipri's "The Shape of My Name" explores the historicity of gender, sex, and sexuality in a story of family relations spanning more than a hundred years. In this piece of epistolary science-fiction, the narrator, Heron, uses his family's time machine to understand why his mother abandoned him, and to experience the unraveling of his identity in time. The story gradually reveals that Heron's mother, Miriam, refused to accept his transgender identity, which is reinforced in the story by her constant insistence that he should use his given name that evidently marks him as a woman. Upon discovering that his family can travel through time, Heron decides to go back to 1927 and ask his uncle Dante, the chronicler of the family, to erase both his given name and assigned sex from the record book. The act expresses Heron's desire to free himself from the name and sex assigned to him at birth, exposing the way in which heteronormative ideology constraints one's identity. Moreover, Dante tells the story about his aunt Lucia who stopped wearing dresses for suits, and simply had "a reputation for eccentricity" (8). Thus, Heron's time travels allow insight into how the categories of gender and sex historically change. His aunt Lucia cannot even conceptualize any deviation from the norm, but the discovery that his mother, born in 1977, had a homosexual relationship with her cousin Dara, reveals a shift in which homosexuality, unlike transgenderism, became culturally and symbolically recognized.

However, the fact that Miriam is able to go all the way to year 2321, and still show prejudice towards trans people, points to the rigidity of historically determined identities. Heron's time-travelling is an attempt at understanding, as well as reclaiming an authentic identity through the various context-bound views of gender and sex that simultaneously unmask the instability of these concepts throughout history and their resilience in each particular context, which limit the characters' understanding and acceptance of non-normative identities.

MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband" problematizes compulsory heterosexuality through the narrative of a young married couple faced with the prospect of the man's terminal cancer diagnosis, but also his shocking confession of same-sex attraction, and the woman's attempts at finding the perfect sexual partner for him, after failing to perform the masculine gender in order to become more *attractive*. Just like the protagonist in "Probabilities," whose homosexuality is confined to the discretion of the park, the husband in MacDonald's story comprehends sexual identity as a private matter (63), performing the heteronormative masculine gender in the marriage with a woman he says he does find "attractive," but "[kind] of the way you can tell a piece of art is beautiful without actually, you know, necessarily wanting to sleep with it" (64). The actual sexual orientation of the man does not affect the manner in which he fulfills the spousal role or contributes to the partnership, which implies the division between the subjective (authentic) and the socio-culturally imposed ideal. As he says, "You wonder: What kind of a man should my husband sleep with? I thought of me, but as a man, and realized maybe that was the point, that he wanted a 'not me'" (MacDonald 66). The invisible norm renders the protagonist of "Probabilities" transgressive in his pursuit of physical intimacy. At the other end of the spectrum, in MacDonald's story, the husband fully embraces the performative of the male gender, enters the socio-cultural and legal agreement of the heterosexual diad (nuclear family) with an individual of the opposite sex, choosing to disregard his same-sex attraction. The matter of the choice, however, is an illusion, for it pertains to avoidance of exclusion, punishment and public shame. Through this polemic about sexuality, "The Perfect Man for My Husband" attempts to deconstruct the conception of

gendered sexuality from the consciousness of the wife who finds herself binding her breasts and letting her body hair grow in order to achieve an appearance that resembles her own idea about masculinity.

Owomoyela's "Three Points Masculine" problematizes how society evaluates and quantifies the gender of the story's characters against their subjective identification, limiting them to particular social and political spaces. Moreover, it questions the existence of a homogenous queer and trans subculture, revealing conflict and animosity within. The narrator of the story, a biological female, identifies himself with the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. However, the perception of society is such that he is denied and excluded from the regular army based on the lack of three points on the masculinity test. Although fully recognizing his identity as a transman, the state, by quantifying someone's gender orientation on the masculinity/femininity scale, encloses the narrator within a limited space allowing him to only serve in the Civil Guard, and preventing him from fully performing his masculinity. Furthermore, the protagonist's desire to occupy the space of the cis-man is threatened by the introduction of John, a man who only poses as a woman without any socially-normalized feminine traits so that he could be a member of the Women's Volunteer Corps. John's desire to help people forces him to pretend to be a non-transitioned woman because society does not allow a man to serve in such a unit. Despite identifying as a man, John lacks all the components of hegemonic masculinity, especially physical prowess and aggression. John's non-conforming gender identity unsettles the narrator precisely because John reminds the latter of his own inability to perform the ideal:

John was in Isaac's group. She didn't look at me when we rounded our eight up, and I mostly ignored her. We just got in line and marched into the evacuation zone. I did notice she didn't walk like a girl learned to, didn't hold herself like a girl learned to. She might've had the GAT, but she was off.

Shit like that makes me check how I'm walking. Out here, no one was gonna come up and check my license, but still, it's habit, like.
(Owomoyela)

By observing John's physical appearance and behavior, which significantly deviate from the ideal heterosexual cis-woman, the narrator becomes aware of his own persistent need to perform and evaluate himself against the normalized ideal of cis masculinity. Furthermore, by fully embracing the socially-defined positions of the gender binary, the narrator's discourse incorporates elements of heteronormativity and misogyny without which the strictly and relationally defined masculinity he desires would not be possible. Consequently, this creates further tension and animosity against the threat posed by the destabilizing effect of John's gender performance on the narrator's part which dramatizes the heterogeneity of LGBTQI subculture and points to the existence of different positions that clash with one another, revealing vulnerability and marginalization within the subculture as well. This seemingly tolerant society in the story claims to recognize the fluidity of gender and sexuality, but fails to account for a myriad of different subjective experiences and performances of those categories.

Anders' "Don't Press Charges and I Won't Sue," another science-fiction story, problematizes the scope of gender and sexual subjectivity, as well as the ideology that aims to normalize individuals who do not conform to the rigid gender binary. The story begins with Rachel, a biological male who is now a fully-transitioned transwoman, captured by the Go Team and taken away to the Love and Dignity for Everyone facility. The name of the facility ironically points to a program, approved by the government, whose aim is to detransition all transgressive individuals by transferring their psyche, mind, and personality to a gender-suitable body. Thus, the facility forcefully invades the personal space of individuals and then detransitions them by performing surgeries that violate their bodily autonomy. Contemplating her coping mechanisms, including meditation, courses on trauma and self-preservation, and carving out a space in her mind "that *they* cannot touch" (3) for dealing with oppression and marginalization, Rachel realizes that the facility, as the most radical instrument of society, ultimately aims to erase any kind of space, both social and mental, where non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations might exist. As she explains, not being alone even when isolated by outside circumstances results in a complete dissociation

from her own identity. Additionally, the facility's standard procedure unmasks the ideology underpinning the entire society. Upon looking at the body which Rachel's consciousness will be transferred to, she notices that the dead man is incredibly muscular, with perfect facial features and a rough commanding voice implying masculine dominance. It becomes clear that the facility's and the state's ideology enforces normalization by replacing aberrant bodies with the ideal ones, further implying that biology is the sole factor that determines a person's gender and negates any kind of anti-essentialist or cultural understanding of these categories. The problematization of the notion of trans-identities and subjective experience of gender and womanhood, points to how those identities are caught up in the relational network between the heteronormative and its cultural significations. Rachel recalls the moment of the recognition of her gender identity, and sexuality – the identification with a transwoman, an actress in a pornographic film, in a scene with a muscular bald man:

The girl was wearing nothing but bright silver shoes and her body was all smooth angles and tapering limbs, and the one piece of evidence of her transgender status looked tiny, both inconsequential and of a piece with the rest of her femininity. She tiptoed across the frame like a ballerina. Like a cartoon deer. Watching this, Rachel quivered, until Jeffrey thought she must be grossed out, but deep down Rachel was having a feeling of recognition. Like: that's me. Like: I am possible. (Anders 7)

Rachel recognizes herself in the commodified object of the male heterosexual desire because the transwoman depicted in the film has all the traits of hegemonic femininity aesthetics. The movements of the actress, her penis, the comparison to a deer, and the qualities of the male actor, emphasize the process of queening, implying over-sexualization and adoption of the fantasy of heteronormative domination. The story raises the question of whether Rachel's search for self-definition is inflected by society's production of commodified objects of desire, or if she actually discovers a suitable expression for her inner experience of womanhood. In a sense, Rachel's actualization of her gender identity and sexuality is directly predicated on the acquisition of a body offered by cultural production or signification. The body-mind dichotomy is further

problematized when the story juxtaposes Rachel's description of her transition and the society's desire to normalize aberrant individuals by violently replacing their bodies. She describes her gender change as "landscaping: building embankments out of raw dirt, heaving big rocks to change the course of rivers, and uprooting plants stem by stem. Dirty bruising work" (5). The comparison points to the daunting and painstaking work of body engineering which aims to transform the body to fit the mind's conception of gender and sexuality. Taking Rachel's previous identification into account, the story questions the extent to which Rachel's own body modifications constitute an authentic expression of womanhood.

Ilo's "Of Warps and Wefts" explores the fluidity of sexuality and gender roles within marriage. The story is told from the perspective of Chime/Dime who describes their marriage with Ping/Ding. Double names denote their split identities and the different roles they can fulfill outside the constraints of their marriage. During the day, Chime assumes the identity of a possessive wife who is jealous of her husband being "another woman's wife" (1) and craves for a masculine husband because Ping possesses a number of feminine traits. During the night, Chime turns into Dime, a man married to a woman named Felicity. On the other hand, Ping, an effeminate man who is another woman's wife, becomes simply Dime's husband Ding. As the reader tries to understand their gender and sexuality, it becomes obvious that their own non-conformity and fluidity is split by the normative which limits their subjective experiences to the traditional gender roles within marriage, leaving the surplus outside of it. As one of the characters says to Chime/Dime: "Marriage is like an offer. It compels one to exist in two different worlds" (4). Thus, the normative defines the dichotomies of wife/husband, woman/man, homosexual/heterosexual and discursively defines the otherness of deviating identities that are enclosed in a space outside of these intersecting dichotomies. Consequently, the normative gives order to their otherwise fluid identities and distributes them within the scope of what is inside and outside marriage. Dime can only assume the roles of a husband and man in their relationship with Felicity, while Ping can freely adopt the role of wife in his relationship with Ikoro. Even the language Chime/Dime uses to describe their and

their husband's shifting identities points to the rigidity of the discursive practice that does not allow for any kind of overlapping or instability of well-established dichotomies.

Concluding Remarks

Whereas Richardson et. al. notice that queer writing focuses more on the significance of sexuality – (male) homosexuality (3) – as specifically contesting the signifiers of the Western culture in the century behind us, the analysis of this selection of contemporary short fiction points to the persistence of the historically established binary gender categories as relevant for the imagining of gender divergence in queer identities. Moreover, women and lesbians appear to be erased from the discourse of queer theory (Roof 51) as queer writing and theory focus on the manner in which sexuality, categorized within an array of binaries, “lesbian/gay, woman/man” (Richardson et. al. 11), enables the effects of gender and sexual categories. Imagining femininity within the range of queerness seems possible only in its fetishized form, which somewhat resonates with what Naomi Zack alludes to in “Can Third Wave Feminism Be Inclusive?,” that culturally constructed gender “[precludes] a universal cultural condition for all women” (203), including intersex and transgender individuals. The representations of trans and queer individuals do not merely contrast or invert the heteronormative standard, but rather investigate its socio-cultural conception. In their specific approaches, these stories explore the artificiality of gender performatives by offering contexts in which the normative is rejected or rendered obsolete. The stories likewise examine fictional contexts in close connection to the referential world in which the normative performatives are exposed as marginalizing and unsustainable. Although the stories unmask the historicity and artificiality of gender and sexuality, they also problematize the resilience of the heteronormative to discursively produce and determine a variety of queer and trans identities.

“Monsoon Season” explores the subjective experience of womanhood and femininity as a process underscoring the artifice of gender and the negation of any substantial universality of it. McNulty

dramatizes how aesthetic modifications ultimately conform to the heteronormative standard that regulates the bodily autonomy of the woman and denies her authenticity under threat of social expulsion. The protagonist's idea about womanhood is based on the male-defined aesthetic perception of the female body – her own perception as Terry – and the heteronormative discourse that allows cis-women to subordinate femininity, and transwomen the potential of the hegemonic one, yet on the margins. Similarly, “Don’t Press Charges and I Won’t Sue” exposes and deconstructs essentialist definitions of gender, dramatizing how the process of queening creates bodies and identities that rely on the emulation of hegemonic femininity as a commodified object of male heterosexual desire. The woman’s identity is fragmented not by her own doing in performing the gender, but by the manner in which the performative denies her authenticity in performing her own body, which also, ironically, highlights the (historical) complementariness and co-extensiveness between the heteronormative and queer identities as constructs. Underlying this system are the heterosexual male’s privilege to the discourse motivated by misogyny. It is questionable whether the hegemonic version of femininity performed by transwomen is an act of female empowerment, or yet another instance of misogyny since, being aimed at the heterosexual male, it clearly objectifies and commodifies the simulated female physique. “The Perfect Man for My Husband” and “Of Warps and Wefts” deal with the division between the subjective (authentic) and the socio-culturally imposed ideal of gender, gender roles and sexuality. In these stories, the characters are forced to embrace the performative of both the female and male gender, and to enter the socio-cultural and legal agreement of the nuclear family. In turn, aspects of their subjective identities are excluded from the discourse of heteronormativity and domesticity, and subsequently forced to exist in marginalized spaces outside the norm. In addition, “Probabilities” explores the tension between heteronormativity and homosexuality, the outcome of which is the practice of sexuality in enclosed spaces, implying vulnerability not only to the internalization of hostile attitudes about homosexuality and shame in the face of marginalization and homophobia, but also to physical harm. “The Shape of My Name” and “Three Points Masculine” challenge the

notion of a unified trans subculture by pointing to tensions and conflicts arising from different positions within non-conforming identities and their relation to the norm. Cipri's story exposes the historicity and arbitrariness of the categories of gender and sex, and dramatizes how the old patriarchal notions still inflect modern conceptions of identity. In "Three Points Masculine," the relation between the trans identities that identify with the heteronormative ideal and those that do not possess or express all the socially-desired traits of their target-gender exposes the misogyny that underlies the perceived ideal.

The selected contemporary short fiction highlights the heteronormative basis in the process of creation of queer and trans identities. The performative of gender and the dichotomy of the gender experience imposed by patriarchy, excludes divergence by means of marginalization by disallowing authentic queerness. Not only is the rejection of the male privilege in trans identities punished, but so is the femininity appropriated by masculinity – transmuted into its abject yet fetishized form, and commodified. The discursive mechanisms that define the heteronormative definition of gender proscribe queer and trans identities, and the access to modifying the experience of gender, exiling the transgressors to the social and economic margins. In "Queer(y)ing the 'Modern Homosexual,'" Weeks even stresses the paradox of the "apparent resilience of the sexual and gender categories and subjectivities as performatively ritualized and lived" (526), as they not only persist, but also "[affirm] a new identity position – that of the transgressive queer" (526). This suggests the fixedness of these categories and their exclusive inscription onto sexual difference, so that what Weeks terms as *subjectivity*, pertains to the individual performative effects, but only as outcomes of the complexity of the various identity dimensions the heterosexual norm regulates – through socio-cultural, economic and political practices.

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