

## Queer Reflections

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Presented with the opportunity to reflect on my writing's "queerness" I find it necessary to begin with the word itself, with how simultaneously fraught and rich it is. Though my work is often frankly homoerotic, my understanding of the "queer" is more slippery than that. For me the queer is a complicated thing; though always rooted in desire (I do hold to that), it is never reducible to sexuality. Rather, I understand desire in a very large sense here, as a powerful longing for, or drive towards, something: a person, a sensation, an object or other. And I see queer desire specifically as being, among other things, a longing that— while moving toward its object — interrogates the contexts through which it moves, which is to say the very spaces that make it intelligible. This will to trouble the frontiers of meaning is one of the defining characteristics of the queer for me in all its forms. In terms of the social or political arena for example, queerness contests normativity (hence the notion of the heteronormative as a structure of power); in gender and sexuality, it disrupts any number of binaries, and — in some cases — even understandings of what might constitute a *sexual act*; in aesthetics, it becomes a questioning of categorical conventions such as genre, the canons, or notions of "good taste"; one only need consider the idea of "camp" or note how often queer art is spoken of as excessive, as "too much," for this to be made clear. Wherever it ventures, queerness troubles categories. It is this movement towards, and play with, boundaries that makes queerness both valuable and fascinating to me because the idea of limits is central to my work in all its iterations. Specifically, I believe the central function of limits, to define space, is *inseparable* from their

transgression and my fiction, poetry and essays tend to explore the formal, thematic and social implications of a paradigmatic case of this: the divide separating experience from the account we give of it. Although a great many other themes and interests also drive my writing, I focus on the space between – and joining – experience and its account because I believe there is no richer vein to mine; this juncture brings language and flesh together in a particularly privileged way while foregrounding the most complex and ambiguous constituents of “character.” Moreover, this division, however carefully policed, is unclear even as it shapes what we understand as our consciousness or self-awareness, and, by extension, our sense of those who are *like us*, our community – and, it creates meaning. Recounting and explaining experience is how events move beyond being mere *data* and are *made* meaningful. Despite this, much of the thought about how texts accomplish this end: how they define, shape or embody the ways in which meaning is extracted from experience has left me unsatisfied as a writer. Therefore, in order to explore the largest implications of such processes, my work considers particularly radical instances, cases that test the boundaries of consciousness and its expression: the body and its inscription; situations of danger and sexuality (there’s the more common understanding of queer again); and hallucinatory or visionary experience. In doing so, it examines the lives of characters whom might be viewed as “outsiders:” as operating at the margins of – not simply ordinary society – but what is often called for convenience’s sake “consensus reality.” It is at these extreme points, these outlying regions, that one may not only discern the shape(s) of limits most clearly, but also best understand both their creative possibilities and their disciplinary functions.

This interest in the limit-defining and limit-shattering encounter of writing and experience takes a variety of forms distinct from subject matter in my creative research, and has been present in it from the beginning. My first published book, *Hovering World*, focuses on an

exploration of the possibilities available to narration by following, with close attention to phenomenological detail, a single day in the life of its protagonist – a 28-year old gay man – during which he receives a photograph of an angel in the mail. The novel blurs the boundaries between event and the account of event, between erotic sensation and its description, and does so with an attention to form that aims to underline the inherent ambiguities. This work attempts, in addition to its exploration of queer sexuality, to collapse the notions of the sequential that are essential to conventional narratives by situating the impact of the numinous snapshot in a world marked by a certain timelessness. This is partly, and paradoxically, accomplished by breaking the book into temporal sections (“5:07 PM”, “7:23 PM” etc.) of widely varying length so a single minute could run to a page and half of close narration of one perceptual incident while an hour could be dealt with in a sentence or two. The novel further highlights this by formal structures such as beginning and ending with ellipses in an attempt to suggest the narrative act is never complete, but suspended in a field of equally complex experiential accounts and bodies of literature. Part of the aim of such textual strategies is to probe at the limits of the novel *as form* and the possibilities for narrating attention and experience.

My investigation of such formal and thematic tensions continues in later publications. My collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the Sky*, is comprised of a series of linked pieces following a group of urban/queer friends as they attempt to understand the impact of an event that is virtually elided in the work: it is never described or narrated. The event itself consists of a lie told by one of the circle to the rest of its members for reasons that are also left undisclosed. The collection endeavours to examine experience by removing certain elements of causality and allowing the emotional *effects* of a moment to occupy the narrative space entirely; it directs the attention not to what happens, but to how it feels. The reader’s experience is, as one reviewer

phrased it, “like a film consisting only of reaction shots” (Davisson 108) and thus they encounter, one hopes, the epistemological consequences of events in their most immediate form.

The novella *Subtle Bodies* is an imagined “biography” of French surrealist René Crevel whose account tests biography as a stable or naturalized genre. In this work, the conflation of imagined events and the historical record highlights the constructed nature of both, while the insertion of a number of “other voices” into the first-person consciousness of my “Crevel” figure’s account destabilizes the notion of narration as the act of a unitary consciousness. My most recent novel, *The City’s Gates*, takes these approaches still further by being constructed of a wide range of ostensibly “found” (though entirely fictional) texts, written by a variety of authors and set in a framework established by an imaginary “editor.” In this case, the reliability of the account, the author, and the fundamental category of the text are troubled not merely by their own status, but by their reliance upon one another. This is further problematized by key “story elements” such as the protagonist’s questionable reliability, which is highlighted by his self-consciousness, his ingestion of psychoactive substances, and the obsessive and reiterative nature of his observations.

In my volume of prose poems, *Conjure: A Book of Spells* I take another angle to some of these questions. It appropriates the generic convention(s) of traditional *grimoires*, the sorcerers’ manuals of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and foregrounds their nature as verbal artefacts. The book consists of a series of “spells” with titles like “To Become Invisible” or “To Influence a Powerful Figure,” but each of the texts consists of a “magical recipe” that includes both traditional elements such as the acquisition of obscure ingredients and more self-consciously literary components like an incomplete, fractured narrative and a lyrical positioning of the speaking subject. This synthesis of different registers of writing alludes to the

performative aspects of language that necessarily adhere to the casting of spells while highlighting the extent to which this too is a matter of *account*. By doing this, the book seeks to bring together various technologies for articulating experience without the attempt to fix that synthesis in any particular generic space.

My critical writing also tends to focus on limit-forms, language and the embodiment of consciousness. I have written essays on queer body art and its debt to ritual and biographical impulses (in “Willing Flesh,” for example) as well as text-based visual art’s exploration of language’s materiality (“Hanging in Mid-Air”) and conceptual art’s strategic use of “absent” or partial narratives (in my survey essay/review of Daniel Olson’s work, “Spectral Light”). Frequently, my analyses in these articles have turned around aesthetic and political issues that are closely related to those of my creative writing.

So, much of my work does contain a forthright presentation or discussion of gay sex and explores its formative role in a particular kind of gay male subjectivity, and its elaboration in cruising and the creation of the sort of sexual communities Patrick Califia has characterized as “The City of Desire.” (205) That said, it is queered in other ways by the deliberate deployment, elaboration and transgression of various linguistic, psychological, social or generic limit-functions, which I believe expands and enlarges the erotic surface content by extending its charge to a broader range of experience. Of course, all this concern with narration, language and limits evokes the question of their shared underpinnings: perception itself and the necessarily attendant matter of subject position, since all perception is perspectival, particularly outsider and queer perception. As Halperin remarks, queerness demarcates “not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.” (62) This positionality affects a text’s efforts to situate itself on every level of the discursive field from questions of representation, to issues of affect and problems of

genre. Further, the matter of position and perception raises, *pace Mulvey*, the question of the gaze and the impact of the specific kind of outsidership implicit in the desiring perception of a homosexual man, because it is turned towards something like *the self*, which is to say something analogous to another subject rather than an object. This intuition is not, of course, unrelated to Radical Faeries founder Harry Hay's notion of "subject-SUBJECT" consciousness, (254-264) but the tradition runs much farther back in the genealogy of the queer subject than this; "*Je est un autre*" wrote Rimbaud, for example – a queer's queer if ever there was one – with flawless prescience. Such speculations, which also haunt the psychic makeup of my characters, and the textual fabrics that lend them shape, evidently disrupt many psychoanalytically inflected models of desire. One must note in this still more ways in which queerness troubles conceptual boundaries. Queerness *détourne*s the notion of desire as always directed to towards some perceived *lack*, and affirms the possibilities of a longing to intimately encounter something separate from oneself in which one nevertheless recognizes something of the *self*, or alternatively, in favour of an understanding of how the self can contain or participate in *otherness*. This is a perspective that doesn't see the distance between the "I" and the "strange," but the connection between them. Which of course, brings us back to the queer's tendency to explore and transgress boundaries with which we began; here is a collapsing of the horizon and the mirror. Of course, as a writer of fiction and poetry, I don't pursue this as a purely theoretical question, much less a therapeutic one, but as an interesting story to tell. Hence perhaps the strange overflowing of consciousness/self-consciousness that is so much a part of my work with its debts to both surrealism and queer culture.

Which leads me to a recent recognition regarding how many images of liminal space are present in my work. While bringing together texts published in various journals and anthologies

over the years for my second collection of short stories *Beginning with the Mirror*, I was struck by the insistent presence of transitional spaces and certain kinds of surfaces: doors, windows, opaque glass and mirrors. In these stories any number of characters reflect on their sense of themselves and their place in the world in passageways and before reflective surfaces: boundary places. Paradoxically, although these moments are often occasions of self-contemplation, they are also often moments in which the characters attempt to *work themselves free* (of situations, perceptions, conditions, identities) and to move past the ordinary boundaries – physical, social and psychic; they attempt to transform or create something new. Once again one finds a queer embrace of self and otherness simultaneously, or of *self as otherness*: the dialectic of the embrace and the transgression, which leads me to another thought regarding my writing. If literature is, as is so often said, a kind of mirror we hold up to the world, my mirrors may be a little closer to those found in legends – another broken frontier – less ones we look at, than one we *pass through* and into a different world, one infinitely recognizable, but somehow also indefinably, “other.” That’s very queer indeed, and a touch utopian. Still the pairing doesn’t trouble me. After all, and here I yield the nearly final word to the late José Esteban Muñoz: “Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative [...] an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.” (1) And I think that is a frontier well worth the crossing.

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