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*Boys Like Her: Queering Gender, Queering the National Body*

*These stories are about identity, about peeling off labels and slipping across borders to get at our own truths, to write them down and lay ourselves open on the page. These stories are true, except the ones we made up. They are written by four women, except when we’re not.*

– Taste This, *Boys Like Her: Transfictions*

The year was unclear, but certainly within the few years preceding 1998. Four young performance artists piled into a borrowed car and headed from Seattle to the Canadian border, hoping to lay their heads down on their own pillows in their own homes in Vancouver that night. All four are documented Canadian citizens, and they were prepared for this border crossing to the utmost extent, yet they still had their anxieties: “We had rent receipts, phone bills, proof of employment and paperwork for cigarettes we had bought and declared. So why were we all so nervous? We were clean. Just four upstanding citizens going back home to resume contributing to the gross national product” (Taste This 17). The problem is that they aren’t “just four upstanding citizens” in the eyes of the state; they are four people whose genders and sexualities cannot be read as normative – there's Anna, the self-declared “brazen femme,” then there are Zoë, Lyndell, and Ivan, each variably genderqueer and variously covered with tattoos and/or piercings. Collectively, they operate as queer performance troupe “Taste This”, and they did not even come close to measuring up to any heteronormative white middle class family ideal – not only were they too queer for the border guards in respect to their gender performance, but they
were also queer in the suspicious kind of way, in the failure to measure up to the standard kind of way, in the not-middle-class, not-straight kind of way.

As they attempted to enter Canada, despite their documentation and prompt responses to the border guards’ questions, they were waved to the side and their most personal possessions were strewn about the pavement as their vehicle was inspected. Although they had been nervous about the border crossing, they were at the same time shocked that they were being detained and searched. Ivan recounts, “We had followed all the rules: Lyndell and I were looking about as respectable as we ever will, both wearing clean white button-up shirts and black Levi’s. Anna was proudly Canadian in her kilt and long socks, and Zoë was wearing that nice-guy, face-splitting smile of hers” (Taste This 17). No matter how nicely they dressed, how big they smiled, or how authentically they performed a particular type of Canadianness, they were not following all the rules, and it was not going to be so easy for them to cross this border.

This incident serves as a very real reminder of the policing that occurs at the US-Canada border, even pre-September 11, 2001, after which Canadian border policing became even tighter. When a car full of queers attempts to cross a border that is regulated by the law when their bodies are not legible in a system which attempts to fix and sex subjects according to a rigid binary, they become immediately suspect. And in this case, their whiteness cannot outshine their queerness. As the law sees it, “Four queers crossing the border in a borrowed car, four smiling and self-satisfied queers, were most certainly up to something” (Taste This 18). But what is it that made this group of “four smiling and self-satisfied queers” suspect? Was it the fact that they were driving a borrowed car? Was it because they were read as queer? Or was it because in their queerness, they could not be read at all? While many factors could have played a part in this story, I suggest that there is something more than homophobia to account for here;
it is not a fear of what is thought to be known about the queer person, but rather a response to the threat posed to the law and to the state because the queer body cannot be read accordingly. In other words, I am asking us to pay attention to the threat and the fear of the unknown, the illegible, and the invisible – that which is not given-to-be-seen on the queer body.² It is this very uncertainty about the body and its continual crossing of borders real and metaphorical that threatens the law and the nation.

This particular border crossing comes in a collection of narratives translated from the group's stage performances into a book entitled *Boys Like Her: Transfictions*. The performers not only journey across international borders, but also continually cross and recross genres of artistic expression (stage performance to writing to photography)³, as well as borders drawn around gender and sexual identity. They write, “The world where our stories exist does not have hard and fast boundaries. It is a place defined by our own queries, where genre, gender and generations are malleable, and where transgression is often the way to transformation – transfictions” (14). Because boundaries are continually transgressed, the text remains in constant motion, transforming how we think about identities, localities, and travel. These performers/writers continuously queer bounded spaces and places, and they are able to navigate a world in which they can create a real transformation of space and body in order to imagine something more malleable (that is, queer) in order to evoke a transformation in how we view knowledge as that which is visible, and to call attention to the threats that lurk in the invisible, especially when it comes to figuring the nation and the citizen’s body and home within the nation. As I briefly take us on a journey through this text, I will continue to work through the connections and disruptions between the boundaries of body and the boundaries of nation, as this cacophony of narrative voices figures the unhomed queer at the national border.
As the quote that began this paper states, these stories were “written by four women, except when we're not” (Taste This 14). From there, with the text constantly shifting between feminine and masculine pronouns to describe the same person, the stories reveal shifting gender identities and performances—a story of a “sex change” when a little girl chooses to pass as a boy just so she doesn't have to wear her uncomfortable and restricting bathing suit top, a story of two women who become ‘boys’ in pursuit of the love of a high femme, a story of a life-threatening encounter at a gas station in small-town America because of queer appearances via dyed hair, tattoos, piercings, and unclear gender signifiers. And then there are the photographs: images of a bare chest, nipples pierced, and a tattoo across the chest that reads, “not girl.” juxtaposed with the image of the back tattooed with the question, “girl?” images of breasts being bound with saran wrap, arms raised with hairy armpits exposed, the image of a woman straddling a pair of gender neutral hairy legs, the shot of a frumpily dressed Zoë standing in front of a wall painted with the unfinished sentence, “I AM A”. These stories and images narrate the constant gender crossing of the performers themselves, refusing to be bound by any one strictly defined gender, ever shifting between gender and not-gender, always bearing the possibility of the not, so that their bodies become illegible before normative society as well as before the law.

It is this illegibility, this ever shifting nature of the queer body that unbounds it, as it refuses to be demarcated according to the strictures of Western, and in this case North American, gender definitions that restrict bodies to the categories of man and woman and correspondingly male or female. Taste This not only breaks out of these bounds, but also reveals the ambiguity of the very meaning of gender. In this sense, we might read gender here as tied to a network akin to Riki Wilchin's sense of the word, “in its widest sense – including sexual orientation, because I take it as self-evident that gay men are insufficiently masculine or lesbian women somehow
inadequately feminine. And I include sex, because I take it as obvious that what animates sexism and misogyny is gender, and our astonishing fear and loathing around issues of vulnerability or femininity” (Wilchins 11). If gender is that which is visible on the body and becomes inevitably linked to sex and sexual orientation via associated proximations of masculinity or femininity, then the queering of gender not only queers the categories of sex and sexual orientation, but also visibility itself. When gender is not given-to-be-seen on these bodies, which are reworking, redefining, and reperforming gender from page to page, stage to stage, and nation to nation, they become that much more difficult to mark, categorize, and police. When a high femme is in a car with three gender ambiguous people, not only can all of their genders or sexualities not be made into legal sense, but by association, her very sexuality becomes unclear – is she straight and is one of these people her boyfriend, is she queer because she’s sitting in a car with other people who may be queer, or is she something else altogether? The answers are uncertain, and uncertainty is disruptive. Full citizenship rights are not only denied to bodies that are marked as a threat to the nation, but also to bodies who cannot be marked, and in their very indeterminacy also threaten the nation.

This confusion, this uncertainty, this indefinity are what criminalize these bodies, or at the very least, make them suspicious. Not only is it confusion, but it is refusal – the queer body will not adjust to the system, to its borders between nations and proper boy and girl places. As Zoë remarks, “Confusing these guys is a crime. Being proud of the things about yourself that confuse them makes it worse (Taste This 113). As such, I argue that it is not simply that the members of Taste This are marked and read as queer – queer in the non-normative sexuality kind of way – that gets them hauled to the side for inspection. Rather, I suggest that this is something other than homophobia; it is a queerness in the suspicious, incomprehensible kind of way that
causes the guards to exert their power and respond to the threat posed to the law and to the state because the queer body cannot be read accordingly. It is this confusion that threatens the nation, the family, and the heteronormative home; these narratives exemplify exactly that fear of the ‘unbounded’ body entering a ‘bounded’ territory.

There is no room for transgression at the border. The only way through is to defer. Zoë argues:

To cross the U.S./Canadian border without incident is at best to look and act as though you never have and never would think of crossing any border, metaphoric or otherwise, without express permission of someone very official with a government-issued badge and uniform. Either that or you yourself have to actually own the border outright. If you do not own it, transgressions are not allowed. (Taste This 113)

Queer bodies will never look as though they would never think of crossing any border, specifically those metaphorical borders around sex, gender, and sexuality, and it is dubious as to whether or not they will ever own the border. If transgression is not allowed at the literal border sites of the nation or within the familial home, then how does transformation ever happen; how are transfictions ever composed? The key is in transforming the violence enacted on the queer body into a productive politics. As Laren Berlant writes, “The queer body – as an agent of publicity, as a unit of self-defense, and finally as a spectacle of ecstasy – becomes the locus where mainstream culture's discipline of gay citizens is written and where the pain caused by this discipline is transformed into rage and pleasure” (155). The transformation comes in the revision of pain into rage and pleasure. It is this rage and pleasure that leads to creation – new homes, new families, and the courage to revisit and revise old ones. It is when the stories of queer pain are narrated on stages, in books, in paint, drawing, music, that they transgress. It is
the rage, the pleasure, and even the mourning that revise queer pain into transfictions – the stories where “transgression is often the way to transformation.”

Notes

1 While I think race and the whiteness of these individuals is an important factor in the story of border crossings, I regret that I do not have the space in this paper to take the question up more fully. However, this is an aspect of these narratives that I plan to address in a larger piece.

2 In *Dissappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* Duke UP, 1997, Diana Taylor writes, “the invisible is not just the specter that's there and not there, it's also that which is there but not given-to-be-seen” (33). I want to apply this to the body which may be read as queer, that is not-heteronormative, in such a way as to reveal what is so threatening about the queer body – it is not just that queers fail to reproduce the citizen and the nation, thus threatening the life of the state, but also that there is so much that is not known about the queer body, that cannot be defined because it cannot be seen, measured and taxonomically contained. Examples include, whether the body is male or female, whether the body performs or does not perform certain sexual acts, etc.

3 This brief description only begins to get at the multiple layers and complexity of this text that I am certain I inadequately cover in this short essay. The shift from the stage to the page and the utilization of photographs and textual layerings are significant, but unfortunately in the scope of this paper, I cannot thoroughly address them. Instead, I focus largely on the textual narrative itself.

4 Here I do not want to forget Douglas Crimp's important work on asking us not to forget the mourning that takes place even when queer militancy is raging. See Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *October* 51 (1989): 3-18.

Works Cited

