

Experiencing Gender

Experiencing Gender:

International Approaches

Edited by

Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco,
Beatriz Domínguez-García
and Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides

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To Pilar, always

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Gender is a disputed concept widely used in many different contexts, which encompasses a great range of human experiences or expressions of self and identity. If we understand gender as the socially constructed definition of female and male identity, it is necessary to uncover how it affects our lives, especially since gender has been understood as a key dimension of our personal experiences, of our social relations and of our cultures.

Especially worrying, however, is the fact that gender as a construct is bound up with power relations that still have an impact on the experience of each one as individuals. Indeed, Western patriarchal cultures have tended to “normalise” or neutralise culturally constructed gender roles by generating a binary logic by which men and women are described as opposites. This model of binary opposites polarises categories in order to make sense of the world and one’s identity. Women have traditionally been secluded in a secondary position within this system imposed by patriarchy, and have been defined as the “other,” the term that is considered as marginal or alien. Hence, within the polarities white/black, masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual, there is one term which is dominant and another one which is subsidiary, as French feminism made clear. One of the most frequently quoted sources for French feminists’ critique of gender binarism is H el ene Cixous’s *The Newly Born Woman* (1975). She reviews the hierarchical system of binary oppositions that organises the Western world and explores the sources of oppression of female consciousness, focusing on female sexuality and the unconscious. Taking into account the binary model, many theories have condemned the subordination of women in different discourses.

The importance of gender division for structuring or ordering social life and human experiences has been dealt with by the discipline called “Gender Studies,” which reached the status of independent discipline in the 1980s, meaning a shift away from the study of women in isolation to the study of men and women within the context of the social construction of gender. Social constructivists propose that there is no inherent truth to gender and that gender as sexual difference constrains feminist practices within a frame of sex opposition. The notion of sexual difference seems to ignore the fact that a subject is constituted in gender not only by this sexual difference but also by other factors such as class, race, ethnicity, relations,

etc. Concerned with these issues, Teresa de Lauretis, in her influential essay “The Technologies of Gender” (1987), defines the term “gender” as “the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalised discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life” (2). She is hereby affirming that the term “gender” describes accurately those behaviours and traits that are not inherent within the human being but that are socially constructed. In a similar vein, many contemporary gender scholars have privileged the concept of gender over sex when they analyse social relationships and life experiences.

Significantly, men have started questioning their natural—and superior—status in different social and domestic spheres. At the end of the twentieth century numerous debates around the issue of masculinity were taking place all over the world. They basically discuss the increasing need for men to understand their transforming world and urge them to think about gender issues. The discipline called Men’s Studies was developed as a consequence of earlier critical perspectives such as feminism and Gay Studies, which questioned for the first time the patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity. Some male liberation movements especially showed this need to revise the traditional concept of masculinity. Thus, feminism contributed to the creation of this new discipline as it made men aware of their involvement in the issue of gender inequalities and of their position in contemporary society. Specially, second-wave feminists of the late 1960s and 1970s (Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Elaine Showalter, Bella Abzug) opened up a new critique in the study of men since they “began to challenge the ‘cultural arrangements’, male power and maleist assumptions increasingly recognised as sustaining gender injustice.”¹ This influence has been admitted by many scholars who, like Harry Brod, Michael Kimmel or David Morgan, among others, argue that Men’s Studies developed “out of earlier critical perspectives, concepts, and methods developed by Women’s Studies and Gay Studies, in conjunction with the women’s movement, and the gay liberation movement” which, they argued, was based on dominance and not on complementariness.²

At the same time, the very idea of experiencing gender becomes notoriously contested in our contemporary “post-gender” context, where gender is no longer considered as a category from where to articulate and/or understand human experiences. Precisely, the idea that gender is

¹ Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 31.

² Brod, “Masculinity as Masquerade,” in *The Masculine Masquerade. Masculinity and Representation*, ed. Andrew Perchuck, et al. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 18-9.

culturally articulated has led many authors to talk about “genders” and to rethink assumptions upon which identities have been constructed. Indeed, postmodern feminism proposes the replacement of unitary notions of women and gender identity with plural conceptions of social identity.³ Ashley Tauchert, for instance, offers a model which she calls “fuzzy gender,” that is, “a conception that moves beyond the binary either/or, without collapsing into the chaos of free floating subjectivity in difference.”⁴ Gender is not totally essential, but somewhere in between.⁵ The term “gender” itself becomes troublesome and unstable if we take into account its artificiality and concern with deconstruction. Feminists like Judith Butler have sought to deconstruct binary systems by reconceptualising gender as unstable and performative. Gender theorising relies increasingly on a discourse that is sceptical about essences and the stability of meaning.

Given the great amount of research about gender identity, which accounts for the importance of these issues not only within academic circles but also in the public arena, the papers included in this volume outline the major modern debates about gender, setting them in a range of theoretical and political contexts. Taking into account the complexities surrounding the study of gender, the present volume gives a comprehensive understanding of gender in an international context. By focusing on diverse and varied critical approaches, it explores how gender identities are shaped by socio-cultural factors, bringing together different analytical tools in order to provide a map of how gender experiences are understood and/or represented in the arts and society. This way, gender becomes a useful tool from where to approach the social sciences, arts and humanities.

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⁴ Tauchert, “Beyond the Binary: Fuzzy Gender and the Radical Center,” in *Unseen Genders. Beyond the Binaries*, ed. Felicity Haynes et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 183.

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SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

HER HAPPY UNHAPPY ENDING: A FEMINIST ANTIRACIST QUEER WRITER REACHES HER FORTIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND TAKES A DEEP BREATH

HIROMI GOTO
WRITER, CANADA

The trouble was, her body was read before she was even born.... Everyone already knew the script before she knew it existed, and they applied the script to her and on her and for her. By the time she understood that such a script existed her body, her gender, her race, her sexuality, her social paradigm had been prescribed. She could not flee this narrative, not even in the reaches of her deepest most private thoughts because the pre-existing script had tainted her always already. The twisty workings of this illogical a priori identity construction haunted every social interaction, every family meal, every chance encounter with the courier delivery man standing by the checkout clerk returning her change room at the local gym bag slung over her shoulder remarks flung back, bitch, cunt, pussy, dyke, fag, chink.

She was a writer. Her tools were words. Let me use this power for good, she thought, having been fond of super heroes as a child (male super heroes, of course –the female heroes' powers were not as powerful), and knowing that words were powerful things. Let me write a world that is not but could be. Let my writing be an unwriting of the master narrative, the one that wrote me without my consent.

Writing, for me, has always been the best combination of artistic and political practice. I cannot separate the one from the other. To my mind every creative project that is written as a form to be shared with a public, or an audience, cannot help but be a politicised site because we cannot absent our political selves in the moment that is social interaction. Every social interaction is political. There is no neutrality.

We can't afford to affect neutrality. This is serious business. Violence against women continues in all strata of society, throughout the world. Women are still murdered in droves, forced into marriage, raped in times of war and plenty. From large scale acts of violence to the seemingly mundane, sexism is very much present in our lives. Every time boys are told to be "a man" and ridiculed for "acting like a girl," it is a moment that reveals the underlying sexist assumptions of that society which devalues and diminishes its women and girls, while simultaneously illustrating an ideology that behaviours are and/or should be "gender appropriate." We see evidence of this everywhere, in the news, at work, in all levels of schooling, at church, in the mosque, and in our own home....

When I attended an English faculty feel-good, morale-boosting tea, a young white male professor stated quite naturally, whilst telling an amusing story about his lacklustre squash game, that he "screamed like a girl."

I watched two female faculty members' lips tighten. A third woman was close to grimacing. I don't know what kind of expression I had on my face— I was observing how the moment would play out. (Really, it might be said, why must you take everything so seriously? The man was joking. But listen... at whose expense?) I was curious, because I was startled, yet again, that entrenched sexism had leaked out in a space I had considered more sensitive, if not conscious.

I parsed what I understood of the male professor's attempt at bonding with female colleagues: 1) he thinks a man ought to behave in a certain way, 2) he thinks there's a common understanding and appreciation of what "like a girl" signifies, and 3) he thinks there is something inherently amusing about the perceived difference of gendered behaviour being interchanged.

You are a man, I thought. Therefore, you screamed like a man.

Of course I understand that he was trying to entertain us (four women) by sharing a story about how un-macho he was, thereby, a kind of enlightened male ally, but the framework he chose through which to execute this story was sexism.... This is truly fucked up.

We are so very far from being anywhere near a social state that no longer needs to consider the negative effects and impact of gender stereotypes. Sexism remains deeply entrenched as a destructive and violent control mechanism as well as a manifestation of the worst kind of unthinking biological instinct (I can think of very few mammalian species that live in social groups that do so without some form of male physical violence and/or male physical domination toward its often physically smaller and weaker female and/or juvenile members, although this does

not preclude that female-to-female violence occurs as well). I am frightened that we have gained so little ground in deconstructing sexist, homophobic and racist structures in our societies. We've not come a long way, baby....

Yet the general mood today, in privileged circles of North America, is that we have somehow dealt with our long history of violence toward women and children (men are victims of this as well, but in different ways), minority groups and "identifiable others," and that we need not invest in this unneeded dialogue, especially since the environment is at risk through global warming, ecological destruction, and environmental degradation. This is the narrative that is now, and is the tremulous future. How can we invest in a "dated" discourse around sexism, and "special interest groups" when the entire population is at risk?

Doing feminist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic work reminds me of my experience of being a child at the beach, digging a hole in the sand. My goal was to dig a big and deep hole, but the longer I dug, the deeper I went, the more the edges came crumbling down, to fill in what I'd scooped out even as the water began to seep from below.

It can drive a woman to drink.

It can lead a writer to despair.

Drowning in the dirty water of a racist, sexist heteronormativity is not the ending I want for me, my lover, my sisters, my mother, my daughter, my son, my friends, my community –this is not an ending I wish for anyone. Not even George Bush.

My mother has often been troubled about what she sees as the depressing nature of my stories. (Luckily) she cannot read my work because she does not have facility with written English so I provide her with general summaries of my projects.

"That sounds very unhappy," she sighs. "You know me... I like happy endings. Why do you write such troubling things?"

I think of my mother's responses to my concepts as representational, in broad sweeping terms, of non-feminist women of her generation (born in the late 1930s) from a particular socio-economic background (In saying "non-feminist" it is important to clarify that I'm speaking from a North American perspective of feminism.). I understand that the "endings" my mother could consider "happy" involve a heterosexual marriage (with promise of children in the future), resolution (all narrative threads neatly tied up), and nothing unsettling to disturb the existing sexist, heteronormative, social fabric. That I would write against this grain and that she would read these narratives as "unhappy" when I write them out

of a strong desire to create my own “happy ending” strikes me as tragic, deeply ironic, sad and rather funny.

To locate the humorous within the troubled has been an act of hope and survival. And without it I would not be able to go on.

To write against the master narrative is an act that is simultaneously critical, political and creative.

The problem with writing against the master narrative is that the master narrative is always present as the normative force –it remains large unthinking and completely entitled. In writing in resistance to a force enormous and so encompassing, the gains that we make are at every moment at risk of crumbling inward –the water is always rising. Instead of writing from inside the hole at the beach as the inexorable tide comes in I would like to step out of the crumbling pit, toss my shovel aside, brush the sand from my knees and walk away.

I can only say this because I come from a privileged place where walking away is an option. I can continue living uncomfortably and unhealthily in a deeply sexist world without daily and immediate worry about my survival. This is a privilege that numbs and dulls, and I see this state of political disconnect reflected in the attitude of the masses.

Of course I think Disney has a lot to answer for....

I'm being facetious as well as completely serious.

Feature-length animated films from Disney encapsulate for me, the workings of the heteronormative, sexist master narrative. Observe, in a great many of their feature-length animated films, the absence of an active empowered maternal figure (the protagonists are mostly orphans), and that all of the “happy endings” for the “girl-films” figure a wedding or coupling of a heterosexual pair (*Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, ad nauseam). In the “mixed audience” category (*Aladdin*, *Lion King*, *Tarzan*), almost all of them also revert to a heterosexual coupled ending.

The social message that is being endorsed, disseminated, mass-produced and marketed (with a full line of merchandizing) is an extremely pervasive and powerful mechanism. And I have not even touched upon aspects of race, racism, and homophobia entwined in these master narratives, spirits help us all!

Disney often leaves me frothing, twitching in a distemper, and, needless to say, no one in my family wants to watch television programs and films with me.... This can be a lonely yet self-righteous place. Can't you see, I bellow into the night. Let the scales fall from your eyes! Oh, ye who are trapped in this oppressive regime! Don't you want to see a better world???

My teenaged children are very much involved with anime culture. Japanese animation and graphic novels, manga, are a growing global phenomenon and a certain kind of collapsed racialised identity of this medium intrigues and troubles me. For those who are unfamiliar with the trend, anime and manga are produced for diverse demographics. The range in material is similar to that of published fiction: there is something for everyone. From the loins of anime otaku/geek culture have sprung “maid cafés.” Maid cafes are establishments where an uber cute young woman dresses in a “French-maid-like” costume and serves her “master” upon his return (to the café). The usual fare offered is either tea or coffee and a modest selection of food items. The draw is not the food. The otaku goes to experience a role-playing scenario in which he is the “master of the house/mansion” (as opposed to a slave-owner) and can be served by an attractive girl who is his maid. Both my son and daughter are intrigued and drawn to this concept.

“Well, I said, “you realize that this is a form of fetish.” And proceeded to explain what I meant.

“Ugh!” the children exclaimed, at their mother who ruins everything.

“Don’t you find it rather sexist?” I asked them.

“Ugh, Hiromi!” my fourteen-year-old daughter exclaimed. “There are butler cafés too!”

I laughed.

My work as a sabotager of mainstream “happy endings” is obviously unfinished. Nothing has made this more clear to me than the grossly popular series of vampire novels written by Stephanie Meyers. My feminist senses were tingling when I first heard the premise of the novel and my skies darkened. Okay –let me be honest: I hated it before I read it. But, I’m a firm believer in knowing the enemy in order to defeat them (yes, a combative model) so I read my daughter’s copy of the novel (I don’t believe in censoring her interests, not even in maid café). “Ohmygod,” I groaned with dismay. “Oh, no,” I hissed. “You’re fucking killing me!” I shouted, as I read another absent-mother narrative about a girl who is so in love with Edward (Note: he’s a 90-year-old virgin vampire who goes to high school, so he’s not only a paedophile, but also extremely emotionally *delayed*.), who would love to suck her blood just as much as he would “love to love her, baby.” Throughout the novel, in which there is very little plot or character development, he saves her from a fatal car accident, helps her when she faints, saves her from other vampires including his own adopted family members, etc. She is always in harm’s way –he saves her even as he’s potentially the greatest threat to her mortality. They are consumed by love for each other. They are nothing

without each other. Bella's desire for this all-consuming love reminds me of something, but I'm not sure what it is. Bella has no ties to family and community. She is a singleton who is made complete by a relationship to a male figure who is, at once, her saviour and her annihilator. Classic abuse narrative. And the girls are eating it up.

"Who do you think this novel was written for?" I asked my daughter.

"For girls who don't have boyfriends?" she guessed.

I see grown women everywhere reading this rubbish and I want to walk up to them and slap them. (Clearly, I am implicated, here, with my own violent thoughts. There is a profound difference, of course, between identifying a violent thought, and acting upon it.)

I went on date with someone I met on a lesbian networking website.

"I love the *Twilight* series," she gushed.

My heart sank. "Ummm, didn't you find it rather heteronormative and rather sexist?" I asked in a neutral tone of voice.

"No, not at all!" she chirped.

There wasn't a second date.

I tried to cast a deconstructive non-heteronormative reading of the text. In one scene, Bella and Edward lie together in a field of flowers as they talk endlessly about their feelings for each other. They were processing for so many pages, before any intimate contact, that I thought, perhaps, Meyers was actually exploring a Mormon-displaced display of the forbidden love of lesbians!

I *wish*.

I know that this is not what most school-girls and women in airports are decoding from the text.

I had the ambiguous privilege of sitting at a book table at Chapters (a mega-bookstore in Canada). My daughter was going to spend time at the mall that day.

"You could come by with your friends," I wheedled. "You could pretend you don't know me, and pick up the book and say, Wow! This sounds great. And way more intelligent than *Twilight*!" I coached.

"Don't you get it, Mummy?" my daughter asked (she only calls me Mummy when she is feeling superior). "People *want* stupid!"

I've published two books for children, and three for adults. All of my novels have a female Japanese Canadian protagonist. In my collection of short stories, almost all of the stories orbit Japanese Canadian subjectivities. I am writing a literary landscape that depicts diverse representations that reflects something of my lived reality (i.e. multiracial, complex, socially queer, critical).

My earlier work was very much located from a place of identity politics. This was in the early nineties and writers of colour were just beginning to take up space in the established Canadian literary canon. Now, in the twenty-first century, I'm somewhat bemused to find that my work has found its own niche in the academic arena. Good, I think, the work has application. It is generating discussion, especially among young students.

My first novel, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, was overtly speaking back to the master narrative, and in doing so claiming diverse representations of women of Japanese background in a predominantly white mainstream culture. Narrated mostly through the experiences of a granddaughter and her grandmother, not only was I seeking to dismantle the accumulated damage of misrepresentations of Asian and Asian Canadian women, I was also dismantling the colonizing structure of the closed narrative form of the novel, in which many of the damaging representations are housed.

Murasaki

Local Elderly Woman Disappears

Search Continues

Late Tuesday night, the immigrant mother-in-law of local mushroom farmer, Sam Tonkatsu, went missing during blizzard-like snow conditions.

"We're very worried," says Sam's wife. "We just want her to come home."

Local RCMP and neighbouring ranchers are combing the countryside, but weather conditions hinder their search.

"Cases like this are difficult," says Constable Norton.

"An elderly woman isn't likely to survive a single night during weather like we've been experiencing."

What is surprising is that most town folk were unaware that the old woman was even living with the Tonkatsus.

Foul play has been ruled out.

"What happened to your grandma?"

"She went back to Japan. She got sick of all this snow and dust and up and left. I don't blame her."

"What happened to your grandma?"

"She went ape-shit and was raving, frothing at the mouth, and she ran naked from the house screaming like the pagan she is."

“What happened to your grandma?”

“She started to grow fur all over her body and at first we thought it was a symptom of illness or something like she wasn’t eating enough so her body was compensating with fur to keep her warm but we found out she was actually a *tanuki* who had assumed the form of a woman so she could marry my grandfather because he had set her free from a trap and she wanted to thank him by becoming his wife, but now, she wanted to return to the wilds whence she came.”

I found out then, that everybody, including me, was always looking for a story. That the story could be anything. They would eat it.

...Mind you, the story can be anything, but there have to be details. People love details. The stranger, the more exotic, the better. “Ooooooh,” they say. “Aaaaaaaah.” Nothing like a freak show to make you feel normal, safe by comparison. “Tell us about the feet,” they say. “Did your grandmother have to bind her feet when she was little?” Actually, feet were never bound in Japan, but someone keeps on perpetuating this myth. It always goes back to that. The binding of the feet. Deformities. Ritual Hari Kari. Actually, it’s *harakiri* but go on saying Hairy Carrie for all I care. It’s not about being bitter. You’re invited somewhere to be a guest speaker. To give a keynote address. Whatever that is. Everybody in suits and ties and designer dresses. You’re the only coloured person there who is not serving food. It’s not about being bitter. You just notice. People talk race this ethnic that. It’s easy to be theoretical if the words are coming from a face that has little or no pigmentation. If your name is Hank and you have three blond kids, no one will come up to you in the Safeway produce section and point at a vegetable and ask, “What is that?”

I was standing in the ethnicChinesericenoodleTofupattiesexotic vegetable section of Safeway. Fingering, squeezing stroking Japanese eggplants for firmness, taut shiny purple skin and no rust spots. I love shopping. The touching of vegetables. Lingering of fruits and tap tapping my fingers on watermelon husks. Just minding my business and choosing eggplants.

“What is that, exactly? I’ve always wondered.”

I looked up from my reverie and a face peered down on me. A kindly face. An interested face.

“It’s an eggplant.”

“Oh really!” Surprisewonderjoy. “How wonderful! This is what *our* eggplants look like. They’re so different!” She held up a round almost-black solid eggplant. Bitter skin and all. She looked up at the handmade signs above the vegetables with the prices marked in dollars per pound.

LOO BOK	they read	BOK CHOY	SUEY CHOY
\$.89/lb		\$.49/lb	\$.69/lb

“What are they called in *your* language?”

I looked up at the signs.

“I don’t speak Chinese,” I said.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Sorry for what? I wondered. And there, right above the eggplants where all the other handwritten signs were:

JAPANESE EGGPLANTS

\$2.09/lb

I took the long and graceful eggplant I still held in my hand and smacked it smartly against the sign.

“Here. Here it is,” I said. And turned my back to examine *hakusai* leaves. Suey Choy in Chinese according to the Safeway produce staff. Leave me in peace. Let a woman choose her vegetables in peace. Vegetable politics.

(*Chorus of Mushrooms*, 88-91)

I do not think that we are done with identity politics, but the term itself needs to be adapted to the times. Words/concepts we create to bring fresh discourse into the old language of an established oppressive culture can be easily co-opted by the status quo that always seeks to undo the work of activists, feminists, community workers, radical thinkers. Consider the term, “politically correct.” How quickly it has lost activist agency and has become a word that is used sneeringly against any kind of expressed social consciousness. Proactive terms become terms of derision. In the same way, “identity politics” has lost its currency even as the necessity to speak to the issues which brought the term into existence continues to infect all our lives. I can envision no future where discriminatory practices are not used to subjugate and control groups of people based on certain “identifiable” markers, no matter how inaccurate or arbitrary they are. There will always be a need to consistently and rigorously dismantle the thought products of regimes (be they governmental, religious, institutional,

etc) whose legacy is based on racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism, ageism.

There is the double-bind of identity politics: on the one hand, not to name yourself could result in erasure or mis-naming, on the other hand, we can easily become framed and contained within the limitations of a vocabulary. On top of that, terms developed to speak back to master narratives are persistently re-framed to be wielded against the very people who created them in order to resist systems of oppression.

When I am invited to conferences I wonder what I am meant to represent. Do they see the sum of my parts? Which part of me do they want? I am, at once, cynical as well as pragmatic. Sure, I think some of my books are pretty good, and I'm trying to write narratives that are critical, distinct, empowering and political as well as artistically pleasing... but I'm acutely aware of how my body performs and how the performance is a particular event for each member of the audience. I am, at once, grateful and suspicious, around what I am representing for whom, and what I am participating with/in.

It is an honour to have my work discussed and to share my writing with a wide audience. It is an honour to be able to participate in a wider discourse even as we share our similarities and talk through differences. I am fortunate to have claimed or carved out a kind of postcolonial feminist space in Canadian literature, and sometimes I marvel that this is so. Yet... How am I meant to perform a post-colonial feminist queer representation when I step outside the borders of my body, my identity, my nation?

What do I represent for you?

Sometimes I am worried that I am meant to represent too much at once, and I cannot carry this load. It is, simultaneously, too much and completely inadequate.

The title of my talk has many qualifiers. To name oneself is also to frame oneself. If I am silent, then I am a blank sheet upon which others would inscribe me. If I speak some of my names, I am at risk of inscribing an identity that would contain me. The words, "queer," "feminist," "anti-racist" mark me and my representational body in particular ways. What must I embody? Would I choose these limitations if I had a choice?

There is no choice involved in the daily interactions with other people. As soon as a body enters a public, the body is read and decoded. Race, sex, gender, sexuality, "ability," size, class, etc.; even before we open our mouths to utter our words, to be heard, so much has been subjectively seen, and subjectively assessed. When I move in and among strangers at any moment I can be estranged from my own sense of self. That others have power to take me from myself enrages me.

An enormous gap exists between what one experiences of the world and what others have assumed of your experiences based upon what they think you represent.

I am passionately, politically and artistically interested in writing the missing stories. I'm not talking about trying to be "unique" or "original" (although as a creative and critical thinker I abhor the idea of recreating cliché); I am looking to fill the gaps between narratives that have colonised mainstream culture, the multitude of stories that exist between Disney's *Snow White* and Meyer's *Twilight*.

A significant missing element in Western literature has been consistent and integrated representations of the body. I find it peculiar that an art form that is often framed as "realistic" has so much realism missing. What could be more "real" than the workings and depictions of the body? Yet, time and again, unless the conceptual nexus of the narrative is tied to a body thematic (i.e. a narrative centred on illness, for instance), then, more often than not, the body is entirely missing. Most of the characters are thoughts disconnected from their body, a personality housed in a thought bubble of ideas and experiences separate from their sensorial world. I have read reams and reams of novels through childhood, undergraduate university literature courses, contemporary fiction for my own interest and pleasure, and again and again I find myself asking, "Where is the body?"

I find this absence to be extremely illogical and bewildering.

Our sensorial world and our perceptions of this world is the primary interface of our lives. Why, then, is the body vacated from so much of Western literature? As if our bodies do not matter? I persistently strive to bring to my narratives diverse realistic bodily depictions in all of its glorious and ignoble details. In my short story, "Tales from the Breast," a young mother negotiates the fraught and the uneasy spaces between social expectations of motherhood, and her lived experience:

"I'm quitting. I hate this."

"You've only been at it for two weeks. This is the worst part and it'll only

get better from here on," he encourages. Smiles gently and tries to kiss me on the nose.

"I quit, I tell you. If I keep on doing this, I'll start hating the baby."

"You're only thinking about yourself," he accuses, pointing a finger at my chest. "Breastfeeding is the best for her and you're giving up, just like that. I thought you were tougher."

"Don't you guilt me! It's my goddamn body and I make my own decisions on what I will and will not do with it!"

“You always have to do what’s best for yourself! What about my input?”

Don’t I have a say on how we raise our baby?” he shouts, Mr Sensible and let’s-talk-about-it-like-two-adults.

“Is everything alright?” his mother whispers from outside the closed bedroom door. “Is anybody hun—”

“We’re fine! Just go to bed!” he yells.

The baby snorts, hiccups into an incredible wail. Nasal and distressed.

“Listen, it’s me who has to breastfeed her, me who’s getting up every two hours to have my nipples lacerated and sucked on till they bleed while you just snore away. You haven’t even got up once in the middle of the night to change her goddamn diaper even as a token fucking gesture of support, so don’t you tell me what I should do with my breasts. There’s nothing wrong with formula. I was raised on formula. You were raised on formula. Our whole generation was raised on formula and we’re fine. So just shut up about it. Just shut up. Because this isn’t about you. This is about me!”

“If I could breastfeed, I would do it gladly!” he hisses. Flings the blankets back and stomps to the crib.

And I laugh. I laugh because the sucker said the words out loud.

3:27 AM. The baby has woken up. Your breasts are heavy with milk but you supplement her with formula. 5:15. You supplement her again and your breasts are so full, so tight, that they lie like marble on your chest. They are ready.

You change the baby’s diapers and put her into the crib. In the low glow of the baby light, you can see her lips pursed around an imaginary nipple. She even sucks in her sleep. You sit on the bed, beside your partner, and unsnap the catches of the nursing bra. The pads are soaked and once the nipples are exposed, they spurt with sweet milk. The skin around your breasts stretches tighter than a drum, so tight that all you need is one little slice for the skin to part. Like a pressured zipper, it tears, spreading across the surface of your chest, directed by your fingers, tears in a complete circle around the entire breast.

There is no blood.

You lean slightly forward and the breast falls gently into your cupped hands. The flesh is a deep red and you wonder at its beauty, how flesh becomes food without you asking or even wanting it. You set the breast on your lap and slice your other breast. Two pulsing orbs

still spurting breast milk. You gently tug the blankets down from the softly clenched fingers of your partner's sleep, unbutton his pyjamas, and fold them back so his chest is exposed. You stroke the hairless skin, then lift one breast, then the other, to lie on top of his flat penny nipples. The flesh of your breasts seeps into his skin, soft whisper of cells joining cells, your skin into his, tissue to tissue, the intimate melding before your eyes, your mouth an "o" of wonder and delight.

"Tales from the Breast" in *Hopeful Monsters*, 62-64.

Recently I visited a first year English class at Simon Fraser University that had included my short story collection as part of their curriculum. During the Q & A, a young woman spoke, not to ask a question, but to make a statement.

"At first I didn't like your writing," she said matter-of-factly. "But then I looked up your other books and read them, and I want to thank you for writing what you do."

"Thank you for sharing that with me," I responded. "But let me ask you a question. Why didn't you like the stories?"

"They made me feel uncomfortable. They were so gross."

I was pleased. I understood her comments to mean that the aspects and details of the body that I foreground and integrate in my narratives were pushing at the boundaries of her comfort level. This is a purposeful kind of unsettling, that demands a response. From this moment of uneasiness or destabilisation the normative is ruptured and in that break there exists a space for a new relationship with that which had been perceived as constant and unchanging.

The past several years much of my writing time has been directed toward fiction for youth. Younger, my intuition tells me. We have to reach them when they're younger.... So much of critical learning at the university level is about deconstruction, the undoing of the damage that's been done. Instead of breaking down, I would like to build up.... (My children's interest in maid cafes notwithstanding....)

Of course stories and novels require some kind of "ending." My happy unhappy endings will never satisfy or reassure my dear mother, who still wishes a happy ending for me, but only within the construction of her own learned grammar. In Japan there is a saying: "The nail that stands out is hammered down." I don't think this kind of thinking is exclusive to Japan, but can be found in most every culture. To be a feminist, queer, an activist, an agitator, a sabatouer of heteronormative culture, is to draw attention to

yourself in ways you might not long for. But to live in silence is not an option for me. Indeed, I do not see how it can be an option for anyone.

When I am vocal with my critiques, my deconstruction of oppression and sexist tyranny, my mother likes to state, with a measure of affection and resignation, “You’re so ill-tempered. But you’ve always been ill-tempered, even as a baby.” I think my mother imagines me, slipping out of her body, as a fully formed feminist, (that I am queer is clearly the fault of my ex-husband!) a case of a kind of temperament-inflected social determinism.

“Look,” I try to be gentle. “I’m just making my own happy ending. Don’t you want me to be happy?” I ask her.

“I want you to be happy,” my mother says sadly. But I know what remains unspoken, “...like everyone else....”

Then it comes to me.... Mother. The mother. Mother! Those loss-of-self “romantic love” narratives, of the ilk of *Snow White* and *Twilight*.... Bella’s consuming desire to be completely protected and loved by Edward, and to almost merge with him in terms of identity, was not only weird because of its irrational self-annihilative extremes, but because it reminded me of something that comes from a different realm of relationship. Bella’s behaviour and emotional need was reminiscent of what my children wanted from me when they were developmentally beginning to learn that they were separate from me – between the ages of two and three years old. As they began to understand that I was not a part of their being, their desire to be protected and loved absolutely by me, their mother, grew intensely strong. And as their understanding of my limitations as loving and all-protective mother grew their desire for me to be that figure grew even greater. (See Japanese psychoanalyst Doi’s groundbreaking book, *The Anatomy of Dependence*.)

Can a great many of those heterosexual romantic love narratives be a form of transference of the longing for Mother?

Is that a happy ending?

My ending is not my mother’s, is not my daughter’s, is not actually mine, because “ending” for me, in fiction and in my lived racialised, queer, feminist life, is actually not possible. Let us speak of “endings,” all possible streams, multitudinous tributaries entwined, to separate and flow through cracks and topsoil, through bedrock and underground channels to all converge in the sea. I will be the one at the beach, digging, going deeper and deeper until suddenly, the clumps of wet sand will cease being pitched onto the pile. A worn shovel will fly up over the crumbling edge.

I'll hop to the surface, sweaty and cross, and swipe the sand from my knees.

"Look," I'll say, after catching my breath. "I've been digging for so long I forgot.... There's a sea."

We'll both look out across the water, where the water meets the sky.

I'll take your hand and we'll start running, the sting of cold and salt, the spray and glints of light. We'll plunge into the froth, cool, cool as winter kisses, under the brilliant sky. In the rocking tide, in the buoyancy of salt. Beneath the glorious sky. Laughing.

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