

Transitional Selves

Possibilities for Identity in a Plurified
World

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First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-12543-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-49963-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-39624-6 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003396246

Typeset in Sabon
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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6 Transilient Identities

Creating Queer Fictive Narratives for Transmodern Cultural Realities

Gil Douglas

Fictional texts surface multiple ontologies for human identities in layered and intersecting narrative expressions of authorship. A queer trans capability, functioning in the virtuality of fiction, demonstrates that a perpetual state of becoming can be envisaged for pluralised narrative extrapolations of identity from fiction into reality. Transrealist narrative movements have cultivated a permeability in fictive frames which facilitates the creative expression of authorial identity into the text. Subsequently, a queering of identity narratives has emerged as a viable aesthetic when authoring multiple inclusive dimensions for character constructs, fostering a transilient capability when navigating fictive worlds. Contemporary audiences evince an appetite for queer transitional identity permutations in transnarratives with a fluid performative facility that works in a feedback loop between fiction and reality. This media-literate knowingness advances an emergent application of fictive transilience into real-world, lived experience for a cultural agency in the transmodern era, creating expressions of character that provoke innovative potentials for transitional human identities.

Modern and postmodernist texts have exposed multiple ontologies for identity constructs enacting performative narratives of selfhood within fictional contexts that reflect reality. Reality, then, reflects these fictitious elements in a constructivist comprehension of authored beings that suggests all identities are fictive and in production, where individuals negotiate identity options, always in a process of “becoming” (Butler, 1990). Transsexual people, already aligned with an understanding of fluid constructs for selfhood, exemplify this immanent fluctuating state, taking control of their presentations to reconstruct their self-selected identities. For Jill St. Jacques (2000, p. 116), this state of being describes an ontological condition that is:

Not man
 Not woman
 Not man-becoming-woman
 Not woman-becoming-man
 Transsexual

In a poststructural continuum such as this, gender identity is merely a hypothesis with no medium point, no central station and without any “fixed platform of operation” (p. 114). Similarly, in *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg (1996, p. ix), a transgender person, states that “there are no pronouns in the English language as complex as I am”. Despite the normative cultural constraints of language, transgenering people bridge and, in doing so, blur the boundaries of gender expressions, sometimes seeking to celebrate both the masculine and feminine facets of their being, or at the very least, determine which aspects they choose to express. Adapting this concept of transsexuality and transgenering to a wider context of transitory identity conditions suggests a perpetual state of becoming for human selfhood that straddles all gender, sexuality and identity determinants in a state of “trans”. For Feinberg, the state of trans—a state between and both simultaneously—embraces the whole spirit and essence of being to span all possible gendered, sexualised and culturally diverse assignations of selfhood, defying confinement and moving towards liberated expressions of a dynamic self with unlimited identity choices (p. xi). Multiple ontologies surface in this unfettered domain where destabilised subversions of identity presentation can be entertained in ficto-realist expressions of the authored self.

Queer Performative Identities

Queer theory recognises that identities and social categories are unstable, fluid and continually authored and acknowledges that cultural patterns or narratives have multiple and diverse expressions and interpretations. An illusion of an abiding gendered self, however, is produced through “a stylised repetition of acts” to conjure an appearance of substance, which must then be perpetually confirmed through endless reiterations (Butler, 1988, p. 520). In her seminal work, *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler suggests the self is performed and that individuals compose and express their selves as actors in a social and cultural context “tenuously constituted in time” (pp. 140–141). But the performative state of trans resists the binary restrictions of compulsory gender categories and heterosexuality by undoing certainties in sites of power that are contestable and, hence, differentially produced in time–space configurations. This suggests the worldly self can be authored in its real time–space just as characters are in fictional domains. Although fiction seeks to provide an “illusion of reality” (Lodge, 1997, p. 182) in narratives that deal with real and imagined facts and how they might be experienced, character selves are undoubtedly constructed and able to operate as evolving identities open to change in their fictive virtuality. Fictional works have explored this processual capability resulting in extraordinary narratives that confound the realistic illusion of stable, gendered identity in a linear time–space. In Woolf’s (1928) novel *Orlando: A Biography*, surface realities are liberated from realist constraints with gender presented as changeable, functioning in time–spaces reconfigured to be flexible and

capricious. This modernist narrative conjures “anticipatory imaginaries” (Bussey et al., 2018), creating the space within which to write relativised identities suited to evolving circumstances and contexts. Such metafictional innovations enhance the understanding of the virtuality of all fictional narratives as a constructed, relational configuration of identities and ontologies. The self is conceived of as a fictional construction and, as such, the internal concepts of selfhood are open to change and self-determination in a spectrum of performative identity options. A trans conceptualisation for identity creates a transnarrative form of expression that explores the fractured performance of the self and the transference of possibilities for identity constructs into imaginable realities.

Performativity suggests that identities, whether fictional or actual, are narrativised and perpetually under construction, in rehearsal for a “theatricalised” presentation. What constitutes gender and being human within the social world are performative acts that manipulate presentations in a transnarrative of self-determining identity. Such “impression management” involves the competent understanding and execution of components such as script, space, staging, participants and audience similar to the overt systems that work to produce theatrical performances (Goffman, 1959, p. 116). So, when the gendered self is understood as not as fixed as is generally perceived and is perpetuated through performative iterations of masculinity and femininity that are prescribed, scripted and rehearsed (Barvosa-Carter, 2005), there are sites for intervention in the process of identity expression and restrictions can be circumvented or dissolved entirely by the actions and decisions of the individual actor. As Butler (2004, p. 3) attests: “if I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact I am constituted by a social world I never chose”. The components of the self are rehearsed, refined and performed to comply with acceptable behavioural repertoires, but when self-conscious identity choices are activated, a purview of irreverent possibilities for constructed identities that influence their social contexts becomes available to the open-minded author of the self. Fictional works illustrate this interventionist manoeuvre such as in Chuck Palahniuk’s (2003) *Invisible Monsters*, where the protagonist trio exhibit irreverent freeplay of identity in a queered production of transient self-determination. The trio constantly reinvent personae—“a different one every week” (p. 46)—as they traverse the edges of society in petty criminal scams. The fluidity of self-presentation and self-definition is evident externally as they change identities, flouting conventional representation of heterosexual stability with interventions from the queer cultural periphery in the quest for freedom of gender expression. Mainstream society and its dominant cultural imperatives are lampooned by the liminal existence of the transgendered personae of Palahniuk’s operatives and their disruptive intrusions into the gender scam. The characters exhibit freedom of choice in a fluid transitional identity charade that provokes a reconsideration of real-world assumptions pertaining to the abiding self in its environment.