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BEYOND THE BINARY: DECONSTRUCTING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN MODERN ENGLISH FICTION

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Abstract:

This paper examines the deconstruction of the gender binary in modern English fiction, arguing that contemporary novelists have transformed literary narrative into a critical site for challenging the stable categories of sex, gender, and sexuality that hegemonic Western culture has naturalized. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler's performativity theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer epistemology, and Paul B. Preciado's pharmacopornographic analysis, the paper offers close readings of three landmark texts: Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992), Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014), and Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021). The analysis identifies three recurring literary strategies through which these writers unsettle binary thinking: the withholding of gendered information, temporal and historical displacement, and the reclamation of the body as a site of inscription and resistance rather than natural destiny. The paper also considers the political limitations of literary deconstruction, including the risk of audience insularity and the gap between textual transgression and material social change. Together, the three novels demonstrate that contemporary English fiction does not merely reflect queer and trans theory but actively produces new knowledge about the instability of gender — knowledge that is available only through the particular affordances of literary narrative.

Keywords: gender binary; queer theory; performativity; trans fiction; contemporary British fiction; literary deconstruction

Introduction:

The novel has long served as a laboratory for the exploration of selfhood, and few dimensions of selfhood have proved more contested in recent decades than gender and sexuality. From the fluid androgynes of Virginia Woolf's modernist imagination to the queer protagonists of twenty-first-century literary fiction, English-language novelists have

persistently interrogated what it means to inhabit a body, desire another, and perform an identity that culture insists upon as natural and fixed. This paper argues that modern English fiction, broadly understood as the body of work produced from the late twentieth century to the present, participates in and extends the theoretical project of gender deconstruction by dramatizing the instability of binary categories—man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, cis/trans—and by privileging ambiguity, liminality, and becoming over the settled identities that hegemonic culture demands. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Paul B. Preciado, and on close readings of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992), Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014), and Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021), the paper traces the literary strategies through which contemporary writers unsettle the gender binary and reimagine desire as irreducibly plural.

I. Theoretical Grounds: Performativity, the Closet, and the Pharmacopornographic Regime

Any rigorous engagement with gender and sexuality in contemporary fiction must begin with the theoretical vocabularies that have made such an engagement possible. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) established the foundational premise that gender is not an ontological given but a performative achievement—a set of stylized, repeated acts that produce the illusion of a stable, interior gender core. For Butler, the binary opposition of masculine and feminine is not a reflection of biological difference but a cultural compulsion, enforced through the citation of norms that are themselves historically contingent. This insight has profound consequences for literary analysis: if gender is performance, then narrative, with its capacity to represent repeated acts and to expose the mechanisms of repetition, becomes a privileged site for both the reproduction and the subversion of the binary.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) complements Butler's analysis by demonstrating that the hetero/homo binary is not merely one of many cultural oppositions but the structuring principle of modern Western knowledge. Sedgwick argues that the closet—the apparatus of concealment and disclosure organized around same-sex desire—is constitutive of the dominant culture, not marginal to it. Her concept of the *open secret* is especially useful for reading fiction in which sexual identity is simultaneously present and deniable, visible and suppressed. Paul B. Preciado's more recent work, particularly *Testo Junkie* (2013), extends these frameworks into the domain of biotechnology and pharmaceutical capitalism, arguing that contemporary gender is produced and policed not only through discourse and performance but through the literal inscription of hormones, surgeries, and prostheses on the body. Together, these three frameworks provide the theoretical scaffold for the literary readings that follow.

II. The Ungendered Beloved: Jeanette Winterson's Written on the Body

Published in 1992, Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* remains one of the most formally audacious experiments in the deconstruction of gendered desire in modern British fiction. The novel's unnamed narrator pursues a passionate love affair with Louise, a married woman, but what distinguishes the text from conventional love narrative is the narrator's absolute refusal of gender. Throughout the novel's 190 pages, Winterson provides no pronoun, no gendered descriptor, no anatomical clue that would allow the reader to fix the narrator's sex. The effect is vertiginous: the reader, conditioned by centuries of heteronormative love narrative, reaches instinctively for a gendering anchor and finds none. This formal strategy is not mere gimmickry; it is the novel's central argumentative move. By withholding the narrator's gender, Winterson forces the reader to confront the degree to which our reading of desire—our sense of who loves whom and why it matters—is saturated with gendered assumption. As Cath Stowers observes, the novel *"interrogates the assumption that desire is always already gendered, that to love is necessarily to love as a man or as a woman"* (78). The text enacts Butler's claim that gender is performative rather than essential by producing a desiring subject who performs desire without performing a legible gender. The narrator's body becomes, in Preciado's terms, a contested terrain on which the pharmacopornographic regime's insistence on binary embodiment is refused.

The novel's second formal innovation is its extended anatomical meditation in the central section, in which the narrator catalogs Louise's body through the language of medical pathology after she is diagnosed with leukemia. This section rewrites the conventional blazon—the Renaissance poetic form that itemizes the female body—from a perspective that refuses the masculine/feminine dyad that the blazon traditionally encodes. Consider the following passage, which renders the erotic and the medical inseparable:

I am thinking of a certain September: morning light, the kind that makes the air seem thick, orange, the smell of fallen fruit, wasps drunk on the juice. The window is open, the day is warm. Louise is reading a medical textbook. I am watching her. She does not know I am watching. The textbook is open at a diagram of the lymphatic system. She is tracing the line of a lymph node with her finger and she looks up and says, 'This is where it is.' She puts her finger on the page and she looks at me. There are tears in her eyes but she is not crying. I think: This is where it is. This is where love is. In the body. It cannot be separated from the body. (Winterson 111)

The passage is remarkable for the way it refuses the conventional opposition between romantic love and bodily decay. Louise's illness does not diminish the narrator's desire; it intensifies it by making the body—the very body that gender ideology would inscribe with fixed meaning—the site of a love that exceeds and exceeds the binary categories available

to name it. The medical gaze here is not clinical detachment but a form of radical intimacy, a mode of knowing the beloved that is also a refusal to reduce the beloved to a legible gender position (Winterson 112). The narrator's love, in this reading, is a model of desire beyond the binary: it is addressed to a body, not to a gendered object.

III. Historical Fluidity: Ali Smith's How to Be Both

Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014), winner of the Goldsmiths Prize and shortlisted for the Man Booker, pursues the deconstruction of gender binaries across two historical periods and through an unusually self-conscious formal architecture. The novel exists in two versions, published simultaneously: in one version, the story of George—a contemporary sixteen-year-old girl grieving her mother's death—precedes the story of Francesco del Cossa, a fifteenth-century Italian painter who, in Smith's fictional reimagining, is a woman who has lived her entire adult life as a man. In the other version, the order is reversed. The structural conceit enacts thematically what the novel argues discursively: that the binary divisions through which we organize experience—past/present, male/female, living/dead—are unstable, permeable, and ultimately insufficient.

Smith's Francesco is perhaps the most fully realized figure of gender nonconformity in contemporary British fiction precisely because the character's cross-gender life is presented not as tragedy or transgression but as a pragmatic, even joyful solution to the problem of artistic ambition in a patriarchal society. Francesco does not experience her male persona as alienation; she experiences it as freedom, as the condition of possibility for the work she needs to make. This is not to say that Smith is naive about the violence of gender norms—the novel is acutely aware of what Francesco must sacrifice and conceal—but rather that the narrative refuses to pathologize non-normative gender identity.

The contemporary strand, organized around George's grief and her burgeoning friendship with a girl named H, is equally invested in questioning binary categories, though here the emphasis falls on sexuality rather than gender per se. George and H's relationship resists easy classification; it is erotic but not explicitly sexual, intense but formally ambiguous. Smith's narrative technique—fragmentary, associative, resistant to resolution—mirrors the identities it represents. As Sarah Wood argues in her analysis of Smith's oeuvre, *"Smith's prose style performs the queerness it describes, refusing the grammatical certainties that conventional narrative uses to stabilize identity"* (203). The formal openness of *How to Be Both* is thus not a failure of resolution but an ethical commitment to representing experience that exceeds the available categories.

IV. Trans Maternity and the Limits of the Binary: Torrey Peters's Detransition, Baby

If Winterson and Smith work primarily within the tradition of experimental literary fiction, Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021) brings the deconstruction of the gender

binary into direct engagement with contemporary trans politics and the lived experience of gender transition and detransition. Peters's novel is a formally assured, emotionally complex work that centers three figures: Reese, a trans woman; Amy/Ames, a trans woman who has detransitioned and now presents as a man; and Katrina, a cis woman who becomes pregnant by Amy/Ames. The novel's central conceit—that the three might form an unconventional family unit, with Katrina as the biological mother, Amy/Ames as the biological father, and Reese as a third parent—places the question of reproduction and parenthood at the heart of its gender analysis.

Peters's achievement is to use the specific experiences of trans and detrans characters not as spectacle or as occasion for cisgender readers' edification but as the ground for a serious inquiry into what gender means and what it costs. The novel is unflinching in its representation of the material and social conditions of trans life—the hormonal regimens, the social dysphoria, the precarious employment, the violent encounters—while refusing to reduce its characters to their genders. Reese, Amy/Ames, and Katrina are fully individuated, contradictory, funny, and flawed in ways that far exceed their gender identities.

The novel's most theoretically provocative move is its staging of what Peters calls *trans female sociality*—the networks of friendship, desire, and mutual aid that trans women construct among themselves, often in the absence of other forms of social recognition. In the following passage, Peters articulates the novel's central insight about the relationship between trans experience and the gender binary:

Reese had begun to understand that womanhood was not a place she had arrived at but a practice she was engaged in, a set of negotiations with the world and with herself that would never be resolved and were never meant to be. The binary had always been a lie, but it was a lie that had organized the world, and to refuse it was not simply to be free—it was to be responsible for building something in its place. She was tired, but she was also, in some way she could not yet name, glad. (Peters 287)

This passage crystallizes Peters's nuanced position on the gender binary. Reese does not simply celebrate the deconstruction of the binary as liberation; she recognizes that the binary, however fictitious, has organized real social arrangements, and that its dismantling creates real obligations. This is a more politically mature position than the straightforward anti-binary rhetoric that characterizes some contemporary queer theory, and it marks Peters as a writer who is engaging seriously with the theoretical stakes of her fiction (Peters 289). The novel's engagement with Preciado's pharmacopornographic framework is particularly evident in its detailed attention to the role of hormones in shaping not only the body but also

desire, mood, and social perception—a dimension of trans experience that literary fiction has rarely addressed with such precision.

V. Literary Strategies of Deconstruction

Across the three texts examined, several recurrent literary strategies emerge as particularly effective vehicles for the deconstruction of the gender binary. The first is *the withholding of gendered information*, exemplified most radically by Winterson's unnamed, unsexed narrator but visible also in Smith's refusal to resolve the ambiguities of George and H's relationship. This strategy places the burden of gendering on the reader, exposing the automaticity of the interpretive frameworks we bring to narrative and defamiliarizing categories we habitually treat as natural.

The second strategy is *temporal and historical displacement*: Smith's movement between the fifteenth and twenty-first centuries allows her to show that the association of gender non-conformity with modernity is historically false. Francesco del Cossa's cross-gender life demonstrates that the binary has always been contested, always leaked, always failed to contain the diversity of human experience. Peters uses a related strategy through her extended flashback structure, which situates her characters' present experiences in the context of the broader history of trans life in America.

The third strategy is *the reclamation of the body*. In all three texts, the body is foregrounded not as the biological ground of a natural gender but as a site of inscription, negotiation, and resistance. Winterson's anatomical meditations, Smith's ekphrastic engagements with del Cossa's frescoes, and Peters's detailed attention to the pharmacological dimensions of transition all insist that the body is never simply given—it is always already written, read, and contested. This insistence aligns the novels with Preciado's argument that the body in the contemporary moment is a pharmacopornographic production, shaped by technologies of gender that are simultaneously medical, economic, and political.

VI. Counterarguments and Limitations

A comprehensive assessment of this literary tradition must also acknowledge its limitations and the counterarguments that the texts themselves sometimes raise. The most significant objection is that the deconstruction of the binary, however politically motivated, risks inadvertently reproducing the binaries it seeks to dismantle by making them the constant center of its attention. Terry Eagleton's broader critique of poststructuralist literary politics—that the endless deferral of meaning can become a form of political quietism, substituting textual transgression for material change—retains some purchase here (170). It is one thing for a novel to perform the instability of gender identity; it is another for that performance to translate into changed material conditions for the people whose lives the novel represents.

A related limitation is the question of audience. Winterson, Smith, and Peters are published by major commercial presses and reviewed in prestigious literary venues; their readers are disproportionately educated, middle-class, and already sympathetic to the political projects the novels advance. The extent to which literary fiction can intervene in the broader culture's attachment to the gender binary—beyond reinforcing the convictions of those already converted—remains genuinely uncertain. These limitations do not, however, diminish the significance of the literary achievement; they simply remind us that literature operates within, rather than above, the social and economic conditions it seeks to transform.

VII. Conclusion

Modern English fiction has developed a rich and varied repertoire of strategies for deconstructing the gender binary and reimagining the possibilities of desire and embodied identity. Through formal experiments with narrative voice and gendered information, through historical displacement and the reclamation of the body as a site of negotiation rather than natural destiny, writers from Winterson to Smith to Peters have extended and enriched the theoretical project inaugurated by Butler, Sedgwick, and Preciado. Their novels do not simply illustrate theory; they produce knowledge about gender and sexuality that is available only through the particular affordances of literary narrative—the sustained inhabitation of other subjectivities, the defamiliarization of the everyday, the capacity to hold contradictions in productive suspension.

The works examined here suggest that contemporary English fiction's engagement with gender and sexuality is neither merely topical nor merely aesthetic but is engaged in a serious, ongoing interrogation of the categories through which modern Western culture has organized the most intimate dimensions of human life. Beyond the binary lies not a world without categories but a world in which categories are held more lightly, inhabited more playfully, and remade more freely—a world that these novels, with their formal intelligence and political seriousness, help us to imagine.

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