

Casey Plett, *A Safe Girl to Love*. New York: Topside Press, 2014. Pp. 229. Softcover, \$19.95.

Casey Plett's debut, *A Safe Girl to Love*, presents eleven short stories about the aftermath of transformation. The reader bears witness to little pieces of a life that gather together in the wake of a rupture in order to form new constellations, ones that fill each protagonist with wonder and terror as she learns to navigate her world by them. From moment to moment, each protagonist oscillates between lost and found. The stories speak to both implications of the collection's title: they are about girls who are safe to love, whose trans genders and queer sexualities pose no danger to those who might love them; and they are about girls who find enough safety to open themselves to the vulnerability of love. If, according to Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, what motivates individuals is the fear of a loss of love, then Plett's characters must find ways to bear not only that fear, but also the constant discovery of what love is lost and re-found in their creative efforts toward a sense of self-worth.

Plett's collection contributes most powerfully to a queer context. She joins such authors as Trish Salah, author of *Lyric of Sexology, Volume 1* and *Wanting in Arabic*, and Ivan E. Coyote, author of the short story collections *One in Every Crowd* and *A Slow Fix*, in a growing and active group of Canadian trans writers who raise questions of category within the realms of literature, gender, family, and nation. More generally, Plett follows a deconstructive tradition in queer literature that exemplifies gender as a kind of "participation without belonging ... [or] membership" (Derrida 227), a deconstruction popularized by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Plett's representations of sexual activity also resonate with well-established associations between queer sex and aggression. Her sadomasochistic scenes of sexualized undoing, especially as they emerge in conjunction with addiction and class issues, recall the political imperative to "think about sex" (Rubin 3), paying homage to a queer cultural practice of reclaiming sexual autonomy from what Michel Foucault identifies as the conservative regime of discourse on sex. But her representations of other social relations highlight the quieter vulnerabilities of queer life.

Self-reflexively, the collection includes some instructions on how Plett's work could be evaluated. The manifesto that bisects Plett's collection, entitled "Real Equality (A Manifesto)" places me or any reviewer in a bit of a bind, were I to read its tone as earnest. The narrator asks readers to regard queer literature in its own

right rather than within a category of exception: "Take literature. I'm through seeing myself ghettoized by the gay studies section in the bookstore. I say gay literature *is* literature, no qualifications, no exceptions." The speaker shares a similar conflict with Plett's other protagonists who are caught in their own (gendered) participation without membership. These stories posit a possibility of participation *with* membership in either the canon of literature or a "legitimate" gender category, however elusive: "the only way we're going to achieve true, real equality is if we're equal in culture and identity, and that means not sectioning ourselves off from the world!" Butler's point about gender, however, is that this desire for membership will always-already be frustrated, for cis- and trans people alike, precisely because gender is an ever-displacing discursive occupation of the body. This manifesto culminates in a bold declaration, one that could thematize the collection as a whole: "we are all human and therefore we are all exactly the same. *EXACTLY THE SAME*. And that we *can't* pretend we're different. There is no difference... And really: Who better to teach this to the world than us queers?" The paradox in the speaker's statement is that queers are in a unique position to teach others about queers' lack of uniqueness.

Whether or not Plett intended a critical distance from this speaker, this moment exemplifies an irresolvable ambivalence that burdens much queer literature and theory between the conflicting desires for difference and for sameness. Queer and trans characters routinely and productively invite a split-identification between the universality of human alienation or love and the singularity of the queer experience, and Plett's characters are no exception, especially in light of the Manifesto's last statements. I cannot obey her Manifesto by evaluating this collection outside its socio-historical context.

Plett's prose is young and raw, depending a little too much on explicit representation and leaving less room for connotative resonances. But I also think Plett's prose style is particular to its context, as are her representations of sex within queer politics. The tone in each story magnifies the muted and fleeting injuries inherent to interpersonal bonds, the frustrated desires and obstinate hopes that structure the everyday, as well as the pain in the discovery that, outside of the closet, love remains, albeit in a deeply disoriented state. So something regressive and child-like affects the way characters address each other, the way they develop expectations with one another, and the way the reader identifies with the text. In the wake of transformation, Plett's characters find themselves in a raw, vulnerable space, never quite ready or all too

eager to accept a defamiliarized love that humans nonetheless still, always, need; indeed, there is something universal in that.

The reader will find something new in Plett's collection: the devastating mundanity and comfort of small working class communities, or the subtlety of familial disavowal, in lieu of the more epic rites of passage in queer narratives about familial abolition and brutal acts of transphobic or homophobic violence. Most of the stories—"Other Women," "How Old Are You Anyway," "Lizzie and Annie," "Not Bleak," "A Carried Ocean Breeze," "Winning," and "Youth"—focus on the interpersonal negotiations in intimate relationships and friendships that follow transformation, told either in first or third person point of view, while "Twenty Hot Tips To Shopping Success," "How to Stay Friends," "Real Equality (A Manifesto)" are, refreshingly, more instructive in tone and use second person perspective. The story "Portland, Oregon" is an exception in its fantastical telling of the companionship between a woman and her cat, who speaks English. The stories are both comedic and sad, tender and brutal. The motifs that run through the collection are strong: small towns, returns to the past, Mennonite communities, familial ambivalence, Oregon, the prairies, Canadian identity, mental health, a lurking and amorphous danger, addiction, youth, socio-economic hardship, and the meticulous details of gender performance. Indeed, unlike the stories of more established authors such as Alice Munro's *Too Much Happiness*, the diegetic details seem homogenous and consistent throughout Plett's collection. Yet the affect of reading one story after another emphasizes the exhausting relentlessness of the composite anxieties in passing, fucking, working, keeping work, making friends, keeping friends, keeping family, letting family go, earning legitimacy, and staying alive over and above mere existence. The feeling of safety in each story is precarious, attesting to protagonists' resilience in their sometimes contradictory desires for self-transformation and environmental consistency. As a surprise and departure from the queer tradition, safety is what these women get to recreate.

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References

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