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Travesties: Alienation and Vitality in Monique Proulx's *Le sexe des étoiles*
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How revolutionary or transformative is the power of pure rejection when applied against established gender binaries? What vitalizing theories or constructions of difference could be put in their place? In her ambitious early novel, *Le sexe des étoiles*, Monique Proulx explores variants of alienation and rejection of established gender binaries from within late 20th c Montreal. The novel is composed of four tightly interlocked narratives, focused on Gaby, the radio station researcher who brings Marie-Pierre onto her show, Dominique, the impotent novelist who hears the interview and becomes fascinated with her, Marie-Pierre (who used to be Pierre-Henri Deslauriers, renowned professor of microbial genetics), and Camille, her genius-level twelve-year-old daughter. The novel swirls around Marie-Pierre, Camille's *Papa* and now a very beautiful woman, whose interview on a province-wide broadcast sets in motion a series of events culminating in death, menarche, aliens, and a pervasive awareness of the constructed nature of gendered action. However, her transgressive desires are themselves transgressed through her ambivalent reactions to others' perceptions of her, not as feminine, but as truly other. Marie-Pierre is not only what Lapointe and Gauvin call "sexual ambiguity incarnate" (58); haunted by her masculine past and her own complex responses to the experience of femininity, Marie-Pierre's own ambivalence queers her own queerness in productive ways. While her ferocious campaign for recognition will eventually meet with decidedly mixed success, Marie-Pierre desires nothing less than total reconstitution: transgressively feminised, she desires the engendering of gender itself.

Although all four of the narratives eventually tangle around the vexed question of enacting gender, it is the parent-daughter dyad of Marie-Pierre and Camille who most raucously use, spindle, mutate, reject, and refashion their own femininities. As the central gravitational pull between all four

narratives, Marie-Pierre's *dérangement* of gendered normativity is rendered through both alienation and vitality, but must ultimately be measured and accounted for temporally: while Marie-Pierre eventually enters a fantastic intradiegetic space, her trenchant disruptions of gendered norms fading out of one text and into another, Camille's experience of a nonreactive form of creative becoming, mediated through her *Marie-Père* and culminating with her own (extremely symbolic!) UFO encounter, direct her toward womanhood from her alien-onset of menarche. It is Camille's doubled alienation, with its imperfect disconnect from extant forms of gender binarisation *and* its allegiance to something that does not yet exist, which the novel proposes as a viable form of being in the world, an ultimately unknowable subjectivity no longer constricted into binaries, but also no longer entirely comprehensible. Camille's alien apotheosis suggests that a total redefinition of sexuality itself is required before those living within those straitened borders can even begin to understand her, rendering her truly an alien on her home planet, even as she rejoices in the possibilities of her newfound subjectivity.

I. Transgression.

Marie-Pierre considers her MTF transsexual operation to be a triumph of revelatory subjectivity, an ontological revolution which allowed her to “become myself... to be myself at 100%” [Je suis devenue moi [...] Je suis moi a cent pour cent] (*SE* 63, 89), a phrase which repeats at several crucial moments throughout the text. She considers this physical expression of difference to be a difference in *kind*, not in degree, but of course others must disagree; she recoils in horror from her would-be lovers, even as she honours herself for successfully passing as a beautiful woman. But is Marie-Pierre's rejection of masculinity at all complete? Not at all – she consistently has episodes of talking to her own masculinised reflection or else is put into situations which have her rejecting her newly feminine role in fear and revulsion. The experiences with the men who come onto her are as indicative in this regard as the blatantly unresolved tensions with the other transsexuals at the club. Her final realisation that she is actually achieving a difference in kind is met with horror and self-rejection: coupled with the realisation of her own entrapment within extant registers of femininity is her rejection of the drag

queens and transsexuals, which she is unable to entirely differentiate, and whose relentless teasing amounts an interrogation of her own inconsistencies within her entrapment and her desire.

Despite the revolutionary reactivity and violent upheavals she incites, Marie-Pierre's example is not terribly conducive to actual change. Far from any romanticised narratives of instantaneous acceptance and transformation, Marie-Pierre is forced out of her former position as primary investigator in a top-level research lab, living in uncertain financial circumstances, and unable to qualify for unemployment benefits because the government will not recognise her change of sex. She volunteers to go on the air with Gaby's radio program partially out of a desire for popular recognition, of forcing reactive confrontation with the pervasive stasis of gendered relations within her social milieu. This perception of otherness is her strength : Marie-Pierre uses it to attract and unsettle in equal measure, as she requires ; within the three other narratives, it is her fluid interpretations of gender which “open a breach in the monotony of their existences” (Lapointe and Gauvin 58)¹, forcing a series of continual and shocking encounters between the other characters and their assumptions and performances of gendered norms. But even within her own determinedly heterogeneous comprehension of femininity, she is unable to completely effectuate the kind of change she wanted, specifically because femininity is, as she has averred from the start, non-elemental, playful, dangerous, and in the end, literally fictional.

Between Marie-Pierre and Gaby, these assumptions play out in the form of relationship, the savage intimacy of what Gaby calls “the friendship of women.” In this respect, Gaby's response to Marie-Pierre is definitive: “we have [knitted?] atoms,” meaning “we have strong affinities” [Nous avons des atomes crochus] (*SÉ* 65), says Marie-Pierre, and Gaby believes her. Far from doubting the blithe assurance of friendship, Marie-Pierre's words set off a series of memories, of Gaby's formative friendships, marked by small stolen trinkets and frenzied infantile laughter [le fou rire infantile] (*SÉ* 74), and of all the ways in which they foundered and failed. Gaby, then, is one of the people who truly

1 “[Elle] ouvre une brèche dans la monotonie de leurs existences” (Lapointe and Gauvin 58). All translations are my own.

sees Marie-Pierre and her actions within the compass of the feminine; according to Gaby's future actions, the two create a friendship between women together. However, any inherently transformative motivation on Gaby's part must come under intense scrutiny in light of her actions at the end of her own narrative, in which she gets not only her replacement but her former good friend and boss fired by using her own sexuality, as she has never done before. The last time we see Gaby, she is leaving her lover behind, and bending her perceived femininity to the will and purpose of her “extremely strong yang, standing upright next to her” [son yang très fort debout à côté d'elle] (*SE* 314), behaving the way her erstwhile boss behaved to her, and thus channelling the masculine self Marie-Pierre must have seen within her from the first.

II. Alienation.

While her father endures the protracted social and psychic aftermaths of her gender reassignment, Camille, already far too observant, responds to that reassignment with near-frenzied relief as the embodied possibility of a violently transgressive sexuality, only to find that the transgression of nature is insufficient to fulfill or even address her own desires. Through her alienated gaze, the gendered concepts of normativity expressed around her are revealed as *systemic*, pervasively present throughout methodologies, civic structures, and entire bodies of work and thought. This is why she focuses with such hope on the stars: not only for their promise of systems-wide destruction, but for the continuing possibility of difference, rebirth, and alienation from the pervasive structures she finds so binding on this planet. Yet, when Camille finally meets her alien, her final question – what is your sex – reveals how far she has already been inculcated into the cults of established genders: according to her question, not only is the alien sexual, but that sexuality must also be a defining and definable trait. It is possible to read the alien's continued silence as either total incomprehension – or else as an undefinable answer to her question. When Camille notices that, as the alien leaves, she has begun to bleed, she seems to have received an answer.

Camille's intense focus on the stars is the product of an equally intense rejection of current static

male-female roles, modelled on her father's rejection of as well as her mother's (hysterical?) embrace of them. She seeks validation and modelled pathways of being in the life cycles and actions of the stars; and feels more in common with galactic models than anything else. With her genius and insight, she has already understood that a) her parents participate in different ways within the same models of sex/gender (what would be le GENRE des étoiles?), and that b) she identifies more with her father's gleeful transgression than her mother's acquiescence. (Isn't this also gendered behaviour?) But Camille's inability to do more than ask the alien questions, right at the end, combines with her rejection of her mother's presence in her own sexuality to produce something more psychopathic than truly alien; longing for difference, she is unable to leave behind her kindness to her father, if not her mother. But Camille's increasing power by novel's end demonstrates that, instead of escaping into the fantastic text with her father (we'll get to that in a minute), she has chosen to simply leave behind what marked her mother and was beginning to mark her father ; her transgressive act stems not from violent confrontation, but from the performance of gender without its binding definition guiding her life – a far more alien reality than any she has experienced so far. The narrative voice and structure are near-silent upon the fallout of Camille's entry into womanhood, but what they do note is significant : Camille begins as she means to continue, alone, not allowing her mother, who has been inextricably compromised by her own relationships, to participate in the definition or even celebration of this moment : I know everything there is to know about men and women, she tells her mother coldly, and despite the seeming thaw between them later on, Camille's alienation from her mother's world is now complete – her Papa's legacy, even though (as we shall see) Marie-Pierre's own powers for change are at an end.

III. Vital Escapes.

Despite the power and ferocious will on display throughout the novel, Marie-Pierre cannot sustain the relentless confrontation necessary to continue living as she has, within the constant demands for and deployment of justification, aggression and self-protection. Thus, relentlessly queer as she is,

Marie-Pierre's disordering effects are necessarily compromised by the same sets of social codes that rendered her “100% herself.”

Caught between gender and other, her disruptive ontological instability is temporally defined: violent, but impermanent, as evidenced in the novel's final chapter, a brief hallucinatory description of Marie-Pierre, which opens with “Elle s'en allait, ” when she is already in the act of leaving (*SÉ* 327). She is carrying the pink bag which had held Dominique Larue's completed manuscript on the day he died, and which she must have taken from the scene of the accident, the stolen personal item indicating, as it had for Gaby, a now-closed circuit of erstwhile meaningful relationship. Having facilitated Dominique's final reconciliations to himself and his father, and midwifed Camille's insurgency against her mother's rigid gender binaries – and having lost her own illusions about ever “truly being a woman”, or having that phrase mean something outside of socially normative boundaries – Marie-Pierre finds herself unable to exist as she so desired to exist within this reality, and so she leaves it behind: within that massive transitional space, the airport terminal, she observes every person there and

she says to herself that they transported with them all their clandestine duality, there, a female cackled in the voice of that man, there, a man meditated beneath the makeup of this woman, they were doubles and trying so hard to be unshakeably one [singular]. One day she would tell them, someone ought to tell them.

[elle se disait qu'ils transportaient tous avec eux leur dualité clandestine, là, une femelle ricanait dans la voix de cet homme, là, un mâle méditait sous le maquillage de cette femme, ils étaient doubles et essayaient si fort d'être inébranlablement uns. Un jour elle leur dirait, quelqu'un devait leur dire.]

(*SÉ* 328)

That the someone who ought to tell them is, by now, indisputably not her, is contained within her finally-articulated awareness of her own transience and final inability to require, coerce, or otherwise induce lasting change; indeed, the novel's last lines are seamlessly integrated into the final page of

Dominique Larue's novel, and the reader has no idea which of the texts has now come to the fore. Thus, any reading of the final chapter becomes peculiarly provocative when combined with its final lines, which have Marie-Pierre moving quickly across the waiting line, transversally, and temporarily. She creates a disturbance, but it is only *momentary* – perhaps too trenchant, too keen? For after she has knifed it through, the line closes up again, with not even a scar left to mark her passage, a heartbreaking testament to the final inability of her reactive disruptions of social norms to truly effect the reality she considers so vital to life, even as she enters the aerial, alien reality she has chosen instead:

She cut through them [those in line] quickly, and that created a crevice [possible vaginal opening reference; dimensional addition to monofilamentary line] in the rectiline perfection of the waiting line, then all became smooth and monochrome as before her passage. She was already farther away, she walked alone and victorious leaving behind her the perfume of an aerial creature, she was going elsewhere to trouble the infallible well-thinkers.

[Elle les traversa rapidement et cela créa une lézarde dans la perfection rectiligne de la file d'attente, puis tout redevint lisse et monochrome comme avant son passage. Elle était déjà rendue plus loin, elle marchait seule et victorieuse en laissant derrière elle un parfum de créature aérienne, elle s'en allait ailleurs troubler les infallibles bien-pensants.] (SÉ 328)

So Marie-Pierre leaves her mark on the text and then walks out of it, beyond it, becoming her daughter's “créature aérienne” even as she herself moves toward that ultimate fantastic space : Southern California.

Together, Marie-Pierre and Camille both observe the performances of femininity around them, and their transgressive participations and interventions demonstrate imperfectly, but suggestively, symmetrical renditions of gender construction even as Gaby's final destruction of her former boss through her supposedly feminine wiles reveals instead her “upright yang,” standing beside her all the

way. Although Proulx's intense, controlled narration demonstrates the creation of the fluidity of gender Marie-Pierre so desperately desires, Marie-Pierre's own stifled responses and disinclinations cut across the perceptions her newly experienced femininity brings with it : even her escape, at the end of the narrative, points not to her transgressive engendering of a new rule, but of her passage through the old ones – swift, marked, and impermanent, as she enters into the fictional fantastic forevermore.

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