

**Spades, Actors and Fags: Fiction and/as Queer Theory
in Timothy Findley's *Spadework***
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Abstract

This paper analyses Timothy Findley's last novel, *Spadework* (2002 [2001]), to engage the relevance of Gender/Queer Theory as a visible intertext. As we read, it seems apparent that that *Spadework* provides a further turn of the screw to invigorate the gender-marked fiction/theory popular in Canadian writing. Issues of gender/sex performativity and performance, in several ways, populate the novel, which, as a whole, is a critique of identity very close to the one proposed by Queer Theory models, usually oriented to interrogate normativity and the identities that it produces.

It is no news that Canadian fiction has been maintaining an intimate liaison with the writing and consumption of theory for decades. From the inception for the Canadian postcolonial in the early 1990s, a proliferation of new theoretical modes has taken place, Queer Theory and Ecocriticism being its most recent siblings (see Hutcheon, 1991; Bennett, 1993-1994; Brydon, 1995; Goldie, 2004). Notwithstanding the distance that separates both fields, they share a common questioning of the humanist subject as centre of progress for the former, and as axis of the heteronormative and heterosexual matrix of society and culture for the latter. Unlike Ecocriticism, which reconsiders the relation between the subject and issues of site and place by rethinking a public discourse of belonging to the nation and/or community (see Garrard, 2004), Queer Theory reinscribes publicly the subject in attention to a re-elaboration of a fundamentally private discourse, sexuality.

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visible intertext.¹ As we read, it seems apparent that *Spadework* provides a further turn of the screw to invigorate the gender-marked fiction/theory popular in Canadian writing. Issues of gendered/sex performativity and performance, in several ways, populate the novel, which, as a whole, is a critique of identity very close to the one proposed by Queer theory models, usually oriented to interrogate normativity and the identities that it produces (see Salih, 2004: 1-17). “Queer confounds the categories that license sexual normativity through its demonstration that sexuality is a discursive effect [...]”, James N. Brown asserts. “Its effects are variously threatening and exhilarating”, he continues, “not least because of its determined indeterminacy and specification and radical potential” (2001: 370).

From identity-politics based movements like Gay & Lesbian, and their committed agenda of liberation and struggle for legal rights, Queer theory has gone farther to put forward a response to any category of identification. The denaturalisation of gender, sex, sexuality and the body proposed by Judith Butler (1990; 1993) has been fundamental for Queer Theory, and its consequent understanding of gendered and sexed identities as performative, namely constituted by acts that imprint on the body a given identity. Still very much in process of development, Queer theory and the resistance that it accomplishes are hardly oppositional but relational. As Brown states, it lacks defining traits but opens a space for the questioning of conventional understandings of sexuality; and hence it is a “site of permanent becoming” that “[...] continually interrogates the preconditions of identity and its effects” (Brown, 2001: 373).

Timothy Findley’s *Spadework* places the emphasis on the constitution of personal and collective identity, as subjected to the interference of the sexual imprint on the body and the immediate transformation of such a physical realm into the border for inclusion and exclusion in that aforementioned space. Hence, the usual inhabitants of Stratford, where the novel is set, appear suspicious of the

¹ As Terry Goldie points out, we should distinguish between gay authors and authors that happen to be gay (2003: 2). Although not exclusively centred on gay experience, many of the novels by Findley neutralise the opposition, whereas some others do not. *Spadework* is decidedly a gay novel by a gay author, where gender and sex are complicated to a maximum, thus rendering it as nurtured by a number of theoretical precepts that pinpoint a re-inscription of the subject, and the queer subject.

many actors that invade the town during the yearly Shakespearean theatre festival, their sexual orientation lying underneath such a distrust: “Many of its citizens – bred, born and raised in a basically conservative community – continued to be wary of the world of theatre – of ‘art’ – that had invaded their lives”, we read immediately after the opening of the novel. “Actors are all a bunch of fags, men would say. ‘We are guys, and we don’t want fags in our bars and restaurants! Why don’t they just fuck off and leave us alone” (Findley, 2002: 6). Unconsciously, the speaker’s words make a distinction between *us* and *they*, the community members and the outsiders, now seen in a dangerous trespassing of the border. Such a crossing risks the distinction, and the fear of the self and the other’s fusion keeps identity existing. Paradoxically, a presumed homosexuality is all the most needed to define its opposite. “[...] The dominant does not like to be undone by its (alien) other. But it likes even less to be undone by its (uncanny) deviant. So it constructs the latter as the former. Otherness may be rooted in a fear of, a disavowal of, similarity” (1991: 122), explains Jonathan Dollimore. His *perverse dynamics*, the coexistence of the self and its other in a relation of mutual exclusion, in a necessary mechanics of difference for the sake of identity is in the opening lines of the novel sharply established. The clear-cut limits of such dynamics, however, blur as *Spadework* unravels normativity and its other in confusing coalescence, perversion and normalcy in a hand-to-hand existence that brings murder and exhibitionism along with homosexuality and bisexuality, the latter in a clearly performative presentation that only temporarily inscribes and marks the bodies within given parameters. Not in vain, the local factory, producing German ball bearings and employing most of Stratford local men, is called FAG, an acronym that immediately portrays *that* which Stratford factory men fiercely despise in actors. In this sense, *Spadework* is from beginning to end a disruptive critique of the heterosexual matrix of society, adopting then the basic precept of Queer Theory.

In the same way that Stratford locals and visiting actors mirror each other, Canada and the USA entail a similar relation of identity as difference.² While south of the border the Clinton-Lewinsky affair

² The parallelism between gender/sexual identity and national identity is not new (see Dickinson, 1999; Carmona-Rodríguez, 2006), as neither is that between national

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scandalises the most conservative political sectors, in Canada Findley's protagonists appropriate it as "important history" (Findley, 2002: 15), an issue to blame for the social malaise of the times. "It was that goddamned Lewinsky woman, making everyone think about it and daydream about it. And want to do it without condoms" (Findley, 2002: 155), grudgingly sentences Jane Kincaid, one of the vortexes of the sexualised square portrayed in *Spadework*. The taint of impropriety that, when impeached, President Bill Clinton created for his sexual intercourse with Monika Lewinski, cannot help but being evidenced here. The presumed lack of normalcy in this non-reproductive practice intrudes and contaminates the Kincaids' story in several ways. As the novel goes by, their notions of normalcy and normativity, lawful marriages and temporary stands, be their nature gay or straight, also tend to vanish.

When the novel sets off its entangled plots in June 1998, Jane Kincaid, a.k.a. Aura Lee Terry from Louisiana, is preparing the stage design for the premiere of *Richard III*, and her husband the renowned actor Griffin Kincaid has been playing Ferdinand in *The Tempest* and is now debuting in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, by the well known producer Jonathan Crawford. Griffin and Jane's life with their child Will is peaceful until the day in which the Kincaids have their garden replanted: one of the workers accidentally severs a Bell Canada cable and the line automatically dies off. As a result, Griffin does not answer Crawford's call, and consequently misses the most important role in his life. What is he willing to do to gain back such an opportunity? When Crawford makes a dishonest proposal for him, Griffin accepts it in turn for being in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a title that ironically resounds when the novel often presents the two men in bed together. From that moment on, Griffin performs several, hardly reconcilable roles like those of heterosexual husband and father and Jonathan's lover. Stage and real-life performances mutually condition each other in the novel, since Jonathan will achieve the former for his sexual roles in the private sphere. In turn, the novel obliquely looks at the theoretical issues of *performance* and *actor*. Although common sense dictates that the latter is a condition for the former, it happens to be the reverse in Butlerian theory, and its corollary deconstruction of the humanist subject. Like

ambivalence (Bhabha, 1990) and sexual dissidence (Dollimore, 1991). For an extensive discussion, see Dickinson (1999).

the Foucaultian notion of discourse, performance predates and outlives the subject, which is constituted as the actor iterates the gendered norm. Following Foucault, Butler centres on the genealogy of the subject, or in how the effect of all these acts results in the creation of the subject: “the subject is precisely the site of [...] reiteration” (1997a: 203), she affirms. Henceforth her definition of the subject and the gender associated as “a free floating signifier” (Butler, 1990: 6). When Griffin’s son inquires about his dad’s job, Jane responds: “[...] Daddy’s pretending to be someone else -as he always does at work” (Findley, 2002: xi). Yet we wonder what happens out of work. Griffin, the actor on stage decides on his deeds, but the subject Griffin is constituted as he performs a given identity with which he sometimes agrees, and some others he utterly rejects. “I’m a father, for God’s sake. I’m a married man. I am a guy and guys don’t do that” (Findley, 2002: 160), he ruminates after making love to Crawford. Horror-stricken when he remembers the stigma attached in high school to the word *cocksucker*, – “Any boy labelled with it was never able to regain respect” (Findley, 2002: 160)–, Griff demarcates his shaky, hegemonic identity by resorting to the confinement of obnoxious categories into the unspeakable and the indicted, namely, abjection.³ Far from the transhistorical aura usually linked to the word (Kristeva, 1982: 207), here abjection is that “[...] mode by which Others become shit”. For Butler, “[i]t founds and consolidates cultural hegemonic identities along sex/ race axes of differentiation” (1990: 133-134).⁴

³ Goldie (2003) affirms that, while in a seminar, some of his openly gay students enraged at the opinions launched by someone who had never had the experience of accomplishing a fellatio, thus reducing queer or gay identity to a literal sexual performance. Butler (1997b) sees in the re-appropriation of the negatively-yielded term *queer* a subversive act consisting in the redirection of injurious speech. Originally derogative words like *cocksucker* or *queer* itself are representative of the relational stance adopted by Queer Theory for the deconstruction of the heterosexual matrix of society lying underneath culture.

⁴ Undoubtedly the concept of *foreclosure* that Lacan (1985) partially takes from Freud floats freely in this discussion. For him, it concerns an unfulfilled operation in the formation of the sexed subject whereby the individual expels the phallic signifier from the Symbolic. Butler, in turn, sees foreclosure as essential in the formation and normative reproduction of heterosexual identities. In other words, “[i]n psychoanalytic theory, foreclosure indicates a fundamental disruption in the formation of the subject, whereas in Butler’s theory, the concept is re-read as the mechanism of the production of normative (and coherent) subjects” (Campbell, 2005: 89). Griff’s split, performative

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Jonathan, in turn, also married and father to a grown-up, sees no gap between his homosexuality and his role as admired community representative. For him, it is a question of materialising a type of desire that women cannot understand and men in general inhibit. That inhibited same-sex desire spoils Griffin's work, he says, in T. Williams' *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), where he could not transmit the close bond between Skipper and Brick: "a woman's way with desire is different from a man's. She waits. [...] Men [...] proceed to the object" (Findley, 2002: 133). Griffin's accomplishment of the phallic object of desire decidedly forces him to draw anew the limits of his identity, but given the relevance of performance in *Spadework*, he re-crosses them to go back to his wife and son. Griff's trespassing of the community borders sets the words by Stratford men posed at the beginning of the novel against themselves, and, what is more, exemplify Dollimore's coexistence of the same and the other at the basis of any identity.

Symptomatic of the steady critique of identity in *Spadework* and Crawford's words on the phallic constitution of desire in male terms is the fact that Jane's way with the Bell Canada repairman, the Polish Milos Saworski, are exactly matching Crawford's description of male-to-male desire. Under the excuse of photographing and painting him nude, Jane also proceeds to the *object* and automatically blurs the boundary between a presumably male morphology of desire and its female counterpart. The nature of the desired object seems irrelevant, therefore, as much as the sex-sameness of such an object. In both cases, desire is the way to an abiding premise whereby the subject and the other trigger a confrontation for mutual consumption. Its achievement, the conformation of a dominant and dominated presence exemplifies the novel's advocating of a return to the normal existence of the Griffins, and eventually, a return to (hetero)normativity, once Jane's affair with Milos is over, as it also is Griff and Crawford's.

Between theory and fiction, we move in and out of Shakespeare's plays into the Griffin's lives to know that "Shakespeare [...] was obsessed with certain patterns, certain situations but succeeding much more often when moving from play to play" (Findley, 2002: 18). And indeed, such is the case of gendered identity on stage and out of it: a repetition of patterns, which, when broken, bring along

identity agrees much more with Lacan's than with Butler's imposition of coherence on the subject's formation.

a consequent collapse of the norm and the structures relying on its conformation. The fracture of these paradigms in and out of Shakespeare's plays implies the loosening of the heterosexual matrix, or the gendered chart containing and sustaining the basic grid of society. As Griffin, a Stratford local, breaks the norm, it seems that the whole system breaks down: his family is de-structured, and the whole community of theatre men shatters knowing the romance he maintains with Crawford. Meanwhile, Jane transcends the norm of her assumed gender and raptures Milos, and, in the meantime, Stratford seems pervaded by disease and pathology. The basic triangulation that Peter Dickinson (1999) sees as a form of contention of the heterosexual matrix when faced with flagrant homosexuality, is here hacked into pieces: Jonathan desires Griff as much as Jane desires Milos; the four of them consummate their will, and, once the subject of desire has been consumed, prohibition does not exist any longer.⁵

Stratford, as presented in the voice of the factory workers, unveils in the course of reading as a community ruled by *passing*, as if heteronormal and sexual. The consideration of the locals as *proper* guys and the visiting actors as *deviant others* turns up a lie as Griff, a local, bends to Crawford's will, and his wife openly seduces Milos, in an overt mimicry of a traditionally male attitude on extramarital liaisons. Till that moment, neither of them had shown any interest in other partners, then *passing* as the perfect father/mother and spouse. Far from implementing *passing* as the opposite of the gay *outing*, here it agrees with Carol-Ann Tyler's words when she states that "[c]oming out, one affirms an identity, declaring and displaying it as a positive difference from a presumptive norm which has also served as the measure of superiority" (Tyler, 1997: 228). The Griffins' act of passing has agreed with a communal norm that their latest performance spoils, as it also launches the need to reformulate the boundaries of the community, the communal subject and the symbolic laws sustaining the systems of

⁵ Drawing on Eve Kosofski Sedgwick (1985: 25) and her followers, the diversion of male-to-male desire onto a third vortex that happens to be female is, for Dickinson (1999: 12), the way in which patriarchal power is transmitted in western societies. Indeed, such a structure, as he shows, is present in a number of Canadian fictions. Findley's, nevertheless, triggers its critique of the heterosexual and patriarchal matrix from that starting-point, by hacking into pieces and scrambling the normative conceptions of desire.

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family bonds and professional connections as well (see Butler, 2004: 40-56). Their latest gendered identities contribute an act of passing, but as *crossing*, trespassing into the other side of desire. From there, although temporarily, they inhabit the enclave of the other, the hegemonic for Jane; the subaltern for Griff.

All in all *Spadework* seems to fictionally facilitate the restoration of the partially affected heteronorm and the survival of the heterosexual matrix: after their out-of-marriage experiences the Griffins return to their life, and in parallel to their doing so, Stratford recovers its vital pulse, lost after the vicious murders and rapes committed in the God-fearing community. In this state of affairs, it is difficult to avoid the parallelism between sexual dissidence and perversion, which the novel circumvents by accepting Griff's trip to the other side of desire as a minor evil, forced by professional circumstances and the will to ascend on stage, and Jane's as a personal retaliation on her husband's infidelity. In this scene ruled by the cleaving of the reigning social, heteronormative discourses and their consequent restoration, the novel once again appears consonant with Queer theory in its character of "identity constituting/identity fracturing discourse" (Brown, 2001: 374). As Brown affirms, its major value now for postcolonial theory is its problematising of normative and heteronormative consolidations of sex, gender, and sexuality considered as naturally evolved from such consolidations (2001: 374). Findley's last creative effort adopts therefore many points of convergence with one of the theoretical flight lines born out of the Canadian Postcolonial, and in doing so, reactivates the fiction/theory nexus once so pervasive in Canadian writing.

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