

Subverting Transnormativity: Rage and Resilience in Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.1 (2019)**

Special Issue ***Gendered Bodies in Transit: Between Vulnerability and Resistance***. Ed. **Manuela Coppola and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz**

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Abstract: This article analyzes the affective politics of rage and resilience in the novel *For Today I Am a Boy* (2014) by Kim Fu. The novel explores the dis-identification (Muñoz 1999) of gender identity through the protagonist, focusing on the rage, sadness, fear, and secrecy that function as the glue holding the body together, but that also work to constrain the process of self-identification. The novel is not the celebration of self-realization, nor is it the lamentation of a traumatized protagonist. Instead, the narrative pays attention to the various ways in which non-binary, or non-normative gender identities are marginalized, and to how the celebratory patina of "transgressive exceptionalism" (Halberstam 2005) applies only to those whose gender identities work to "redo" rather than "undo" gender (Butler 2004) systems that, for those who do not fit within the mandates, are subjected to violent economies of exclusion which are made manifest in Fu's novel. Central to this area of inquiry is the way in which the "negative affects" (Love 2007) that circulate within the novel demonstrate a resistance to the "happy affects" (Ahmed 2011) prescribed by the promise of transnormativity. This article posits that Fu's novel represents a potential transgender subjectivity that derives its resilience from its vulnerability as an unrecognizable social other.

Andrea RUTHVEN

Subverting Transnormativity: Rage and Resilience in Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*

In his 2005 book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, J. Halberstam questions how we should read transgender subjectivity, linking it to the notion of "transgressive exceptionalism" and interrogating its "promise of flexibility and its reality of a committed rigidity" (21). While in no way denying or delegitimizing the lived experience of transgender individuals, Halberstam does point to the way in which the mediated images of transgender people are quite often held up as a celebratory site of social change and activism without interrogating the systems of privilege and oppression that operate in tandem. In celebrating transgender people who have achieved what Jay Prosser (5) terms the "homecoming narrative" – in which transition results in the incorporation of the "correct gender" – the positive acceptance of bodies that redo rather than "undo" gender is brought to the fore (Butler, 1). In so doing, these narratives often elide the *trans*, that is, the transition, the transitory, the potential for identities which conform to neither of the gender binaries, but rather destabilize the concept of gender rigidity. This elision not only denies the very real, lived experience of many trans and gender non-conforming people, but also negates the violence of systems of representation that demand an either/or.

In recent years, the presence of transgender people and their stories within popular culture and media has greatly increased. From Laverne Cox in the television series *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan 2013-), to Caitlin Jenner's reality show *I Am Cait* (2015) depicting her life post-transition, to *Transparent* (Solloway 2014-), to a variety of films such as *About Ray* (Dellal 2015) or *The Danish Girl* (Hooper 2015), which broach the transition narratives of the protagonists, it would seem that contemporary audiences are, at the very least, interested in viewing mediated transgender subjectivities. Part and parcel with this interest is the increasing pressure to "normalize" or "normativize" transgender identities within the spheres of politics and representation, with the correlating advantages and disadvantages this action might bring with it.

This essay considers Kim Fu's novel *For Today I Am a Boy* (2014), which, far from lauding the achievement of a recognizable gender identity, traces the process of dis-identification (Muñoz 1999) and disaffection in the protagonist's relationship to their body (given that the main character does not express a preference for a given personal pronoun in the novel, I will use "they" and "their" throughout as a means of maintaining the tension and fraught nature of their exploration of their gender identity). Fu explores the rage, sadness, fear, and secrecy that function as the glue holding the body together, but that also work to constrain the process of self-identification. Set in a small town in Southern Ontario, Canada, the novel tells the story of Peter Huang (who comes to identify as Audrey in the final pages of the novel), the only son of five siblings and the son of Chinese immigrants, who struggles with gender dysphoria in a landscape and socio-cultural context that offers little in the way of support or information about what they are experiencing. As much a story about coming of age as a transgender individual as it is about the competing claims of second-generation Chinese-Canadian identity, Fu's novel addresses the ways in which heteronormative masculinity intersects with racialized identities. The title and the novel's epigraph are taken from a song by then musical group Antony and the Johnsons, now Anohni, which encapsulates the longing of the story's main character and its link to popular and contemporary culture. Anohni's lyrics frame the novel and cast the singer "as a spokesperson of a queer utopia where, as in Fu's novel, the 'feminine' is not a biologically, anatomically, and/or socially gendered identity but a radically antagonistic vision of the human's place in the universe" (Guarracino 134).

The novel expresses not a self-congratulatory neoliberal celebration of gender non-conforming acceptance, but instead explores the production of the negative feelings of disenchantment and disenfranchisement, produced by what Halberstam (2011) terms, in the book of the same name, "the queer art of failure." With an eye to the ethical role of literary analysis, this paper will consider the ways in which so-called trans acceptance, when aligned with the gender binary system, is productive of violent systems of exclusion that are made manifest in Fu's novel. As Serena Guarracino has noted, "the novel makes use of what could be called 'queer intertextuality' to unmake masculinity as a heteronormative discourse, but also femininity as a unified arrival point of the transition process" (128). Indeed, the novel willingly explores the possibility for an open-ended gender identity, one that rejects the homecoming narrative in favor of a more transnational concept of belonging.

As Judith Butler has argued in *Undoing Gender*, "In the same way that a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option" (8). The object becomes how to negotiate the terms of a "livable life" so that the categories for recognition do not further violate the body that seeks to attain them. As she also

points out, "[t]here are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms" (Butler 3). Peter Huang in Fu's novel is constrained by intelligible categories of recognition, and even though the possibility of being unintelligible could offer the potential for carving out a livable space, this possibility is never shown as an option for Peter. While unintelligibility and unrecognizability may offer a means of breaking with violent binary systems, they are not without their own risks.

As Gabeba Baderoon asserts in her discussion of Zanele Muholi's photographic practice in South African queer communities, being intelligible brings with it further risks when the queer body is exposed to "the possibility of further violation through being made visible" (406). For Baderoon, visibility carries the potential for real, material violence when the category of recognition threatens normative identity models. Consider, briefly, the phrase "I see you," and the multiple meanings it conveys. On the one hand it can, as Butler suggests, carry with it the affection of recognition, of an affirmation of identity. On the other hand, it can also be threatening, coercive, and dangerous, as Black people who have become targets of police violence, women walking alone at night, or individuals being bullied can testify. Invisibility can, in some cases, act as a shield protecting the individual from unwanted attention and/or bodily harm. There is, undoubtedly, a certain danger in being recognized when what you are seen to be is non-normative. Perhaps it is worth articulating that intelligibility and recognition are valuable and desirable when they confer an acceptance of what is being seen, when the body that is recognized is understood as equally human as the normative body against which it, problematically, is measured.

What I seek to interrogate here is the tension that the novel opens up between not only visibility/invisibility and how these can lead to what Judith Butler calls a "livable life" (8), but also the way in which, as Sara Ahmed notes:

Those of us committed to a queer life know that forms of recognition are either precariously conditional, you have to be the right kind of queer by depositing your hope for happiness in the right places (even with perverse desire you can have straight aspirations), or it is simply not given. Not only is recognition not given but it is often not given in places that are not noticeable to those who do not need to be recognized, which helps us sustain the illusion that is it given (which means that if you say that it has not been given, you are read as paranoid). (Ahmed 106)

Ahmed's remarks, while specifically aimed at unteazing the trope of homonationalism, are equally extensible to what Emily Skidmore recognizes as imperative to being "the good transsexual" (278), the western states' "trans hailing," or "trans(homo)nationalism" (Puar 46). The question of who or which transgender identities are deemed worthy of being hailed and are considered acceptable representations of the state's tolerance and liberality is intricately linked to questions of race, able-bodiedness, class, sexuality, and certainly, how gender is performed.

In Fu's novel, through the protagonist's yearning for a specific form of visibility, the tensions surrounding the desire for recognition emerge. Peter Huang's desire for visibility is, in some ways, positioned as counter to the way in which their father craves invisibility. For their father, the visible marker of race, of being Chinese, is to be fought against at every turn, to be eradicated, as much as possible, through conforming to ideals for being "just Canadian":

Eventually he was hired by the Passport Canada office near us, part of a federal visible-minorities program. Nothing could be more antithetical to the way my father saw himself. Under the Languages Spoken sign, they added a slate: Cantonese. The rare Chinese customers always ended up at his window. Father forced them to speak English. He was patient but unrelenting. There were only three offices with doors behind the service windows, and within two years, one of them was my father's. Being a civil servant fit his white-collar idea of prosperity. Everyone dressed the way he always had—jackets, ties, shined shoes. No burgers. But their pale faces in the fluorescence reminded him how he'd gotten there, by being visible. (45-46)

Peter's desire to be recognized and their father's concomitant need to have others see him as he sees himself are parallel yearnings; both are, in a sense, categorizations at the service of hegemonic identities. Indeed, as David Eng has argued, "heterosexuality gains its discursive power through its tacit coupling with a hegemonic, unmarked whiteness" (*Racial Castration*, 13). Thus, the masculinity that Peter's father would ascribe to his son (the Chinese name their parents give them at birth is "Powerful king" (Fu xiii)) can be read in part as a "toxic masculinity resulting from the painful fracture of migration" (Guarracino 141) that would counteract the "emasculatation of the racial other" (Guarracino 140). That Peter's father's identity should align with a civil servant position at the passport office is, perhaps, not casual; his job, as it were, is to help people obtain the documentation required to travel outside Canadian borders and to affirm through administrative means the location of nationality.

The documents he provides serve as a means of permitting transit, of allowing those who bear them to step outside the borders of the state and negotiate different terrain. He is "patient but unrelenting" in his demand that those who seek these documents speak English, that they align with his definition of who is eligible for the documents. The border crossings that he enables, however, are aligned with the way in which he views other boundaries, such as gender: rigidly demarcated zones that can only be traversed when identity has been confirmed as adhering to a strict set of parameters. Transit, then, is broken down into categories of the permissible. Travel, with its 'official' documentation and national stamp of approval, is a means of obtaining hegemonic status, while Peter's imprisonment within the boundaries of gender is an affirmation of what their father wants of them. Their father polices both the boundaries of the nation, those allowed to bear the documents permitting border crossings, and the boundaries of his children's gender identities, demanding and prescribing how his son's masculinity should be enacted.

Peter recognizes their father's prescriptions for masculinity when, as a child, they and a group of boys violate one of their female classmates. As she sits crying in the dirt, they think: "Better to be one of us, better to be standing on this side than kneeling and weeping in the gravel while they leer, that was all my father wanted from me, to be one of them, to be a king" (18). Though their father's dreams for his child may appear straight forward, to be on the side of the victors, the strong, the *boys*, the impossibility of this desire is expressed, though obliquely, in the mandate to 'be one of them' but also to 'be a king.' The king is unique, individual, not, by definition, part of the multitude. Consequently, Peter's competing desire to fit in, all the while recognizing that they will never be one of the boys, is paralleled in their father's desire for a son who is the same but different from the rest.

Peter is not ambiguous in their desire to be female. Even as a child they tell their sisters:

Because he wants you to be like him," Helen said. Adele added, "Big and strong like him." "But I want to be like you," I said, grabbing Adele's knee. "I want to have hair like you. I want to be pretty like you." Her sad, saintly expression frightened me. "You can't." Helen had turned in her chair. Adele glared at her. "What?" Helen said. "He can't. You can't, Peter. You can be handsome, like Father or Bruce Lee." She pointed at a poster of theirs, one that Father disapproved of: dot-pixelated like a comic book, a shirtless Bruce Lee posed in fighting stance, his body warped wide with muscle. I stared at the poster in horror. I started to cry. "You're a boy." Helen said it like she thought it would be comforting. "I am not! I am not!" (11)

For Peter, it is not simply wanting to be a girl, "to be pretty" like the older sister, but the fact of not being a boy that matters. Though the father's desire to spend time with them is an unvarnished attempt to mold his child through the performative aspects of masculinity – for example by teaching them to shave or to relish the homosocial violence committed by the high school football team – Peter rejects these behaviors, or rather takes away from them less the lessons of masculinity that their father imparts, and more the notion that, by following order they can bask in their father's love: "I met my father's gaze. He stayed leaning on the wall across from me, his expression inscrutable. Slowly, deliberately, he straightened up. He was smiling. He didn't speak for a long time, just smiled. I felt his approval like a warm glow" (19). Though Peter wants their father's love and approval, they recognize that to achieve this end means disavowing their identity and being instead who their father wants them to be. The object of happiness is not the cisgender body but the paternal affection and approval such a body would grant.

In Fu's novel, the question of visibility is broached in gendered terms, wherein the protagonist yearns to have the to-be-looked-at-ness that they locate as inherent to femininity. They articulate this as such:

There was a deep-down, physical ache. The opposite of a phantom limb: pain because that thing, that thing I loathed, was always there. I had to use it and look at it every day. But more than that, pain because I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be noticed, *in a way that both men and cooks were not*. The hostesses at the Japanese restaurant wore makeup that made their eyes cartoonishly large and dresses in oriental prints that were slit to the upper thigh. They were required to wear their hair in high, old-fashioned buns. They were art. *They were there to be looked at and admired and worshipped*. I was there to serve a purpose, to make things. A workhorse. A man. (116-17; emphasis added)

This passage makes explicit the extent to which Peter Huang dis-identifies with their body, and the indication that they loathe their penis, "that thing" they cannot distance themselves from, not only because it identifies them as a man, but also because it condemns them to invisibility. There is, of course, something somewhat problematic in Peter's desire "to be seen." On the one hand, they appear ignorant to the potential violence inherent in being made visible when that visibility is predicated on not being a 'normative' – white, heterosexual, middle-class – man (though they will become cognizant of this potential violence further on in the text (232)). On the other hand, they also elide the violence of being

made "art," that is, an object that does not "serve a purpose" other than to be on display for the (generally) hetero-normative male gaze. As Bartky has asserted, working through Laura Mulvey's work on spectatorship and the male gaze: "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other" (72). Certainly, Peter Huang's desire to be *seen, to be noticed*, is predicated on the visibility of one kind of femininity, the kind both visible to and imagined by Bartky's 'panoptical male connoisseur.'

Further, it is not coincidental that the women Peter admires interpret Western stereotypes of Asian femininity. As Guarracino again notes, "His submissiveness to other people's vision of him only gives him access to the patriarchal vision of femininity *and* to the Western vision of Asianness" (137). Peter's first intimate relationship occurs within the bounds of a voyeuristic, racist dynamic with an older woman, Margie, that reinforces prevailing notions of Asian men as passive or effeminate. She recites stereotypes at Peter, "you're so gentle, my poor little boy. Probably never seen a woman, right? Not supposed to look at women?" (125) and dresses them up with "a brocade hat with a braid built into it from a novelty store; she made me fake an accent, a cruel mimicry of my father" (127). While Peter does have the opportunity to wear make-up and women's clothes while with her, the unequal power dynamic and abuse undermine any potential for joy or play. Indeed, their relationship ends when she tries to rape them one night, frustrated that they never have sex because Peter's penis never becomes erect because they are uninterested in using their penis for penetrative intercourse (136). Despite the horror and violence of the relationship, it does offer the opportunity for a small measure of self-recognition. Margie accuses, "I knew you guys were, you know, shy and effeminate. I didn't know you don't even fuck," to which Peter replies, "'They do', I said. Admitting that I wasn't one of them, what she wanted me to be. Her yellow man. 'Just not me'" (135).

Rather than being a celebratory narrative of over/be-coming, Fu's novel wallows in the negative feelings, the rage, frustration, and sadness that characterize the protagonist's relationship with their body. While there are moments of lightness, of happiness, these are produced under the knowledge that they are stolen moments. After Peter buys a pair of women's shoes, he says: "I wore them whenever I was in my apartment [...] At first I loved looking down at my still meticulously hairless legs – all the muscles extended and activated by the shoes, which tilted at the same sharp angle as a Barbie doll's feet – and then it was routine [...] Painfully *not enough*" (114; italics in original). The seeming impossibility of finding what would be enough is the overarching tone of the text. The shoes become an object representative of an economy of affect that produces both joy and pain, of being and not being, the cruel optimism, to use Berlant's term, wherein what you desire is also the impediment to your well-being (Berlant 13). The problem is not in Peter's desire for the women's shoes, nor in the recognition, subtle though it may be, of what that desire means, rather, the relationship of cruel optimism is established in the promise of the shoes, that by wearing them, by donning the exterior signifiers of femininity, that this performativity will be enough. And yet, "There is very little of the multiple possibilities of a queer masculinity or femininity in the shadow of the transvestite Oriental as emerges at the intersection between gender and racial hegemonic discourse" (Guarracino 135). Seemingly, Peter's gender identity is negated by their racial identity when it is read through the lens of hegemonic, patriarchal structures.

Through the focus on the pain of what is 'not enough,' the text enacts Halberstam's theorization of "the queer art of failure" (2011), namely, "the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). In Fu's text, this 'toxic positivity' is rejected as the protagonist opts out of taking part in "larger fight, against doctors and bureaucracy, against hate" (236). Deciding instead to engage in a "last act of cowardice" (238) that means walking away from the "marches, vigils, hate crimes, unjust laws, a world that needed education" (238), Peter appears less as a heroic figure who comes to embrace an unequivocal gender identity and advocate for others than as a resigned subject who thinks "I'd fought long enough. I wanted to go home" (238). This rejection of political engagement can be read as pushing against the positive affects of joy and optimism, choosing instead "cowardice" and resignation. As Elizabeth Stephens (2015) has noted: "When joy and positivity are privileged as ethical states, despondency and negative [sic] might be construed as personal ethical failings in a way that overlooks how mediated these affects are by wider cultural and subjective forces. Such a move places responsibility for cultural affective conditions – such as misery in the face of structural oppression – onto the shoulders of individual subjects" (276). The image of the "happy transgender" positions transition as the only way to achieve the happiness society holds out as the desirable state of being. While the end of the novel suggests that Peter has embraced their identity as Audrey, this embrace occurs while in Germany, surrounded by their sisters (238), thereby suggesting

that the potential for transition occurs only through a literal un-homing: "Migration seems here to be the ultimate queer utopia, so that Peter can 'go and be reborn' as Audrey" (Guarracino 141).

The act of being un-homed brings together the intersectional threads of race and gender identity. The longing for the "Coming Home Story" of transgender identity (Prosser 1995), that is transition as a way of "coming home" to the "correct" gender identity that was denied the subject from birth, and David Eng's understanding of the impossibility of home for the Asian American diaspora converge here. For Eng, "Suspended between departure and arrival, Asian Americans remain permanently disenfranchised from home, relegated to a nostalgic sense of its loss or to an optative sense of its unattainability" (Eng, "Out Here" 31). For Peter, home is a site of unhappiness, representing a rigid gender binary and enforcing a toxic masculinity. "Home," then, must be constructed elsewhere.

The attainment of the desired gender identity is, certainly, a means of ethically recognizing the transgender right to transition. For Miquel Missé, "the success of the trans struggle is not that people can undergo surgery at increasingly younger ages and that these operations are more and more effective. Success is that fewer and fewer people will feel the need to modify their bodies in order to continue with their lives and that, rather than continuing to invent ways of changing and erasing our bodies, we begin to change our societies. Further: creating alternatives, making other corporealities and other identities visible, so that these too can be lived, by building a space that is livable for everyone" ("el éxito de la lucha trans no es que las personas puedan operarse cada vez más jóvenes y que las operaciones sean cada vez más punteras. El éxito está en que cada vez menos personas necesiten modificar su cuerpo para seguir con sus vidas y que, en vez de seguir inventando maneras de cambiar y de borrar el cuerpo, empecemos a cambiar nuestras sociedades"; translation mine; 273). Indeed, what Missé points to, and what Fu's novel clearly articulates through the character of John, is that even the option of gender reassignment surgery is one that is subordinated to questions of class and race, and that there is still much work to be done to create societies where surgery is not the only option for achieving a livable life.

Halberstam claims that "as a model of gender inversion recedes into anachronism, the transgender body has emerged as futurity itself, a kind of heroic fulfillment of postmodern promises of gender flexibility. Why has gender flexibility become a site of both fascination and promise in the late twentieth century and what did this new flexibility have to do with other economies of flexibility within postmodernism?" (18). The potential flexibility of the transgender body, however, is, as Halberstam suggests, undercut by both the way in which its acceptability is predicated on conforming to traditional or legible gender representation, and also in the way in which it reinforces the boundaries of those countries or cultures worthy of belonging to the transnational market and those that are excluded.

This system of inclusion/exclusion becomes clear in the novel when, some years after moving away from their hometown, to live in Montréal, Peter is befriended by a transgender man, John, and his girlfriend. It is through him and his friends that Peter comes to see that there is not just a name for what he is, but that it is a recognizable identity category. This understanding is not, however, met without resistance on Peter's part:

A moment passed in silence. The hooks above our heads were crowded with left-behind clothes and junk. Toques and scarves, a T-shirt, a bow tie, a nude-colored bra. Another of John's smiles, this one small and solitary, for himself. "Did you think . . . you were the only one?" he said. "No, I thought . . ." Yes, and I still did. John wasn't like me. Whatever he was, whatever he called himself, he was something else entirely. He had to be. "Are you a woman?" He threw off this question readily, like it was nothing at all. My whole life summed up in a question I never got to ask. "I can't do this," I said. (Fu 212-13)

Amidst the various items of clothing, Peter is asked the one thing they "never got to ask," and while they do not have an answer, or perhaps more accurately, they do not want to articulate the answer, even to themselves, the question reveals much. Though the boy interrogating Peter, John, is an FTM transgender man who, unlike Peter, was supported by both his parents and the medical community in his transition as a young child and adolescent, the gap between them is still too large for Peter. It is not just a case of John rejecting what Peter has always wanted: "Give me your girlhood, John, I thought nonsensically. You don't want it? Give it to me. I want to be the woman you would've been: blonde, simple, sunny" (212), there is also the question of John rejecting what Peter can never be: "blond, simple, sunny." Peter's racialized body precludes them from John's "girlhood."

That John and his friends can ask the question Peter "never got to ask," the question "Are you a woman?" speaks to the differences in class and cultural identity that exist between them. While John has the benefit of a family that can not only conceptualize his identity but also support it through moving to the city and consulting specialists, as the child of white parents, his racial identity is never brought into the question. His whiteness means that he need not negotiate the doubly ambivalent terrain of

mapping a racial and cultural identity along with a gender one. After spending time with John and his friends and hearing them speak of their food preferences and allergies, Peter comes to a realization:

[W]hat I was feeling gave itself a name. Rage. I was so angry I could've driven the tiny blades into her side. I hadn't understood some of the terms she used, but I understood the tone. Who were these kids? What right had they to be born into a world where they were taught to look endlessly into themselves, to ask how the texture of a mushroom made them feel? To ask themselves, and not be told, whether they were boys or girls? (218)

Rather, for Peter, the fact of learning John's story from his girlfriend – which involves supportive parents, a family that moves to Toronto "for better care," and medical support from the age of five (218) – provokes an affective response. Undoubtedly much of Peter's rage stems from the fact that the opportunity John had to "ask himself" whether he was a boy or a girl was denied Peter, that the potential for a livable life, to be recognized and to have that recognition coincide not with constraining categories for social acceptability but with love and affirmation, was also denied. Further, it is worth considering the patronizing way in which John and his friends are positioned as colonizers of Peter's identity. With their education, their multiple books that they offer to lend them, and their insistence that they join them in their demonstrations, a hierarchy is implemented in which Peter, the racialized and non-developed Other, is rescued by the white children of the West. Indeed, John's girlfriend tells Peter that "He's always bringing home curious strays. Thinks it's his job to educate the whole fucking world" (217).

Through the scholar Heather Love's work, one way of conceptualizing the gap between Peter and John can be understood as an effect of pinkwashing and homonationalism. Love articulates this through an analysis of who is considered as deserving of acceptance: "One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it – the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others" (10). John is positioned as the desirable transgender: white, middle class, educated, attractive, and in a monogamous relationship with a woman. As such he reproduces "heteronormative assumptions and institutions" (Duggan qtd. in Halberstam, 2005 19) rather than contesting them. While his transgender identity necessarily belies the fallacy of strict gender binaries, his performance of masculinity reaffirms the desirability of a normative male gender, and that the promise of happiness lies in adhering as best as possible to one gender rather than inhabiting a fluidity along the gender spectrum.

My own argument, then, is predicated on the idea that for many trans people there is a need, a desire, and the right to achieve this state of "homecoming" and that this means of articulating the self should not be overlooked nor downplayed; at the same time, the potential for a livable life should not be negated for those who inhabit, whether temporarily or permanently, the transitional space that rejects a static or stable either/or identity. For Peter Huang, much of the novel is spent in a state of tension between recognizing himself and rejecting that recognition. When they meet a woman in the text who joins the church as a means of eradicating her lesbian identity, she says: "I know how you feel, Peter. You want one thing, but more than that, you want to want something else" (Fu 167). It is this state of wanting "to want something else" that characterizes Fu's novel. For Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*, this orientation of desire is part of the recognition not only of what positions or identities purport to offer happiness, but also that the present is a place of unhappiness. In her discussion of the novel *Anita and Me*, Ahmed suggests that for the protagonist "It is not simply that she desires happiness but that she wants what she wants because she is not happy. So it is not that she wants what she wants because she wants it. We learn about the curious nature of want when she speaks of wanting whiteness, which is also about not wanting what she has" (151). Peter wants to want what they have, wants to want a cisgender identity and the promise of happiness this identity offers despite the fact that their cisgender identity proves productive of exactly the opposite: shame, depression, and unhappiness.

Peter's desire to be a woman is not limited to any one expression of femininity. From the exoticized women at the Japanese restaurant where they work, to the blonde whiteness they imagine for John, even to the svelte and toned woman on a poster in the gym, what Peter wants is both the body and the gendered performance of femininity. As Halberstam has pointed out in *Female Masculinity* (1998): "It is remarkably easy in this society not to look like a woman. It is relatively difficult, by comparison, not to look like a man" (28). Thus, when Peter does decide to dress publicly as a woman, they do so on Halloween, when "You can be whoever you want" (Fu 224). The costume chosen is Audrey Hepburn, an undeniable and iconic image of traditional femininity. The costume functions less as a means of disguising Peter's identity than it does as a reflection of the self long-denied: "It felt like something restored: a tail cut off and regrown" (227).

Transnormativity, the way in which transgender subjectivity and corporeality become "normalized" through the deployment of binary gender norms, falls under scrutiny for the way in which it not only performs a blurring of "the performative character of gender with the physical 'fact' of sex" (Stone 222), but also demands that "the cultural imperative faced by the transsexual is to represent oneself as *either* male or female, a condition of communal incorporation that requires making oneself legible according to social norms" (Bow 87; emphasis added).

Through prefacing the rage, frustration, shame and negative affects that accompany the protagonist, Fu's novel counteracts prevailing notions of transgender identity that focus only on the celebratory, transhomonalist discourse that excludes all those who do not conform to an either/or gender identity. Even so, Fu does not condemn her protagonist to the standard tropes for transgender unhappiness: death, isolation, and depression. Rather, she holds out a slim ray of hope at the very end of the novel, suggesting that there is a means of moving beyond the misery the protagonist has felt throughout the narrative. Though, Fu does so in such a way that hope does not come to be a single way of being, but is instead a snapshot of the four sisters: Bonnie, Adele, Helen, and now, Audrey.

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