Southern New Hampshire University

Queer Representation in Literature: Opening the Door to Self-Exploration and Identification with Tamsyn Muir

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By

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Abstract

This paper uses queer and feminist theory in conjunction with an autoethnographic approach to interrogate the interaction between literature, gender representation, the individual, and society through a reading of the works of fiction author Tamsyn Muir from the perspective of a gender-queer reader. We respond to previous research by scholars including Meredith Miller, Westbrook and Schiltz, and A. Šporčič, addressing representation in text, societal gender attribution, and the utility of science fiction as a genre in exploring the concept of gender. Through a textual analysis of specific themes, characters, and stylistic choices found in Muir's work, we ultimately argue that representation of a wide variety of gender presentations, as well as aspirational literature that presents a post-queer, radically accepting society, can only work to support the free expression of all people.

Keywords: queer theory, feminist theory, autoethnography, queer representation, fiction

Introduction

> A phrase I have frequently found myself using to describe the sensation of feeling unseen by my society throughout my life is "incandescent with rage", and it is a feeling I have been breathing through since my childhood. I remember my mother teaching me anger-management exercises when I was somewhere around ten years old- *breathe in for a four count, hold for four, breathe out for four, hold for four-* to varying degrees of success. Growing up, I experienced what I have retroactively learned to be a very common childhood experience among queer individuals: a pervasive feeling of unbelonging, without obvious cause. I knew I felt different. I did not know why. My reaction to the unknowing, to the uncertainty, and to the fear of abnormality was one that I have also learned in recent years to be quite common: the unceasing wrath that only a small, confused child seems able to generate.

Representation of queer bodies, presentations, and experiences in literature make space for self-exploration and self-identification within the reader, particularly within the queer reader. Here, queer denotes those individuals who deviate from heterosexual, cissexual, traditional norms or modes of gender identity and sexual expression. This being said, the term "queer" is often an elective term, and not all who may fall under this definition decide to use it. The ability to see oneself, or possible iterations of the self in society fosters positive self-worth, a sense of belonging, and alleviates feelings of abnormality, confusion, and loneliness. For a person to see the self in the world around them is to know that they belong, where to exist unseen is to exist as the "other", to feel unwelcome, and unintentionally or deliberately ignored. In service of this self-identification, fiction is uniquely positioned within literature to explore a variety of identities, gender presentations, and sexualities. Fictional demonstrations of different ways to

exist as a person, regardless of one's type of body, gender, or sexuality, influence a reader's perception of and interaction with their own body, gender, and sexuality.

Existing as queer is often an isolating experience. The average queer American is not born into a queer family, but a heterosexual one. They are raised in a culture that centers the heterosexual, cisgendered, patriarchal experience, and this translates to a feeling of intense abnormality. The world that is shown to queer youth by the mainstream media and their initial surroundings does not readily share their feelings or experiences. Queerness is often hidden, found in the cracks. Thus, current queer culture is defined by one shared experience: the necessary act of overcoming the provided traditional script and defining oneself as queer. The subject of this paper, however, explores a world where existing as queer is not a tenuous, isolating experience, but a standard, common mode of existence.

Herein, we will discuss the works of Tamsyn Muir and their representation of, in some instances, a society that looks at the ramifications of traditional gender ideology on the individual and, in others, explores gender and presentation in a post-queer society. Post-queer is taken here to mean a society in which an individual's queerness, whether in physical presentation, action, or identity, is considered commonplace and unremarkable. We will investigate distinct queer representation in literature, where queer identities that fall outside of or apart from the traditional gender binary do and do not show up in fiction, and how this representation, or lack thereof, influences the social conversation around queerness, identity, and acceptance within society. Characters and representations to be discussed will be drawn from two of Muir's short stories, *Princess Floralinda and the Forty-Flight Tower* and *Undercover*, as well as Muir's *The Locked Tomb* series, primarily the first novel: *Gideon the Ninth*.

This paper will seek to articulate the significance of the ability to see oneself reflected in literature and the ways in which literature acts as a vehicle for finding community, as a means of finding validation in one's identity, and the utility of literature in providing the individual with multiple examples within which they may choose to align themselves. Queer and Feminist theories will be utilized in the making of this argument, as well as Autoethnography, being a useful framework from which to write in that it will allow myself, as a member of the queer community who identifies as queer in both sexuality and gender, to write from an in-group perspective, and to bring my personal experience and understanding to bear. The topic of queer representation in literature is critical for further thought and study into societal limitations created on the basis of gender and gender presentation. Given the current political climate in the United States regarding queer rights, namely legislation and threatening legislation dictating access to medical procedures and autonomy for trans and gender non-conforming individuals, it is evident that a conversation regarding the acceptance and awareness of gender identities and presentations that exist beyond the traditional binary is vital to progress in the arenas of equity and justice in our modern reality.

Queer theory is defined in part by its indefinability. As Jagose states, "it is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent parts" (1). In other words, queerness, and by extension queer theory, is fundamentally mutable, resisting concreteness of definition. It adapts to fill the space that is left for the unloved, unheard, and unrepresented by the leading hegemonic society. As a queer individual, I am no stranger to the ways in which my identity is difficult to articulate and convey to others. I frequently find myself describing my experience in the negative, by what it is not, as opposed to what it is. A lack of queer representation in my

formative years meant that I had no positive queer figure to guide my thinking or demonstrate what a healthy queer identity looked like. I was unable to find myself in anything, not in any way that was not piece by disjointed piece, and the unlovely result was that I existed largely unaware of my own queerness until I was nearly out of my teens. Queer theory, as a mode of analysis that interrogates that which is unspoken and unrecognized, is a useful framework from which to approach *The Locked Tomb* and its manifold mysteries, its characterization of the queer, the deviant, and the unrecognized.

Following this thinking, feminist theory frequently functions as an extension of queer theory, or vice versa depending on the focus of the subject and text in question. Given that women as a class and categorization are often poorly represented or explored as characters in literature, feminist theory here echoes and responds to queer theory in its approach to investigating the nuances and social intricacies of gendered experiences in-text. If feminism can be understood as a movement to end oppression on the basis of sex (bell hooks 17), feminist theory can be understood to contain useful utility in articulating and contextualizing existing disparities between recognized and accepted genders, as well as their presentations and guiding social expressions, and the impact these roles and expectations have on the lives of the individual and the collective. As we utilize Muir's work to explore literature that challenges assumptions on the basis of gender, that flagrantly deviates from and modulates gendered tropes and themes, and further dissects the ideology and make-up of gender and gender roles, feminist theory will serve to highlight and exemplify the social structures and disparities that Muir challenges.

Autoethnography as a form of writing utilizes the authors lived experience as a member of a community or culture, and supports the belief that "doing research focused on human longing, pleasure, pain, loss, grief, suffering, or joy ought to require holding authors to some

standard of vulnerability" (Bochner & Ellis 212). This paper is thus, by necessity, a vulnerable piece that relies upon the inclusion of personal accounts of thoughts and experiences which will appear throughout this paper as we explore the impact of representation and identification in my own life. Evidence presented will include personal experiences as a queer reader trying to identify myself in literature as a child, teen, and adult; personal anecdotes detailing my own experiences and those I have witnessed, as well as broader experiences that have been made known to me as a member to the wider queer community.

History

> I have struggled on and off with my gender presentation over the years, physically speaking. When I was young it was easy to be more conforming, because I did not yet understand that I was doing it. I liked my twirly skirts, and wasn't opposed to climbing fences or getting scraped up and filthy while wearing them. I wasn't slowed down by expectations of behavior in the slightest. I have three little brothers, and we were all treated roughly the same in regards to available activities and extracurriculars, and received, as youngsters, relatively similar treatment from our parents. As I aged and was subjected to the hormonal war that is puberty, I suddenly had to deal with a body that developed differently from my siblings, that changed how people perceived me.

We are, all of us, made up in part by the world we live in. We are our communities and our neighborhoods, our belief systems and our systems of learning. This deep immersion in the world around us means that it is often easy to ignore or fail to see the ways in which we are impacted by the many and varied social systems and ideologies that we are surrounded by. Yet, as scholars Smith and Smith write, "the many roles, groups, and situations in which we all participate merge with our own idiosyncratic, creative, and biological makeup, to shape how we

perceive the world, how we experience emotion, and our behavior in a world of constant social interaction" (63-64). Environment determines, or at the very least heavily influences, perception. This, in turn, influences presentation on the part of the individual- the way one acts, dresses, or carries oneself are all reflections of that which have been absorbed and collected from the culmination of their lived experience within their culture. Thus, we see the significance of being represented within that culture: if a person fails to find themself within their environment, the implication is that one does not belong, is aberrant, abnormal, or unwelcome.

Miller writes about the impact of queer representation in her paper on the implied lesbian reader, wherein she argues that "lesbian readership was an integral part of the process of lesbian identification for many women" (37). She describes a reader's desire to find a "structure of meaning and subjectivity" (39) as they learn about and explore their emerging identity, the space and understanding provided to the reader through text, and further describes previous attempts at intervention in this process by various legal bodies. Specifically, Miller cites a five day hearing conducted by the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials in 1952, during which legal representatives debated the morality of letting a reader have access to materials and texts that they believed vulnerable to the "wrong literature" (41), and therefore had the potential to become threats to society. Miller identifies this concern as a belief in "representation [being] dangerous in that a latent class of individuals may be inspired by the depiction of acts of which it might otherwise have remained blissfully ignorant" (41). Evidently, the ruling body was afraid that, once a mode of behavior was investigated and found desirable, or eye-opening, or freeing, ultimately mundane in the grand scheme of things, expectations and understandings on the wider societal scale would shift. This is true, to some degree. As the average person learns more about something, the less they fear it, whether that be the function of a magnet or the intricacies of

queer attraction. It becomes known, understood, and holds no further threat as a function of that understanding.

Fear of the unknown contributes to exclusion, and in excluding the unknown there is lost the opportunity for it to become the known, the understood, the accepted. This exclusion, large-scale, becomes social exclusion, or "an institutionalized form of social distancing. . .[which] effectively keeps the affected group outside the structures of power and privilege, opportunities and resources, if not leading to outright oppression and/or exploitation" (Modi 7). Keeping specific groups unseen, encouraging identities to go unexplored, restricting expression, punishing deviance, all of these component parts come together to make up exclusion. This process is as damaging as it is dangerous, both to the targeted group or individual as well as to wider society. A culture that punishes the out-group for their differences is a culture that will not tolerate exploration or the potential to find differences in members of the in-group.

Spencer Garrison writes about the additional factor of cultural legibility in regards to gender expression and acceptance. Garrison writes "emphasis on the transformative possibilities of gender identity play has overshadowed the regulatory threat imposed by those same categories: namely, the fact that gender attribution continues to play a fundamental role in attaining cultural intelligibility" (614). In other words, the ability of the dominant culture to recognize and identify specific identities fundamentally contributes to its understanding and inclusion of these identities. Literature, and fiction in specific, is uniquely positioned to combat this easy exclusion through explication of the "other", by making visible what is hidden, by allowing for exploration, by encouraging the seeking of knowledge, and by demonstrating mundane expressions and providing examples of, in this case, queerness. Further, Björklund and Lönngren argue for the significance of visibility in literature, stating "making visible what others

have not seen before is crucial to literary interpretation and has been discussed at length in the field of queer readings. Queer readings are a kind of textual analysis with unique character and can be described as a tension between denotation and connotation, between visibility and invisibility" (196). This sensation of at once being present and yet invisible, easy to mask over or ignore, is one that I have seen in others and felt in myself over and over again as I navigate my own queer identity. An awareness, if not a genuine understanding, of queer identities, presentations, and experiences in fiction is critical to the self-exploration and identification of not only the queer reader in society, but any reader that finds themselves departing from the "norm".

Tamsyn Muir

> Presentation got harder. Shirt choices were suddenly a statement, wearing a skirt felt risky, and all I really wanted was to be comfortable. I was furious that I was being treated differently than my brothers, and for what? Having longer hair? Tits? I didn't want to be cosetted, or told that I had good mothering instincts because I watched out for my younger siblings and liked to hold my baby cousins. I was incredulous the first time I was pulled aside in school and sent home because my shorts were too short and distracting to teachers. I didn't understand what was happening when some school mates contrived to get me to touch my elbows behind my back or made comments about the fact that I can touch my tongue to my nose. The world was closing in around me, and it was because the world thought I was a woman and that they knew how a woman needed to be treated.

Tamsyn Muir is an Australian born New Zealander known for her works in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. She was first published in 2011, in the February edition of *Fantasy Magazine,* a short story titled "The House That Made The Sixteen Loops of Time". She is also, notably, a lesbian, a factor which this reader found largely impactful for the simple and

uncomplicated way in which Muir writes her own queer characters. Muir is a particularly relevant author when discussing gender and representation purely because of how she writes gender as a functional concept. Muir's characters are varied and well-developed, and gender is simply one arena in which she wields a masterful stroke in writing creative fiction. In her series *The Locked Tomb*, the gender of her characters is not restrictive of their skills, motivations, nor goals. Instead, gender kindly fades into the background of her narrative, allowing action, ability, and a truly buckwild plot to lead the story beyond the "badass woman with a sword" trope. Although, it must be noted, there exist multiple badass women with swords in many of Muir's works. Muir's novella *Princess Floralinda and the Forty-Flight Tower*, hereafter referred to as *PFFFT* for brevity, also engages with the topic of gender in the signature style by which Muir can be recognized, although more explicitly stated and deliberately explored than within *The Locked Tomb*.

A frank and open conversation that *PFFFT* holds in the midst of its narrative highlights social constructions that influence gender roles, and thus influence those who lean into/out of/and otherwise act within the confines of gendered thinking. Muir continues this trend of gently and not so gently twisting and confronting gender assumptions and characterizations in another short story titled *Undercover*, which does not so obviously call out gender in the way of *PFFFT*, but allows it to recede into the background as in *The Locked Tomb*, to be more subtly interrogated and applied at the author's will. Muir is an excellent author who describes gender and gender presentations in many and varied forms, thus encouraging the reader to take a wider consideration of gender and what it means as they apply it to their own lives.

Princess Floralinda and the Forty-Flight Tower

Cobweb and Gender Attribution

> Fiction was my first introduction to a lot of things. Notably, fiction is where I first learned about people who are transgender, a mode of being I was firmly oblivious to until my twenties. I don't recall the exact piece in which I read this, but there is a line that I will remember for the rest of my life. An old grandfather was outing his trans grandson to the grandson's employer, spouting some general hate speech about how they were not what they claimed to be, the boss should watch out, etcetera. The boss responded with something to the effect of "I don't know what you're on about. I know (character) is a man, because they told me so". That line has done a lot for me, in hindsight. It has become foundational to how I think about gender, self-designation, and who gets to decide what we are, not just in regards to our gender, but in all life.

Shortly after the debut of *Gideon the Ninth*, Muir published a short story titled *Princess Floralinda and the Forty Flight Tower*, within which lives a character called Cobweb. Cobweb is a fairy, and at the time of their introduction to the story they are referred to as it/its, i.e. its wings, its blonde-green hair/it sat forlornly, waiting for moonbeams. About a third of the way into the story, Floralinda asks Cobweb to decide if they are a boy or a girl, so that she knows what sort of clothes to make for Cobweb, and further how to treat them. That, right there, constitutes my general thoughts on the social construction of gender: a tool used to determine how people are treated. This thought is echoed by Kessler and McKenna's book, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, originally published in 1978, wherein they argue that gender is primarily attributed by others in social contexts in order to determine how to interact with one another in accordance with assumed social roles. Schilt and Westbrook discussed this same concept in 2014, as it relates to transgender individuals, stating that "gender determination does occur at the level of *everyday interaction*. . . Both cis- and transwomen, for instance, may find their biological claim to use a public women's restroom challenged by other women if they do

not present the expected visual cues warranted for access" (36). This argument starkly underlines the impact of a person's physical presentation as a means by which they will be extrinsically judged, and thus how they will be treated.

Unconvinced by the necessity of this exercise, but willing to entertain it, Cobweb asks Floralinda which gender is superior, to which Floralinda replies that this wasn't really how it worked, ". . .at the same time suffering a guilty pang that she was not really communicating all the facts" (32). Cobweb chooses to "be a girl", largely influenced by Floralinda, who is now thinking of how inappropriate it would be to have been changing clothes and wandering around in various states of undress full view of Cobweb for the last several weeks, should Cobweb decide to be a boy. The two have an insightful discussion about gender and expectation, which consists mainly of Floralinda telling Cobweb that boys generally have more good times, but may be subject to being eaten by dragons, and that girls have less good times, but are generally not as often asked to do anything strenuous (32). A notable absence in this exchange is any analysis on Cobweb's existent or nonexistent genitalia. By couching Cobweb's gender determination as voluntary and not intrinsically linked to the characters biology, Muir makes interesting commentary about gender determination, trans bodies, and the significance of sex or gender assignment. Presumably, Cobweb appears androgynous enough to Floralinda to obfuscate any attempts to assign gender based on their presentation. In the absence of recognizable characteristics that indicate one gender attribution over the other (Westbrook and Schilt, Kessler and Mckenna), Floralinda is left with no recourse but to ask Cobweb what they self-identify as.

The very instant that Cobweb agrees to girlhood, her interactions with Floralinda change. Floralinda has loud thoughts and opinions on Cobwebs behavior now, such as "now that she was a girl, Floralinda thought Cobweb ought to look as though she were enjoying herself a bit less"

(34), and "[Cobweb] was also very susceptible to flattery and thought quite a lot of herself, which Floralinda also did not think was quite appropriate now that she was a girl" (35), and "[Floralinda] had told Cobweb that Cobweb ought to talk softly, being a girl; Cobweb had looked close to slapping her" (78). Cobweb's opinion of the whole mess can be summed up in a comment near the end of the narrative: "I even was a girl for you, though frankly, I don't think there's much to recommend it, and I worry that the whole experience has given me a complex" (105). This is a simultaneous recognition of the social aspect of gender determination, as Cobweb is only a girl in the context of being seen as one by Floralinda, as well as a damning commentary on the perils of girlhood from a being who only wore the mantle for about a month.

Cobweb is not a girl in their own culture, but they can be one for Floralinda. The flavor of the thing is very much the idea that gender is a costume that one puts on and takes off as desired. Cobweb wears girlhood because Floralinda needs a way to conceptualize their relationship, and it immediately influences the way Floralinda treats Cobweb. Wallowitz writes that "our notions of femininity and masculinity are socially and culturally constructed by the music we listen to, the books we read, the television we watch, and the stories we heard growing up" (27). We see this active construction in Cobweb, as the newly christened "she" begins to be assigned expectations and presuppositions the moment she picks up her new pronouns.

Undercover

> Part of my struggle with identity and self-understanding came from living in a niche religious culture that didn't encourage questions or discovery, and part of it came from my own naive inability to read between the lines or parse anything that was not clearly stated. I was terribly afraid of being wrong as a child, afraid of being shamed or challenged or confronted with the universal human experience of being young, and therefore not in full

> possession of all world knowledge set in stone. This translated to a hesitation to make intuitive leaps, even if they were probably a safe bet. If I was not told something directly, far be it from me to believe it was real. I took things as they were, and did not imagine what they might be.

In *Undercover*, another short story by Muir, our protagonist is in town for a new job with The Widower, a mob boss who is "one of the most dangerous gangsters in the whole hemisphere", who "wore a soft gray suit dandified with a bit of orange carnation in her pocket", hair "short, pomaded, very dark" (4), whose study was "dark and elegant and smelled like good cologne and bad tobacco" (3), who is a woman. "Boss" to her employees, and "The Widower" to everyone else. I picture the Widower like a character in a Godfather movie, knees wide, cigar at hand, smoke curling towards the ceiling, controlled and hard like iron. The Widower manages her business from a private booth in a club she owns, has trouble with the law, and keeps a zombie in the basement. The zombie is her ex-wife.

The ex-wife is named Lucille. Lucille is a previously undercover cop who has since been outed after an off-screen attempt to take down The Widower in a plan that involved infecting herself with a zombie virus. Becoming zombie-fied has left her tattered, with "moth-eaten holes in the abdomen and the neck, and one knee and hip were fully defleshed" (9), and locked in a reinforced cage set up like 1920's style dressing room, where she is kept in lipstick and pearls and less-than-fresh flesh to gnaw on, on account of how the fresh stuff makes her too excited (read: faster/hungry/awake). Miz Amy Starr, our protagonist, is here to wrangle the zombie.

Trope Switching and Playing with Gender

> I don't like the pressure to be legible, to be visible, to present in a specific way so people will know and understand that I am queer on sight. I don't want to have to change how I

> act/present in order to be interpreted correctly. I present feminine. That is not how I consider myself. I don't want to be required to present androgynously to be seriously considered gender queer. To me, this obviates the entire argument of authentic, queer presentation. The second someone starts adding rules and labels and restrictions, all they are doing is creating a new gender prison. And I refuse to help build those walls.

The Widower is the classic mob boss- boxy suits that emphasize the shoulders, the dapper hat, the cigar, the way she speaks to those around her. She is in charge and inexorable and dangerous. As far as the reader is made aware, The Widower's gender is not really commented on by the society in which she operates. In a departure from the narrative choices Muir makes in *PFFFT*, the world of *Undercover* doesn't have much to say about how one should act on the basis of gender; it is not commented on by the protagonist, by The Widower's business partners, by her staff, or by her ex-wife. Her deviations from any traditional gender roles are simply not worthy of note. The standard visual and physical cues that would signal possible gender attribution (Westbrook and Schilt) do not apply here as they do in *PFFFT*, and the deliberate shift in social tone translated to something very akin to euphoria for me as a reader. I kept waiting for someone to make a cutting comment about The Widower's sexuality, or say something derogatory about her gender, even if it would have likely ended up with them six feet under. In my experience, deviating from traditional gender roles in-text is often used to shame or assign flaws to a character, or to "other" a character and designate them as breaking some kind of barrier; an exception proving a rule. But the cutting comments never came, and I rode that high all the way through my marathon reading of the text.

Lucille is at once the mob wife and the chained dog in the basement. She has her silks, her furs and her feathers, her lipstick and her wedding ring, but she is also the most violent character in the narrative. Her introduction to the story consists of her fighting and then eating a

giant lizard, and her role in her ex-wife's mob operation is very point-and-shoot, in that The Widower points her at people she would like dead and Lucille eats them. She used her identity of "mob moll", accessing the trope of the femme fatale to win over the wanted gang leader with the express purpose of taking them down. In an article on traditional roles of women in narrative, Sanchez writes that "women introduce the possibilities of marriage, courtship, and sexual desire" (52), possibilities Muir leans into in the relationship between The Widower and Lucille. Muir's awareness and deliberate manipulation of gender through relatively simple trope adjustments, i.e. gender swapping the mob boss and making the classic femme fatale meets mob man narrative a queer story between two women, makes an old story feel brand new, compelling, and it opens up a classic trope to new interpretation that is inclusive of different gender presentations and identities.

The 58 pages that make-up *Undercover* grab gender roles by the shoulders and shake, rearranging them, playing with the rules, dissecting parts to flip them over and paste them back in fun new configurations that force a consideration of presentation versus identity, presentation as a function of identity, determinism, gender-related and otherwise, and the stark humanness (zombie-related flesh eating notwithstanding) of the women in the narrative. People aren't treated differently on the basis of sex, not really, not as we see it in-text. Granted, this is a very tight story with a microscopic focus that only hints at the wider world and culture that surrounds it, but any rules or restrictions the reader can infer do not seem to apply to the women in question. In contrast to *PFFFT*, which named the gender dilemma and put it on the table to talk about, *Undercover* simply flips the script and lets gender become unremarkable. Both narratives are dynamic in their address of gender and gender presentation, one by its overt presence and the

other by its deliberate and uncommented upon acceptance.

Gideon the Ninth and *The Locked Tomb*

> The piece of fiction that introduced me to the idea of being transgender made me think about the way we treat each other, and how I wanted to treat people. I am really glad my first thoughts about trans identities came from fiction, because I struggled with adapting to the concept of elective pronouns. My background in that conservative, religious community and its disdain for new ideas and self-reflection was difficult to cut my way out of. Pronouns hadn't been an issue for me before, but now that my world had widened and it was suddenly possible for me to mess up how I referred to people, it was like my brain kept tripping on an imaginary jumping rope.

The world of *The Locked Tomb* is set approximately 10,000 years into the future across what the reader will recognize as theoretically our solar system, in a culture that has grown out of an extinction event involving environmental collapse, nuclear missiles, and a man who can raise the dead. John Gaius, the King Undying, the Necrolord Prime, Emperor of the Nine Houses, is a necromancer who started the post-nuclear civilization that would grow into the world and culture that houses *Gideon the Ninth*, which is made up of colonies on the nine planets of the solar system and a intergalactic space force that is doing more colonizing of nearby star systems than anything else. John, it is revealed somewhere at the end of book two, is the major influence in the culture of his now ten thousand year-old empire. This essentially means that this incredibly niche culture is based almost entirely off of one man's values and beliefs. While he kept nuns, classic religious iconography, stained glass and computer tablets, he dropped institutionalized homophobia, democracy, and the internet.

SciFi and the Promise of Post-Gender Thinking

> I am relieved that I got to practice first with fictional characters whom I couldn't harm by accidental misgendering. I am glad that I got to do the bulk of my critical thinking and brain-realigning in purely theoretical arenas instead of subjecting some poor trans person down the line to my poorly thought out misconceptions and stuttered understandings, which I have since learned are all too common in the interactions in the lives of the not-cis (cis/cis-gender referring to those who identify mostly in accordance with their gender assigned at birth), and sometimes even cis people who aren't perceived as cis-enough by the world around them. Those fiction-prompted thoughts also cushioned my own landing when I realized a lot of those thoughts actually applied to myself.

Gideon the Ninth is science fiction meets fantasy, occurring far into the future, drawing heavily from our current culture and modern reality while abstracting and exemplifying the parts of it that Muir wanted to explore. There are spaceships, exciting new technologies, and, most interesting to me, Muir follows through on a promise that science fiction makes but does not always get to keep: the way she talks about people changes. Often in fiction, the reader's concept of gender and presentation is necessarily influenced by their reality, by the author's reality, by the insidious depths of the hooks sunk into us by our culture and society that dictate how we see each other and ourselves. In a paper on nonbinary and genderqueer readers in science fiction, Šporčič writes that "science fiction throughout the history of the genre only sporadically heads in the direction of attempting to transcend the hierarchical understandings of gender and experimenting with possible alternatives" (63), citing historical and cultural weights that all to often interfere with a narratives inclusion and expansion of different genders and identities. Muir is one of the authors who follow through, and she does this by approaching gender attribution at the level of the individual.

An example of Muir's avoidance of conformity can be found in an early description of a supporting character that simply states "they might have been a woman and might have been a man and might have been neither" (*GTN* 80), and leaves it at that. No further interrogation or explanation. It is startlingly refreshing. An example of the way in which Muir contextualizes approaches to sexuality can similarly be found early in book two, *Harrow the Ninth*, wherein the titular character remarks of her first crush: "God's victory and death was a girl. Maybe a woman. At the time Harrowhark had not known how to tell, and the gender was only a self-interested guess" (50) which is both an excellent acknowledgement of a character who recognizes their own queerness at an early age, as well as being a fascinating commentary on gender and gender recognition. Muir writes gender as it is functional to the narrative, which, upon reading, feels much like how one encounters questions of gender in reality. Muir's acknowledgement of gender-impressions through the eyes of her narrators points out the instinct towards gender attribution while simultaneously releasing her character and the reader from the burden of following through on that attribution.

Muir approaches gender and sexuality institutionally, socially, allowing her cast within *The Locked Tomb* to embody queerness as a natural extension of their identities within a culture that does not question or deride them. Here exists a world in which the queer is not condemned, viewed as abnormal, nor debated in high school civil rights courses. It simply is. Queer relationships are as unremarkable as heterosexual ones, questions of progeny and reproduction are solved neatly with scientific advancements, obviating inane arguments that center around continuation of a family or reproductive necessity. They don't quibble about how their queerness will be interpreted by some amorphous higher power (their god doesn't quite have a cell phone, but he is reachable). Queerness has become part of the norm. Who a character is attracted to is

only relevant in the way that any character's sexuality would be relevant; it comes up abstractly, in moments where a character notices another character's appearance, or makes an offhand comment about a previous fling or attraction. It does not feel forced, it does not feel awkward or uncomfortable, or heavy-handed. Instead the reader, and this queer reader specifically, is given the simple gift of having a well-written, interesting, compelling character who lives and loves like they do.

The characters within *The Locked Tomb* exist within a culture that does not socialize or train their behavior on the basis of their sex, nor on their gender. In fact, the closest equivalent to traditional gender roles in-text is very probably found within the necro/cav relationship. While this is not the strict case for the entire world of The Nine Houses, the bulk of the characters in *Gideon the Ninth* the reader meets at Canaan House, the main setting of the story, generally come in pairs, with some critical exceptions. Briefly: necromancers, individuals who wield power over death, are paired with cavaliers, denoted by the "the (house number)" title, i.e. Gideon the Ninth or Camilla the Sixth. The necromancers we encounter are high-ranked members of their houses, leaders or near-leaders, who have proven themselves to be quite capable, necromantically speaking. A cavalier is essentially a bodyguard, a swords-person devoted to the protection and care of their partner. It is not always the most reciprocal of relationships.

Gideon and Sexuality

> When I was teaching in my home state I made a habit of using Mr. in a deliberate attempt to be visibly queer for my students and to alleviate personal discomfort over the mandate of using a title at all, as establishing my gender every time I speak with someone is not something I have enjoyed, historically. This clear deviation from expectation (as,

> physically, I am what is generally considered feminine presenting) was not something I had in my teachers when I was in school. Shortly after first meeting my students, one brought in a book with the transgender pride flag on the cover, and spent the entire first half of class making direct eye contact with me while they held it. When I released them to work on their own projects, I went up to this student. I told them I liked their book, and asked if they were enjoying reading it. I remember their bright eyes and that shy smile. I remember the look on their face when I *saw* them, when I let them *see* me. Who I was and where I stood, a visible part of my community.

The first time I read Gideon the Ninth I was riveted to the point of sleep deprivation. Aside from having a dynamic setting, fascinating magic system, amazing world-building, wildly compelling characters, and a rip-roaring plot that did not let me up to breathe let alone put the book down, the main character was queer. And it wasn't a big deal. Or even really a deal at all. The ways in which queerness is central to the narrative are consequential because the story is not about the fact that Gideon is queer. The story is just about Gideon, and Gideon happens to be queer. Gideon's sole age mate, Harrowhark, is also queer. Harrow's queerness is only plot relevant because, like Gideon, this story is about Harrow, and decisions Harrow makes, and a fair number of Harrow's decisions are influenced by her sexuality, and by her attraction to specific people.

Gideon Nav, also known as Gideon the Ninth, later as Kiriona Gaia, First of the Tower Princes, is the titular character of the first installment of *The Locked Tomb Series*. She is quite tall, in possession of an impressive set of biceps, maintains a codependent relationship with her two-handed sword, and one of the queerest characters I have ever had the pleasure of encountering. The world of *The Locked Tomb*, and specifically the Ninth House wherein our adventure begins, simply does not bother to address Gideon's queerness. Not in the "we have

stated it and now we are refusing to engage with it", nor the "representation accomplished, we have virtue signaled, clearly we have done our job" kind of ways all too common in mainstream media as they attempt to bring in queer audiences without bothering to truly access the queer experience. Gideon's sexuality is treated exactly as a straight protagonist's sexuality is generally treated. The audience is aware of it, but if it's not immediately plot relevant it takes up as much page-time as their hair-color, though it does influence the story. She has a deeply complicated love/hate/mostly hate relationship with the only other girl her age on her planet; the first time she leaves that planet for another she near instantaneously meets a woman with whom she immediately embarks on what could have been a torrid affair, if the woman in question hadn't been suffering from a debilitating chronic illness at the time, and the relationship was thus instead a torrid and occupying flirtation.

Gideon's queerness is central to the story, in that the story is about Gideon, but it must be noted that sexuality within *The Locked Tomb* is rarely overtly stated, when it is discussed at all. It’s simply a part of the character. Lesbian characters, and indeed most characters that are women loving women, are frequently characterized as “other”, as abnormal and strange and dangerous, and as deserving of any violence they encounter (Benshoff 231). They are also commonly portrayed as hypersexualized, for the male gaze, and reduced to the sexual gratification they bring to a non-lesbian audience (Annati & Ramsey 312). The prevailing message to queer readers then becomes one that centers on their utility as sexual objects and cautionary tales instead of affirming their existence and celebrating their identities. This devaluation and commodification of the lesbian character further acts to devalue and degrade the lesbian reader, and, by extension, all queer readers, reinforcing a prevailing feeling of social exclusion, unbelonging, and isolation. Gideon, then, deviates from this representation of women

loving women as dangerous sex objects and instead affirms the queer reader through a demonstration of a character who is not centered on sex, whose sexuality is not treated as deviant, who is loved by the text and its author.

Gideon cuts decisively between the sexually aggressive and asexual woman of lesbian sexuality myths (Iasenza 112) in her embodiment of her sexuality. Her attraction to women is present all throughout the text, largely in the fact that Gideon is constantly aware of them, and the way in which she is aware of them. For example, in a scene in which Gideon is sarcastically listing potential bribes that Harrowhark, the series deuteragonist, may feel compelled to offer her in exchange for Gideon's cooperation in an as yet unexplained scheme, Gideon suggests "Gideon, here's a bed of writhing babes. It's the cloisterites, though, so they're ninety percent osteoporosis" (*GTN* 18). Gideon is constantly oriented towards the women around her, and she is aware of them in a way that does not come across as overdone, or zealous, or creepy. As a queer reader who has all too often been introduced to characters of queer women as predatory, aberrant, or for titillation, finding Gideon felt intense in its anticlimax. Her queerness is not big or dynamic or revelatory in-text, nor is it predatory, demeaning, or othering. Instead, it is almost insultingly casual.

Gideon and Gender Presentation - Butch in a Vacuum

> The day I announced that I was leaving the school, that student broke down crying in my arms. We had barely spoken - there was a rule against talking about anything queer in school, and a terrible policy that would require me to out this student to the counselor and, in turn, their guardians if I heard or discovered anything, so I tried to keep my kids safe by not asking questions and being as present as possible- but just interacting with me, an adult who was an out, happy queer person gave this kid something that I never had. An

> acknowledgement that there were others like them, at a time when they were young and vulnerable and living in a community that did not celebrate them. If their immediate community was anything like mine at their age, they were with people who would tacitly demand silence on this topic, that they refrain from rocking the boat, that they "pray the gay away". I wish I could have done more for this student. I think about what would have happened if I had stayed. I still think about that kid sometimes, and what I would have given to be seen back when I was in their shoes.

Gideon's physical presentation is another facet of her queer characterization that is worthy of note. Gideon dresses in utilitarian black trousers, black shirts, and black robes, in keeping with the black on black aesthetic of the Ninth House. She is generally armed, and her weapon of choice is a massive two-handed infantry sword that requires her to maintain quite a bit of upper body muscle with which to wield it. When she is denied her longsword, she carries a rapier and knuckle knives. Her ginger hair is cut short, though not shaved like many other Ninth House devotees, and she is, for a solid portion of the novel, wearing aviator sunglasses. Gideon's sheer physical size is the subject of much commentary in Canaan House. There are a number of appreciative observations made of the size of Gideon's biceps, her quickness in a fight, and her sheer ability with a sword.

Gideon is what the modern queer reader can recognize as butch, although a natural consequence of the manner in which Muir writes *The Locked Tomb* as a relatively gender-neutral culture results in Gideon as a butch with nothing to prove. If we bring our social understanding to bear on her character, we see the masculine presentation, the physical capability, the embodied role of the protector, the toughness often associated with the butch stereotype (Jain 502). Yet in Gideon's world, much of her presentation is not determined by gender, it is determined by role. The role of a cavalier is a protective, combat oriented role. Before she was a cavalier, Gideon's

sole ambition in life was to join the cohort, the military force of the Nine Houses, and like any military role there exist physical fitness requirements that dictate both entry to the position and ability to do the job. There are no apparent barriers that exist in what the reader knows of the cohort on the basis of gender or sex. The first cohort officers the reader meets are both women of high standing rank, and no mention of their place in this system indicates any disparity in the participation of either men or women.

In creating a world that does not emphasize or debate gender, Muir has wiped the board clean of social ideology which influences or dictates prevailing thoughts that lead to discrimination or ostracization on the basis of sex. The social systems and ideology that we are mired in within our own reality are simply not a factor in-text, and this makes it surprisingly difficult to articulate the ways in which Gideon breaks barriers, because she is not actually breaking barriers in her own life. *The Locked Tomb* does not have the societal baggage that influences queerness and queer presentation in the way that our modern reality does- Gideon is butch without the trappings and hang-ups of a butch woman because her culture does not necessitate or leave space for a traditional butch role. She is butch without being butch, if we take butch-ness to be a response to a societal expectation for a hetero-normative man/woman couple, and the butch acting to fill the gap of the "masculine" in a queer woman/woman relationship. Gideon is not stepping in or compensating or adjusting performance to fill a gap. She is just big and strong and likes swords and has short hair and women and presents fairly masculine. She does this with no censure, no push-back, no expectation to be anything other than what she is. This is the aspect that at once makes Gideon unique among queer characters and difficult to articulate. As previously stated, queerness is often defined in opposition to the norm, in its deviance and its divergence (Jagose 1). Gideon, while factually queer, is not rebelling

against anything in terms of her sexuality or presentation. She simply embodies her authentic presentation and performance, the simple and true way that she is. Thus, the barriers she is breaking are barriers she breaks for the reader, and not herself.

Wallowitz asserts that "literature and media both reflect and create images of femininity and masculinity, and…readers project their own assumptions about gender onto a text" (26). In this vein, Gideon's presentation as a person, let alone a queer character, challenges assumptions of what is masculine and what is feminine. Gideon, for me, transcends gendered behavior and expectations to achieve personhood, leaving behind the cluttered and superfluous connotations and expectations of behavior and attitudes in favor of acting as a real person, with desires and wants and agency and attitude and a heart that echoed my own. That is not something that I have seen very often as a reader. Following Wallowitz's claim that the reader projects their assumptions onto the text and that these assumptions are in part created by what the reader sees in media and literature, it is evident that *Gideon the Ninth* disrupts this cycle of reinforced assumptions of traditional gendered behavior. By breaking the reader out of an assumed pattern of assumption, Muir makes space for every reader to widen the expectations and beliefs that they apply to both the media they engage with and themselves.

Harrow and the Body

> I am still finding my most impactful community ties through literature, usually in the idea of the author. Knowing that someone was moved by a perspective or experience and driven to write a character that resonates with me, or a narrative that explores queer themes and ideas- it has a way of making me feel distinctly seen. I recently read a short story featuring several characters in different flavors of queer and divergent gender expression, and neurodivergent to boot, and have been pleasantly reminded that there are people out there

> who think like I do, who live like I do, and, though I may not see them in my day to day, I find it deeply reassuring to know they exist. It feels intimate in a way that does not necessitate interaction beyond the text. A startling moment of unspoken connection.

Harrowhark Nonagesimus, the Reverend Daughter of The Locked Tomb, Greatest Necromancer of her generation, cuts an imposing figure at first blush. She enters the narrative swathed in black robes, the formal vestments of her house and her station, face painted to resemble a human skull and loaded down to the ground with accessories of human bone. Harrow's necromantic discipline is bone magic, and she arms herself accordingly. She wears bone studs in her ears, a necklace of teeth at her neck, hides bone chips in her clothing and the clothing of those she expects to have access to (mostly Gideon), and wears a corslet of bone clamped around her ribcage. When divested of the noise, she is also, as described by Gideon, a "girl younger than Gideon, and rather small and feeble" (29). This description directly precedes Gideon and her very large sword and very impressive biceps getting beaten quite spectacularly in a fight by a Harrowhark who reveals herself to have torn her nails and bloodied her fingers digging in the hard packed ground of their battleground in order to bury her bone weapons of choice, all in anticipation of seemingly disarming herself before Gideon's eyes. Mckay writes that "the vast majority of people tend to view the female body in terms of its form, rather than function" (56). The lesson on Harrowhark Nonagesimus is that she will do whatever it takes to achieve her goals, and that to her, function will always precede form. Her body is a useful tool that she will leverage towards whatever ends her goals drive her.

It is through Harrow that we learn the cost of necromancy, which is revealed to be an art that takes an intense physical toll on the body. Harrow is frequently depicted as having blood running out of her nose or ears, wet with blood sweat, or with burst and reddened veins in the whites of her eyes, although that last one is also partially due to her abysmal sleeping habits and

general lack of self care. Self care, in this instance, meaning regular feeding and adequate amounts of sleep. Harrow's regular appearance in this state, often in front of people she would consider outsiders or in front of her congregation no less (the Ninth House being essentially a relatively small monastery), indicates to the reader Harrow's opinion on her dishevelment: it's normal. So normal as to be unremarkable, as to not even warrant being daubed with a wet cloth before appearing at and even speaking before her flock of devotees. She is instead seen with her face "dusted with a handful of luminescent powder that had stuck to the blood trails coming out her nose" (*GTN* 36), and otherwise frequently turning up covered in blood and bone dust without pause or consideration for witnesses.

The reader's first introduction to a wider cast of necromancers occurs after Gideon and Harrow leave the Ninth and arrive at Canaan House, where it rapidly becomes apparent that blood sweat and other signs of necromantic exertion are quite common in necromancers, though most other necromancers do not readily push themselves quite so far or so fast as regularly as Harrow does herself. Where another necromancer generally will not balk from a little elbow grease should the situation call for it, Harrowhark frequently seeks out elbow grease requiring tasks and throws herself into them hole-hog, often to the point of unconsciousness. In one particular instance that finds Harrow having spent a large portion of time in a dark and nominally haunted laboratory trying to solve a bone puzzle alone, Gideon finds her at the end of a bloody trail wrapped inside a bone cocoon apparently built by Harrow herself before she passed out inside it, ". . .hands bloodied, paint smeared, the skin beneath it the same oily gray as the curtains" (139). Concerned with the condition of her skin, Harrow is not.

It is not often that I have found a woman character whose primary requirement of her body is that it is functional, as frequently characters who are women are presented as desirable

and easily objectifiable, designed to be pleasant and consumable (Thapan 32). Harrow's dramatic deviation from this expectation is that her primary focus is on what her body can *do* over what her body *is*. Often, in literature and reality, a woman is expected to care about her appearance, at least a little. Even characters who do not care to engage in traditional beauty standards and practices usually bother to brush their hair or keep themselves out of situations that they know will end with them bloody or bruised, unless it be a critical event like a battle or a self-sacrificing moment in the name of protecting something/someone they care about.

Harrow goes beyond this. She will black her eyes and split her nails because it is more convenient or more expedient for her to dig into hard-packed dirt with her hands than to find a shovel. In an article on the subject of othering women's bodies through their body hair, Fahs writes that "women internalize ideas about their bodies as central to "proper" femininity, and become other-directed, concerned about the male gaze, and oriented toward the (heterosexual) dating market" (Fahs 452). By deliberately writing Harrow as she is, a lesbian who keeps her hair shorn to the skin, her face painted with grease paint in depictions of skulls ranging from lovely to horrid, drowns herself in black fabric because her robes are the mark of her station and it is abysmally cold on her planet, Muir plainly removes her from this kind of internalized inner conflict that many who do and do not present as women experience. Harrowhark's focus on her ability and functionality as a capable body breaks the reader away from a primary question of appeal and attraction, and brings them home to the originality of a body that functions as a body before anything else. It conveys to the reader the idea that a body can just be a tool, well-loved, or well-used, or thoroughly abused, but primarily a vessel for taking the brain from place to place.

Conclusion

> It took a long time, a lot of exploring, moving across the country twice in different directions, and a never-ending effort of self-reflection to come to the realization that there does not yet exist a world where every person is, by-and-large, treated as people without their perceived gender gumming up the works. This realization is bittersweet. On one hand, it means that we have to make it ourselves. There is no running away to a beautiful, lush world where no one stops to consider what a person looks like or how they act because it does not affect their treatment of them in the slightest. On the other hand, it means that we have the opportunity to make sure that no one is left behind.
>
> The trouble with running away to somewhere is that a person cannot save everyone along with themself. The joy in deliberately working towards a post-gender world is the chance to give everybody the opportunity to save themselves. To save themselves from the judgment and the self-censoring and the guilt and the hurt and the irritation and the constant wrath of being misinterpreted, misunderstood, of being assumed and summed up and diminished. I had not realized that I felt so alone in my desire to cast off the judgements and diatribes that come with being considered gender-first until I happened upon a funny little book about a jock and her childhood rival going to bone graduate school 10,000 years into a future where gender honestly felt cursory, as interesting as a characters hair color. And then Tamsyn Muir arrived to show me how.

In a study arguing for creating a safer school environment for LGBTQ+ youth, Fleshman writes about the importance of incorporating queer narratives in a classroom setting, stating that "visibility gives LGBTQ+ students hope while educating and fostering compassion among their peers" (8). She talks about library books, lesson plans, the impact of Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) that help build community and provide support for students in a positive, safe environment. The impact of community beyond one's immediate surrounds, of being seen in wider

society, acknowledged in one's culture, cannot be overstated. It goes beyond a sense of belonging, it bleeds into one's feeling of acceptance. The visibility of queer people and queer experiences also opens the door to exploration in others, those who may not consider themselves a part of the queer community. Yet one does not have to belong to the queer community in order to experiment and engage with their presentation, or to interrogate their gender expression.

Gender studies scholar Dr. Alex Iantaffi states that "it is impossible… to consider the future direction of non-binary genders without also addressing the movement towards decolonization of identities and experiences" (284), citing the concept of intersectionality, and the ways in which all of the disparate systems that makeup our identities overlap and collide with each other to influence how we perceive others and ourselves. While this paper focuses on the concept of gender and freeing the reader from the strict, imposed confines of a gender binary, further considerations of Muir's work and other modern fiction should include an expanded consideration of further minority groups, and how social consideration of gender affect them in specific; individuals and communities of color, those living with disabilities, and those who are neurodivergent. Muir engages with concepts beyond gender and queer expression; she also addresses colonialism, mental illness, and systems of abuse. She introduces concepts and questions that provide fertile ground for dialogue and exploration by scholars more appropriate than myself to discuss. There exist a plethora of lives and experiences that are impacted by societal rules and restrictions, and as research and work in this arena develops, it is critical to remain mindful of the disparate impact on contributing factors that subtly influence the landscape on which we all stand.

At the end of the night, Tamsyn Muirs characterization and demonstration of characters' gender, presentation, and action invites the reader to consider their relationship with their own gender ideology, what it means to them and how they define themselves by it or how they let it

define them. I believe that an individual's consideration of the self is intrinsically linked to their beliefs and participation in society. By inviting the individual to consider themselves as extrinsically gendered, and by providing them with diverse demonstrations of gender presentations, literature creates space for the reader to find identity, self-reflection, and self-identification, along with an opportunity to consider the inherent possibility that exists around them. Beyond queer readers, beyond social binaries, and beyond traditional narratives, literature and authors like Tamsyn Muir describe a reality that allows the individual to determine for themselves where they fit, who they are, and what they want that to look like. It is the same old story: literature describes possibility.

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