

Queering the Narrative – Joelle Taylor

The word *queer* is a shapeshifter, one that has changed meaning 4 times in my life:

Queer - the insult that proceeded the fist or the sexual assault

Queer - the shorthand for radical homosexual, popular in 1990's in Western culture

Queer - the collective noun for disparate sexual and gender identities

& now:

Queer - a code meaning to disrupt

This afternoon, I want to speak into each of these meanings, for each exists between the lines.

In 1983 I came out quietly to myself as a lesbian, and as a poet. For me the two identities were indivisible. I was lucky to have been born in a time in the UK when there was a proliferation of writing by lesbians and gay men: novels, poetry collections, hand printed fanzines, and imported magazines. These were the seeds of our resistance to an increasingly homophobic Britain. The AIDS pandemic gave the right-wing establishment the weapon they need to enforce laws against the positive promotion of homosexuality. They banned us. This law was called Clause 28 and it took 15 years of hard campaigning to overturn it. By 'positive promotion', what they meant was that we should be silent, we should be ashamed, and we should be imprisoned either within the justice system for men, or psychiatric institutions for women. Many of us were physically attacked not only on the streets but most heart breaking of all within our own homes. I grew up afraid of my family.

But as everyone gathered here at conference knows, times of great oppression can often be times of heightened creativity. And so, we wrote. We wrote ourselves into the world. We wrote love stories, we wrote polemics, we wrote poems that imagined ourselves as belonging. Each book produced was a small revolution in the heart of this small queer child. Each book was contraband that I would truant from school to read, or squint at in the thrill of a darkened bedroom. To be queer was to be exiled from our families. To be queer was to be exiled from our wider communities. To be queer was to be exiled even from our bodies. We didn't 'come out'. We got out. Queer is a word that avoids its own meaning, that insults even those who use it to describe ourselves. How strange that our freedom lies within our initial oppression

The queer body is neither male nor female, everything and nothing, a conquered city, a land in the act of quiet resistance. It is the cast shadow.

But power lives between the lines. It is where the silence which gives birth to noise, to chaos, lives. And chaos gave birth to the world, and to each one of us.

Between the lines is the closet. The closet gives us the lie. The lie gives us invention. Invention gives us camp. And camp gives us survival. Survival gave us literature.

But exile can also give us the opportunity to reimagine the world. As a writer, I knew instinctively that I should be writing books that would become mirrors for those growing up like me. All books are mirrors but often when I looked into them all I saw was an old white heterosexual man staring back at me. I enjoy the diverse experiences that reading has the possibility of offering. But to understand my face is something that has taken years to achieve. The work was simply not out there. And so I write it.

But queer is not just content. It is also form.

Let us suppose that traditional narrative follows the male morphology, the male body. The story would be linear, it would follow the male sexual experience: foreplay, excitement, catharsis. It would have clear objectives. If we suppose for a moment that this might be true, then what would a narrative formed around the female morphology be like? It would cyclical, multi climactic, multiple narratives threaded into the one if we take into consideration the possibility of reproduction. The story would not end, it would simply keep reproducing

I used this notion to write my last book *Cunto & Othered Poems*, a collection about the hidden story of queer lesbian counterculture in 1990's Britain. It seemed important that the form should echo the content. And I took it even further. I wanted to create a book that existed in this queer space, between the lines, somewhere in the no man's land between the published and the spoken, between ink and breath.

To queer the page means to leave it sometimes. I founded my career on the live stage. I built the stage I performed on – literally, in some cases. It was the only way for a working-class queer butch dyke to bypass literary gatekeepers. Without access to culture, we created our own language. The language of the communal, the physical, the event. Our poems inhabited our bodies, became our bodies. Poetry, like water, becomes the shape of the vessel that holds it and so I needed to create a form that would explore that in some way; that works as well on the page as in the air, but that changes as it travels between the two, is distinct in each environment.

Live poetry is living poetry. It is inherently queer. I fear that academic poetry and literature studies are history lessons. Where are you? Why aren't you present in our underground clubs, where new forms and narratives are pushing up from the earth. Poetry is happening now. It is alive, resisting form, upsetting dominant ideologies, speaking with bodies as well as minds. There is a third poem that erupts between performer and audience, and that dynamic creates a profound poetic that resists the solidity of the page. It is the butterfly that unpins itself.

I am genderless when I write and gendered when I publish. I am a woman on the bookshelf. I am queer on the stage. In spite of my clothing and hair style, I am not transgender. But while I may not be transgender, I am almost certainly *transgenre*.

(trauma: the opera)

and for you, my darling/ my high priest of pious pornography/ poetry pimp/ you may fuck my
Soho-pink sacred heart// I want to write a book in which I live/ a story where the girl gets the
girl/ and the girl is herself/ a novel where I return/ to find a six year old child opening a
bedroom door/ and shotgun, *don't do that/* stop all that opera/ there is still so much to learn/
but how do I write/ that if *war is God's way of teaching Americans geography*¹/ then maybe
this 'this'/ 0-god/ oubliette/ is God's way of teaching lesbians history/ how do I ask her to
lift skin/ organise dust/ pin back the night/ excavate/ glue// I know that/ if you press your ear
against my shell/ you will hear Bangkok/ my Koh San Road/ or the itch of Moss Side

pavements/ the call of corner boys/ slouching, with bees in their mouths// tonight you will hear reindeer over Rotherham/ children/ my mother's funeral laugh/ you will hear black women/ teaching/ scratching chalk outlines on blackboard skin/ unpicking acronyms by candlelight/ my shell sings the sirens of Mount Sinjara/ my song seduces war/ listen/ can you hear a child ticking/ the slow-dance of bones beside Phnom Penn brothels/ my dropped vase/ kintsugi cunt;/ paint all the scars in Poundshop glitter, girl// are all women/ inside other women?// & how do I write/ that you are there too/ pretty dust girl/ curled deep in your cave of remarkable horror/ inside yourself/ uroboros/ smiling a no/ putting your headphones on/ staring into your hands/ taking off your fists// every time you/ open your mouth/ a white man jumps out/ and eats you// if *war is God's way of teaching Americans geography*/ then maybe rape is God's way of teaching women/ Woman// how do I write that/ there is a grave at the grave meeting of my legs/ & no one goes there after dark/ except with nets to catch all these beautiful ghosts/ pinning them to novels/ pages plucked/ vajazzled// how do I write Stone// and while we are at it/ how should I write that/ I had all your ghost babies. They live together at the edge of the woods/ and don't write home anymore.

thank you for listening. lay a wreath where the two roads pleat. photocopy my photograph. return to me once a year. tell them a story.

make me live.