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Complex Identities: Putting Casey Plett's Fiction in a Trans and Religious Studies Context

Catherine Brown
University of South Florida

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Complex Identities: Putting Casey Plett's Fiction in a Trans and Religious Studies Context

by

Catherine Brown

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Humanities & Cultural Studies
College of the Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Sara Callahan, Ph.D.
Brendan Cook, Ph.D.
Andrew Berish, Ph.D.
David Rubin, Ph.D.

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Abstract

The work of Casey Plett is a prime place to discuss the experiences of being transgender and a Mennonite. However, her writing has received little discussion in the field of trans and religious studies, simply because fiction is rarely the focus of analysis in the field. This thesis argues that not only does fiction have a place in the field, but that there are unique analytic tools, such as trans standpoint theory, that can be used in the analysis of works of fiction to heighten what is gained and found in the endeavor. And so, this thesis not only argues for fiction to have a seat at the analytic table, but also provides an avenue for the analysis of fiction in the field of trans and religious studies to take place.

Introduction

Casey Plett is a notable author because she presents a discussion of identity that is rarely brought to light – existing as a trans woman while also being Mennonite. There are few writers who discuss these identities coexisting, either in fiction or academia. However, trans and religious studies are growing and evolving to include more analysis and understanding of the different ways for trans identities and religious identities to interact and intermingle with each other. As a contribution to the field of trans and religious studies, this thesis examines how the fiction of Casey Plett highlights the ways in which trans people negotiate and understand their Mennonite identities. This thesis argues that the analysis of fiction has a place in the field of trans and religious studies, and argues for this by providing a framework of how to undertake such analysis.

Before embarking on this, however, it is important to establish definitions of key terms, just as it is important to discuss why my focus on certain terms is present. Frequently, a thesis like this would be discussed and analyzed through a lens of intersectionality. However, intersectionality has become so ubiquitous a term that it no longer holds the analytical value it once did – we must create a political and academic space which “*includes* but also *exceeds* intersectionality” (Nash, 138). Further, intersectionality was created by black feminists to specifically discuss intersections of racial marginality, with the marginalization felt and experienced by other identities in conjunction with racial ones. Discussions of this idea take place in *Black Feminism Reimagined* by Jennifer Nash. Her discussion at the end is one of

“interrogating the lure of intersectionality” but also one of “letting go,” both of the term, and of defensiveness of the term (137-138). This thesis will not focus on intersectionality, and it will instead place the focus on trans standpoint theory.

I must first define both components of that term, “trans” and “standpoint theory”. “Trans”, as a shortening of transgender, is a term that is complicated at times. There are those in the trans community who aim to gatekeep who is considered to ‘truly’ be trans. This takes many forms, but one of the more recent avenues of this gatekeeping has been trans-medicalism, or the idea that only trans people who medically transition are trans. There are also those who do not consider nonbinary trans people to actually be trans either. As such, I will define trans as referencing anyone who does not identify with their gender or sex assigned to them at birth, and who finds the term “trans” useful to identify with. To be trans does not necessitate an endpoint; it simply requires a desire to move away from what was assigned at birth, but what this movement looks like is individual in nature.

Standpoint theory are theories that acknowledge the fact that marginalized people have knowledge that can only easily be ascertained by people of that marginalization (Haraway, 584). This is often imagined in terms of a feminist standpoint theory, but for this project, I am envisioning “trans standpoint theory,” which would be the theoretical and analytical framework that trans people have knowledge and experiences that are only easily understood by having a trans identity. This gives me, as a trans person, a specific capacity to see, understand, and interpret information and media and trans components that exist within them. This is especially present and helpful in the analysis of Casey Plett’s work, which is focused around trans people and trans experiences, but which would also be hard to interpret from a purely cis perspective, i.e., the perspective of someone who identifies with their sex assigned at birth.

While the work of Casey Plett has been analyzed from a specifically Mennonite perspective, it has seen yet to see any analysis from a trans perspective. By combining previous Mennonite discussions and analyses of Plett's work, I can augment these discussions with trans standpoint theory both allowing me to understand points in which a cis Mennonite exploration of the texts can be lacking, but also allowing me to unlock elements of Plett's work, explaining hidden trans elements and understandings, which would allow Plett's work to be understood to a greater extent by cis readers.

The importance of this thesis is also heightened by the fact that trans and religious studies primarily utilize religious texts and works of non-fiction, while I argue for the inclusion of fiction in these discussions. There are currently some related avenues of analysis in the trans and religious studies field, but there is currently no framework for analyzing fiction in the field.

And so, the goals of this project are two-fold. This thesis project posits trans standpoint theory, then utilizes it in the analysis of Plett's fiction, thereby demonstrating the usefulness of the inclusion and analysis of fiction in trans and religious studies. These two arguments make up a double-pronged analysis of Casey Plett's work, allowing her writing to be understood at a dual-level, and creating a framework for this to be done with other pieces of literature in the future.

Literature Review

The goal of this thesis project is to establish trans standpoint theory through analyses of fiction and demonstrate the importance of this kind of work to the field of trans and religious studies. To accomplish these objectives, I must lean on certain scholarship.

One especially important piece is “Multiplicity and Contradiction - A Literature Review of Trans* Studies in Religion” written by Siobahn Kelly. This is an integral piece of writing because this thesis ultimately relies upon augmenting the ideas present in the article, and gains much of its value and importance through this augmentation. Kelly’s article outlines the main ways in which discussions of literature take place in the field of trans and religious studies. If this project, and the analysis of Casey Plett’s work, had to be fit into specific categories that are already present, it would most likely fit into the category of: 1) a work that explores “individual people and the intersection of their religious, spiritual, and sex and gender experiences;” or 2) a work “takes the nonnormatively gendered and sexed as a source for critical theoretical discourse and exploration alongside the existing canon of critical theory and philosophy” (Kelly, 8). However, neither of these angles truly fit the project, as they are presented in a context which only allows them to be discussed in the context of autobiographies, historical texts, or religious texts, which necessitates a new angle of analysis to be created. This is what this thesis ultimately takes on, the act of creating a framework for analyzing fiction in trans and religious studies.

Truly, I would argue that discussion of fiction is important in any field, but this is especially true of things relating to trans studies. The reason for this is most of the writing that

publishing companies want to publish from trans writers, is tell-all autobiographies (Serano, 1-2). These tell-all autobiographies are never really written for trans people, and there is only so much you can put in one that truly speaks to the trans experience, if your primary audience is going to be cis people. And so, fiction plays an important role because it is specifically curated to be a representation of reality – this is clearly stated in Eile’s article, “The Novel as an Expression of the Writer’s Vision of the World”. Eile writes about the novel form saying “In fact, it is fuller and richer, since it is viewed – depending on the method of presentation – in a greater or lesser approximation, but always selectively and in some perspective” (116). This is restated more succinctly when Eile says how the novel is essentially a “quasi report of quasi events” (116). Trans fiction and trans literature are pieces of writing selectively written from a trans perspective, and as such, they involve elements of the trans lived experience.

It can be difficult for a cis reader to understand the trans moments of trans writing because “the novel imposes a certain epistemology on the reality which it seeks to portray” (Eile, 116). Novels are written in certain ways to reflect the realities they are portraying- and it is these little breadcrumbs that also make trans-standpoint theory important. When a trans writer is leaving these breadcrumbs, these unique epistemological moments, it is necessary to be able to understand and interpret these moments so one can fully understand the worldview of the writer, and understand the reality they are speaking to.

One way to understand the worldview of Plett, is to look at the ways in which Plett has her finger on the pulse of discussions within the trans community. She interrogates trans temporality in *Little Fish*, an idea which has yet to be deeply investigated in academia. Plett says:

“Age is completely different for trans people. The way we talk about age is not how cis people talk about age.”

“You mean that thing,” said Wendy, “Where our age is also how long we’ve been out or on hormones or whatever?”

“Or do you mean that thing,” said Lisa “Where we don’t age as much. Because we die sooner.”

“Both those things, yes!” Sophie said. “But there’s more! There’s much more. Think of how hormones preserve you...” (Plett, *Little Fish*, 11)

Plett’s ability to address complex, timely concepts through fiction makes her work ideal for a project such as this. Not only does Plett write stories about primarily trans and Mennonite characters, which itself is rare, Plett also is involved with and interacts with the trans community and trans scenes in many ways that make her work important as a contemporary piece of media.

Notably, Casey Plett also contributes to academic discourse. She starts by pointing out how there are few other trans Mennonite authors then quickly pivots into a discussion of how members of the Mennonite community, even those who are worldly and open-minded, are still willing to accept the “disdain and hatred for LGBT people that other Mennonites might have” (Plett, 287). In considering why this is the case, Plett notes the similarities Mennonite and queer writings and stories tend to have to each other and identifies issues present at the heart of both communities. Plett writes: “I thought persistently of how much queer literature and Mennonite literature hold in common. What their concerns are, what gets at their hearts. Family, community. And of course, the loss of family, the loss of community” (Plett, 287). It is clear that this loss of community is something that it not only on Plett’s mind, but on the minds of other academics as well.

Goosen’s scholarship contributes significantly to understanding how trans Mennonite individuals negotiate their communal identities during times of crisis. For instance, when one Mennonites were questioned in their values during the AIDs epidemic “progressive allies, along with queer family members and friends, ‘when asked to choose between social justice ideals and

institutional loyalty ... walked their convictions out of the churches” (Goosen, 81). Interestingly though, as many Mennonite churches and communities began to have more inclusive allowances in membership and ideas, Goosen states that:

the oral history interviews make clear that ‘staying Mennonite’ is not necessarily the most desirable outcome for pastoral leaders who have moved on to other faith traditions. Most who leave continue to identify culturally and theologically as Anabaptist Mennonites, even while serving in other faith communities. Some layer denominational loyalties together... (Goosen, 83).

Whether an individual is primarily culturally or theologically identifying with their Mennonite roots, or they are performing a process of layering their identities, Goosen provides an insight as to the ways in which queer folk will grapple with and understand their identities.

As an audience has grown for pieces of trans literature and trans media that are not simply autobiographical tell-all stories intended for a cis audience, more stories are being told by trans people for trans people. However, there are many people who are unwilling, for one reason or another, to attribute every experience they discuss in their books or stories to themselves. Take for example Meredith Russo, who talks about how “moms aren’t generally supposed to be running around admitting to their high school shenanigans” when discussing how fiction can make it easier to discuss topics she otherwise wouldn’t in an autobiographical work (Russo, 300). Authors often insert aspects of their lives into their stories, but not everyone wants to have the direct correlation an autobio creates. And so, fiction provides an important space for people to tell stories that they otherwise may feel unable to discuss in an autobiographical setting and as such we can bring these aspects of reality into broader discussion. Further, because fiction – and writing in general, will be influenced in varying degrees by the creator, trans-standpoint theory is an especially necessary tool, as it allows the experiences of marginalized trans creators to be best

understood and interpreted in a way that can make analysis of their text more useful to a broader field. Ironically, it is trans-standpoint theory which allows an analysis of Casey Plett's work to exit a purely trans studies field, and enter into a field such as trans and religious studies. And thus, the double pronged effort of this thesis is formed.

Analysis

Casey Plett, like many trans authors, focuses her work on trans people. Most of the time, the focus is on trans women in specific. Sometimes these characters are Mennonite, sometimes they are transnational, but often their lives are messy, complicated and unpredictable. For many trans people, the experiences of these characters are true to their lives as well. Regardless of whether these aspects of life are similar or different, many trans people like myself are hoping to feel seen in the literature they read. By this, I mean that I, and many other people, wish to feel like their experiences are similar to my own, and like I can genuinely relate to them. Often, it is other trans people who are able to write in such a way that I can feel seen by the characters, and it has been rare for me to encounter a cis writer who can make a trans character that will make me feel seen in a similar way. Ultimately, everyone wants to feel seen by the media they consume at some point or another, and this is why trans writers like Torrey Peters have been “part of a trans literary movement based on trans people sharing their work among each other without barriers.” (Peters, 2022) Casey Plett likely had similar ideas in mind when she made the pdf of *A Safe Girl to Love* free to access and download.

While these materials are made accessible whenever possible, it is often difficult for a cis person, with an outside perspective, to interpret these texts and understand them in the same way that a trans person is able to. Further, the pseudo-biographical nature of these more grounded pieces of fiction is a way for trans people (and people in general) to discuss elements of themselves and their experiences that they may not be open about in a more factually grounded

biographical account. This is put best by Meredith Russo in the “Author Q&A” section of her story, *If I Was Your Girl*. In it, there is the question posed as to whether or not fiction makes it easier to discuss things that would be difficult to put in a biography, and Russo says,

“Ah, yes, absolutely... say that hypothetically I was a tremendous stoner in high school, but I’ve got a kid now and moms aren’t generally supposed to run around admitting to their high school shenanigans. In that situation, wouldn’t it be easier to take those experiences and slap them on a fictional character so that you can still use them?” (Russo, 300)

Fiction is a place to explore many things, and sometimes what gets explored has elements which are close to reality. This grounds the trans characters, making them similar to real world trans experiences, and in the case of Plett, grounds the Mennonite experiences as well, and is an important component of why these pieces of work are useful for further analysis in fields such as trans and religious studies. The field itself is still growing, but there has been little discussion of fiction, and trans standpoint theory provides an effective way to analyze and understand the works at hand. But first, we must discuss why fiction deserves a seat at the table, so to speak.

Finding the Truth in Fiction

As of now, many of the works analyzed and discussed in trans and religious studies tend to be nonfiction, some form of biography, or religious texts. As is described by Kelly Siobhan, much of trans studies in religion fits into “five major categories”, primarily being: “biographical studies of trans people and their religious experience”; “autobiographical and autotheoretical work” “used as a jumping-off point for religious exploration”; “critiques of cultural imperialism’s influence” on understanding of the “gendered and sexed ‘other’”; “work dealing

with intersex individuals” and the ways in which they grapple with understanding of tradition surrounding binary sex; and lastly, work that is more broadly considered as “gender/queer/feminist theory” (8). This issue of fiction being focused on is also present in Dr. Hutson’s discussion of trans fiction, in which it is discussed how

“key trans authored texts like Imogen Binnie’s *Nevada* (2013) and Roz Kaveney’s *Tiny Pieces of Skull* (2015), have not received such attention. Leslie Feinberg’s 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues* is one of the only trans authored novels to have been substantially studied (see Prosser, 1998; Crawley, 2002; Enzer, 2015). In addition to this, the majority of academic output regarding trans texts has been focused on life writing, for example, Jay Prosser’s work on Jan Morris (1998) and Emily Skidmore’s discussion of Christine Jorgensen (2011). Analysis of trans fiction has instead largely been through the anecdotal online accounts of individualized readings.” (Hutson, 9)

Further, Hutson argues that “Trans theory cannot exist separately from lived experience” and that as such, “trans authored texts are the written equivalent of lived experience” (2). For these reasons, there is much to be gained from putting trans fiction into a greater context.

As it stands there is little room in the current analytic categories of trans and religious studies for analysis of fiction, and while it would be possible to bend a category to fit fiction into its analysis, it would ultimately be more fitting for there to be a category specifically focused on the analysis of fiction in trans and religious studies. The connection between fiction and reality has been a topic of discussions for quite some time. There are many recent pieces of literature focused on these matters, but one of the most interesting is a piece of literature that broached this topic in the 1970s.

This key work is “The Novel as an Expression of the Writer’s Vision of the World” by Eile and Halikowska-Smith. One of the early ideas discussed in the article is the ways in which the novel can act as a “quasi report of quasi events” (Eile and Halikowska-Smith, 116). This is the idea of the ways in which authors may partially implement some aspect of truth or truths from

their own lived experiences into their novels. This is strengthened by ideas that were brought up earlier in this thesis, such as when Meredith Russo describes how it is difficult to admit to her drug use as a teen now that she is a mother, and says “In that situation, wouldn’t it be easier to take those experiences and slap them on a fictional character so that you can still use them?” (300). Further, there are many moments in fictional works when it seems like an author is speaking directly to the audience via a character, which is discussed in Eile’s work at multiple points. These are moments in which “The novel becomes a lecture disguised as fiction” – or put another way, “the words of the hero often constitute a crypto-commentary on the general message of the work.” (Eile and Halikowska-Smith, 119, 124) As such, there are moments when fiction can act as a way for truthful elements based on lived experiences to be incorporated into a text, but there are also situations in which an author is speaking through the book, sometimes in a lecture-like manner. There are moments in Plett’s writing that can be understood through these ways of interpreting them, such as when Plett includes a discussion of age and trans time in *Little Fish*. Even beyond this, however, fiction is a way to abstract and simulate the social experience, and as another article puts it,

“the function of fiction can thus be seen to include the recording, abstraction, and communication of complex social information in a manner that offers personal enactments of experience, rendering it more comprehensible than usual. Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it” (Mar and Oatley, 173).

Thus, even if a novel is not stating the opinions of the author, or telling partial truths of the author’s life experiences, novels are still useful in understanding social experiences and the varied ways in which humans live their lives. As such, there are multiple ways for a novel to provide useful information for analysis in many fields, but for the focus of this project, it is

certainly true that fiction has a use in trans and religious studies. So, lets use these ideas to discuss Plett's work.

In "Not Bleak", which is one of the stories of *A Safe Girl to Love*, the life of Carla, the main character, is aspirational simply because it is mediocre and boring. The story starts with Carla saying how "nobody wants to fucking be here except me" (Plett, 122). Carla talks about how she has given up on most of her dreams, and how getting to say she likes coming in to work every day is basically good enough, but the end of the story returns to this idea (122). Carla talks about how people always question why she is still working her job, but says that she likes it, loves her partner, and doesn't feel like a mess. Then she begins to discuss how sometimes she will lay on her bed, and put her laptop up against her pubic bone to feel its warmth, and imagine that she has a vagina (177). In these moments, if she focuses on her body instead of spiraling into sadness over wanting a vagina, then Carla, as she says, "can feel better" (177). That is the final thing said in this short story: "I can feel better" (177). This is not the story of someone living a wonderful, perfect, majestic life; instead, it is the story of a trans woman who gets to have a life that is boring, mundane, and the ways in which such a life is good enough.

Transness is often sensationalized in media and thought of in extremes. This is done to such extents that many trans people wonder if they really can just exist in the world as a trans person, and live an otherwise normal life. This is why a story like that of Carla, who does get to live a normal life, can feel aspirational. Trans people do not need to be extreme, or a spectacle.

This idea is put best by Imogen Binnie, in her story *Nevada*:

That's what it's like to be a trans woman: never being sure who knows you're trans or what that knowledge would even mean to them. Being on unsure, weird social footing. And it's not even like it matters if somebody knows you're trans. Who cares. You just don't want your hilarious, charming, complicated weirdo self to be erased by ideas people have in their heads that were made up by, like, hack

TV writers, or even hackier Internet porn writers. It just sucks having to educate people. Sound familiar? Trans women have the same exact shit that everybody else in the world has who isn't white, het, male, able-bodied or otherwise privileged. It's not glamorous or mysterious. It's boring (Binnie, 6).

Despite this, trans people are still sensationalized, are still othered, and the thoughts of many cis people are clouded with the few pieces of media they have interacted with that involved trans people. This is because many trans people work to be invisible, to go 'stealth', and pass themselves off as cis. This is part of the reason why, when someone says that they have never met a trans person before, a common response in the trans community is to say that they just *don't know* if they have ever met a trans person before.

It is in these ways that we can see fiction writers comment on, and provide experiences of, trans lives. Works like those of Plett can provide insight as to what normalcy can look like for a trans person, and can provide a way for readers to contemplate what a normal life might look like. This is an idea that is expressed by Plett, but which is also made clear by Binnie in what Eile's work would allow us to understand as a "lecture". Part of the use of Plett's work, is that by writing short stories, she is able to provide reference for what life may look like for many different trans women, whether they are sex workers, or college kids, or adults living a normal, mostly happy life.

It is important to understand the importance of the aspirational nature of trans characters as mundane. In a great deal of trans fiction, there is a T4T ethos present, which is a term that was originally present on craigslist in which trans people were searching to meet or have relations with other trans people. This idea is sometimes specifically built upon in writing such as *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* by Torrey Peters, but these ideas are also present in many other pieces of fiction. It is the ways in which people will create a community for themselves, and for

other trans people, the ways in which trans people will care for one another. This is clearly a theme that Plett plays with, which is why ‘Not Bleak’ is such an interesting story, because some of this T4T ethos is present in the fact that a trans woman and her trans boyfriend are letting trans and queer people couch surf while they look for more permanent housing. These aren’t close friends, however, and are just people that Liam has met on internet forums (Plett, 123). And so, this ethos is an explicit addition, and the ways in which these stories can be filled with trans characters is an important component of the trans mundane, because it brings light to the reality of the world that we live in: there are a lot of trans people. Despite this fact, it can be easy for trans people to feel isolated, alone, and like they are the only trans person in the world. I know that I struggled with these feelings of isolation in the past – which is why the idea of the mundane is an important component to highlight here. These varied lives and stories are useful in trans studies, but we can also use Plett’s writing to great effect when analyzing the religious components of her work as well..

A great deal of the religious elements in Plett’s writing have to do with shunning, or small injustices that are still meant to hurt you, or the ways in which a person leaves behind their Mennonite community, but still continues to identify as Mennonite. These themes are interwoven into all of her books. In the story “Other Women,” the first story of *A Safe Girl to Love*, there is a scene where Sophie (the main character) and her mom are talking about how their extended family will react to Sophie being trans. This conversation is occurring during the Christmas church session, and Sophie eventually says: “Should I not sit with you guys or something?” (Plett, 13). This is ultimately the solution, to just not be near her family so that way her transness is not associated with them, as if it is embarrassing. Sophie’s mom would rather not focus on this, and prefers to focus more on things like how “It’s nice they haven’t called you by your old

name, don't you think?" (Plett, 14). Her family is not calling her Sophie, nor referring to her as a granddaughter. They are using neutral, ambiguous terms. Often, it is assumed that trans people just need to be happy with these small steps people take, which is why Sophie's mom makes that comment.

However, even this does not last, as Bernie, a younger cousin or a nephew of Sophie, ends up asking her why she chose the name Sophie. After Sophie responds, Bernie says "I think part of my head will always think of you as" Sophie's deadname (Plett, 16). Understandably, it takes Sophie all she can muster to stay levelheaded and not explode into a heap of anger (Plett, 16). Even later, as Sophie's family begins to say grace before dinner, she becomes the focus of the prayer as her grandfather says: "We are especially thankful you saw fit to guide up from America our grandson Leon—" (Plett, 18) Sophie is understandably frustrated by being deadnamed, and instantly corrects him. Her mother and grandmother are both frustrated by this, and rather than correct himself, Sophie's grandfather just focuses the prayer on somebody else.

This is a trend in much of Plett's writing, where characters will be allowed to interact with their family, and are even free to visit as they wish, but there is still a tension, the looming threat of being disrespected. In "Not Bleak", a trans woman named Zeke describes what it would be like if she came out to her grandfather, and how "I doubt he would cut me out entirely. He would probably still let me in the house, though I doubt I would be invited, exactly. But it's not like I would stop calling and going up there every couple months" (Plett, 156). We can see what these interactions would look like in Plett's second book, *Little Fish*, where the main character Wendy is visiting a woman named Anna in a quest to find out if her grandfather was trans or not. Throughout all of their interactions, Wendy has been trying to hide her identity, but near the end

of this visit, Anna lets it be made known that she knew all along – and further, that she judges Wendy for transitioning (Plett, 263). Anna says:

“God’s fire is pure. You may have thought you needed to be a woman or die. Have you any idea what you can manage? You think you’re weak. And because you think you’re weak, you can’t actually do anything. So you choose the easy, selfish path. Now, I’m telling you that” (Plett, 263-264).

And despite this, Anna still tells Wendy to bring some sandwiches home with her when she is leaving, and says that it was “Very nice to meet you” (Plett, 264). Trans people, and LGBTQ+ people more broadly, are meant to endure it all in silence, to not allow themselves the sin of existing as they truly are, and for this reason, it is no surprise that so many of Plett’s characters feel like they are left with little option but to leave their Mennonite hometown. Sophie, Zeke, Gemma from a story in Plett’s *A Dream of a Woman*, and so many other characters seem to feel like escape is the only option if they want to live freely.

Rachel Goosen discusses similar ideas in “*Repent of the Sins of Homophobia*” *The Rise of Queer Mennonite Leaders*. One topic that is discussed at length is that of shunning, in which Goosen writes “The practice of shunning – the act of persistently avoiding, ignoring, or rejecting someone – has resonance for queer Mennonites...” (72). Later in the article, while discussing Mennonite leaders who feel unwelcome in their communities, and leave, Goosen writes how “Most who leave continue to identify culturally and theologically as Anabaptist Mennonites, even while serving in other faith communities” (83). As one Interviewee sums it up, “The Mennonites are becoming more welcoming, but those changes are coming too late for me” (Goosen, 83). These are not simply the struggles of fictional characters, these are the struggles of many real people, of feeling like they aren’t fully accepted, even when they wish they could be, or of being outright treated with cruelty. In the wake of this, these people, and these characters as well, are forced to

grapple with how they want to conceptualize themselves even when it seems as though their community has no place for them. And yet, in spite of this heat and anger, there are still scenes such as when Anna says to Wendy, “Henry might even be a woman in heaven for all eternity,” “Perhaps that’s his Godly reward for enduring on Earth. I don’t think it’s inappropriate to say that’s a possibility...” (Plett, 262). People and characters are able to have these moments of contemplation as to what other people desired, of how they identified, but there is ultimately this view of the *right* way to exist, of the *right* way to act on one’s feelings and desires, and it is an inability to perform this *rightness* that ultimately leads to the destruction of a person’s place in the social order of Mennonite communities.

Plett is not writing in a vacuum, nor is any other fiction writer. The issues she speaks of and writes of are real issues faced by trans people in the Mennonite community. Moments of connection, moments of community, moments of heartbreak and of being pushed away. Her work allows us as readers to contemplate and understand a variety of ways in which trans people are struggling. Whether it is a struggle to live or a struggle to connect, the issues faced are real, and the fact that they are written in the form of fiction does not instantly make them intangible. Plett’s work provides an insight, and many other works of fiction will provide their insight as well, because the things we create always bear the impression of our experiences, our lives. This fact is inescapable – and we miss out if we think otherwise.

Safe Girls, (un)Safe communities

Casey Plett makes it effortless to tell that her writing is about trans people. It is apparent in the titles, it is often referenced and discussed on the back of the book, and it is readily apparent from the characters. Plett’s work oozes an aura of transness, and it is for this reason that trans standpoint theory holds so much importance because understanding Plett’s work seems like

it would be impossible to accomplish in a holistic way if there isn't a deep level of trans knowledge residing within the reader. For example, it may not be readily apparent to a cis reader that *A Safe Girl to Love*, in its title, is arguing that trans women are women, and also that they are in fact safe to love. There are many transphobia-laden fears and concerns that will be expressed surrounding the idea of being in a relationship with a trans woman at times, but ultimately, trans women are as safe to love as any other woman. This is what the title argues, and it is messages like these that sometimes require trans standpoint theory, or knowledge of trans experiences and culture, to crack open.

It is important to continue this discussion on the importance of trans standpoint theory in the analysis of Plett's work, to discuss the ways in which this knowledge and theory is sorely lacking from some discussions of her writing. In 2019, Daniel Cruz's book *Queering Mennonite literature : archives, activism, and the search for community* was published – and it is one of the few academic writings that references and analyzes the work of Casey Plett. Cruz often has a very strong analysis, and he is able to offer a Mennonite perspective on her work, and analyzes her work through a specifically Mennonite lens at points. One might even say he is theorizing his own kind of standpoint theory in this process of analysis. Regardless, there are still some moments in which the analysis breaks down, simply because Cruz failed to account for some crucial components of trans experience.

This primarily takes place in his analysis of the first story of the book, "Other Women". The story focuses on Sophie, a recurring character in some of Plett's stories. In it, Sophie is returning to her hometown, and is grappling with a great deal of transphobia from her family, and from other people in the neighborhood. The story culminates in Sophie having a sexual encounter with her childhood friend, Megan, and then later in the night she has a sexual

encounter with Mark, who is Megan's roommate (Plett, 25-32). The way that Cruz discusses these encounters is as follows:

Sophie is more interested in whether her partner listens to her desires and respects her transitioning body than in their gender... She rejects Megan in favor of Mark because he does a better job of letting Sophie explore her desires... He is attracted to Sophie as a person, not specifically as a man or woman. Sophie's lack of knowledge about his sexual preferences allows her to relax around him and ultimately accept his advances (Cruz, 106).

Ultimately, this ignores Sophie's agency. Yes, Sophie wants a partner that will "listen to her desires", as Cruz states, but the scenes as they unfold are laden with Sophie's struggles with dysphoria. Megan was frustrated that one of the effects hormones had on Sophie, is that she has a harder time getting fully erect. Megan even asks: "So what's wrong," "do girls just not do it for you anymore?" (Plett, 26). Sophie's encounter with Megan eventually becomes nonconsensual, as Sophie gets uncomfortable from the ways in which the encounter begin to make her feel dysphoric – and Sophie repeatedly tells Megan "no", and to stop. When Megan finally does stop, Megan feels sorry, and sad at first, but then she expresses an explosion of anger, expressed in the text via this scene: "Then she looked up hurt, furious. No, she said. I'm sorry, don't worry, I won't bother you again tonight. I think she was about to cry." (Plett, 26-27).

You cannot effectively discuss these scenes, and the events that follow, without getting into the fact that this sexual encounter was filled with feelings of dysphoria, and that much of it was not consensual. Further, it is not like Cruz said, that Mark is attracted to Sophie simply as a "person", I argue that Sophie is instead assuming specifically that Mark is straight, and that he will be attracted to her *as a woman* (Cruz, 106). And this is what Sophie wants – for someone to be attracted to her as a woman, which is in opposition to the way that Megan was attracted to

Sophie, through a veneer of the sex they had when Sophie was presenting as a boy. Sophie has not only had her trust betrayed, but she feels betrayed by her body and the ways in which it reacted to Megan's actions. Sophie feels like she had no agency in the situation, no agency in the dysphoria inducing ways that her body reacted. Further, it is not that Mark is propositioning Sophie and that Sophie is able to "ultimately accept his advances." (Cruz, 106) Sophie is instead, specifically trying to seduce Mark, because she wants to have control and agency again, and she also wants to have sex that will make her feel like a woman. In doing this, she wants to override the encounter that she just had with Megan, in which Megan was constantly trying to get Sophie's body to react in the ways it did pre-HRT. Sophie would rather focus on how she "wanted [Mark] to split [her] open" than on the ways in which Megan had broken her trust and hurt her, and the uncomfortable ways in which her body had just reacted (Plett, 31).

These are some of the things that make trans standpoint theory important as an analytic tool for Plett's work. It is through a deep trans knowledge that it is possible to understand the integral role of dysphoria in these scenes. Further, it is through the knowledge that Sophie is desperately wishing that she can both forget about her encounter with Megan, but also wishing that she can feel more like a woman, feel desired as a woman, that she seeks out her encounter with Mark. Without these understandings, an analysis of these scenes may end up with a misplaced focus, as we saw with the way Cruz interpreted these situations. Instead, an analysis of these scenes through the lens of trans standpoint theory is able to understand that Sophie was not only hurt that her trust was broken, but was fighting against the ways her body reacted, and the ways in which those reactions reminded her of sexual encounters before she began taking HRT. Sophie wanted to feel in control of her body, wanted to create a situation in which it responded

in ways that she felt comfortable with, and this is what drove her to seek that encounter with Mark.

“Not Bleak” is another story in which having one’s trust broken is an important theme. It is also an excellent example of both trans *and* Mennonite components of Plett’s writing. At first, the focus is more on the trans component of the characters than the religious component. The story begins with a focus on Carla, and her boyfriend Liam, both of whom are trans. Even more important than her in this story, however, is Zeke. Zeke is introduced as just being one of the many queer people who spends some time couch surfing on Carla and Liam’s couch for a bit while they try to get settled in the small-town gay life. Even though Zeke is introduced to the reader as a boy, there are small elements that make it unsurprising for Zeke to come out as a trans woman later in the story. Of particular note is the half of a paragraph dedicated to describing the ways in which Zeke was “inherently unobtrusive”, which is something that is particularly common among trans women who are in boy-mode. (Plett, 123) That term, boy-mode, refers to a trans woman who is dressing as a boy, or trying to pass as a cis guy, as opposed to presenting in a more feminine way, either due to a lack of femme clothing options, or for fear of persecution.

For this reason, it is common for trans women to want to be difficult to notice so that they are less likely to be targeted, but it is even more likely for this to be the case for a trans woman in boy-mode, who doesn’t want to be acknowledged by anyone, for fear of staying in that person’s mind as a boy. To be seen and acknowledged as a man after all, is one of the main components of gender dysphoria, and while this can tear someone up, many trans women would rather be seen as a boy while in boy-mode, than as a man while they are presenting as femme – because to *try* and look like a woman in a societally acceptable way, and then still be denied that, is even

more crushing. For these reasons, it is no surprise that Zeke is introduced to the reader in boy-mode, as she is couch surfing and trying to get a job, and likely has been unable to create a wardrobe for herself at this point. And so, while it is not surprising that Zeke was initially introduced as a boy, when we next see her, she is wearing a dress and has a job, and seems to have found enough stability that being open about her transness felt safe (Plett, 124)

The term ‘gender dysphoria’ is important to define here, due to the use it has had in the analytical discussion thus far. In medical terms, gender dysphoria “refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one’s sex assigned at birth and one’s gender identity” (APA, 2020). Put more colloquially, however, gender dysphoria can be understood as the things which make a person realize that their body doesn’t feel “right” in relation to their gender. For example, a trans woman may feel gender dysphoria when waking up and seeing stubble on her face and neck in the mirror – or put in the context of Plett’s work, Sophie felt dysphoric when her body reacted to sexual stimulus in the ways it did before she began HRT (Plett, 27).

Returning to “Not Bleak”, one of the main conflicts of the story is that Zeke steals Carla and Liam’s passports, and Carla’s supply of backup hormones. (Plett, 126) Ultimately, the reasons why Zeke stole those things are uncertain, but it is plausible Zeke was uncertain if she would get a good paying job, and wanted the money she could get from selling the stolen passports. She was likely also uncertain how soon she could get on hormones, and wanted to be able to take them regardless of what a doctor said.

While this would be a pretty simple situation of theft normally, things are complicated by the fact that Carla and Zeke start to become close friends. As Carla says, “There aren’t a lot of other trans women here,” and so the idea that Zeke is trans was exciting for Carla. (Plett, 124)

Further, there is a special sort of trans kinship that Zeke and Carla had. For trans people, if you catch a person as they start hormones, and continue to see them for the next few months, or few years, you can catch the different stages of their body being changed by the hormones – and Carla was especially happy and excited to see these changes:

“So, lovely thing, I got to be around for some of those stages. The fat from her cheeks smoothing her face, her skin sprouting freckles, her hair getting fluffier. Zeke would rarely talk about that either — another weird thing—but she’d smile whenever I brought any of this up to her. She was so obviously guarded, but even I could see some of the weights lift from underneath her. This many years after transitioning I’ve pretty much forgotten what that feels like, or even looks like... So Zeke—it really was beautiful to watch her.” (Plett, 134).

In this way, Zeke and Carla become close. In the trans community, there are many people who end up being like mentor figures to other trans people, whether they actually have that much more knowledge or not. In many ways, the relationship between Zeke and Carla seems more equal than those connections typically entail, but surely seems that there is, like I said, a special sort of trans kinship that Zeke and Carla are having that brings them closer as friends, and allows their friendship to grow so quickly.

The closeness of their connection is what eventually brings Zeke to ask Carla if she will come along for a bit of a road trip as Zeke visits her grandfather. Zeke plans to go in boy-mode and asks if Carla will pretend to be Zeke’s girlfriend. This leads to a bit of heat, as the conversation goes like this:

Honey, I said—and I enunciated clear here—you don’t want me.

Yes I do.

The blind could read me, Zeke.

Well, I don’t know if that’s true.

I gave her a dark look. Don’t fuck with me.

Well Carla, she said. You have to understand. They don't even know it's possible.

She was sounding both reasonable and condescending as hell. *Well*, why me? I said. Why not a cis girl? Or if you really want a trans girl with you, there is Sophie, fuck, she looks gorgeous, besides isn't she a goddamn Menno like—

I don't *want* to bring fucking Sophie! she said. Her voice became stilted. Perhaps. Maybe. It's possible. I don't. Trust other people here! Right?!" (Plett, 141)

This interaction brings to light many different pieces of information of note. Carla talking about how even the blind could “read” her, is in reference to Carla feeling like it is impossible for her to pass, that anyone can tell that she is trans, and is much more likely to misgender her for this reason. However, even more importantly, this interaction shows the idea that some Mennonites don't even realize it is possible to *be* trans, that whether or not Carla passes doesn't actually matter, because since there is no way to discuss Carla being trans, the only option is to read her as cis. This is an idea that also gets discussed in some of Plett's other writing, particularly *Little Fish*, in which being gay and being trans are equated to both existing in the same broad sphere of being queer, or other – further showing the ways in which queerness can be murky and intangible in the queer community (Plett, 21) Finally, is the idea that Zeke cannot trust Sophie. While I had discussed one issue I had with some of Daniel Cruz's analysis earlier, his analysis and insight is by and large quite insightful, and his analysis and way of pointing out Zeke's inability to trust Sophie is put quite poignantly like this: “Zeke responds that Carla is the only one in town that she “trust[s]”. Her rejection of Sophie as a possible ally shows just how much Zeke has been scarred by Mennonite transphobia: she is unable to trust even other queer Mennonites” (Cruz, 110).

Ultimately, Carla agrees to go along on this trip to visit Zeke's grandfather, but when they get there, they find Zeke's grandfather collapsed in the bathroom (Plett, 148). We next find the story taking us to the hospital, and it is there that we meet the neighbor of the grandfather,

Abe, who to Carla's surprise, doesn't "read" her at all. In fact, Abe doesn't seem to be suspicious at all, even saying "How'd Ezekiel keep a lady like you that's lovely *and* funny?" (149). Carla is so taken aback by the realization that she passes here, that she eventually comes to the sickening realization that she "wasn't able to believe" Abe (Plett, 150). She felt unable to believe that she could not only pass here, but that people really were just seeing her as a woman. Her own internalized transphobia about this, her inability to think that people could genuinely think of her as a woman, is starkly brought to light in this moment, and realizing that these thoughts existed within Carla made it, as she says, "really hard not to cry" (Plett, 150).

At the end of the story, it is found out that Zeke stole from Carla and Liam. When this realization is made, Zeke runs off into the night, and the next day Carla gets an email from Zeke saying that she is sorry about everything and that she has moved back to Canada (Plett, 172-173). Cruz, when analyzing this, essentially argues that the reason why Sophie is able to find a home in this town in North Dakota, while Zeke was unable to find a home here, is because Sophie fully claims her trans identity, while Zeke does not (Cruz, 110). While I think this is fair enough on its own, Cruz argues that the proof that Zeke has not fully accepted her trans identity is because Zeke never came out to her grandfather (Cruz, 110).

This is where Cruz's argument breaks down, because it is not as if Zeke has not come out to the rest of her family. Zeke says that she has come out to the rest of her family, and that afterwards "everyone became a worse person" and the idea of her grandfather also becoming a "worse person" to her is just too heartbreaking (Plett, 156). Zeke not outing herself to her grandfather in specific is not the biggest issue at hand when arguing that she doesn't fully accept her trans identity. Instead, the focus should more so be put on how she feels like she can "fulfill one last responsibility as a grandson" by visiting her grandfather and trying to have an

uncomplicated relationship with him until he dies (Plett, 156). In doing this, Zeke has trapped herself in this liminal space where she feels like she *has* to fulfill a duty as a “grandson”, which is more the proof that she has not fully accepted her identity, than the lack of outing. Further, an even more pressing matter is that Zeke has never chosen a new name for herself, and still uses her deadname. Choosing a new name is important for many trans people, which is shown in Plett’s work in a scene where Carla, upon finding out that Zeke is a trans woman, expected her to have also chosen a new name (Plett, 124). And so, it is these two factors that are larger signifiers to the ways in which Zeke has not fully accepted her identity, and it further seems like Zeke possibly knew that things just couldn’t work out in the current state of how she regarded her identity. Maybe this is what drove Zeke to steal from Carla and Liam, because Carla argues that Zeke likely didn’t need the money that badly, and that so many of Zeke’s decisions seemed like they didn’t fit; even further, Zeke created a situation for everything to blow up by intentionally seeking Carla out and trying to befriend her (Plett, 176).

It is moments like this that highlight the need for minority insider knowledge, for trans standpoint theory when analyzing trans works, because there are ultimately matters that are more obvious to trans people than to cis people. By utilizing that knowledge, it is possible to break down these stories in a way that allows them to be understood at deeper levels, and while academics like Cruz can provide a great deal of insight, there are some aspects that cis people may ultimately overlook, or be unaware of, when performing their analysis. Regardless, after this close analysis, it is time to take a second pass, and discuss the ways in which texts from writers like Plett can be effectively used and discussed in fields such as trans and religious studies, as well as the ways in which these pieces of fiction can hold value and pieces of reality in their written worlds.

Discussion

Plett's writing provides a place of contemplation. Her work allows people to consider the elements of how one might exist in a Mennonite community while also holding a trans identity, and what that grappling might look like. Fiction is a way for writers to bring to light social interactions and ways of being in a way that is intentional, and this intentionality makes the discussions that form around these works more focused – it is like a well written work is providing handholds and footholds to rely upon in the metaphorical mountain of discussion surrounding a work. Nonfiction does this as well, but fiction need not be excluded from the conversation.

This is the heart of this project, ultimately. The idea that fiction can tell stories about the ways in which humans exist in this world, and it can do so in a way that has applications to reality. Fiction cannot be made in a vacuum, after all – writers are not typing robots. And so, writers will be influenced by their life, and we can see these webs of reality weaving their way together into the books of fiction we find on our screens, in our hands, being read aloud in our audio books – and these works are fit for analysis and discussion and contemplation. I am not the first to say this, and I will not be the last, but still, there has been a focus on biography and memoirs and other types of nonfiction in many fields, with trans and religious studies being one of many fields in which this is an issue at hand.

Further, regardless of the piece of media in question, it is rare for that media to be discussed by someone who has lived experiences with that identity. Even that isn't necessary, but it is clear that in order for the analysis to fully speak to these components relating to marginalized identities,

a deep familiarity and knowledge of said identities are necessary. In this way, ideas such as standpoint theory are of deep importance, because often analysis of identities takes place primarily via discussions of intersectionality. However, as these academic fields continue to evolve, intersectionality as a primary method of discussion and analysis will yield diminishing returns in what it is capable of saying. As such, viewing texts and experiences through the eyes and analysis of someone who can speak to a relevant standpoint will provide a new angle analysis to take place.

As it stands, this project is an example of the ways in which these dual efforts can take place. Analyzing fiction as it relates to a field such as trans and religious studies, while also utilizing standpoint theory to uncover and understand elements of a story that are difficult to make sense of without the relevant community knowledge. Plett's work has a place in the field of trans and religious studies due to the ways in which it can speak to the experiences of trans women and of trans Mennonites. By standing as an example, academic fields will hopefully incorporate more pieces of analysis like this, and like that of Daniel Cruz, as time goes on.

Conclusion

In 2015, Plett was invited to be a member of a panel for LGBTQ writers at a Mennonite writing conference. While reflecting on the experience, she writes about how the issues at the heart of LGBTQ+ and Mennonite pieces of writing are often the same: “Family, community. And of course, the loss of family, the loss of community. Displacement, the destruction of stability” (Plett, 287). Maybe the times *are* changing, as was stated in the Goosen article, but these changes are coming too slow for many. Plett writes that even though there are many Mennonites who read the important Mennonite texts, who might consider themselves liberal and open-minded, but ultimately “—the disdain and hatred for LGBT people that *other* Mennonites might have is still tolerated” (Plett, 287). The changes happen too slow.

When I first read *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* by Torrey Peters, I felt seen. And then, when I read “Other Women” in *A Safe Girl to Love*, I felt seen in even stronger, more specific ways. As I tried to figure out my place in the world as a trans woman, and where I would fit in, I struggled so much with community and friends and how I wanted to exist in a relationship. For a while, at some point in every piece of trans fiction I read, I would feel like I was being seen, like my experiences were being put into words, and it was comforting to feel like I was not alone, like I was not the only person who felt that way, or had those struggles. As a seasoned reader of trans fiction, as someone who has been out as trans for a while now, I don’t feel that way as strongly anymore. I feel more and more like an adult woman with plenty of experiences and less of a need

to feel validated, but sometimes I will still read something that will evoke a deep sense of understanding, and of being understood, and it is still comforting.

Fiction has its place. It has its place in our lives, and it has a place in analysis. But just like Plett wrote how trans Mennonite writers are rare, and that she hopes to see more LGBTQ+ Mennonite writers in the future, I hope to see more LGBTQ+ academics using their own experiences to illuminate a text to allow a deeper understanding of it. (Plett, 286, 290) Times are changing, and as people feel that it is safer to exist in their identities, there will be more writers among them. As that happens, I hope there will be more queer academics using their own standpoint theories to analyze those works in the ways they feel best equipped to do so. There are so many influential pieces of writing out there, and there will be so many more in the future, that it would be a shame not to consider what they are saying about the world.

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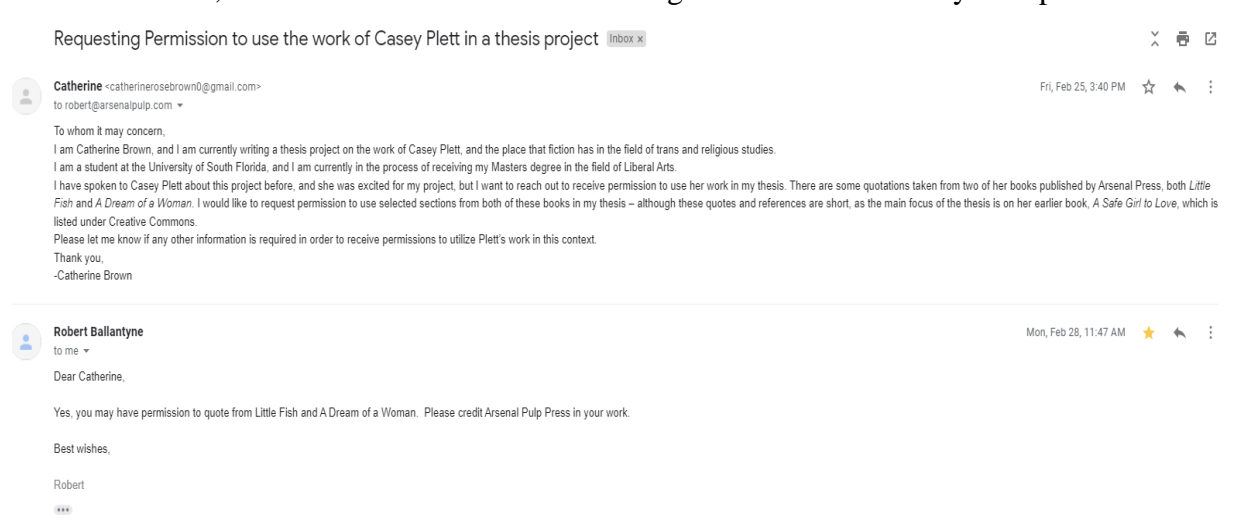
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Appendix 1: Supplemental Documentation

In a request to use sections of Casey Plett's work, *Little Fish*, and *A Dream of a Woman*, the publisher, Arsenal Press, was contacted. Robert Ballantyne of Arsenal Press gave permission to use these works, which can be reviewed in this image of the emails as they transpired.



With This, I would like to thank Arsenal Press for allowing the use of *Little Fish* and *A Dream of a Woman* in this thesis, and I would also like to thank Casey Plett for writing these works, and for listing *A Safe Girl to Love* under creative commons.