A Drag Queen in Your Living Room: Michael Cunningham's Revision of Assimilative Gay Fiction

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Abstract

The paper explores Michael Cunningham's revision of the concept of assimilative gay fiction in his novel Flesh and Blood *(1995). Unlike other authors of this stream of gay fiction, who avoid the central elements of American gay culture in their novels, Cunningham brings the themes of AIDS, camp, and drag queens into the literary mainstream and in this way performs a revision of the very concept of assimilative fiction.*

Michael Cunningham joined the ranks of the best-known American authors when his fourth novel, *The Hours* (1998), won the Pulitzer Prize in 1999. He was not unknown before but he was primarily successful as an author of gay literature: both *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) and *Flesh and Blood* (1995) are considered significant gay novels. (By "gay novels" I mean novels that make use of gay motifs and themes, regardless of the sexual orientation of their authors.)

Gay literature has long been a subject of serious academic enquiry and there have been various attempts at its classification according to varying criteria. The most obvious criterion is the key historical events. In the twentieth century, three such milestones related to gay culture may be identified. The first was the publication of Alfred Kinsey's report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, which shed light into the sexual lives of American men and started a general interest in the issues of sexuality. The second was the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969, generally considered the symbolic beginning of the gay liberation movement. The third was the emergence of the first AIDS cases in the early 1980s. Such a classification may seem convenient but it is not necessarily helpful. For example, after the Stonewall Riots, the first important "liberated" gay novels arrived as late as 1978. However, two of them, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) and Larry Krammer's *Faggots* (1978), turned out to be quite prophetic, as they predicted the collapse of the New York gay subculture which was yet to happen with the emergence of AIDS.

In order to avoid the limitations of a chronological approach, another division was proposed by Reed Woodhouse who in his essay "Five Houses of Gay Fiction" (which later, in its revised form, became the introduction to Woodhouse's 1998 book *Unlimited Embrace*) divided gay fiction into five groups according to the work's attitude to gay subjects. Woodhouse's famous classification included closet fiction, proto-ghetto fiction, ghetto fiction, assimilative fiction, and transgressive fiction (Woodhouse, 1–3). Ghetto fiction and assimilative fiction represented two extremes: ghetto fiction was the fiction written "by, for, and about gay men" (1) without any normative reference to the heterosexual world. Assimilative fiction aspires to the role of bringing gay themes into mainstream American culture. Woodhouse writes:

> This literature broke away from the ghetto tradition by placing its gay characters outside the ghetto or in a hostile relation to it. But the books were also outside of the symbolic, literary ghetto: nothing but their inclusion of a gay character would have made one think these were gay books. Assimilative stories were deliberately integrative and frequently concerned a gay character's coming to terms with his family, living with straight friends (often women), or finding a lover and settling down in a monogamous relationship. (3)

Cunningham is usually considered to be an "assimilative" writer, along with other writers, such as David Leavitt, Christopher Bram or Stephen McCauley. However, Cunningham's assimilation is rather unique because unlike other assimilative authors — for example, David Leavitt — Cunningham is well acquainted with the gay subculture, or even underworld, whose culture is a significant source for his fiction. Moreover, even though I do not want to commit the sin of intentional fallacy, it is interesting to note that Cunningham admitted he wanted to write novels for gay men dying of AIDS and having time to read only a few books before they died (Canning, 92). Seen from this perspective, the resulting assimilative character of his prose is even more puzzling. I will argue that Cunningham is indeed an assimilative author but he is actually revising the very concept of assimilation: instead of shunning the issues central to the gay subculture, he takes them directly to the literary mainstream.

The novel that best shows the queer roots of Cunningham's fiction is, in my opinion, *Flesh and Blood* (1995). This almost five-hundred-page long novel deals with one hundred years in the life of the Stassos family,

covering the period from 1935 to 2035. The family is composed of the Greek immigrant Constantine Stassos, his first wife Mary, who is of Italian origin, and their three children: Susan, Will and Zoe. The choice of a family saga form is consistent with Cunningham's all-pervading interest in family issues already demonstrated in his earlier novels — the epic width of the novel provides an opportunity to address family issues again.

There is sexual abuse (Susan is molested by her father), there is a gay son. However, looking at the novel from a gay perspective, Will as a gay man is a rather uninteresting character and he almost seems a model for a gay character in unoffending assimilative fiction. In spite of his highly troublesome relationship with his father, after his coming out and a few years of exploration, he soon settles down with a man whom he grows to love, he is HIV-negative, and he even reaches old age.

Of the three Stassos children, the most remarkable character is Zoe who, being an outcast from the earliest age, leaves the family on the first possible occasion and becomes a prostitute in New York. In the Big Apple underworld, she is helped by Cassandra, a drag queen (a cross-dressing male homosexual), who not only teaches her the rules of the trade but also provides enormous support when her mulatto son Jamal is born. In addition to that, as neither Cassandra nor Zoe can be said to be monogamous, both get infected with HIV and die of AIDS in the 1990s.

The motif of AIDS is indeed a significant link to the gay subculture of the period but, considering Cunningham's intended target audience, it comes as no surprise that AIDS is an essential motif in *A Home at the End of the World*, *Flesh and Blood*, and *The Hours*. This makes Cunningham different from another assimilative author, David Leavitt, who in his early novels *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986) and *Equal Affections* (1989), published about the same time as *A Home at the End of the World*, did not pay much attention to the disease, for which he was heavily criticized by Woodhouse (145). Even though Leavitt did not avoid the theme of AIDS altogether, which can be seen in the short story "Gravity" in his collection *A Place I've Never Been* (1990), the disease has never been a central issue in his fiction.

Besides AIDS, the most conspicuous link to the heart of the gay subculture is the character of a drag queen. While the ostensible focus of the novel is on the Stassos family, Cassandra does have a unique position in the novel due to her crucial role in Zoe's life, and this unusual character could not escape the attention of literary critics. For example, Tory Young, in the introduction to her *Michael Cunningham's* The Hours*: A Reader's Guide* (2003), comments at large on the role of Cassandra in *Flesh and Blood*. She perceives her primarily in her role of Zoe's surrogate mother along with other mothers in Cunningham's fiction (Alice in *A Home*, Mrs. Brown

in *The Hours*). Moreover, Young believes that Cassandra was the most successful of Cunningham's mothers: "In *Flesh and Blood* it is Cassandra […], a middle-aged drag queen, who embraces maternal duties with most success, not to say finesse" (27). Cassandra's drag-queen status is weakened by Young, though:

> Cunningham does not resort to cliché in his inclusion of the camp classic of the drag queen. Such "mothers" are something of a trope in popular gay fiction, often presiding over liberated families of gay men and feisty women. [. . .] [I]n *Flesh and Blood* Cassandra is a model of conventional maternal care for both Zoe and Jamal, and also instructs Mary in her maternal duties. (29)

Indeed, Cunningham does not resort to cliché, yet Young's shifting Cassandra's role to that of a conventional mother is, in my opinion, rather misleading: it — perhaps unintentionally — diminishes the indebtedness of Michael Cunningham to the queer culture and also his revisionism of its founding concepts. The motif of caring has a long tradition in gay culture and literature and it usually takes the form of mentor/protégé relationships. However, the mentors only rarely act as effeminate mothers; more often than not they are perfectly masculine men. Mentors are also extremely important *during* the process of coming out (the coming of age as a gay) so they do not necessarily preside over "liberated" men but they contribute to their liberation.

Such a mentor/protégé relationship was portrayed in great detail in James Barr's *Quatrefoil: A Modern Novel* (1950), in which Tim, a thirty-three-year-old army officer, helps out Phillip, a ten-years younger subordinate questioning his sexual identity. Indeed, such a relationship could hardly be called "motherly." Another well-known example of this kind of bond could be found in James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) in Eric who becomes a mentor to Yves. Of course, "motherly" mentors do exist: in the classic ghetto novel, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978), a drag queen, Sutherland, becomes a mentor for Malone, a new arrival in the New York gay subculture, and this relationship becomes one of the central elements in the plot of the novel. Yet speaking of Sutherland in terms of "conventional maternity" would certainly amount to a misreading of the character.

In all of these examples the protégés are people who, in one way or another, question their sexual identity. Cunningham, on the contrary, revises the concept of the mentor/protégé relationship in American gay

culture when Cassandra becomes a mentor/mother to a heterosexual woman (moreover, one with a child) who may be on the margin of society due to her libertine sex life but whose sexual identity is never challenged.

Another revision by Cunningham comes in his inclusion of the drag — or cross-dressing — subculture in his novels. Drag queens actually represent a particular expression of another phenomenon typical of the gay subculture — camp. This style is notorious for being difficult to define, yet Esther Newton was able to find three basic elements always present in camp: incongruity, theatricality, and humor, all of which are present in drag.

Camp — besides being so much fun — has served many purposes in gay communities. Most significantly, it was often used to provide protection from stigmatization and marginalization — which any individual dressing in a gender-inappropriate way certainly suffered from, and had to cope with. Martin P. Levine identified three "techniques for neutralizing stigma [that] largely shaped the patterns of life within this world": passing, minstrelization, and capitulation. As passing (attempts at hiding gay identity) and capitulation ("the feeling of guilt, shame, and self-hatred associated with the damaged sense of self that resulted from believing that homosexuality was a form of gender deviance") were out of question for any drag queen, minstrelization in the form of camp provided virtually the only way of survival (73).

Richard R. Troiden explains the principle when he notes that "[i]ndividuals who use *minstrelization* express their homosexuality along lines etched out by the popular culture. They behave as the wider culture expects them to behave, in highly stereotyped, gender-inappropriate fashions" (62, Troiden's italics). In other words, they use the well-known queer strategy of throwing one's difference into the enemies' faces — basically, an aggressive strategy of protecting oneself from others' aggression.

People using this strategy can usually afford to be so radical because they are confined to the homosexual ghetto. However, Cunningham takes such a drag queen out of the ghetto and makes her deal face-to-face with the unfriendly outer world against which she revolted. By helping out Zoe, Cassandra has to deal with the members of the Stassos family and, gradually, she even becomes friends with Mary, Zoe's biological mother. Moreover, as the generations go by, the all-important strategy of the past becomes unnecessary, and accepting Cassandra as "she" becomes a matter of simple politeness, as the following dialog taking place in 1992 between Zoe's son, Jamal, and his cousin, Ben, shows:

"Do you still hang around with that other crazy guy."
"What guy?"
"The one who wears the dresses."
"Oh, Cassandra. She's not crazy."
Ben said, "He used to give me the creeps."
"You should call Cassandra 'she.'"
"Why?"
"It's polite," Jamal said. (354)

This vision of Cunningham's begs the question: If the choice of calling a drag queen "he" or "she" becomes of a matter of politeness, is American society not coming to the point of respect and acceptance that any drag queen might dream of? Alas, such a degree of respect remains only a vision — in the context of *Flesh and Blood*, Cassandra was accepted in this matter-of-fact way only by Zoe, Jamal, and, gradually, Mary.

The character of Cassandra shows that Michael Cunningham's *Flesh and Blood* is indeed an assimilative novel but Cunningham has revised the way assimilation works in this novel: He is well informed of the fundamental aspects of American gay culture, such as AIDS, camp, or drag queens. But while other authors do not feel the need to bring these issues to the attention of the readers of mainstream literature, either because they prefer assimilation by eschewing these sensitive matters (Leavitt), or because they happily stay in the ghetto (Holleran in *Dancer from the Dance*), Cunningham brings these themes to wide audiences. By bringing Cassandra right into Mary's living room, Cunningham not only pays a great tribute to the roots of American gay culture, but also presents a vision that is yet to become reality on a larger scale.

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