

## Performing Your Fictional Identity: The True Imaginary

Roughly speaking, transgender theory is divided into two opposing camps. Tara Mae Bettcher differentiates between: “the traditional wrong-body account of transsexuality (in which gender identity is taken as innate, allegedly determining one's “real” sex) and the newer, beyond-the-binary vision that emerged with the new transgender politics of the nineteen-nineties” This debate intersects significantly with wide-ranging and relevant philosophical issues that are contingent on the discussion of what I call ‘fictional identities.’

I wish to introduce the notion of fictional identities as an antidote to the polarization of ‘fake’ identities versus ‘real’ ones. An example of a ‘fake identity’ would be the recent objections raised against the notion of transgender washrooms in North Carolina. Members of the Christian right routinely object to transgender washrooms, asking ‘Would you feel safe with your daughter being in a public restroom with a adult male who is a stranger?’ These right-wing critics consider transgender people to be ‘faking’ their chosen identities; they refuse to recognize any other gender besides those which we are all assigned at birth.

I intend to argue in this essay that instead of polarizing the fake and the true, we might accept all identities as fictional. This doesn’t mean that we wouldn’t challenge people’s chosen fictional identities. It means that we must accept all identities as fictional, and accept that consequently there is no such thing as a real identity.

It’s difficult, in the ‘reality TV’ era — where science has to some degree replaced religion — to valorize the fictional. But I wish to resuscitate fiction, that is, to give it some much needed and well deserved mouth-to-mouth. I think there is good reason to celebrate fiction, which as I intend to prove, has been conflated with misrepresentation, decadence and lies in philosophical circles. Indeed, fiction has been summarily rejected by both postmodernist and ‘post-theory’ philosophers. But the articulation — indeed the romanticization — of the notion of fiction by queer philosophers Oscar Wilde and Michel Foucault offers a potent defence of fictional gender and sexuality identities.

Traditionally, transexual individuals found themselves in the wrong body. As children they looked down at their genitals and were horrified. The earliest publicized American transexual woman was Christine Jorgensen, who had a sex change in 1951. A BBC news story reported that “as a teenager he [Jorgenson] became convinced he was trapped in the wrong body.” Though medically categorized as male and in possession of a penis, a young MTF transexual would endeavour to replace male genitals with female ones and a young FTM individual would endeavour to make their body look like the body of a person assigned a ‘boy’s’ identity at birth. After the sex change, their ‘true’ gender identity would be reflected by a material reality.

In the wake of queer theory, transgender theorists and activists have increasingly questioned the categories of male and female, asking whether the gender binary is true in either a spiritual or material way. Kate Bornstein asserts that the transexual notion of discovering one’s true identity is a convenient but intolerable fiction. But the concept of non-binary gender — challenging the traditional notion of categorizing human beings as either male or female — has become increasingly popular in both academic, and non-academic circles. The World Health Organization tell us that “it is important to be sensitive to different identities that do not necessarily fit

into binary male or female sex categories.” Sam Escobar speaks of non-binary gender in a recent issue of *Esquire* magazine: “The gender binary separates those who identify as male or female, simple as that. Non-binary genders, however, don’t fit neatly within these two—they can be a combination of male and female, a fluid back-and-forth, or totally outside of the binary.” In “Trans\*-Subjectivity: Exploring Research Positionality in the Field” Cameron T. Whitely says that “feminist literature discussing one’s subjectivity has largely focused on the dialectical existence between men and women, with little room for trans\* or gender diverse perspectives.”

Kate Bornstein and Pat Califia represent opposite poles of the transgender theory debate. Bornstein wishes to eradicate gender, an oppressive system of arbitrary categories - “It’s safe having gender. But there’s a price for safety and security within some hard shell. You can’t grow anymore....And the only thing to do is come out of that shell, leave it behind us” (156). Califia, on the other hand argues that the “need to oppress is human” (246) — and that jettisoning categories will not eliminate hate or prejudice. The battle between Bornstein and Califia has been played out in the context of notions of what is *real*, with justifications sometimes coming from an appeal to empirical evidence. Bornstein is not merely suggesting that there might be no gender in an ideal world; she argues that gender is a toxic lie that has no basis in material reality. Califia’s opposing argument also appeals to empiricism, noting that different genders do actually exist; after all, some individuals are born with a specific allocation of x and y chromosomes, while other individuals are not.

The elephant in the room may be Judith Butler’s notion of performativity. Butler contends that “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (313). This seems to suggest gender is imaginary. She says: “The performance constitutes the appearance of a ‘subject’ as its effect” (315). Butler also reveals that she believes that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes” (308). This somewhat offhand dismissal of gender identity may stop short of Bornstein’s demonization of the binary, but nevertheless Butler treats gender and sexuality labels with skepticism. Could Kate Bornstein’s distrust of gender categories have its origin in an opposition to Butler’s theories? Certainly the theory of the fictional nature of gender that alienates some transsexual gender essentialists has been associated with Butler. In this transgender debate theorists such as Jay Prosser have taken issue with theorists like Judith (now Jack) Halberstam who reference Butler to prove that gender is fictional.

So Butler’s notion of performativity is a contentious issue in the transgender community. But I wish to defend her ideas because they resonate with contemporary discussions about the nature of reality, debates that have dominated theoretical speculation since the dawn of philosophy. In this essay I will employ the word ‘fiction’, rather than the word ‘performativity.’ ‘Performativity’ is too often misapplied to theatrical performance. Butler intended it to refer to the ongoing creation of the self in daily life (i.e the repetition of certain gender characteristics to produce identity) not to a theatrical creation. **In addition, utilizing the word fiction polarizes the discussion in a good way around a very contentious modern issue: fiction versus the real.**

The rejection of fiction (and its corollary, the rejection of ‘story’) is a popular trope in present day mass culture, and also finds its reflection in aesthetic theories deemed radical or experimental. The dominance of reality TV shows over sitcoms on network television, **born with the *The Real World* in 1993**, is reflected in the mass consumption of youtube videos that star

your next door neighbours chatting about their own lives, or filming their amusing cats, dogs, or children.

Do most people today prefer reality entertainment to fictional entertainment? Of course one could argue that reality TV shows are not actually very real at all, but are instead plump with invented conflicts and scripted climaxes. However, what interests me here is not whether reality TV shows are more real than traditional entertainment, but the degree to which we obsess with the notion that our entertainment (and art) must become more 'real.'

This obsession is not new; the history of the theatre is to some degree a history of those who claim that dramatic art has shifted further from fiction and closer to reality. Each theatrical era claims that the most recent theatrical creations are closer to what is true. Critiques of actors from the 18th century onward often rate actors on the basis of the realism of their performances, with each new era offering characterizations free from false and stilted expression or gesture. The apotheosis of this mania for realism would seem to have been Konstantin Stanislavsky in Russia, and The Method in America. Marlon Brando's portrayal of Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947; 1951 film) achieved the status of myth because it represented (for many) the epitome of naturalistic detail. But David Mamet has recently taken the quest for theatrical realism one step further. It is not 'real' enough just to portray a character in exhaustive detail; all the actor should do is 'be themselves'. In terms of craft, an actor need only understand the meaning of the lines: "The actor does not need to 'become' the character ... There is no character ... the audience sees an illusion of a character upon the stage ... the actor has to undergo nothing whatsoever" (9).

Toronto dramaturgy has lately also moved away from fictional narrative to focus on actors 'being themselves' and expressing their own ideas. *Globe and Mail* critic J. Kelly Nestruck's review of *Winners and Losers* (created and performed by James Long and Marcus Youssef (Canadian Stage; December 2013) asks whether the improvised argument between two friends that constitutes the bulk of the play is real: "The structure is centred on two friends having a lively debate while drinking a bottle of beer.....But unsettling questions start to arise in the audience's mind. Do they really believe in what they are saying, or does one take the opposing view just to play devil's advocate?" Michael Rubinfeld and Sarah Stanley of the Selfconscious performance company (The Book of Judith) create work in which "we are the protagonists and our personal stories are the entry point into how we explore narrative," and in Ravi Jain's hit 2012 play *A Brimful of Asha* the director and his mother sit on stage and simply, well — chat.

Even the modern novel seems to be reflecting this anti-fiction trend. Karl Ove Knausgaard's much lauded magnum opus *My Struggle* (2013) reports on the mundane details of his own life using the real names of relatives and family members. Knausgaard himself declares: "The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet" (497). Similarly, ex-novelist David Shields abandoned fiction in his diatribe *Reality Hunger* (2010), a controversial collection of quotations from various authors (including himself) focusing on the fragile and antique mutability of the novel and its increasing lack of relevance in the modern world: "Story seems to say that everything happens for a reason and I want to say, No, it doesn't" (114).

Shields is simply rephrasing Oscar Wilde's sentiments in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (275).

This contemporary preference for reality over fiction sometimes works to invalidate narrative, although personal narrations are rated above fictional stories because they are considered more real. Of course those who celebrate 'realism' seem blind to the fact that the personal stories narrated in the play *Winners and Losers* (and the novel *My Struggle*) may be as fat with invention as a reality TV show. Nevertheless I predict that the reality obsession is here to stay. I say this not merely because popular culture and avant-garde theatre are obsessed with reality, but because material truth has become an obsession for philosophers too.

As David Hawkes points out in his book *Ideology*, the history of philosophy has been dominated by the debate over the nature of reality. Hawkes is a Marxist philosopher with a very particular point of view. *Ideology* argues that postmodern theory (exemplified by Jean Baudrillard) is nihilistic and ultimately dangerous in its disregard for truth.

Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreality can be best understood through his analysis of Operation Desert Storm in his essay "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" (1991). The Gulf War (1990 – 1991) consisted of an American intervention in Kuwait to drive out invading Iraqi forces (with the help of the U.N.). The central assertion of Baudrillard's essay is that the American media manipulated the public into viewing what was essentially a series of American war crimes as a 'war.' Hyperreality is Baudrillard's conception of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century transmogrification of art. According to Baudrillard art metamorphosed from imitation and representation in the 17th century to 'production' after the industrial revolution (i.e. the mass reproduction of artistic objects changed the value and meaning of art into a product). Today mass production in the digital world has transformed what was once an easily recognizable material 'reality,' into an (unreal) state of 'hyperreality.' Disneyland is significant for Baudrillard as a symbol of an America that has lost touch with material reality. No one knows what America really is anymore; Americans believe America is what Disney tells them it is.

Baudrillard's bland, smooth, unflappable writing style seems, on the surface to be non-judgmental. But his bald generalizations certainly smack of nihilism: "What lies hidden behind this falsely transparent world? Another kind of intelligence or a terminal lobotomy?" (26). It is this "skeptical relativism of postmodernity" (8) that angers Hawkes, and is so central to his critique of postmodernism. A necessary corollary to Baudrillard's philosophy, according to Hawkes, is that there can be no right and wrong — since there is nothing real anymore. Thus, Hawkes claims that postmodernism serves globalism, economic fascism, neo-liberalism — what he considers to be the most evil forces of the modern world — by denying that there is good or evil. Since capitalism is essentially amoral (being less concerned with the rules of morality than the rules of the market) "Postmodernism is the ideology of globalization." (10)

Significantly, Hawkes does not disagree with Baudrillard's description of the modern world, only his attitude to it: "There is no doubt that, in the twenty-first century, images really do determine reality, the human subject really is objectified, and the global market really is likely to remain the only significant world power for the foreseeable future. But the market's success does not have to be applauded" (179). But Hawke's analysis of Baudrillard is deeply flawed, because the French philosopher is not applauding anything. Hawkes holds capitalism responsible for our

imprisonment in an uber-unreality. Though Baudrillard does not overtly blame capitalism in a manner that Hawkes wishes to see, his theory of hyperreality is directly related to Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Guy Debord, who do. Central to Hawkes' argument is the idea that western society has consistently warned against 'idols' and asserted that money is the most dangerous idol of all. He quotes Psalm 135: "The idols of heathens are silver and gold, the work of men's hands...eyes have they, but they see not" (17). From credit card to bitcoin, we are being urged these days to deal in an increasingly mythical form of exchange that no longer has a relationship to the gold standard; but is nevertheless the measure of the success of our lives and our self-realization. Money, Hawkes asserts, has — figuratively and literally — become a spectacle that dominates our lives, but has little material reality.

Hawkes agrees with Adorno, Horkheimer and Debord, who theorize that in capitalism the pursuit of money smothers all of our values, and that the commodification of values and discourse (transmitted through the media) has made it impossible to understand the true nature of evil. Hawkes quotes Adorno and Horkheimer: "That the hygienic shop-floor and everything that goes with it, the Volkswagen or the sportsdrome, leads to an insensitive liquidation of metaphysics, would be irrelevant; but that in the social whole they themselves become a metaphysics, an ideological curtain behind which the real evil is concentrated, is not irrelevant" (133). Adorno and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944) argued that Hollywood executives would eventually produce only movies that reflected their own values — to the exclusion of all that was original, challenging, or in any way innovative: "What is new in the phase of mass culture compared to that of late liberalism is the exclusion of the new. The machine is rotating on the spot. While it already determines consumption, it rejects anything untried as a risk" (106). Adorno and Horkheimer's vision of the future of the entertainment industry was remarkably prescient. We find that there are only a few movies to see these days — despite the plethora of films about comic book heroes, dinosaurs, car chases, and monsters. Hollywood makes the same movies over and over again because capitalism defines very narrowly not only what we may purchase and view, but how we imagine ourselves. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) Debord asserts that these kind of spectacles eventually change human values and abridge the range of their personal dreams and expectations: we end up thinking about success in capitalist terms, for instance, because of the capitalist spectacle that movies and advertising have become. Hawkes, again, quotes Debord: "the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by 'intangible as well as tangible things,' which reaches its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which at the same time are recognized as the tangible par excellence" (161).

Hawkes' analysis acknowledges Adorno, Horkheimer and Debord's critiques of the capitalist spectacle but refuses to acknowledge that Baudrillard shares their views. I would argue that though Baudrillard does not blame capitalism in the same way, his detached, nihilistic description of a modern imaginary inevitably invites us to rebel against it. For example, some have suggested that Baudrillard's theory of the simulacra was the inspiration for the film *The Matrix* (though Baudrillard had nothing to do with the film). In *The Matrix* (1999), the leading character desperately fights his way out of the 'unreal' matrix (read: hyperreality) in which he is enmeshed to get to the 'real' world. Thus what unites Hawkes, Adorno, Horkheimer, Debord and Bau-

drillard, is that each writes passionately against a modern inability to perceive a material world veiled by false images. And they all blame capitalism. Hawkes focuses on the ‘false idol’ of the capitalist monetary system, Adorno and Horkheimer on mass culture, Debord on ‘the spectacle’ and Baudrillard on ‘hyperreality,’ but all attack our fetishization of image over the real.

Can I be forgiven for thinking that modern philosophy ‘has it in’ for art?

One might argue that these philosophers are criticizing mediatized images from mass entertainment, not art. I would posit that what is significant is all of them are extremely suspicious of products of the human imagination. And certainly the process of perceiving and appreciating art is similar to the process of imagining the world through mediatized images that all of these philosophers criticize. On the other hand, Adorno, for one, certainly differentiates between high art and mass culture (which has earned him the label of ‘elitist’) when he writes effusively about Beckett, asserting that though it is difficult to create art that is meaningful in a post-Holocaust era it is nevertheless possible and necessary to do so. But Adorno is not the only modern philosopher who defends art. Hawkes ignores two modern theorists who offer spirited defences of the imaginary, and also (I would suggest) a detailed plan for self-realization through fiction: Michel Foucault and Oscar Wilde.

Hawkes does not, strictly speaking, ignore Foucault. Instead he rejects him - as so many philosophers do — for homophobic reasons. Since Foucault’s death from AIDS, James Miller (his last and most controversial biographer) has led a pack of contemporary writers, philosophers and theorists who can’t help interpolating the rumours swirling around Foucault’s death into their evaluations of his philosophy. For instance, Carvalho points out that Miller’s biography of Foucault — *The Passion of Michel Foucault* — “paints a lurid picture of a man obsessed by death and drugs, suicide and sadomasochistic sex which Foucault is described as seeking right up until his death in the bath houses in New York and San Francisco.” Hawkes dismisses Foucault in the same manner in his differentiation between Adorno and Foucault: “The materialist and superficial culture of Los Angeles seems to have induced in Adorno a political pessimism so deep as to verge on the misanthropic. Foucault, on the other hand, found in San Francisco a hedonistic carnality that he evidently regarded as politically, as well as personally, liberating” (159). Hawkes, with Foucault’s imagined sexual excesses at the back of his mind, is hell-bent on classifying Foucault as a materialist, i.e. a philosopher who demands physical manifestations of his theories, whether they be manifest in the physical world, or simply in occurrences of history. He makes the startling claim Foucault considered ‘discourse’ (a concept fundamental to his philosophy) to be material: “In order to exist ‘for us’, the ‘statement’ must take on a material form. A ‘discourse’ is a regular pattern, or ‘formation,’ of such ‘statements’. To all intents and purposes, then, ‘discourse’ is itself material” (156). However, though Foucault does indeed discuss the materiality of discourse, it is only to clarify that the ideology of certain discourses may have enough power to become a material reality. (One might think, perhaps of the concepts of justice, revenge, and punishment as finding their material reality in prisons.) But rather than being a materialist, Foucault is the very opposite; an idealist who — when confronted with the dismaying disorder of reality — makes it his life’s work to deconstruct the various fictions that we make about the

world, while maintaining a desperate, somewhat wistful obsession over the relationship between truth and lies.

Fiction, art, representation, language — these are all different names for the imaginary central to Foucault's philosophy. His fourth book *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel is literary criticism* (1963), is an analysis of the convoluted poetic/semantic puzzle novels of an obscure 19<sup>th</sup>-century writer whom some see as a precursor to surrealism. Foucault's fifth book *The Order of Things* (1966) is an attempt to understand 'Grammar,' the third pillar of education that (along with Rhetoric and Dialectics) formed the medieval classical trivium. In this book, Foucault describes an episteme that declared that the names of objects were intimately connected with the real objects themselves, and that poetry had an inexplicable material reality. For after all, poetry was considered, in effect, scripture — the word of God. Significantly, Foucault deploys an elegiac tone; he seems sad that this era is gone:

The primacy of the written word went into abeyance. And that uniform layer, in which the seen and the read, the visible and the expressible, were endlessly interwoven, vanished too. Things and words were to be separated from one another. Discourse was still to have the task of speaking that which is, but it [what is] was no longer to be anything more than what is said. (47)

Because the evidence in much of his work is often anecdotal and sometimes not footnoted, Foucault has been labeled a bad historian. This critique is, I would suggest, irrelevant. Foucault himself did not consider his work to be history or philosophy. Blanchot says: "Did he not confide to Lucette Finas: 'I am fully aware that i have never written anything other than fictions....But i believe it is possible to make fiction function within truth'" (94). The idea that fiction might be truth is fundamental to Foucault's work, and became the focus of his late research. The final volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1988) is concerned with the ancient Greek practice of 'the care of the self.' When Foucault discusses St. Augustine's *Confessions*, he asserts that part of the care of the self in ancient times was the creation of personhood through writing: "The new form of the experience of the self is to be seen in the first and second centuries, when introspection becomes more and more detailed... Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of self was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing" (28). Foucault also talks of Parrhesia. — an ancient technique of self examination, self creation, and the exploration of truth. An excerpt from a lecture he delivered at Berkeley less than a year before he died (entitled "Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia") explains the practice:

The one who uses parrhesia, the parrhesiastes, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse.... there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth...  
...For not only are these practices supposed to endow the individual with self-knowledge, this self-knowledge in turn is supposed to grant access to truth for further knowledge.

As Alexander Nehamas notes in *The Art of Living*, Foucault “believed that the care of the self was not a process of discovering who one truly is but of invention and improvising who one can be. Foucault’s model for the care of the self was the creation of art” (178). Foucault says that when Diogenes confronted Greek citizens with everything that was on his mind (and masturbated in public) he was in the process of creating himself through fiction, and clarifying not only his own private, but also a public, truth: “They wanted their own lives to be a blazon of essential truths which would then serve as a guideline, or as an example for others to follow. But there is nothing in this Cynic emphasis on philosophy as an art of life which is alien to Greek philosophy.”

Fiction is, at its essence, a possibility for limitless self-creation, for an imagined self can be anything we want it to be. As James Woods observes about the novel, fiction is “an utterly free space, where anything might be thought, anything uttered” (9). The creator of fiction, like the parrhesiastes, can reveal everything, question everything, and most importantly, imagine everything a kind of fiction very much like Woods’ description of the novel: “Without God, as Dostoevsky put it ‘everything is permitted’” (12).

Oscar Wilde wrote in much the same way Foucault did about the creation of the self in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891). Here he speaks of a utopia in which all our physical needs are taken care of, which allows each person to become an artist through development of their own ‘personality’:

It will be a marvellous thing “the true personality of man” when we see it... Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. ...It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child. (26-27)

I see this concept of a playful fiction that constantly intersects with the truth as the future of identity politics. People may identify as gay or straight, male or female, or none of the above, and their identities will be accepted by others as truth or not — because there is no absolute truth in the world of concepts; there never has been any truth other than the fictions we have eternally concocted about ourselves. The danger of identities and categories comes only when we declare that our personal, national, religious, cultural, gender and sexuality fictions are universal. Those who say fiction has a dangerous disregard for truth must understand that the danger comes not from believing lies, but from believing our own personal lies to be universally true. A trans person who feels that they are neither male or female not only has every right to identify as genderqueer, or intersexed, or androgynous, but it is everyone’s duty to create an identity for themselves as part and parcel of the care of one’s self. And these imaginings will become true if we believe them and act in the world as if they are true. But no one should ever declare that gender is over; they should declare instead that ‘gender is over for me.’ Everyone has the right to challenge everyone else’s fictional truth with their own fictional truth, but no one has the right to po-

lice the imaginaries of others with physical force and/or the rule of law. People's chosen fictional identities should not bear the burden of judgment in terms of practicalities; for they are imaginary. The only way we can decide what government benefits ought to be allowed to anyone, or what affirmative action choices must be made concerning them, or what 'special treatment' (as some call it!) we should give them, is by looking at the reality of their privilege, not the imaginary of their chosen identities. In an ideal world, we are all artists; and this is what art has to bring to 'real' life. It is sad that philosophers like David Hawkes (and all those who criticize the postmodernists and Foucault for ignoring the real world) are so intent on forcing their notions of reality on the rest of us. The argument between real identity and fictional identity will never be resolved, it is still the same old 'essentialism vs constructionism' dichotomy. If fiction could be respected for its enormous power; if people could only realize that we are creatures of fiction, creatures of art, and respect that; the world would be a much more humane — and human — place.

In the Youtube web series "Love with Leila," Izad Etemadi plays the leading character, an Iranian immigrant from Tehran, who speaks with a heavy accent. Etemadi describes his character as a "bearded lady." Leila wears a prettily decorated yellow and brown hijab, carries a purse, and often sports a pair of large, colourful sunglasses — otherwise she has the facial features of a middle eastern male, replete with a very full beard (Leila forgoes western-style feminine make-up). In episode two of "Love with Leila," the leading character perilously ventures into a coffee shop. (In Tehran Leila's parents did not allow her to drink coffee, believing it was a gateway drug to heroin.) After marvelling at the red hair of the coffee girl (Leila says the colour is "like de debil!") she bonds with the pretty young self described "ginger" behind the counter (Rebecca Perry). The two gossip about a cute boy employee trainee: "I order one of *him* 'to go'!" says Leila. The Red-headed Coffeeshop Girl has other ideas; but neither has a chance with the appealing barista in training, because after finishing work, he kisses what appears to be his young male lover on the lips. Leila observes, somewhat wistfully "This never happen in my countary, (sic) at least in the public. You know...." —at which point she makes a gesture for hanging. She and the Redheaded Coffeeshop girl commiserate, with the latter musing that in Canada the only problem is only that, sadly, all the cutest men are gay.

"Love with Leila" masquerades as a comedy web series but is really much more than that. Although Izad plays the character of Leila with an innocent truth (right down to the accuracy of the accent) one might ask why the series lead is bearded male in a hijab rather than a **cisgender** Iranian woman. Having a 'bearded lady' as the central character of a comedy series neatly avoids accusations of colonialism — i.e. that it is making fun of Iranian fundamentalist Muslim culture. For "Love with Leila" **does not, in colonial fashion, simply critique the sexism of Muslim fundamentalism, but also** the prejudice and barbarism that lie **just** behind hypocritical Canadian liberal **facade**. We might say that Canadians are tolerant of Muslims. **But** if a *bearded* Iranian **person** — **who may look to some like a man** in a hijab — tried to flirt with men in a Toronto coffee shop she would inevitably encounter fear and confusion — and she might very well engender hate and/or requisite violence due to **the fact that we live in a sexist, homophobic and transphobic culture**.

“Love with Leila,” is a recent example of a performance fiction that is also intricately connected with the creation of the author’s own identity. In ‘real’ life, Izad identifies both as a gay man and an Iranian immigrant. In real life he does not have an accent, and does not wear a hijab or carry a purse (although I have seen him wear colourful sunglasses!). To what degree is ‘Leila’ a fiction, and to what degree is she a faithful rendering of Izad’s experience of being a gay Iranian-Canadian? One would have to ask Izad (and how effective is any artist at identifying their own motives?). But the piece offers a glimpse at how fictional identities may — in both real life and art — help us understand who we are.

How can fiction be true? It might be best to think — as Wilde does — on the minds of children. Of course it is still necessary to tell children that they mustn’t touch a hot stove as they will be burned; these material facts need not be treated as fictions. But beauty, identity, morality, values, dreams, hopes, etc., must remain personal, fictional and eternally controversial. I would argue that most of the time we consider all nominalisms to be quite true when they are not (i.e.: does any of us know absolutely what ‘real’ love is?) *so why not just imagine they are true?* I’m certain that Charles Kingsley would not have recommended anyone’s children go and live underwater, and yet his advice to young readers of his children’s tale “The Water Babies,” is relevant here: “But remember always, as I told you at first, that this is all a fairy tale, and only fun and pretence; and therefore, you are not to believe a word of it, even if it is true” (41).

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