

C+nto & Othered Poems

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Joelle Taylor's *C+nto & Othered Poems* (2021) is a fierce and potent elegy for the butch lesbian counterculture of 1980s-1990s London, but also a textual vitrine which preserves the people and places of the era. The collection takes its name from the obsolete word 'cuntare' meaning 'To narrate, tell, or recount' (Taylor 2021: p.7). It also toys with the poetic

form of the canto, most famously used by poets such as Dante, Byron and Pound. Taylor's *C+nto* is a queer, feminist reclamation of the canto form in which the body becomes inextricably intertwined with the text. This echoes a wider re-appropriation of traditionally male forms such as Dodie Bellamy's *Cunt-Ups* (2001) which re-appropriates the Burroughsian 'cut-up'. Taylor's

collection was awarded the 2021 T.S. Eliot Prize, being described by Chair of Judges Glyn Maxwell as ‘a blazing book of rage and light’ (T.S. Eliot Prize 2022).

The people and places intrinsic to the counterculture are preserved in textual vitrines for the reader to explore as they navigate their way through the text. Taylor figures Old Compton Street, a popular queer hub in the 80s and 90s, into a museum of its own past. The first poem of the collection poignantly begins:

& now that Old Compton Street
Is a museum & the old bars

are shopping arcades &
the sex cinema a gift

shop & now that
pimps have blue plaques

here come the tourists (Taylor
2021: p.23)

Taylor maps the transition of the street from a cultural gay space to a commercialised spectacle in which fragments of queer history are awkwardly nestled between postcards, bobble heads and American sweets. The text performs in a similar way to the

‘blue plaques’ which pepper the streets of London; it commemorates the people and places of the counterculture, but in their textual rendering, signifies their absence and relocation to the realm of history.

It is not just the places of the counterculture that are preserved in Taylor’s text, but the people too. The voice goes on to state:

My people, vitrine.
My people, homunculus. (Taylor
2021: p.24)

Through the figuring of the LGBTQ+ community as pathologized specimens, Taylor demonstrates how lesbians are often displayed as curiosities or spectacles on the dissection table of culture. Commenting on *C+nto*, poet Fran Lock suggests that butch lesbians are ‘visible in all the wrong ways: an obtruding target for ridicule and violence, a medical curiosity, and a sideshow spectacle. Your visibility is punitive (punished?) politicised and policed’ (2021).

Taylor constantly toys with language by teasing out the eclectic

connotations of particular words, thus gesturing to the hermeneutic possibilities, as well as the political potential, of her work. Political moments of LGBTQ+ history are repeatedly alluded to without being directly evoked, encouraging the reader to make the semantic inference and therefore connect with queer culture. In 'ROUND SEVEN' for example, the narrative voice recalls 'how we carved our / epitaphs into a stone wall no one will remember' (Taylor 2021: p.43). This somberly suggests the lives lost to homophobic violence, but also evokes the Stonewall Riots beginning in 1969 which are widely considered a watershed moment of the gay liberation movement. The voice's poignant statement 'no one will remember' perhaps alludes to the public's general failure of appreciating that Pride Month began due to the Stonewall protests. This misremembering is apparent in the popular phrase 'the first pride was a riot'. Moreover, the poem '*Black Triangle*', which reflects on lesbians in the Second World War being made to wear identificatory black triangular badges, begins:

takes your breath away / this
cunus crossed out / this
boardroom satire / real camp / the
vulva excised / sewn to a sleeve /
& called antisocial (Taylor 2021:
p.104)

The word 'camp' evokes the atrocities enacted on marginalised groups in concentration camps, but also the queer aestheticism outlined by Susan Sontag in her essay *Notes on "Camp"* (1964). Taylor here employs a lexical and thematic overlap between the Holocaust and homophobic discrimination which was also drawn upon by AIDS activists. The pink badge, which was used in concentration camps to identify gay men, has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ Community as a symbol of pride and protest. It was used in the ACT UP movement as activist Avram Finkelstein noticed parallels between the holocaust and the AIDS epidemic. Finkelstein recalls 'public discussion of putting gay men into concentration camps to keep the epidemic from spreading' (2018), as well as suggestions that infected men should get tattoos to alert others of their status. The symbol was hence appropriated and re-galvanised to accommodate a queer aesthetic as well as a political revolt

against the government's failure to respond effectively to the AIDS crisis. Taylor on the other hand refuses to re-appropriate the black triangle for positive means. Instead, she reveals the badge to be a process of violent dissection; the vulva severed and sewed. The body here becomes a text for people to read as lesbian, as other. These poems not only detail the butch counterculture, but gesture to the complex and sobering history of global queer oppression.

The lingering reality of homophobic hatred and violence is not sanitised or resolved by Taylor. The reader is constantly reminded of the persisting persecution queer women face. Taylor repeatedly asserts that 'There is no part of a butch lesbian that is welcome in this world. It was bad when I was a teenager. It is as bad today' (Taylor 2021: p.14), highlighting how 'it is illegal to be a lesbian in almost a quarter of the world's countries' (Taylor 2021: p.15). Taylor's use of these sobering facts in the introduction to her collection is a fitting preface for the unrelenting and hard-hitting themes she covers in her poetry. Rather than pointing to the progress made by the gay

liberation movement, Taylor chooses to focus on the work that still needs to be done, the battles yet to have been fought.

The battlefield however has shifted, moving from the streets to the screen. The fighting is no longer physical, but digital. One of the themes Taylor repeatedly touches upon is the alienating nature of the Internet and its divisive consequences for the LGBTQ+ community. She suggests that 'Our meeting places, clubs and bars have closed, and we gather in distinct flocks across social media, each flock speaking a different language [...] The internet celebrates difference. The club celebrates unity' (Taylor 2021: p.14). This idea is particularly pertinent in the era of COVID which has entailed further disunity between people through the closure of the public spaces so integral to the LGBTQ+ community. According to the speaker, we live in a world where 'women are crucified on hashtags' (Taylor 2021: p.33), where 'I will be screen shot / before I am shot' (Taylor 2021: p.110). Taylor toys with the shared lexicon of the military and the Internet in her repetition of the word

‘shot’. The action of shooting means different things in their respective vernaculars, but both involve the posing of fingers over a trigger to cause intended harm to a subject. Taylor fashions the camera in the Sontagian sense of ‘a predatory weapon—one that’s as automated as possible, ready to spring’ (Sontag 2005 [1973]: p.10). *C+nto* highlights the need for physical queer spaces that unify as opposed to digital battlegrounds that separate as fiercely as they promise to connect.

Above all else, *C+nto* is a sacred archaeology site which attempts to textually excavate and preserve the rich history of the butch counterculture. The speaker outlines how:

In this case, reliquary. the bones
of saints & inverts (Taylor 2021:
p.26)

The poems simultaneously act as glass case and mass grave, a space which houses the bones of ‘inverts’ (a medicalised name for lesbians in the twentieth-century). These bodies are given names in the poem ‘*Eulogy*’ in which the speaker lists the names of murdered lesbians:

& I carry
Roxanne Ellis
within me.
& I carry
Ashanti
Posey within
me (Taylor 2021: p.113)

The inclusion of the names of these murdered women act in the same way as an inscription on a grave. The women, similarly to a corpse in a coffin, are captured and preserved as dead specimens in the body of the text, but also in the body of the speaker. As I suggested earlier, the body and the text are intertwined in Taylor’s collection and this is a poignant example of that. The repetition of ‘within me’ highlights how Taylor’s own body, like the text, is a vessel which houses the spectral memories of the victims, as well as the resultant trauma caused by their murders.

The ghosts of these women are contained within the text, but the narrative voice frequently threatens to shatter the vitrines and release the anger, protest and struggle these women symbolise and ignite. Taylor says of her collection:

Everything in this book is preserved: salt, vinegar, alcohol, aspic, in vitrine. Whatever is within remains there.

In case of emergency, break the glass (Taylor 2021: p.16)

C+nto has an explosive potential—it is a call to arms and a queer manifesto. All the reader has to do is ‘break the glass’.

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