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TOMASZ SIKORA, *BODIES OUT OF RULE. TRANSVERSAL READINGS IN CANADIAN LITERATURE AND FILM*. KRAKÓW: WYDAWNICTWO NAUKOWE UNIwersYTETU PEDAGOGICZNEGO, 2014. 161 PAGES. ISBN 978-83-7271-859-8

Tomasz Sikora's book can be fittingly described as a pleasurable body of work. Although – with a palpable dose of self-deprecation– in its opening paragraph it threatens to be “out of rule” (9), its structure is, in fact, very consistent (albeit flowing). Its (attractive) parts can be read independently of one another, but studied together they reveal a very clear-cut academic perspective, coherent in its transgressive and playful potential. The book continually teases the reader with its clever word-plays and its sharp sense of humor, and lures him/her to the shadowy nooks of Canadian culture. Unlike a zombie (107), therefore, it is definitely sexy.

Bodies Out of Rule is divided into seven chapters, bookended by an Introduction and at the end by a Coda. The Introduction begins with Sikora's reflection on the nature of bodies and the roles they play in subsequent chapters. Admittedly, the body is a problematic and complex category, and the bodies “of difference” (22) which the author cautiously probes are even more so. Various othered, such bodies desire to move across, transversally and transgressively. In fact, *trans-* appears to be Sikora's favorite prefix (it is then a case in point that Smaro Kamboureli, the Director of the TransCanada Institute, has dubbed the author her “trans-man”). Semantically linked to the word “queer,” *trans-* is disruptive and destabilizing, in which it is descriptive of (numerous instances of) Canadian cinema and literature. These are the theoretical correlations between Canadianness and Otherness, queerness, (postmodern) irony and grotesqueness, as well as the Gothic genre, that Sikora finds stimulating. It is then within such theoretical, trans-Canadian space that he inscribes his desiring bodies.

Before it breaches its own borderlines and becomes a human-insect-machine hybrid, the body analyzed in the first chapter entitled “Multiculturalism and Its Monsters” belongs to Seth Brundle, the main character in David Cronenberg's

1986 movie *The Fly*. In its metamorphic monstrosity, Brundle's body is feminized; in its monstrous excesses, it is undoubtedly Gothic. Even though Sikora chooses to debate the shifting boundaries of "human" rather than "Canadian" bodies and identities, he uses the concept of Canadian multiculturalism to talk about the means of normalizing and regulating diversity. "[B]y fetishizing difference" – Sikora asserts – "administrative multiculturalism attempts to prevent interbreeding and hybridization, stabilize the cultures and identities for their effective management" (38). Canadian Gothic, on the other hand, his own definition of which the author derives from Justin D. Edwards's *Gothic Canada*, contests not only the regulatory purposes of Canadian multiculturalism, but "the most fundamental of all values: humanity" (31).

Sikora's ponderings on the blurred boundaries of humanity, the distinction between human and inhuman, and the "tension between control and excess" (42) continue in the second chapter entitled "Fleshed Out: On Meat and Excess." Here, Sikora refers to Barbara Gowdy's short stories included in her collection *We So Seldom Look on Love*, particularly "The Two-Headed Man" and "Sylvie." Both texts feature characters who have been educated in cultural definitions of monstrosity and thus fancy themselves "abnormals"; as obedient recipients of these definitions they take radical steps to become "normals." Samuel, for instance, one of the heads, abhors his Siamese twin/the other head, Simon, and saws him/it off. The operation, however, fails in trimming Samuel into a "standard" man (the post-head wound swells into a "hideous boil"), as well as in getting rid of Simon's subjectivity (which now co-inhabits the remaining head). The important question the story raises – namely, what constitutes a person? – reappears, in an opposite configuration, in "Sylvie" who has two pairs of legs (as well as two vaginas and two sets of intestines) and an apparently single identity (or at least a single head). Sikora draws the reader's attention to a fairy-tale pattern the story follows: Sylvie meets Dr. John Wilcox who volunteers to amputate what is no longer hypothesized to be her deformed twin, Sue, but an autoparasite. In order to become Cinderella, Sylvie has to cut off her superfluous flesh (a sacrifice reminiscent of a desperate act committed by Cinderella's ugly stepsisters in the 19th century version of the tale, in which one girl cuts off her toes, and the other her heel, in order to fit the standard measured by a glass slipper. Regardless of their sacrifice, the two girls can never turn into a model of femininity represented by Cinderella). However, after the amputation, Sylvie does not feel happily "normal" but misses Sue's unique, bodily "knowledge." Sikora's analysis serves to illustrate his claim that flesh/meat evades categorization and is by definition transgressive, as well as his concept of "promiscuous mixing" (in Gowdy's stories, at the level of the body, "anything can connect with anything else and even worse: anything desires to connect with anything else" (46)).

Correspondingly, the author's interpretation of Dionne Brand's short-story "Blossom" focuses on the protagonist's uncanny ability to "go outside of the little box that modernity has called 'human'" (61). Chapter Three, "Performing the (Non)Human," therefore, focuses on Blossom's transhumanity (61), her Otherness and liminality. Both in her speech and in her performances Blossom refuses to make sense: she loses reason in her bouts of madness (can she then still be called human?) and in her ritualistic dance through which she becomes (or does she?) the goddess Oya. Blossom's is the body of movement, one that keeps jumping across categories of humanity, one that refuses to yield to the Western processes of marginalization and Othering (although it is female, black, and old). As Sikora aptly notices, Blossom is authentic in being a copy (61), and subversive to the order of the Canadian official policy of multiculturalism.

Unlike the first three chapters, Chapter Four, entitled "Bodies, Boundaries, and the Death Drive," studies monstrosity that is "ordinary" (25), in the context of the female domestic Gothic fiction of three prominent Anglophone Canadian female writers: Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Isabel Huggan. Sikora's interpretation of these writers' short-stories is inscribed within Freudian framework and concentrates on the "constant presence of the negative, always potentially on the verge of 'eruption'" (78) in the characters' everyday lives. Although the focus on the dark aspects of the human mind and ordinary, rather than extraordinary, circumstances has characterized American Gothic tradition (as best illustrated by Grant Wood's famous painting "American Gothic"), Canadian Gothic, says Sikora, springs from the problematization of such notions as "home" or "identity" which has marked Canadian literature as well as numerous theories of Canadian national identity. Canada's negative space, as defined by Atwood's 1972 *Survival*, is a fitting setting for any Gothic story which probes the inhuman drives of ordinary characters (rather than their resistance to victimhood as proposed in Atwood's thematic guide).

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, all propose interpretations of selected Canadian movies. In "Desiring Bodies and the Vicissitudes of Transgression" Sikora focuses on transgressiveness of (and in) the works of David Cronenberg, Guy Maddin, and Bruce LaBruce, as related to the recurring notion of the Canadian Gothic. Guy Maddin's *Careful*, for instance, explores the problematic relationship between Canadian culture and the body. Here, the excessive Canadian landscape comes to signify excessive corporeality which, Sikora proposes, is the source of anxiety and fear for the Canadian society. Transgressiveness inscribed within Cronenberg's works is associated with losing control of one's body, this body's dangerous excesses, and the director's characteristic aesthetics of disgust. Bruce LaBruce, on the other hand, embodies for Sikora "transgression *par excellence*," through his reveling

in homosexual excess. His movie *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* – which is the subject of extensive analysis proposed in Chapter Six, “The Pornography of Bare Life” – is concerned with breaking all kinds of rules and questioning all kinds of borderlines, primarily the ones associated with the so-called “good taste.” Kitschy, ridiculous, and indecent, *Otto* provides a pretext for Sikora to ponder the nature of the pornographic body and the subversive potential of pornography as such. Connectedly, in Chapter Seven, entitled “Queer Epidemics,” Sikora offers an analysis of John Greyson’s movie *Zero Patience*. This musical comedy on the subject of AIDS questions the dominant discourses of the syndrome and the seriousness with which such discourses are constructed. What interests Sikora is the meaning of contagion in modern, political contexts, the ways in which fear and panic are spread, as well as the implications of such spreading.

The book finishes with a Coda (or a tail). Instead of simply demarcating the end of this body (of work), the final part aims to direct the book’s (dis)orderly flows “to the transformative (non)economy of contagion” (142). As creative and free-flowing as the book is, however, it is deeply suffused with theoretical concepts by a great variety of scholars (including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Giorgio Agamben, Donna Haraway, and Roberto Esposito, to name just a few). Yet it is not, as I believe, the careful referencing of other thinkers that makes Sikora’s book unique, but the way in which he enters into a dialogue with them and opens their concepts up. Sharp and unfettered, *Bodies Out of Rule* not only offers its readers brilliant scholarship on the present-day Canadian culture, but it also invites a discussion on the phenomena which both specify and undermine theories of this – and any – culture’s identity.