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Harmonious Chaos: World-Making and Queerness in the Poetry of Xavier Gould

Abstract

Xavier Gould is a trans, non-binary, and multidisciplinary artist from Shédiac, New Brunswick. They work mainly in performance art, such as drag and filmmaking, but also write poetry through which they explore the existence of queer identities in an Acadian cultural setting that is marked by cisheteronormative histories. Through their art, they aim at challenging the “social norms of contemporary Acadian identity to include people from the queer community” (Gould, 2020a). Gould’s trans francophone identity is a strength in their art, and they have made their mark on the Acadian art scene through their unapologetic use of chiac to express their queerness. In this essay, I argue that Gould is world-making through their active engagement with questions of identity, place, and language in their poetry. World-making has been discussed by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2017) as the making of a “world out of the shattered pieces even when we shatter the pieces or even when we are the shattered pieces” (p. 261). It is with this understanding of world-making that I tackle the work of Xavier Gould and explore how their “texts are worlds” (Ahmed, p. 14), but also how they create worlds; they are interested in rewriting relationships to history and land and building solidarity across communities. Acadian voices, as a linguistic minority, have not gotten recognition at the national level. Diverse Acadian representation is important for Canada; since it would legitimize the stories and cultural contributions of people whose voices are rarely heard.

Keywords: Poetry, Queer Poetry, Worldmaking, Acadian Literature

Résumé

Xavier Gould est un artiste multidisciplinaire trans et non-binaire de Shédiac au Nouveau-Brunswick. Iel travaille principalement en art performance, tel que la drag et la réalisation de films, mais aussi en poésie au travers duquel iel explore l'identité queer dans le contexte culturel acadien marqué par l'histoire cishétéronormative. À travers de leur art, iel a comme but de défier les “normes sociales d'identité contemporaine acadienne afin d'inclure les gens de la communauté queer” (Gould, 2020a). L'identité trans et francophone de Gould est une force dans son art, et iel ont marqué la scène artistique acadienne à travers leur usage franc de chiac afin d'exprimer leur identité queer. Dans ce texte, je soutiens que

Gould contribue à la création d'un nouveau monde (*world-making*) à travers leur engagement actif en ce qui a trait d'identité, de positionnement, et de langue dans leur poésie. Le concept de « world-making » est définie par l'érudite féministe Sara Ahmed (2017) en tant que la création d'un « monde à l'extérieur de ce qui est fracturé même can nous le fracturons ou lorsque nous sommes fracturé nous-même » (p. 261). C'est avec leur définition de « world-making » que je me tourne vers les textes de Xavier Gould et que j'explore non seulement comment leurs "textes sont des mondes" (Ahmed, p. 14), mais aussi comment iel crée des mondes. Iel est intéressé dans l'acte de réécrire nos relations à l'histoire et à la terre et l'acte de bâtir un sens de solidarité au sein de nos communautés. Les voix acadiennes, comme minorité linguistique, n'ont toujours pas reçu de reconnaissance nationale. Une représentation acadienne diverse est importante pour le Canada puisqu'elle rendrait l'histoire et les contributions culturelles de ces gens qui sont rarement écoutés, légitimes.

Mots clés : poésie, poésie queer, création de mondes (world-making), littérature acadienne

Introduction

Xavier Gould is a trans, non-binary, and multidisciplinary artist from Shédiac, New Brunswick. They work mainly in performance art, such as drag and filmmaking, but also write poetry through which they explore the existence of queer identities in an Acadian cultural setting that is marked by cisheteronormative histories. Through their art, they aim to challenge the "social norms of contemporary Acadian identity to include people from the queer community" (Gould, 2020a). Gould's trans francophone identity is a strength in their art, and they have made their mark on the Acadian art scene through their unapologetic use of chiac to express their queerness. In this essay, I argue that Gould is world-making through their active engagement with questions of identity, place, and language in their poetry. World-making has been discussed by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2017) as the making of a "world out of the shattered pieces even when we shatter the pieces or even when we are the shattered pieces" (p. 261). It is with this understanding of world-making that I tackle the work of Xavier Gould and explore how their "texts are worlds" (Ahmed, p. 14), but also how they create worlds; they are interested in rewriting relationships to history and land and building solidarity across communities. Acadian voices, as a linguistic minority, have not gotten recognition at the national level. Diverse Acadian representation is important for Canada; since it would legitimize the stories and cultural contributions of people whose voices are rarely heard.

Language is Gould's main tool of world-making. Gould writes in chiac, an Acadian dialect, originating from the South-East of New Brunswick, characterized by a blending of English phrasal verbs and

adjectives, standard French syntax, and Acadian French vocabulary. Chiac is central not only to Gould's queer Acadian identity, but also to their world-making. They understand that language is always evolving with identity and culture, consequently prioritizing inclusion over maintenance of traditions. For example, their use of neologisms (i.e. the pronoun "iel") inherently contradicts and challenges the presumably static nature of the French language, a norm that linguistic purists have tried to maintain. This situation is complicated in Acadie, where one must also struggle against the "hegemony of English"; that is, the "set of structures, institutions, and beliefs that marks English as the norm," defined as anglonormativity (Baril, 2017). While recognizing the colonial histories of the French language, Gould makes evident their refusal of anglonormativity. This relates to their aim at building solidarity in a way that people can work together against colonial linguistic control and understand the role of linguistic power relations as a primary source of institutional and social exclusion (Baril, 2017).

The emerging queer discourse regarding chiac as a form of resistance to the dominant heteronormative culture can be understood as a way to refuse the invisibility of queer people in Acadie. It is in this intersection that Gould's work becomes most relevant. Being a trans, non-binary, and francophone individual can be quite difficult; as the "entire structure of the language is based around words being masculine or feminine"

(Gould, 2019, as cited in Jardine, 2019). Gould (2019) states that “chiac is the queerest language of them all” (as cited in Jardine, 2019), as it allows individuals to take parts of both French and English, create something new, and bypass gendered conjugations, allowing for a new form of non-binary language. Both chiac and queerness go beyond binaries. They refuse to be confined and transcend borders of language and identity (Jardine, 2019). Using language to play with identity is a way for Gould to create new worlds and possibilities for queer people around them, while portraying how the “linguistic dimension intersects with trans embodiments and identities” (Baril, 2017, p. 131). It also allows us to challenge traditional understandings of gender in a colonial language by not only challenging its authority, but also making it inclusive of all gender identities. Overall, Gould’s careful use of language mirrors their interest in rewriting the dominant historical narrative defining the relationship between language and identity, while challenging linguistic institutions that have made queer people invisible. Building upon Audre Lorde’s infamous phrase, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984), I propose that Gould’s use of chiac is a way to build worlds without the tools of the masters.

Gould’s attention to the fluid nature of identities is central to their work on trans and queer identities. They define their transness as a movement rather than a destination, as the fluid relationship between mind and body that constantly fluctuates between disharmony and harmony (2021b). This fluidity is the emphasis “Les arbres”, a recent untitled poem of Gould’s, which states : “Aujourd’hui, les gens ont vu une différente version de moi que d’hier” (Gould, 2021c). Here, Gould is reiterating the constant fluidity of their identity, which can change daily. Identity is not a fixed subject, but rather a manifestation of the various ways our interpersonal relationships and lived experiences impact our perceptions of ourselves. Further, they also acknowledge that certain aspects of oneself are present even if they are not yet discovered when they say: “La brume [qui] brute sur

certaines de ces butes les rendent floues. Comme certains aspects de moi, j’l’ai voient pas encore, mais elles sont là” (Gould, 2021c). In this passage, Gould re-emphasizes the ever-changing nature of their trans identity. This approach recognizes that hidden things still exist. Again, Gould is actively engaging with the process of constructing gender; they portray gender as a journey, rather than a destination.

Yet, they are not only making gender, but also creating new worlds and possibilities for many genderqueer people around them. The phrase “le chaos harmonieux de mon ensemble”, from their poem “Les arbres” (Gould, 2021c), refers to the messiness and harmony of themselves, thus reiterating the process and practices of identity construction. They acknowledge that existence is chaotic, but see the potential to bring different perspectives together, making evident the world-making in Gould’s work. The words “*Chaos harmonieux*,” as an oxymoron, allow us to understand the coexistence of opposing elements, highlighting the contrasting nature of one’s identity. This means that one’s identity might be composed of opposing elements, but they come together in a balanced way (or even finding comfort in the opposite). The idea of harmonious chaos also suggests a comfort with change and echoes their approach to language as a place for identity construction. Furthermore, chaos can be very creative, as it emerges from the messiness and collapse of binaries and hierarchies.

Gould’s relationship to their body is often a focal point of identity building. One of the clearest examples is when they say: “Réclamer quelque chose, c’est dire qu’on l’a déjà eu. Pourtant, ne m’étant jamais appartenu, mon corps queer fit bien entre les arbres comme que tes lèvres fissent bien entre mes cuisses” (Gould, 2020b). In this line, Gould refers to their complex relationship with their queer body. They are trying to make peace with their body in a way that feels authentic, but they also feel as if they never truly owned it. Here, we can see the way that the “necessity” to conform to heteronormative ideals of

gender performance can lead to a feeling of disconnect between one's own body and sense of self. Historically, trans bodies have been described as defying the "borders of systemic order" because of their refusal to adhere to cisheteronormative ways of understanding the body (Kristeva, as cited in Phillips, 2014, p. 19). Therefore, these bodies have been cast out and rejected through the process of abjection, since they challenge and threaten heteronormative understandings of gender, sex, bodies, and embodiment (Phillips, 2014). Growing up surrounded by such heteronormative messages, it is likely that Gould never felt at home in their body. Yet, while abjection generally has had negative connotations, marginalized groups—such as trans folks—have at times also reclaimed and embraced this abjection as a political strategy. Reclaiming their trans identity has allowed Gould to, "disrupt and confound long-standing systems of power that are sustained by the methodical exclusion, repression, and silencing of certain others" (Phillips, 2014). This means that while this journey of identity building has been full of obstacles (i.e. cultural forces that hinder total freedom like systemic transphobia), the texts they create out of this frustration have tremendous world-making potential. It is in these moments where meaning collapses that hegemonic forces—heteronormativity and linguistic hierarchies—can be problematized.

There are several instances in which Gould expresses positively their questioning and internal search for themselves. For example, when they say: "Look at yourself / Look at my masks / Are you wearing any? / See the real me / Find yourself / You'll find us there / But just trust, don't ask" (Gould, 2020c). Even through the perplexity of coming to terms with the complexities of one's identity, they continue to build towards a community of and for queer Acadians. Gould is making their own vulnerabilities visible (removing their "masks") to allow others to work through their identity. This openness is an explicit act of communal world-making, as they "build a world in which we become each other's building blocks" (Ahmed,

2017, p. 232). Gould is willing (or were they?) to vulnerably express themselves publicly for the benefit of others. While this portrays Gould's work within their own identity and the power that can come from this self-revelation, it is important to recognize the weight and pressure that comes from this imposed influence on what being queer is in Acadie. When a world is not welcoming, we must "create other ways of being in the world" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 223). For Gould, positive images "created by us and for us" are essential for queerness to flourish in Acadie (Gould, 2019a), meaning that cultural productions of queer Acadians must be recognized to achieve holistic and inclusive relationships with marginalized communities, which would help make queer people at home in their own culture.

These themes of fluidity and queerness are echoed in Gould's discussion of what a queer Acadie looks like. For them, queer Acadie is "a state of mind," "imaginary," and "an imperfect kingdom" (Gould, 2019a). These words reflect the conceivable freedom and hope the future might bring but recognize that many things remain unknown. More recently, Gould has engaged in discussions regarding Acadie in relation to Indigenous land sovereignty, resulting in a joining of identity, politics of location, and world-making. Gould's interest in rewriting relationships to history and land is most present as they critique contemporary tendencies in Acadie of re-centering white innocence, in which imperial subjects are framed as "innocent of their imperial histories and present complicities," (p. 171) as explained by scholar Sunera Thobani (2007). The importance of building real relationships with Indigenous communities is centred in their work, and they acknowledge that this work is not yet over. In "C'est le temps qu'on unsettle l'Acadie", Gould writes, "en regardant vers un future où je fais des compromis linguistiques pour bâtir des actuals relationships avec d'autres artistes qui m'inspirent, j'va pas perdre mon Acadienneté dans tout ça, mais si anything, j'va la retrouver" (Gould, 2020d). When they engage with discussions of identity in relationship to land and attempt to build positive relationships among

communities, they are explicitly world-making and fighting for a future that is founded on relationships of respect, compromises, reciprocity, and solidarity. Therefore, when Gould says, “Nous sommes fragiles, nous sommes forts, nous sommes les deux. Et la queer acadie, se trouve entre et à l’extérieur des deux” (Gould, 2021a), we understand the importance of accepting the contradictions and complexities of what Acadie truly is.

To conclude, Gould is an important artistic figure of contemporary Acadie. While I have focused on their written work, their oeuvre expands much further than the literary world. Their focus on fragmentation and the chaotic nature of life and identity results in new possibilities to reconfigure embodiment and identity, and new possibilities for solidarity. Gould is engaging in many forms of world-making; they are making language, identities, and

relationships to place and space. World-making remains an unfinished project, especially “when the world we oppose is the world we still inhabit” (Ahmed as cited in Mehra, 2017), but Gould’s poetry is a source of power for themselves as well as for everyone encountering it, thus shedding light on the importance of self-determination and autonomy. Through their poems, Gould is using their identity as a tool for world-making and creates a safe space for them and other queer Acadians to exist and work through their identity. Identity is created through language, yet it exceeds its capacity. It is at this precise site where knowledge and meaning are created. Writing becomes a way for trans people to navigate the limits of a language in which their bodies had been historically indecipherable in Canada.

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