

“Not that her being black had anything to do with it, for me”: Blackness in Emma Donoghue’s “The Welcome”¹

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Abstract. The paper aims to analyze the construction of the character JJ in Emma Donoghue’s short story “The Welcome” (2006). The story portrays Luce’s sexual awakening for JJ, the new resident of the women-only cooperative living residence, The Welcome. The shyness of JJ and her supposed indifference to the attempt at a romantic approach and friendship made by Luce is a reaction to the process of transgenderism. If, as the Argentine critic Ricardo Piglia (2000) argues, all short stories narrate two stories, the first is a frustrated love story, and the second is about JJ’s revelation as a transgender person. The critical intervention undertaken in this article challenges and exposes internalized images and racial regimes of representation by demonstrating that the signs and elements which prepare the reader for JJ’s revelation represent her as an abject character. From being fundamental to the theory of subjectivity (Kristeva 1988, McAfee 2004) to a signifying practice of the body and sexuality (Butler 1999), abjection is a common signifier of blackness (Scott 2010). By intersecting race, gender, and sexual identities, the short story fails to represent JJ as a complete subject because it articulates stereotypical images around blackness and transgenderism, casting, at once, both terms as abjection. Thus, the centralization of Luce’s desire and the representation of JJ as an abject character suggest the impossibility of intimacy for the black queer body within the homonormative parameters of gender, sexuality, and race.

Key Words. Abjection, race, sexuality, Emma Donoghue, short story.

Resumen. Este trabajo pretende analizar la construcción del personaje JJ en el cuento “The Welcome” de Emma Donoghue (2006). El relato retrata el despertar sexual de Luce hacia JJ, la nueva residente de la cooperativa de viviendas para mujeres The Welcome. La timidez y supuesta indiferencia de JJ ante el intento romántico y amistad de Luce resulta ser una reacción al proceso de transexualidad de JJ. Si, como sostiene el crítico argentino Ricardo Piglia (2000), todo cuento narra dos historias, la primera es una historia de amor frustrada, y la segunda trata de la revelación de JJ como transgénero. La intervención crítica realizada en este trabajo desafía y expone imágenes internalizadas y regímenes raciales de representación al poner en evidencia que los signos y elementos que preparan al lector para la revelación de JJ la representan como

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un personaje abyecto. Fundamental para la teoría de la subjetividad (Kristeva 1988, McAfee 2004) y para la práctica significativa del cuerpo y la sexualidad (Butler 1999), la abyección es un significativo común de la negritud (Scott 2010). Al entrecruzar raza, género e identidades sexuales, el cuento no logra representar a JJ como un sujeto completo porque articula imágenes estereotipadas en torno a la negritud y la transexualidad, arrojando, a la vez, ambos términos como abyección. Así, la centralización del deseo de Luce y la representación de JJ como personaje abyecto sugieren la imposibilidad de intimidad para el cuerpo negro queer dentro de los parámetros homonormativos de género, sexualidad y raza.

Palabras clave. Abyección, raza, sexualidad, Emma Donoghue, cuento.

“[...] when I publish my fiction, I sometimes wish I had a veto over interpretations of my work, but as a reader, I am glad that is not the case.”
Emma Donoghue, *Inseparable*.

“[The critical essays in *Black Looks*] represent my political struggle to push against the boundaries of the image, to find words that express what I see, especially when I am looking in ways that move against the grain, when I am seeing things that most folks want to believe simply are not there.”
bell hooks, *Black Looks. Race and Representation*.

The intersection of queerness and blackness is uncommon in Irish fiction. On the one hand, the representation of queer characters considers the construction of queerness as otherness against the paradigms of Irish identity based on the impositions of heterosexuality. On the other, the sexuality of black characters seems to be of relatively lesser importance, having heterosexuality as their common descriptor. Paraphrasing Jasbir Puar (2017: 32), this problematic configuration reiterates the homosexual other as white and the racial/black other as straight, making it difficult for a nuanced analysis of identity and subjectivity. Fortunately, an attempt at such an intersection exists, and it was written by the acclaimed Irish writer Emma Donoghue in the short story “The Welcome”.² The story was published in her 2006 collection *Touchy Subjects*, which is, as Donoghue describes on her website,³ a “collection of contemporary stories about taboos and embarrassment ranges from Ireland to Louisiana, Canada to Tuscany, and includes characters old, young, queer, straight, and simply confused” (Donoghue n.p.). Donoghue claims that “The Welcome” had as inspiration her “fond memories of six years in a Cambridge housing cooperative,” and it “is a love story with a twist” (Donoghue n.p.). Having a black queer woman as one of the main characters, “The Welcome” represents the intersection of blackness and queerness within a common plot motif, specifically a doomed summer love story. The article will critically engage with the representation of blackness and the signs attached to the black character.

Set in the women-only living co-op, the story is narrated by Luce, an 18-year-old woman who describes herself as “a pedant, a twitching spinster, dried up before my time” with “a short, skinny, pale, post-adolescent Anglo-Saxon body” (Donoghue 2006: 197). As her description suggests, Luce has a predilection for order, classification, and organization, reflected in how she corrects people’s grammar constantly. After a few pages, the reader is told that Luce has not started her sexual life yet, remarked by her housemates with constant internal

² It is important to mention that Keith Ridgway’s 2021 novel, *A Shock*, has a gay black character. Coincidentally, the novel is also set in England.

³ <https://www.emmadonoghue.com/books/short-story-collections/touchy-subjects.html>

jokes. That changes when the housing co-op opens a new vacancy and interviews JJ, a black woman who does not give much information about herself. She was not a unanimous choice, but, as Luce had argued, “if we were serious about Particularly Welcoming and all that—if we wanted to improve the co-op’s representation of women of colour from none in nine to one in nine—then we had to pick JJ.” Although it is a valid argument, Luce had a vested interest; in fact, she “wanted JJ because her fingers were long and broad and made me feel slightly shaky” (Donoghue 2006: 199). As JJ does not give much information about herself, and her only peculiarity is that she owns a rat as a pet, the narrator centralizes her remarks about JJ’s body. With a voice “as deep as [the singer] Tracy Chapman”, JJ has “hundreds of [gleam] skinny plaits [...] Under her army surplus shirt, her shoulders were wider than anyone’s I knew. She had all she needed to be a total butch and didn’t seem to realize it” (Donoghue 2006: 199, 202). Luce’s obsession with classification and not knowing whether JJ is a lesbian frustrates and intensifies her interest in JJ.

Although JJ and Luce get along well, the apparent receptivity to the new resident collapses when one of the housemates teases JJ asking her to “show a little flesh” and opens JJ’s dressing gown, which makes JJ hit her in the eye. After the incident, JJ decides to leave *The Welcome*, but not before revealing in a letter to Luce that she is transgender, and that “if I had the right body—if I had any kind of body I was wanting to show or share, or if I could feel much of anything these days—then it would be you I’d want to do it with. You’d be welcome” (Donoghue 2006: 216). In the last paragraphs, Luce admits that she did not reply to the letter because she would not have known what to say, but the “doomed first-love story” with JJ taught her that she does not “know the first thing about anything” (Donoghue 2006: 217). Thus, the narrative works with a conscious irony by having “the welcome” as its title and by the fact that the whole story questions Luce’s perspective on the world.

The narrative adopts a binary structure essential to the disclosure of JJ’s identity. The Argentine writer and critic Ricardo Piglia, in his essay “Thesis and new thesis about the short story,” argues that all short stories narrate two stories: “the classic short story [...] narrates the story 1 on the first level [...] and secretly constructs story 2. [...] The writer’s skillfulness consists in knowing how to encode story 2 in the interstices of story 1. A visible story hides a secret story, narrated in an elliptical and fragmented way” (Piglia 2008: 89-90, my translation).⁴ Following Piglia’s theory, story 1 has the form of a “doomed first-love story,” and story 2 is about JJ’s revelation. In this sense, JJ’s shyness and privacy, her interactions with Luce, especially when she states that “bodies are an accident” and that she is not at peace with herself, and even the doubleness of the consonant “j” prepare the reader for the revelation contained in the letter. It is also interesting to point out that the short story starts with the ad announcing the vacancy, and symbolically ends with JJ’s letter, both genres that hint at the public and private division of trans and queer coming-of-age narratives.

Besides the signs anticipating JJ’s revelation, the doomed-first love story (or story 1) relies on the division between butch and femme identity as a narrative topic which serves as the explanation of why the sexual/love interest will inevitably fail:

“Jesus, Luce,” asked Di out of nowhere, “why her?”
 My head whipped round.
 Di pushed it back into place gently. “And don’t say ‘who?’ You’re so obvious.
 Whenever JJ’s in the room you sit with your limbs sort of parted at her.”
 My face scalded. “No I don’t.”
 “Even Kay’s noticed, and Kay wouldn’t register the fall of a nuclear bomb.”

⁴ “O conto clássico [...] narra em primeiro plano a história 1 [...] e constrói em segredo a história 2 [...] A arte do contista consiste em saber cifrar a história 2 nos interstícios da história 1. Um relato visível esconde um relato secreto, narrado de um modo elíptico e fragmentário” (Piglia 2008: 89-90).

I hid my face in my hand.

“Of all people to fall for!” said Di crossly.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked.

“JJ’s an untouchable, honey.”

I flinched at the word.

“You know it’s true. That rat is the only one let into her bed. You’ll never get anywhere with her in a million years. Don’t take it personally; nobody could get past that force field.” (Donoghue 2006: 208-209)

As Ann Cvetkovich argues in *An Archive of Feelings*, lesbian sexual culture relies on a division between femmes and butches that is, at once, a sexual positionality and a public display of identity. Nonetheless, as Cvetkovich remarks, “The discourse of femmes [/butches] undoes assumptions about any simple relation or analogy between binarisms such as ‘femme/butch,’ ‘top/bottom,’ ‘fucking/being fucked,’ and ‘penetrating/being penetrated,’” making “it difficult to reduce them to any single master binaries, such as ‘masculine/feminine’ or ‘active/passive’” (Cvetkovich 2017: 60). The narrator had already told the reader that JJ “had all she needed to be a total butch and didn’t seem to realize it” (Donoghue 2007: 202). In the scene, Di draws attention to JJ’s untouchability, which within the butch culture means “a resistance to touch that can be both sexual and emotional” (Cvetkovich 2017: 52). The resistance to sexual and emotional touch, however, cannot be perceived as an inexistence of feelings. As JJ reveals in her letter, Luce would be welcome if JJ had the right body or any type of body she would like to share. Up to this point, the narrative interconnects a relationship between lesbian sexual culture and trans narratives since it constructs JJ’s untouchability within the dimensions of body and gender dysphoria. The issue, however, is that the narrative seems to consider the notions of untouchability of butch women, transness, and blackness as free-floating signs that can be semantically attached unproblematically. This happens because blackness seems to disturb and give another layer of meaning to the interaction between transness and untouchability.

Although the irony of the narrative and its main critique reveal that the queer feminist housing co-op is incapable of fully accepting racial otherness, it does so by not engaging with racial representation. This can be seen during the reception dinner to celebrate JJ’s arrival when one of the housemates asks her “is it going to make you feel at all uncomfortable, d’you think, being the only woman of colour in the co-op?” and “How old would you say you were, like, when you first became aware of systemic racism?” (Donoghue 2006: 201). The logic behind these questions is that racialization does not entail whiteness, and racism is a problem black people have to deal with. Blackness is hypervisible even in a feminist, queer-oriented environment open to welcoming “all ethnic groups.”

It is not as if whiteness is not acknowledged, quite the contrary. During the preparations for the new resident, the housemates transformed the living room, giving an atmosphere of “white guilt signals,” with “a Mexican blanket slung over the back of the pink couch, an African head scarf wrapped around the lampshade, and [...] a dog-eared poster of a woman carrying a stack of bricks on her head that said Oxfam In India: Empowerment Through Education” (Donoghue 2006: 199). Comparing herself to JJ, Luce refers to her body as an “Anglo-Saxon body; a random conglomeration of genes.” There is a self-awareness of whiteness as an onto-epistemological ground for human experience, but, as the plot needs the idea of JJ as a shy, aloof person so it can have a revelation in the end, there is no development of her subjectivity or personality, reducing JJ to a black lesbian trans woman, the narrator’s object of desire. Both of these terms are rooted in Luce’s perspective, who classifies and describes JJ according to a visual scheme of representation. While blackness is a given because of the epidermalization of racial difference, JJ’s sexual and gender identities need to be discovered or confirmed. Thus, the ironic dimension of the narrative does not dismantle the field of visual representation in

which the stylization of the body and the skin are signifiers of racial, gender, and sexual difference and identity (Hall 1996: 20; Bey 2022: 37). Moreover, the representation of a black trans woman character reifies queerness and feminism within the normative parameters of whiteness, and that is the reason why blackness disturbs transness and untouchability, both terms seem to be attributes of a white queer subject. I argue that, on the one hand, the narrative works with a refined sense of self-consciousness and criticism by acknowledging whiteness as an issue, but, on the other, it lacks a critical perspective on and engagement with racial regimes of representation of blackness. The task here is to read against the grain and displace the narrator as the onto-epistemological ground to interrogate the representation of blackness and the signs employed for such representation. Following bell hooks (2015: 5), the critical intervention performed in this article challenges and exposes internalized images and racial regimes of representation by putting in evidence that the signs and elements which prepare the reader for JJ's revelation represent her as an abject character.

Abjection was a concept popularized by Julia Kristeva's work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, published in English in 1982. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory, in which the child (mis)recognizes herself as a unitary being separated from her mother, Kristeva argues that the child develops a sense of separation between the "I" and the other before the mirror stage through abjection, i.e., the process of "jettisoning what seems to be part of oneself" (McAfee 2003: 46). The typical examples of this jettisoning process are related to food, taboos, body fluids, and the corpse, but Kristeva argues that "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order" (1982: 4). For the author, abjection had a civilizing function, linked to primitive repression that separated humans from animals:

In this sense, abjection is coextensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as on the collective level. By virtue of this, abjection, just like prohibition of incest, is a universal phenomenon; one encounters it as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted, and this throughout the course of civilization. But abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to the various "symbolic systems." (Kristeva 1982: 68)

Different from the process of repression essential to the Freudian understanding of unconsciousness, abjection is part of the symbolic order and threatens the borders that form the subject. Kristeva argues that "as abjection is coextensive with social and symbolic order," society purifies the abject elements through religion and literature. For her, "literature is privileged signifier [for abjection]" (Kristeva 1982: 208).

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler uses the term to propose that "the abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (1993: 3). Butler considers abjection throughout the scripts of gender and sexual normative parameters, but her definition applies to the analysis of blackness. Following Butler, blackness is necessary to circumscribe the domain of the white subject, and those racialized as black do not enjoy the status of subject. As Darieck Scott argues, "blackness is constituted by a history of abjection, and is itself a form of abjection," it "[...] is a construction, not an essence, which serves to shore up white identity and superiority" (2010: 5, 258).

The readings of abjection,⁵ influenced by Black Studies scholars such as Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman,⁶ inscribe the domain of black abjection through the parameters of gender and sexuality. For these authors, gender and sexual undecidability mark a disruption of black gender and sexuality as an abject characteristic. In the celebrated and influential article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers argues that because of slavery, an impossibility of gender differentiation marks black subjects. The “theft of the body,” as Spillers puts it, makes “the female body and the male body [...] a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific” (Spillers 1984: 67). Following Marquis Bey (2022), I contend that Spiller’s remarks on gender and sexual undecidability afford us a paradigm from which to think about to think about gender and sexuality through blackness. This is not to say that Spiller proposes a queer (or even trans) reading of blackness, but that gender undecidability can disrupt the normative parameters of gender, race, and sexuality. The problem is that from the point of view of whiteness and hetero/homonormative parameters, the queerness of blackness or blackness as queerness is only possible through abjection.

In light of the theoretical approaches discussed above, I would like to return to JJ’s untouchability as a sign of abjection. As the skin is responsible for sensing the touch and is the mark of the epidermalization of racial difference, the narrative proposes a racialized sense of untouchability, having blackness in its center. The interjections of Di when asking Luce ““why her?” [...] ‘Of all people to fall for!’” exceed the meaning of untouchability as pertaining to lesbian sexual culture. Luce’s desire is incomprehensible because JJ is beyond desirability and romantic interest. As untouchability and abjection share a sense of interdiction, prohibition, and exclusion as well as exceptionality, JJ is someone who “ought not to be touched” (Sarukkai 2009: 43) by a fully autonomous (white) subject who can choose other people to fall in love for. The dialogue suggests a phenomenology of untouchability, as Sundar Sarukkai puts it, in which the (un)touchability reverberates directly in the capacity to affect and be affected. Di is proscribing the limits of affec(ta)tion by delimiting the possibilities of touch. This proscription has a double effect because it circumscribes JJ in the realm of an untouchable object, as abject, and interdicts the romantic attempt sought by Luce. The proscription works because the narration places JJ as a shy, mysterious (and even anti-social) person, after all, “nobody could get past that force field.” But, as Di suggests, JJ is not incapable of touching: “[the] rat is the only one let into her bed.”

The animality suggested by Di is the second level of abjection that constructs JJ. In her interview for the vacancy, JJ forgets to mention that she has a rat as a pet, surprising and disgusting some housemates. This peculiarity makes Luce note that

[JJ] lavished care on Victor the rat, stroking his coat and scratching behind his ears with a methodical tenderness that softened me like candle wax. But she never touched another human being, that I could see. She wouldn’t take or give massages; instead of good-bye hugs, she nodded at people. It was just how JJ was. I knew I shouldn’t take it personally, but of course I did. (Donoghue 2006: 206)

Although Luce admires JJ for being a tolerant person, the narrative relies on the crossing of “the species barrier” to represent JJ as a sentient being-not-quite-as-human, who “only fancies rats” and the “rat is the only one let into her bed.” It is interesting to note that the movement of

⁵ See Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection. Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York: New York University Press, 2010, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson *Becoming Human. Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York: New York University Press, 2020.

⁶ Hortense Spiller’s article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” and Saidiya Hartman *Scenes of Subjection*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

the narration points out that JJ is constructed through/in abjection by the specific meanings assigned to JJ's personality and actions. Abjection, and racialization for that matter, is a discursive category that places some bodies as abject. In the passage, JJ's relationship with her pet alludes to the human and animal binary by which scientific discourse constructed blackness. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson points out, liberal humanism and Enlightenment philosophy "relies on animal abjection" (2020: 18) as a form of racialization of blackness, "suggesting that black people are most representative of the abject animalistic dimensions of humanity, or the beast" (2020: 20). The human/animal dichotomy in the short story is an intimate relationship between the character and the rat. JJ crosses the species barrier by representing the abject animalistic dimensions of humanity through the sensual affect on her rat. The moment of intimacy between the character and the rat demonstrates her capacity for feeling and tenderness, providing a sense of vulnerability and touchability. The methodical tenderness, applied to the stroke and scratch of the rat, softens Luce, who transforms the scene into an erotic act. The narrator is jealous because she wishes to receive the erotic investment of JJ's touch. The erotism is only possible because of Luce's perspective/narration since there is nothing intrinsic to the scene but the narrator's erotic charge.

As the narration suggests an erotic investment in the relationship between JJ and the rat, I question Luce's genuine interest in JJ as the thin line between JJ as an object of love interest, her position as an abject character, and the sexual objectification of the black body is not clear. Since the short story has the form of a "doomed first-love story," the relationship between Luce and JJ has to fail in order for the narrative form to make sense, but it mainly fails because JJ is beyond the standards of desirability. Taking psychoanalytic theory into consideration, we can propose, with Felluga, that "desire is most interested not in fully attaining the object of desire but in keeping our distance, thus allowing desire to persist" (Felluga 2015: 199). The virtuality of fulfilling the desire⁷ is crucial to the narrative form of the short story once it introduces tension to the relationship between the characters. The decision to choose JJ as the new resident in "The Welcome" was taken by Luce, who "wanted JJ because her fingers were long and broad and made me feel slightly shaky." Even though the narrator claims that "Not that her being black had anything to do with it, for me," the signifying chain attached to the black body makes that claim an affirmation that needs careful consideration. Put differently, by denying the possibility of her desire as an objectification of the black body, Luce is affirming it through negation since she is drawn to the idea of sexual fulfillment JJ's body could provide.

And it is interesting to speculate about all possibilities of pets, the author specifically chose the rat, an animal that, on the one hand, is associated with dirtiness, lack of cleanliness, and disease, and, on the other, is the material of laboratory experiments, responsible for the development of the sciences. This ambivalent position connects to the discourses on abjection and the representation of blackness. As Jonathan Burt argues, the cultural depiction of rats in Western society links rats to humanity as twins, given that the animal represents the "very debasement of evolution" (7). Rats disturb system and order, as Kristeva puts it, through their "unbounded sexual reproduction, a limitless appetite, and dirt" (Burt 2005: 12). Similarly, JJ is

⁷ I am aware that the use of the word desire poses a contradiction to Kristeva's theory on abjection. Kristeva posited abjection in the domain of *jouissance*. This Lacanian term does not have any direct translation into English and describes sexual pleasure and pleasure or enjoyment provided by the transgression of moral codes. *Jouissance* is linked to the superego, the "anti-ethical agency" that is "at once the law and its own destruction or that which undermines the law" (Homer 2005: 58). *Jouissance* is different from desire because desire is linked to the Symbolic: the subject desires the desire of the other since she is socialized into language. In its turn, *jouissance* is the realm of the pre-symbolic, a pleasure with no language to describe it. As with abjection, Kristeva argues that in *jouissance* "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (1982: 9). The pleasure in/as pain is fundamental to understand the paradigmatic position of antiblack violence because it is inscribed in *jouissance* in the sense that there is an "absolute' right to enjoyment" of the black body.

attached to the “abject animalistic dimensions of humanity” by having a pet signified as the degradation of humanity. The mirroring aspect in the relationship between the characters acts as direct complementation as if JJ and the rat shared intrinsic similarities. In this sense, considering the thesis about the short stories, the pet is also a sign that reveals JJ as transgender. There is a subtle allusion to the relation of the (im)proper body to the (im)proper pet when Luce notes that “[...] it didn’t seem to have occurred to [JJ], for instance, that a rat wasn’t a suitable pet” (Donoghue 2006: 203). The unsuitable pet mirrors JJ’s abjection as a black trans character. Thus the domesticity of the rat as a pet in the short story does not erase the abjection the animal denotes but increases JJ’s abjection, establishing an associative chain that places JJ as an object for the development of scientific reason.

The parallelism between blackness, transness, and rats through scientific reason is possible because of the position Luce occupies inside the text. As JJ notes: “You like to classify things, don’t you, Luce? [...] Everything in its little box;” (Donoghue 204). Luce is constructed through the domain of the knowledge of grammar, here rendered as another productive scientific discourse. Her status as narrator grants the capacity to articulate facts as a sovereign “I,” the white subject of narration. The onto-epistemological ground is not disturbed by JJ’s abjection, quite the contrary. The onto-epistemological ground needs JJ’s abjection to guarantee its position even if this position is partial, as Luce affirms by the end of the narrative: “I don’t read [JJ’s letter] for nostalgia; I prefer not to read it at all [...] I keep the letter in my box for anytime I catch myself thinking I know the first thing about anything” (Donoghue 2006: 217). Although the scientific method applied by Luce may have failed once she could not fully classify JJ in her “little box,” the story enriches Luce’s perspective, and her position as subject does not change.

The abject animalistic dimension of JJ appears again in the climax of the narrative when the character hits one of the housemates:

[...] Iona caught [JJ] by the lapel of her dressing gown and said, “Hey, Lynn, have you met JJ? She’s the house prude!”

JJ didn’t smile. She just kept a tight hold of the neck of her thick robe.

[...]

“Jesus, woman,” she said in JJ’s face, “how hot does it have to get before you’ll show a little flesh?” She put on a parodic games-mistress voice: “We’re all gells here, y’know!” As she spoke she hauled on the dressing gown, and it fell open, and the next thing I knew Iona was on the floor, clutching her face.

JJ, knotted into her robe again, had backed against the door.

“She hit me,” howled Iona. “The bitch hit me in the eye!” (Donoghue 2006: 211-212)

When Iona teases her, JJ reacts by hitting her in the eye. This construction makes her someone who cannot argue with reason and uses violence as her solution to solve problems. The scene also highlights the paradox of black representation: on the one hand, JJ is an untouchable who resists touch and displays of feelings (for another human being), and on the other, the excess of feelings is uncontrollable, making her react with violence. By activating the stereotypical representation of black people as inherently violent, the racially charged act exposes the racial configuration of the housing co-op that opts to expel JJ. As abjection threatens the boundaries of the subject, the aggression threatens the racial stability and peacefulness of the house. Her expulsion is a mechanism of defense to secure the inviolability of the white body/space.

Not only does JJ’s aggression connect blackness with violence, but it does so by also suggesting a male behavior. This is not to take an essentialist position, separating womanhood from the realm of violence, given that predisposition to violence also figures as a representative stereotype of black women, but the scene activates gendered and racial regimes of

representation that aligns blackness, violence, and masculinity. This alignment is further suggested by Luce when, trying to make JJ change her mind and stay in *The Welcome*, she reveals that “‘My father hit my mother once,’ I told her, ‘and you know what? [...] She deserved it. The things my mother used to say, I should have hit her myself’” (Donoghue 2006: 214). In this case, violence is gender-coded in a power-imbalanced heterosexual relationship meaning that the misogynistic violence of Luce’s father is comparable to what JJ has done to Iona.

Masculinity appears again in the letter JJ sends to Luce, suggesting a case of racial and gender anxiety at once. In the letter, JJ introduces herself as John and uses transgender medical narratives to explain her reality to Luce: “They said the hormones would be hard ... and the doctors won’t give me the operation because they say I’m not serious enough about wanting it. According to their classifications, I should wear makeup and tights and get a boyfriend.” The “conventional transsexual narratives based on the concept of inhabiting the ‘wrong body’ and the desire to pass as a woman or a man” (Elliot 2010: 33) is not here used to affirm JJ’s passability as woman, but to deny any relationship with masculinity. It is curious, however, that, by using this strategy, the text is reaffirming the gender binary it wants to overcome through a same-sex doomed first love story and its use of conventional trans narrative. Similarly in “Not that her being black had anything to do with it, for me,” JJ opens her letter by saying: “If I say hi, this is John, you won’t know who I mean, will you?”. The negation structure, which implies an affirmative statement, challenges JJ’s passability as a woman.

The argument here is not that trans people do not use strategies to refer to themselves by their birth name, nor that the intertextuality with trans narratives of medical procedures is not a lived experience. The issue is how the onto-epistemological violence creates JJ as an intelligible character. Even when JJ speaks in the first person, she does so through an intertextual practice, with a narrative that secures gender and sexual respectability to white heterosexual audiences. In the article “Constructing the ‘Good Transsexual’: Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press,” Emily Skidmore argues that “public narratives of transsexuality are not simply about gender but also about race, class, and sexuality” and their articulation during the period covered by the text was possible “through an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, most notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality” (Skidmore 2011: 271). One could argue that the short story dismantles heterosexuality as a normative parameter through a same-sex relationship. By the end of the story, the reader learns that Luce has “a very normal happy life, in a two-dykes-and-their-dogs-and-their-mortgage kind of way” (Donoghue 2006: 217). The alignment with a homonormative subject, that is, an experience of homosexuality as a private couple imbued with the logics of neoliberal ideology, reinforces the binary division and the normativity of the story, suggesting that the norms of white womanhood are an embodiment impossible for JJ.

Considering the use of abjection proposed by Butler, we can argue that the uninhabitable zones of social life correspond to the uninhabitable body assigned for JJ, and it is also the uninhabitable home as a physical space within *The Welcome*. JJ is jettisoned from all the categories of the livable because her blackness saturates the physical space marked by whiteness. Contradicting the narrator’s claim that “Not that her being black had anything to do with it, for me,” a detailed reading of the signs attached to JJ as a black character suggests that blackness has everything to do with it. The short story reinforces abjection as the descriptive/prescriptive vocabulary for the black body, creating a problem space that acknowledges the queerness within blackness but considers blackness as “almost too queer to rehabilitate” (Puar 2017: 170). Although “*The Welcome*” uses irony to criticize the unwelcoming atmosphere of a feminist, queer housing community, there is a lack of engagement with racialized regimes of representation, placing JJ in/as abjection. JJ’s untouchability, the animalistic dimension in her relationship with the rat, and the scene of

violence inscribe JJ as an abject character who disturbs whiteness as a normative parameter of identity, system, and order.

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