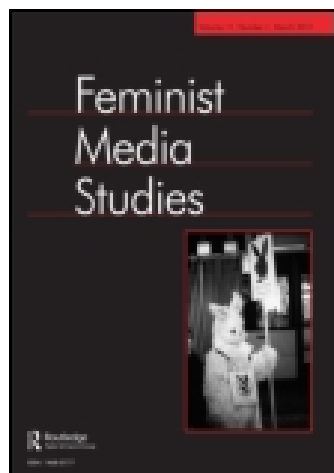




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Exploring Grey Zones and Blind Spots in the Binaries and Boundaries of E.L. James' Fifty Shades Trilogy

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fetishised embodiment of celebrity culture.” For Al-Mahadin, unpacking the text in this way opens the opportunity for a more complex feminist analysis of the text. Collectively, these short commentaries offer a thoughtful starting point for a much more long-ranging discussion on the genre in general and the series in particular.

We conclude this issue of Commentary and Criticism, with Victoria Cann’s review of Dafna Lemish’s *Screening Gender on Children’s Television: The Views of Producers around the World* and Jessalynn Keller’s review of Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff’s *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*.

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EXPLORING GREY ZONES AND BLIND SPOTS IN THE BINARIES AND BOUNDARIES OF E.L. JAMES’ *FIFTY SHADES* TRILOGY

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Among the most striking features of the story that unfolds in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy (E.L. James 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) is the numerous classic binary oppositions upon which it draws. As in a fairytale or a biblical parable, this is a story about the attraction and struggle between good and evil, light and dark, the whole and the broken, the pure and the tainted. This, of course, is nothing unusual for best-selling products of popular culture and undoubtedly is one of the main reasons for their popularity. These well-known tropes resonate with many readers, producing feelings of recognition, comforting familiarity and, consequently, feelings of security.

In this essay, we problematise the implications of some of these familiar binaries as they are used in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. Through analysis of some of the trilogy’s narrative tropes, we investigate how the separate poles of binary oppositions are established and kept in tension in order to make clear distinctions between the two. At the same time we would like to highlight the constant work that has to be done to obtain these distinctions and a certain form of normative violence that is performed in the story to practices and identities that are constructed as outside the normal. In the second part of the essay, we seek to queer these binaries by exploring alternative narratives towards which the story

itself points as either impossible to imagine for many of its characters or silenced through denial. These grey zones and blind spots can be taken as a point of departure for a queer critique of the binaries and norms about sexualities that organise the story.

Familiar Binaries

Activity/passivity,
Sun/Moon,
Culture/Nature,
Day/Night,

Father/Mother,
Head/heart,
Intelligible/sensitive,
Logos/pathos
(...)

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it transports us, in all of its forms, wherever a discourse is organized. The same thread, or double tress leads us, whether we are reading or speaking, through literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation, of reflection. (Helene Cixous 1981, p. 90)

Pairs of opposites familiar to most readers from fairytales, parables, and romantic novels dominate the *Fifty Shades* trilogy both structurally and metaphorically. Powerful metaphors associate the female protagonist, Ana, with innocence, light, virginity, and a healthy mentality. These contrast with the male protagonist, Christian, who is associated with experience, darkness, sexual deviance, and mental trauma (see for example, James 2012a, pp. 53, 68, 72; 2012c, p. 430). The narrative arc of the book follows Christian's journey from the "darkness" of wanting a purely sexual relationship with Ana centred on controlling bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM) to an apparently more loving relationship which includes "lighter" elements of BDSM and is less centred on pain and more on pleasure and intimacy. This transformation, which Ana wishes for early in the narrative, is unfolded in the three volumes though perhaps in a different way than she imagines from the beginning:

He's not a hero; he's a man with serious, deep emotional flaws, and he's dragging me into the dark. Can I not guide him into the light? (Ana on Christian: James 2012a, p. 355)

Christian's traumatic childhood is given as the reason for not only his preference for BDSM but also his general need for control and his inner "darkness" (James 2012b, p. 329). This is made even clearer when Christian is compared to his brother, Elliot. Elliot—like Christian—is also adopted, but is portrayed as resolutely well-adjusted: "He's obviously nothing like Christian, but then they're adopted brothers" (James 2012a, p. 83). Unlike Christian, Elliot is outgoing, relaxed, tactile, and open about his passionate, heterosexual relationship with Ana's roommate, Kate.

In this way, the binary oppositions which organise both the style and narrative arc of the text not only reinforce stereotypical and long-critiqued gender correlations between femininity and innocence, for example, but also reinforce certain normative notions of what is considered to be sexually normal and not normal. The contrasts between Ana and

Christian and Christian and Elliot create a correlation between non-normative sexual preferences/practices and childhood trauma.

Fifty Shades has been widely touted as offering erotica for a certain segment of the population ("mommy porn") and as promoting more open discussion about sexual practices (Tim Peel 2012). Rather than broadening the scope of erotica and sexual pleasure, however, we want to suggest that it seems to do the opposite by limiting what counts as "acceptable" forms of sexual pleasure by framing some BDSM and all non-heterosexual sexual practices as the result of childhood trauma and thus as signs and results of a pathological condition. More precisely, we wonder if the text actually begs the following question: if Ana's preferences are framed as being the norm in healthy, acceptable, visible relationships, then are all those of us who have other preferences and conduct other kinds of relationship only doing so due to some kind of trauma in our past? In our reading from a queer point of view, these powerful binary oppositions perform a kind of textual violence that tries to undermine, ignore, and erase non-heterosexual and hardcore BDSM sexual preferences.

Blurring the Boundaries

As described above, Christian's childhood trauma kicks off a narrative arc which spans purification through his taking of Ana's virginity and gradual return to the "light" of heteronormative sexual relations. (Christian has earlier had a long relationship with an older dominatrix, Elena, in which he was the submissive partner, but the affair ends after her husband becomes aware of it, and now Christian prefers BDSM relationships where he is the dominant partner.) This narrative can be read as a symbolic coming-of-age story told from a pseudo-psychoanalytical viewpoint drawing on classical Freudian and Lacanian models about trauma, processes of the child's distancing and making itself independent of the mother, and the formation of a normal self (Julia Kristeva 1982; Margrit Shildrick 2002, pp. 79–80, 103–106). In fact, it is very difficult to understand the progression of events of the story from any other narrative model. Alternative narratives and understandings of BDSM, but also a myriad of other queer identities and lifestyles in which the traditional male and female roles are challenged, subverted, or more fluid and dynamic, are thus either immediately silenced if they appear, or they are placed outside the borders of the imaginable in the story.

An example of this is Christian's shocked reaction when Ana asks him about his sexual orientation at their first meeting:

Ana: "Are you gay, Mr Grey?"

Christian: "What the fuck? I cannot *believe* she's said that out loud! The unspoken question that my own family dares not ask (...)." (James 2012c, p. 430)

Christian has kept his BDSM lifestyle hidden and never introduces his submissives to his family or friends. In the absence of any visible girlfriend to confirm Christian's heterosexuality, his family assume that he is gay but celibate. Other sexual identities, or BDSM and non-heterosexual sexual practices, are thus presented as impossible for Christian's family to imagine and thereby also effectively silenced, indicating that they are not considered by them to be publicly acceptable.

In order for Christian to be intelligible to his family and broader social context, and to maintain the high social status that he has, he is forced to fit within an extremely dominant narrative form about heteronormativity and sexual normality. It is no wonder that his quality of life increases during the process in which he is normalised and emerges as a heterosexual subject whose sexual practices are centred on intimacy and mutual pleasure in a monogamous relationship. To fit the dominant norms results in social recognition, acceptance, less questioning and policing, and the privilege of being able to pass as unremarkable and intelligible.

However, if we look at this narrative from another perspective, following Judith Butler, it could be argued that Christian exchanges one kind of trauma (psychological and physical) for another (discursive) during this process:

Here it is not only a question of how discourse injures bodies, but how certain injuries establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility. (Judith Butler 1993, p. 170)

Christian's Dom body is quite literally at the limits of intelligibility in the book as his own self-silencing to his family and more public silencing revealed through the Non-Disclosure Agreements he insists that his submissives must sign. Furthermore, his childhood injuries (both psychological and physical) render his body at the limit of his own notion of intelligibility, and he literally works on silencing it in various ways; his two years of silence as a child immediately following his adoption is mirrored in his more formal methods of silencing himself and others as an adult. Haunted by his own trauma and desperate to achieve socio-cultural intelligibility, Christian obsessively self-polices his life through various control mechanisms, from his daily exercising to the contract he writes for his submissives determining their exercise programmes, diet, and sleep patterns, to his evident pleasure in his own power over his employees (James 2012a, p. 10).

Christian's disciplining of his own body makes clear the repetitive, daily labour involved in achieving visible, viable subjectivity. We are witnessing Christian's own struggle to achieve recognition of himself as a gendered, sexualised, desiring body. The simple, black and white quality of the metaphors used to describe this recognition throws Christian's work of achieving subjectivity into sharp relief, denaturalising it and raising the question of what lurks in the grey shadows outside the clear cut world of black and white. These grey shadows are the domain of what Butler describes as the abject:

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 the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Butler 1993, p. 3)

The movement within the text from the "darkness" of hardcore BDSM to the "light" of a sexual relationship where BDSM practices are a means to intimacy and pleasure is played out so dramatically that it may be easy for a reader to lose sight of what is assumed in this narrative arc: it is firmly placed within the framework of the heterosexual matrix. Heterosexual BDSM relations represent the limit of intelligibility within the text, the most outrageous preference imaginable. Consequently, all queer practices and bodies are literally pushed out of the discourse of *Fifty Shades*, and Christian's development can be read alternatively, not as a salvation story, but as a story of a normalisation and disciplining into the heteronormative regime of his social context.

In telling a story that there might be reasons other than being gay for people not to have a publicly visible partner, the books implicitly point to the silencing of queer sexualities, practices, and identities other than BDSM and homosexuality. It never actually touches upon what these could be and thus can be said to contribute to the silencing of them. These silences, however, point to shadowy grey zones beyond the black and white of its own narrative space. A crack is opened to an alternative understanding of Christian's story which makes it possible to examine the processes of constant policing and reconstruction of the boundaries between both heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as between normalised sexualities and all other "dark" and queer sexualities.

Conclusion

In this reading of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy we offer a queer perspective which we hope will open the text to alternative readings. We started by highlighting the binaries which order the text and the bodies contained within it and followed by suggesting the problematic implications of these binaries for those who exist outside them. We have also highlighted some points of entry into the text for alternative readings, such as the small moments of instability and disruption caused by mention of gay identities and relationships that challenge traditional gender performances of male and female bodies. Drawing on Butler's understanding of the abject, we also explore how Christian's own struggle to achieve subjectivity takes the spotlight, casting long grey shadows of unintelligibility on other possible subjects.

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