

TAKING “What She Knew” SERIOUSLY

On the Genderqueer Capacity of Very Short Fictions

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“People did not know what she knew, that she was not really a woman but a man, often a fat man, but more often, probably, an old man. The fact that she was an old man made it hard for her to be a young woman. It was hard for her to talk to a young man, for instance, though the young man was clearly interested in her. She had to ask herself, Why is this young man flirting with this old man?”

This is “What she knew” by Lydia Davis (1986), a story that consists of 83 words and four sentences. Such extreme minimalism is not rare for Davis, who is known as one of the greats of what is sometimes called flash fiction, sometimes microfiction, and even the short-short story form.¹ Texts belonging to this genre often become mixed with other, less narrative genres, because their tone (and occasionally their rhythm) appear close to texts published as prose poetry. Unsurprisingly, this text by Davis was first published in *Paris Review* as a “poem”, as were two other texts later published in the author’s first short story collection².

- 1 Word limits for a text to merit the status of “micro” or “short short” differ greatly, as do definitions based on the likely time of reading them. For a summary of definitions, see Nelles 2012, 89.
- 2 <https://www.theparisreview.org/poetry/2876/three-poems-lydia-davis>

My brief essay is an attempt to discuss why I perceive Davis’s absurdist microfiction as an interesting, even emotionally resonant, representation of a life unseen. In a wider sense, it is also about the queer pleasures of the minimalistic and the non-specific. What can such playful examples of gender trouble teach their readers about the invisibility of gender, sexual differences and the limits of perception?

The first thing that drew my attention was an absence, a notable lack of a narrative element: an attempt to change the situation by a decision or a choice of some kind. The text offers a description of a continuous state. It presents a statement of a character’s self-perception, not a narrative of causal connections and motivated progression. The wording seems to suggest that this kind of thing happens to our protagonist often: young men approaching her with (unknowingly) homoerotic suggestions. “But I’m not a gay man”, we can imagine the character thinking, “I’m just this old man now, probably”.

The character’s confusion is not marked as motivation for further events, or as an issue to be solved. Rather, confusion is the truth, the confusing truth. “It was hard for her”, according to the narrator, but this hardship is not a difficulty to be solved by moving towards a proper social identity.

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And it doesn't serve as a proud statement of the character's personal truth either. The tone is very distant from something like "he knew who he was and you can take it or leave it, thank you very much". Perhaps even the opposite, since the text suggests a kind of resignation. It doesn't seem that the character is feeling that they should do anything about being constantly misgendered. This element makes the text difficult to perceive as a narrative about a possibly transgender character, or perhaps even as a narrative of any kind.

These peculiarities make the character's dilemma unrecognizable – both as a cultural "issue" and as an element of story employment. What the text says is, in a sense, too weird to match any cultural criteria for tellability. For example, being old and being fat are strangely depicted as separate experiences. As a man, the character is not both old and fat, but old or fat at a given moment in time. If this is a possible meeting space of intersecting subject positions, it certainly isn't often referenced in gender studies classrooms.

This is where another set of cultural expectations limits our perception of the possible: the playful and the absurd are often understood as the opposite of serious political engagement or commitment. Additionally, in contemporary literature, trans and genderqueer topics are associated with trans and genderqueer authors – or at least, transparently stated and intentional handling of minority issues marked as specific issues. As Madhavi Menon (2015, 1) states, contemporary identity politics is invested in difference, but one already shaped by "the parameters within which that difference could be known and disseminated". The combination of strange details in Davis's story creates a moment where those parameters have stopped making sense.

I have yet to mention one of the most obvious topics for anyone reading this text in the 2020s. This is the contradictory use of gendered pronouns: in this

case, the continued choice of "she" as a pronoun. This text was written in the 1980s, preceding contemporary discussions about gendered pronouns and how to properly use them.³ But I am not suggesting that if Davis had first published this story closer to our date, the title would or should read "what *they* knew". Not only would that feel like a naturalizing move, a kind of late fix that is too hasty to "repair" a previous injury, it would misread where the queer potentiality resides in this case.

Davis's text is not about correct pronouns but rather about the impossibility of becoming perceived "correctly". The third person, therefore, is an important thematic element in the text. It places the sign of gendering as the inescapable social "fact" of the situation, even if it also questions the factuality of said fact. This literalizes the chasm between one's social identity and self-identity. It also refuses to make the decision on behalf of the reader: is this short fiction about what *she* (thought she) knew or about what "she" (really) *knew*?

The paradox of capacity

In a 2015 book on 1960s abstract sculpture and mixed forms of plastic arts, David J. Getsy writes about transgender capacity: "Transgender capacity is the ability or the potential for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive and multiple." (Getsy 2015, 34.)

For Getsy's purposes, transgender capacity is a useful tool for finding gender diversity and breaches of traditional sex/gender attribution in times and places where it has previously been overlooked. It is therefore a way to fight the historical erasure of transness and the conception of

3 Although experimental gender-neutral third person pronouns had been employed by several writers well before the 1980s. See for example Livia 2001.

non-representational art as principally unrelated to gender and sexual politics. It is my persuasion that a focus on such capacity for gender ambiguity remains useful for the study of contemporary literature, outside the work of trans and genderqueer authors and the fictions delving into recognizably LGBTQIA+ subject matter. Even though what is recognized as queer in contemporary art and literature has gradually become more representational and identitarian, thus at times questioning the validity of specifically *queering* readings⁴, one still has encounters with texts where ambiguity reigns: for example, I am certain that there is something queer going on in “What She Knew”, but queer *how*?

Even though the material and medium-specific differences between plastic arts and written texts should be noted, Getsy’s approach opens some interesting possibilities about queer forms and queer aesthetics. Getsy’s research can be perceived as participating in queer formalism, a diffuse project which greatly differs from earlier anti-contextual and ahistorical approaches to formal methods. Here, the materiality of form is understood as participating in the political meaning of the work of art, criticizing any direct thematic summary of political “content” that does not consider how art employs its formal affordances. Challenges to normative conceptions of gender and sexuality can happen by means of formal manipulation, artistic technique and style.⁵

Getsy shows how even highly abstract, non-mimetic constructions have a connection to the questioning of gender normativity and critique of cultural conceptions of gender and sexualities. Instead of defining the

work from the outset, capacity is a kind of potentiality, only at times fully activated and apparent (Getsy 2015, 34). Getsy’s take on transgender capacity might be expanded to reading the mutability of gender in several different types of art and media representation. For example, literary descriptions of apparently impossible bodies and minds are not necessarily “an avoidance of representation” but can at times be better appreciated as “an embrace of potentiality and the unforeclosed” (Ibid., 276).

For Getsy (2015, 88), an artist like David Smith “banished the mimetic human form while nevertheless invoking its palimpsest as the foil” for the artistic project. In literary works, antimimetic descriptions of events, characters and storyworlds can resist recognizability in a parallel fashion: they do not allow us to identify and interpret events and character traits on conventional terms, yet their difference can only be understood and felt in relation to the conventions they seek to displace. The dynamic of “push and pull” (Ibid., 88) between the mimetic and the artificial, the recognizable and the non-recognizable, is somewhat similar in formal experimentation across disciplines, media and materials. This does not mean that trans becomes only a metaphor or an abstract topic.

Getsy’s discussion points to three important extensions of trans and genderqueer interpretation that are not based on identitarian approaches but rather on the formal, material and contextual elements of art works. First, transgender capacity can be perceived in works that are not figurative or easily perceived as representational. Second, the concept promotes trans interpretation of works predating contemporary concepts and identitarian taxonomies of transsexuality, transgender and different non-binary possibilities. It is one way to resist the overlooking of gender multiplicity in history and to affirm that innovative art works were connected to sexual and gender dissidence well before contemporary culture. Third, the artists discussed by Getsy were not trans or proto-trans people whose work could

4 For can one go about queering works already populated by straightforwardly queer characters? This depends very much on how a researcher defines queer/ness, but it may also stem from certain aesthetic preferences. See for example Nichols 2022; Bradway 2023, 209.

5 For some recent summaries of queer formalism across disciplines, see Fawaz 2022 and Bradway 2025.

generally be approached as an expression of their gender identities. This means that trans capacity is not tied to authorial intentionality. (Getsy 2015, 34–39; see also Getsy 2014.)⁶

A literary application of transgender capacity might discuss characters, narrators and textual voices that are not coded as transgender in any obvious way. In addition to permanently ungendered or ambigendered characters this might include genderqueer characters in several literary genres – including those where character development and individualization are not as central as they are in most traditional novels. Gender confusion can be powerfully and complexly figured by minimalist condensation as well as baroque over-explication and conflicting details. Formalist approaches appear to me as a possibility to draw more attention to those cases where the form or structure of the text differ from representational dynamics.

Is the short form, in this case a micro form, a surprisingly capacious ground for the queering of gender and sexuality? I would say yes – paradoxically, its extreme brevity and compactness are what make it capacious. The trademarks of microfiction include non-individualized characters in anonymized settings, a condensation of extreme actions or events, and a surprising plot twist at the end of the text. In general, the situation of the protagonist is more important than their individuality (Nelles 2012). Such elements emphasize the conceptual, the artificial, and the abstract. Arguably, it is this heightened artificiality that makes the form so capacious.

The concept of capacity is reminiscent of other spatial metaphors of art works, such as the idea of literary forms as vessels or containing forms. One formulation often cited in feminist and queer discussions is Ursula

⁶ In a 2025 publication on Trans narrators, Chiara Pellegrini (2025, 26–27) employs Getsy’s concept to define her concept of “trans-inhabitation”.

LeGuin’s “carrier bag theory” of fiction which depicts literary works as “sacks” or “bags” containing complex worlds that fundamentally challenge the most traditional linear narrative forms based on conflict, linear progression and male heroism (Le Guin, 2019). While it privileges ambiguity, Le Guin’s conception still approaches narrative complexity in terms of representational content and the novel genre.⁷ The ambiguity in the micro forms of Lydia Davis often works differently: the lack of contextual backgrounding and the centrality of abstract “ideas” work in opposition to psychological motivation. This makes micronarratives more likely to sketch genders not found in realist or speculative genres where character development and worldbuilding tend to rule.

We can enjoy the paradox of brevity and smallness as capacity. In Davis’s writing, the complexity of interpretation becomes inseparable from the “simply stated” style: the more succinctly something is put in writing, the more ambiguous its meaning becomes.

How we interpret such texts is also influenced by the literary context: equally important to genre is the question of *tone*. How is the reader invited to perceive what she knew? Published in a short story collection that contains many absurdist and surreal elements, potentially unreliable narrators and quirky characters, it might be easier to approach this story more as an exercise in style. If I were to approach the text with these expectations, I might emphasize indecision and estrangement as intrinsic values of the author’s artistic practice. That it just happens to be about

⁷ For Le Guin (2019), this conception fundamentally enjoins holding to relating (or containing to transmitting), as the following citation crystallizes: “A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.” The idea that literary works would successfully transmit or carry specific meanings might be an important point of conflict for some queer scholars, especially ones steeped in poststructuralist theories.

gender in this instance, would not be so important. “Oh, that’s just what Davis does”, one might say.

Another approach would be to perceive the story as simply comical. Certainly, “What She Knew” is a funny text. The danger here is that the tone causes readers to consider the character (and not themselves as readers) as the “butt” of the joke – as if the expected or implied reaction would be to roar in disbelief at such impossible and ridiculous identifications.⁸ That is a position trans people know all too well.

Emotional engagement with what “she” knew

And yet, there is nothing ambiguous about my feelings about “What She Knew”. What reading this particular text makes *me* feel is pure delight; just the idea that it is possible to imagine such a she, knowing what she knew, still fills me with joy.

Empathetic identification and a strongly felt sense of complexity are emotive responses typically related to the novel and at times the lengthier short stories where focal characters become fleshed out in greater detail. Furthermore, in discussions of aesthetics, emotional pleasure is not typically related to the absurd or experimental. Why, then, am I so thrilled about this character, who is hardly even a character, and her drama which doesn’t seem so dramatic? What makes encountering her dilemma so powerfully resonant?

Perhaps it is somewhat personal. After all, I am reading the story as a person who is aware of being constantly gendered as a man, while not at

⁸ According to Nelles (2012, 97) one “especially common trick is revealing in the last line that a character is gay or a cross-dresser”. In “What She Knew”, by contrast, the big surprise is declared at the very beginning.

all interested in identifying with or occupying that (or any) gender. It is obviously not the case that I would identify with the specific situation of the character, for whom being one gender is the truth. Rather, I feel a certain allegiance to the story’s tone, its whimsical take on invisible gender(s). The role that recognition plays in readerly identifications is always more complex than a simple case of “that’s me” (Felski 2020, 94–111). I feel “What She Knew” to be in tune with a fundamental openness that I have always cherished in queer theory, a willingness to experience surprise when encountering the possibility of differences outside the socially coded and culturally “credible” cross-gender identifications.

As a teacher of narrative theory, I have recently used “What She Knew” as a case study in course work. I asked the students to describe in detail the elements that make it a strange narrative – especially in terms of textual and cognitive approaches to narratology that they have learned during the course. The answers of the students support my assumption that readers struggle to grasp the “point” of such a confusing example of gender trouble. Previous knowledge of non-binary identities offers one possible interpretive frame. Knowing the publication date of the story, several students were still willing to consider the protagonist as a gender-fluid or possibly transgender character. Yet, as some noticed, the particularity of identifications that for some reason are narrated as separate (an old man, a fat man), make it hard to connect the character’s self-conception to existing cultural scripts.

Some, having already learned about different approaches to queer and queer narrative, entertained the notion that by telling *differently* about gender/s and therefore challenging cultural expectations about narrative progression, the text might serve as a queering of narrative logic. Yet a smaller sample of students stated that they found the text both personally moving and intriguing. A Google search led me to other readers who felt

like this was a text that “gets them”, even if such experiences don’t really seem to make sense and are therefore hard to talk about. A contemporary poet described how reading Davis’ unsentimental statements of complex experiences creates a feeling “like looking out to sea and losing yourself” (Parkes 2017).

It seems that it is exactly the confusing and self-contradictory aspects of the text that contribute to emotional response. In addition to negative forms of confusion, readers may experience a sort of giddy delight in uncertainties. This is further emphasized by the matter-of-factness of the text’s sentences, their apparent lucidity, and the use of expressions like “for instance”. It is this contradiction – between what is stated and how it is stated – that at least partly explains the affective power of this text.

Other ways of not knowing

There isn’t much thematic continuity about questioning of gender or sexual difference in Davis’s literary output, which more often present variations on the marital and other kinds of relationship drama between women and men. The most famous queer reading of the author’s work, offered by Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant in their dialogic *Sex, or the Unbearable*, focuses on the story “Break It Down”, where a male character attempts to check both the monetary and emotional costs of a finished love affair, wondering if it was really worth it. Berlant and Edelman mostly use the story to expand on their theoretical discussion about sex and sexual encounters, which by their unbearable intensity and the overt presence of the other continue to undo and disorganize any stable identities or optimism about resolving contradictions in interpersonal relations. Their reading emphasizes pronoun use, which in the case of this considerably longer short story turns out to be at times ambiguous, including the shifting subject pronouns and even the “it” of the title. (Berlant & Edelman 2014, 68–117.)

However, the disappearance of language is aligned with the vacillation of gender identity in a later short text by Davis (2007). Here is an even shorter text from the collection *Varieties of Disturbance*, titled “Suddenly afraid”:

“because she couldn’t write the name of what she was: a wa wam owm owamn womn”

What is going on here? The suddenness might easily be naturalized as a seizure of some kind, causing aphasia. But a reader trained in valuing literary ambiguities can hardly feel pleased with medical explanations: why, specifically, the word “woman” and why emphasize it as the truth of this character’s being (“what she was”)? How does the fear of losing language relate to a fear of losing a sense of self, or are they the same thing? Once again, we do not know enough to make decisions about the context. For example, what makes “woman” appear as a problem, suddenly, and whether it’s the strangeness of the word itself, or a dawning notion of (gender) identity trouble? This experience of not knowing exactly what is going on in this very short quasi-narrative is part of the queer charm of Davis’s writing.

It is important to note that similar ideas about the disappearance of words and their meaningfulness as categories are employed by writers for very definite rhetorical ends. Think, for example, of the usefulness of such wordplay for anti-transgender agendas, which can make fun of the disappearance or denaturalization of words. Obviously, one can use similar rhetorical devices for conservative purposes.

For example, in a conference paper delivered in 2024, Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen compared “Suddenly Afraid” to J. K. Rowling’s infamous Twitter message from 2020 (Zetterberg-Nielsen 2024). In this tweet, which in some ways began one of the most publicized feuds about the gender and the cultural recognition of trans women and trans men, Rowling (2020) took issue with the expression “people who menstruate”. Rowling’s tweet

guides readers to view the lack of word “women” as a doubtful form of newspeak: “‘People who menstruate.’ I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?”

Notice how the leading and apparently self-obvious rhetorical structure of Rowling’s mocking tone contrasts to the ambiguity in Davis’s story. “Someone help me out”, indeed. In contradiction, the strongly anonymized scene of telling in microfictions by Davis guides us to notice how our how strange and vacant our beloved categories already are. The problem of recognition, removed from the psychological, individualizing dynamic of fully fleshed narrative form, almost appears as a parable about the limits of perception. The narrated situation may be absurd, yet truthful precisely because of its absurdity.

In “What She Knew” the misrecognition or misreading of gender becomes a universal possibility. Can I ever “see” who *you* are? The character appears to feel surprised about the situation, as if the flirtatious young man should somehow know better, to immediately see or perceive that this person is not a woman. And yet the text offers no explanation to why this would be the case. As readers we might go on to ask: what is the young man thinking? How does that character identify? If she isn’t really a she, is it safe to assume that he would be a he? As a queer scholar, I am aware that transness is not always transparent, and yet most representations of that invisibility assume it as a stage, something to move past. By contrast, the character in “What She Knew” appears to be locked in a state of permanent unrecognizability.

An added source of pleasure is to encounter queerness in a text where one does not expect to find it – a text that doesn’t wear its queer topicality on the book sleeve. To use Getsy’s keyword in a different way, these microfictions allow us to think about trans and genderqueer capacities in what appear to be cis-hetero contexts. Reading and re-reading them is to open one’s attention to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in writing about Marcel Proust’s

very long prose form, described “the irreducibly contingent – the saving inexhaustibility of surprise” (Sedgwick 2011, 35).

But to appreciate this possibility, one must first take what she knew seriously.

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