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An Effortless Voice: Queer Vocality and Transgender Identity in Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*

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1 Introduction

This chapter offers some reflections on the social and cultural relevance of vocal identity in the embodiment of queer subjectivities through a reading of Kim Fu's 2014 novel *For Today I Am a Boy*. Here, readers follow the *bildung* of Peter Huang, a young Canadian of Chinese descent, as she¹ undertakes the slow and painful journey from boy to woman, from "Peter" to "Audrey". This eccentric journey is mapped out through a web of intertextual references that this contribution aims at unravelling: my starting point is the title of the novel itself, a direct reference to the song "For Today I Am a Boy" by Antony Hegarty (see Antony and the Johnsons 2005). Antony's voice frames the story of Asian-American Peter as he grows into Audrey, as the song (quoted in the novel's epigraph) goes: "One day I'll grow up, I'll be a beautiful woman/[...] But for today, I am

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a child. For today, I am a boy” (Fu 2014). Choosing the title—the only one in a narrative rather devoid of musical references—as a privileged “point of hearing”² allows for the relevance of vocal positioning to emerge, in the novel as well as in wider elaborations of queer positionalities.

By tracing references to vocal practices as diverse as Italian and Chinese opera and contemporary pop music, I attempt to trace a (necessarily partial) cultural history of the high male voice and its undermining of biologically assigned gender identities. My point is that *For Today I Am a Boy* bears traces of this history with its open reference to Antony, but also via subtler hints to cultural practices from the different backgrounds that shape the main character’s journey. The novel features voice as “a particularly intense site for the emergence of the queer” (Jarman 2011, 4); however, although its narrative is concerned with a male-to-female transition, the term “queer” as used in the following pages does not simply designate either a transgender or a lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex (LGBTI) identity. On the contrary, “queer” is intended here as a radical undermining of *any* fixed construction of subjectivity, be it along the lines of the sex-gender axis, of racial embodiments, or of cultural histories and formations. As José Esteban Muñoz has famously argued in *Cruising Utopia*, queer is “the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009, 1).

Antony’s voice, as the heir of a long tradition of queer “assigned male” vocalities, embodies this utopian drive for another world. It is also the most evident element in an imaginary landscape where intertextuality works not just as a more or less explicit reference to another text, but as what Julia Kristeva notoriously identified as a practice undermining the unity of both the subject and object positions (see Oliver 1993, 93). The novel hence makes use of what could be called “queer intertextuality” to unmake masculinity as a heteronormative discourse, but also femininity as a unified arrival point of the transition process. Queer intertextuality also tackles the cultural conflicts spun out in Fu’s novel, where the character’s Asian descent—he is the third out of four children and only son of a Cantonese family living in Fort Michel,³ Canada—emerges as a major constituent of the heteronormative paradigm.

At the beginning of the novel, growing into a Chinese man appears to be the only option available to the boy Peter. Hence, when Peter becomes

Audrey he not only becomes the “beautiful woman” evoked in Antony’s song, but also grows into an “Audrey Hepburn” persona, apparently morphing into a white, British woman. *Sabrina* (1954), Hepburn’s iconic performance referenced multiple times in the novel, works as a counterpart of the “transvestite Oriental” stereotype, the mark of shame for Chinese effeminacy. The dialogue between these two tropes expose how the novel’s gendered discourses are interrupted by racial and cultural difference; it also makes Peter/Audrey’s journey utopian, quite literally aiming at a non-place, as none of these models represents a safe place of arrival.

Thus, in this chapter, I trace the trajectory of high-ranged male vocality in Western performativity (with a short detour on Chinese musical theatre) in order to shed light on the intertwined cultural histories that converge into the making of Peter/Audrey’s utopia. To do this, I will first explore the history of the high male voice in Western music, where it has been constantly cherished while at the same time disparagingly associated with effeminacy and other forms of deviancy from the heterosexual norm. Then I will trace the association of male falsetto with ethnic difference, to highlight the intersectionality of race and gender as complementary but also competing paradigms in Peter/Audrey’s journey. Finally, I will offer a queer reading of the novel’s voices to show how Fu’s main character does not perform a straight trajectory from a male to a female identity; on the contrary, Peter/Audrey’s is a quest whose ending, paradoxically, both overlaps with its starting point and looks at more journeys to come.

2 What Makes a Male Voice?

Near the end of the novel, Peter dresses up as Audrey Hepburn for Halloween and, in a self-defining gesture, introduces herself to some guests with the name she will eventually choose as her own: “Hello-*o*’, I said. I added a melodic whistle to the name when I said it myself, the voice *effortless*. ‘My name is Audrey’” (Fu 2014; my italics). Audrey’s voice, as she finally enjoys the feeling of being comfortable in her own skin, is significantly “effortless”—a voice fitting perfectly with her newly donned female persona. This is rather uncommon in narratives about

transsexual experiences, where the voice often emerges as an element resistant to transitioning because its range and tone are determined by elements—such as hormonal patterns and larynx conformation—that are supposed to be more rigidly related to biological sex.⁴ The very word used to define the high male voice—“falsetto”—speaks of falseness and trickery, the very opposite of Peter’s voice as it finally becomes Audrey’s.

Voice pitch is indeed a pivotal index of gender identity in everyday communication, but also one that exposes how difficult it may be to attribute a given feature to either biological factors or social and cultural conditioning. In their fundamental contribution to sociophonetics, Paul Foulkes, James M. Scobbie, and Dominic Watt state that “some gender-appropriate speech behavior must be learned in childhood rather than being determined solely by anatomical differences between the sexes”, leading to the conclusion that “[i]t can therefore be difficult, even impossible, to disentangle socially influenced variation from variation which is the product of biology and physics” (Foulkes et al. 2010, 706). In the same individual, voice pitch may vary according to many factors, such as ageing and hormone therapies; it can also be manipulated through more or less self-conscious vocal positioning, which can be altered not only through time but also according to social context. Moreover, pitch often becomes a meaningful category in relation to gender identity only when it differs from socially expected voice ranges: “Most of us are familiar with the sensation of hearing a person speak, and noticing voice characteristics that do not conform to our vocal stereotypes, e.g. a man with a high and shrill voice, or a woman with a deep and sonorous voice” (Biemans 1998, 41).

In this area, falsetto voices—and especially male falsettos—occupy a peculiar position as social and cultural signifier. Robert J. Podesva, in his study on the role of voice quality in creating a public persona for speakers, defines falsetto as follows:

The glottal configuration for falsetto gives rise to rapid vocal fold vibration, correlating acoustically with a high fundamental frequency (f_0) level which can range from 240 Hz to 634 Hz in the speech of men. This contrasts sharply with the average modal voice f_0 level for adult men of approximately 100 Hz. (Podesva 2007, 480)

Rapid vibration of vocal folds is not by any means unique to men, and women can use falsetto to produce voices higher in frequency than their “average” pitch as well. Yet, as Podesva clearly notes, male falsetto is invested with major significance in relation to the production of a gendered identity, as it contrasts with the cultural capital that a deep voice confers in relation to socially constructed perceptions of masculinity. Podesva explicitly talks about “gay-sounding voices”, stating that “using the high f_0 levels characteristic of falsetto phonation is a socially marked behavior, at odds with more culturally normative pitch practices for men, and may be involved in the performance of stereotypical gay identity” (Podesva 2007, 480).

While sociolinguistics has only recently started to investigate the significance of pitch, music offers a long and complex history of vocal manipulation; differently from everyday practices, however, the individual elements of a musical performance—including voice range and its relationship with the gendering of the performing body—are subordinated to the pleasure that can be aroused in listeners. This does not mean that the musical voice works independently from the “everyday” speaking voice: on the contrary, the two realms often intersect with each other. The singing voice puts into operation a complex mechanism of identification in listeners which has been subject to a great deal of scrutiny; in particular, practices such as sing-along and lip-synching may function to mark a person’s identity positioning in relation to different social realms, among which gender emerges as crucial (see Jarman 2011). As Michael Chanan writes, “if the experience of music is subjective then this subjectivity is not so spontaneous and naïve as usually supposed, but is constructed by the subject’s own social, cultural and historical situation and self-interest” (Chanan 1994, 8). “Public” voices, such as singers’, play a central role in how any subject places or perceives herself/himself vocally, as they offer a recognizable gendered (but also racialized) identity which the subject may intend to partake in.

In this context, male high voices emerge as a crucial cultural nexus rather early in the history of European classical music—a nexus that, as I have explored elsewhere, is intertwined both with gender politics and with British national identity discourses (see Guarracino 2004, 2011). This is especially the case of the Italian *castrati*, who embody with specific

historical relevance the gender politics of eighteenth-century English theatre: singers such as Nicolini, Farinelli, or Senesino offered to amazed Londoners the spectacle of heroes (such as Julius Caesar from Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, 1724) endowed with a soaring voice that far exceeded the perceived "natural" male range (see e.g. Dame 1994). In the English press of the time, these freakish "capons"—generally poor or orphaned boys from Southern Italy who had been mutilated in early youth in order to preserve their extraordinary voices—were routinely accused of being effeminate, and Italian opera was cast as England's "feminine other" (McGeary 1994, 17).⁵ *Castrati* were to disappear from European stages: while the last one to perform in a theatre was Giovanni Battista Velluti in 1825, and the last known castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, died in 1922, by the end of the eighteenth century the high male voice had already fallen into disrepute in theatres throughout Europe.⁶

Yet England retained its own, centuries-old tradition of male altos—not in theatres though, but in churches, and, having not been subjected to any mutilation, these singers perfected a falsetto technique that allowed them to sing in a higher than "natural" range. Differently from the Italian opera of the time, which disappeared with the *castrati* who interpreted it, this religious music has remained a lasting tradition throughout England; so much so that under the head "Falsetto" from the *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* it is stated that "it is only in England that second-mode singing enjoyed an uninterrupted, widespread tradition, particularly in all-male cathedral and collegiate choirs, academia, and in the glee club tradition" (Negus et al. 2001, 538). Nonetheless, the *New Grove* prefers the diction "second-mode singing" to "falsetto", because "the phonatory mode known as 'falsetto' has been equated with 'unnatural' as opposed to 'natural', partly through misleading philological usage" (537).⁷

Falsetto's supposed unnaturalness exposes the complex cultural role played by male voices which do not conform to the standard range expected from men: hence in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music* it is stated that falsetto means a "singing method used by males, particularly tens. [tenors], to achieve a note or notes higher than comes within the normal range of their [voice]" (Kennedy et al. 2013, 278).⁸ As the tenor is the highest of male voices in Western classification, it follows that falsetto resides in an aural realm associated with women. The cultural grounds for

Podesva's identification of falsetto as a gay male signifier start to gain historical consistency here: there is something definitely not "straight" in falsetto when used by a man. Indeed, cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum writes that "falsetto is part of the history of effeminacy. [...] Long before anyone knew what a homosexual was, entire cultures knew to mock men who sang unconventionally high" (1994a, 165). The superimposition of homosexuality and effeminacy underplays the challenge male homosexuals represent for heteronormative masculinity by performing a conflation between the male homosexual and the feminine, a conflation that has only recently been challenged.

Readers have no way of locating the pitch of Peter/Audrey's "melodic whistle". Yet, the novel clarifies its symbolic distance from the taint of inauthenticity that accompanies the cultural history of a high voice coming from an assigned male body. In this, it mirrors recent trends in music performance which have both countered and exploited the socially perceived "unnaturalness" of the male high voice. This does not mean that the stigma associated with a man singing "high" has diminished over time: but this voice has also been appropriated in different ways to mark resistance to hegemonic masculinity. Pop music has offered a substantial contribution to the presence of falsetto voices in the public arena: Antony Hegarty, in this sense, may be considered the (temporary) point of arrival of a long history of high male singing as the voice rebelling against normative gender discourses. This history, from the eighteenth-century *castrati* all the way to the pop and rock experiences of the 1970s and 1980s, features falsetto as a shifting signifier, as it has been used with equal effectiveness by performers showing off an ostentatious (if sometimes boyish) masculinity such as Michael Jackson and Marvin Gaye, and by singers committed to the battle for gay and transgender rights, such as Jimmy Somerville and Sylvester.⁹

3 Beauty and the Butterfly

Simon Ravens offers an interesting map of the ways male altos may have made their way in contemporary music, underlining, for example the centrality of racial difference in some uses of falsetto in pop and rock,

which trace back to African-American music. Yet, among the many and different lineages of the high male voice, Ravens concludes that “in truth, though, popular singers probably find and use falsetto simply because it is there” (2014, 203): falsetto is there, in any assigned male body, ready to come out. Antony, an England-born singer and founder of the Antony and the Johnson ensemble, uses falsetto intermittently and seamlessly with other registers, and the emotional impact of his songs does not stem from a virtuoso’s ability to defy a gender assigned vocal range. On the contrary, as John Hodgman argues, Antony’s voice shows “the pace and intimacy of breathing” (Hodgman 2005, n.p.). The performer’s appearance mirrors this musical choice, functioning as an exploration of possibilities more than an assigned male assuming a female persona: “The makeup and silk slips he has worn onstage have never seemed to be an imitation of womanliness but more a pursuit of a kind of inclusive idea of beauty that he is still in the midst of defining” (Hodgman 2005, n.p.).

Beauty, this elusive category to which the male body has had intermittent access, in Antony’s imaginary equates freedom, the freedom to grow up as a beautiful woman or as a bird—as the title of the album including “For Today I Am a Boy”, *I Am a Bird Now* (Antony and the Johnsons 2005), suggests. The desire to explore the endless possibilities of one’s own body emerges as a central preoccupation of Antony’s writing, and in the speech “Future Feminism” the singer has explicitly linked transgender practices to a radical political involvement, based on the intimate relationship between the body and the material world: “I’ve been searching and searching for that little bit of my constitution that isn’t of this place and I still haven’t found it. Every atom of me, every element of me seems to resonate, seems to reflect the great world around me. [...] I truly believe that unless we move into feminine systems of governance we don’t have a chance on this planet” (Antony and the Johnsons 2012). Antony here casts herself/himself as spokesperson of a queer utopia where, as in Fu’s novel, the “feminine” is not a biologically, anatomically, and/or socially gendered identity but a radically antagonist vision of the human’s place in the universe. Indeed, in much the same way, the “beautiful girl” from “For Today I Am a Boy” is not a normative bodily standard but, on the contrary, the embodiment of the multiple possibilities to happiness inscribed within the body.¹⁰

This possibility finds a painful counterpoint in the novel, where a six-year-old Peter goes into a crying fit when bluntly told by his older sister Helen that he cannot grow up to be pretty like their eldest sister, Adele: “You can’t, Peter. You can be handsome, like Father or Bruce Lee. [...] You’re a boy” (Fu 2012, position 211). Peter immediately rejects this socially imposed “handsomeness”; although imbued with advantages of its own (something his three sisters will always be a painful reminder of), the novel highlights the curtailing of possibilities and the entrenchment of desires that heteronormative masculinity embodies in a rigid system of familial and social expectations. Moreover, Bruce Lee, as a viable model of masculinity, works as an intertextual reference to the context of Chinese migration to North America. Masculinity for Chinese, and more generally East Asian, migrants has historically been a vexed question, as David Eng has argued in exploring the feminization of Asian-American men through an analysis—among other texts—of David Henry Hwang’s well-known play *M. Butterfly*. Here, the traumas of sexual and racial difference are negotiated by the white male subject through the symbolic emasculation of the Chinese male body (see Eng 2001, 138–166). Yet the gendered identity of *M. Butterfly*’s Asian Other—aptly named Song—is elaborated through performance practices from Chinese opera, where female characters are traditionally played by men. In this context male falsetto, already tainted with effeminacy to the Western ear, also becomes the cultural mark of racial difference: “Falsetto constituted a significant part of the Chinese theater experience. [...] This situation constituted, conveniently for the nineteenth-century Western tourists, a rendition, a dramatization, and a sonification of effeminate Chinese” (Rao 2015, 55).

There is very little of the multiple possibilities of a queer masculinity or femininity in the shadow of the transvestite Oriental as emerges at the intersection between gender and racial hegemonic discourses. Yet, when it is featured in the novel, this stereotype marks two significant moments in Peter’s road to her queer utopia. The transvestite Oriental appears for the first time in the tales of Chef, head of the kitchen where young Peter is working as a dishwasher while still at his parents’ in Fort Michel. Chef, a big man with hands “large enough to eclipse mine completely” (Fu 2014, position 968), features as Peter’s first love interest, and embodies a powerful but benign masculinity whose potential for violence is only

subtly hinted at. He distorts Peter's family name—making everyone call him Wong instead of the correct Huang—and avowedly likes the new employee because “I feel like I could whip you into shape. Like you're not anything yet” (position 973). The possible negative impact of Chef's paternalistic stance is played down when he actually saves Peter from Simon Hughman, his co-worker and former schoolmate. Simon bullies Peter repeatedly and eventually traps him in the kitchen cooler. Being rescued and swept from his knees into Chef's arms offers the main character, half-dazed by the cold, the first awareness of the sexual nature of his attraction to his boss: “As I woke more fully, I leaned on him [Chef] harder, letting myself enjoy the firmness of his body, his smell of smoke and cooking meat and burned hair and spices and something more delicious besides” (Fu 2014, position 1269).

Chef introduces in Peter's and the novel's imaginary sexual desires and practices that do not conform to the biological assignation of the bodies involved. He is a champion of male heterosexuality and prowess, and his tale of when “I fucked a guy in Montreal” (position 1160) comes as quite a surprise for his interlocutors as well as for the readers. Still, this tale not only comes at the end of a long list of sexual adventures with women, but is meant to be a part of the same narration: “Not much to tell. I met a girl, I fucked her, and she turned out to be a he” (position 1164). The scene, told in graphic detail, echoes the misunderstanding at the core of Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, where the main character Gallimard has a relationship with a Chinese male singer believing for years that he is in love with a suitably bashful—but sexually available—Chinese woman. In much the same vein, the body of Chef's lover, though never racially marked as Asian, is described as “smooth as a baby's”, with a behind “like perfect, firm pillows and round as peaches” and covered by a “short, sexy kimono thing” (Fu 2014, position 1172). The kimono, actually a Japanese traditional garment, reinforces the parallel with the *M. Butterfly* narrative, where Gallimard falls in love with Song as he listens to his performance of excerpts from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.¹¹

A Chinese man dressed in a kimono is here elected as a suitable object of sexual desire for a Caucasian heterosexual male such as Chef—an authorization which does not get lost on Peter who projects this fantasy over his own body: “I turned my back to the mirror and looked over my

shoulder. [...] My robe became a silk kimono, black with a red rash, tied loosely. I pulled it slowly up, clutching what I needed to at the front, lifting it high. *Round as peaches*, Chef said, squeezing each one, testing for ripeness” (Fu 2014, position 1293; italics in the text). This body, as Teresa de Lauretis has argued for *M. Butterfly*, is nothing but “an orientalist fantasy based on hierarchies of gender, race, and colonial and political domination” (de Lauretis 1999, 308); yet this is also, at the beginning of the novel, the only fantasy that allows Peter’s assigned masculinity to experience the disturbing pull of the queer. At this point in the narrative, Peter has no other resource than to “pull a Butterfly”, a popular expression mentioned by Hwang in the afterword to his play meaning “playing the submissive Oriental number” (Hwang 1989, 95): in the aforementioned episode when Chef saves him from the cooler, the narrating “I” exposes how Peter’s assumption of a vulnerable persona saves his life, as he exploits Chef to have Simon fired on the spot: “I buried my face in Chef’s armpit, trying to go limp, to seem as pathetic as possible. My eyes watered from the strong light. I let the tears flow” (Fu 2014, position 1271).

The ability to “pull a Butterfly” allows Peter to survive to a world where his needs—his desire to wear high heels, or his sexual attraction to Chef—must remain hidden from public censure; yet it also represents a hindrance to his eventual metamorphosis into Audrey. His submissiveness to other people’s vision of him only gives him access to the patriarchal vision of femininity *and* to the Western vision of Asianness,¹² both of which he impersonates in his relationship with Margie. An older woman with a soft spot for “exotic” younger men, she is introduced to the reader clasping a diamond bracelet to Peter’s wrist and telling him: “I always wanted a little China boy [...]. I’ve never had one before” (Fu 2014, position 1531). Their relationship is immediately articulated through an overturning of traditional gender power relations—it is the woman who takes on a younger lover seducing him through costly gifts—but one that reinstates racial ones: Margie hence works obsessively to make Peter her own “little China boy”, plucking his sparse body hair, making him “wear a brocade hat with a braid built into it from a novelty store” and “fake an accent, a cruel mimicry of my father” (Fu 2014, position 1566).

Given the intersection of racial and gender codifications, Margie’s sometimes violent coercion becomes a way for Peter to further explore

how to queer his assigned male status. Now the split between the narrating “I” and “Peter Huang”, the boy-to-become-man persona, becomes explicit: “Peter should have protested, punched her on behalf of Asian men everywhere. But I was—I was—drunk. The name that had never fit slipped completely out of my grasp” (Fu 2014, position 1551). It is with her that Peter dresses as a woman in front of another person for the first time, and although the complex ritual staged by Margie—first making him wear her own underwear, then painting his face with elaborate make-up—is devised to humiliate him for not being able to engage with her sexually (climaxing in her choking him with a feathered boa), Peter still introduces the episode as “the best thing” (Fu 2014, position 1571) that happens during their short and stormy affair. As their relationship progresses, Peter becomes more and more aware that he cannot bring himself to feel any sexual desire for Margie; his tentative explorations of her body make him aware of the fact that he wants Margie’s body not to “possess” sexually but as his own: “From this angle, it was perfect, it was just where it was supposed to be. It was between my legs” (Fu 2014, position 1561).

In both episodes, with Chef and with Margie, Peter is significantly mute, as it is the other characters that tell the story—Chef about his man in a kimono, and Marge of the “little China boy” she is going to mould him into. Peter’s eventual voice—Audrey’s effortless ‘Hello-o’—emerges only after the main character has gone through a complex network of identifications and disavowals with the voices of other characters—a dynamics where, Jarman argues, “a site for the emergence of queer [is contained]” (2011, 2). Jarman finds this interplay in the relation with the singing voice; thanks to the musical frame symbolically offered by the novel, here it can be related to “everyday”, speaking voices as well. The first is Simon’s, his antagonist and colleague at the restaurant in Fort Michel, who is remembered because “he has a notoriously squeaky voice, as immortalized on the boys’-room wall: *Simon Hymen/forever a virgin/ voice so high/the girls won’t screw him*” (Fu 2014, position 1047). The novel does not give out any hint about Simon’s sexual orientation, but his “high, wounded voice” (Fu 2014, position 1064) or “painful contralto” (Fu 2014, position 1148) is strongly remindful of Podesva’s “gay-sounding voice”. Yet Simon resists this social identification—and the stigma that comes with it—through behaviour Chef will derogatorily define as

“macho fuckup” (Fu 2014, position 1060). His final violent gesture shows the wound of his endangered masculinity, and the insulting rhyme marks Peter’s victory as Simon is fired: “Simon Hymen, forever a virgin, voice so high the girls won’t screw him” (Fu 2014, position 1276). Simon’s high-pitched voice features here as any man’s nightmare, a “natural” voice exposing the male body’s vulnerability to ridicule in a social context that values deep voices in men and associates high voices derogatorily with effeminacy.

Peter’s straightforward disidentification with Simon is due to the violence associated with the character, but also to the disgrace of having a voice that does not collocate with the apparent gender of the body that produces it. Such a voice queers the pitch of heteronormative paradigms, in the sense of “to interfere with, to spoil the business” mentioned by Wayne Koestenbaum in the introduction to the miscellany *Queering the Pitch* (1994b, 1). Yet as the narration proceeds, queer pitches start to have a very different effect on Peter. As he is engaged in a relation with Claire, an activist from a fundamentalist Christian church called The Pathway, one such voice calls out to him. Claire, a lesbian who is trying to redeem herself from what she believes is the result of a sinful nature, is taking Peter on a round of distributing flyers for Pathway at the Village in Montreal, and here they are approached by “a woman [...]. Her voice was throaty, awkward. False. [...] Thick-limbed, thick-shouldered. Square jaw smothered in orange-toned foundation, fake eyelashes in the daytime. Still somehow convincing” (Fu 2014, position 2091). The slow recognition of the assigned male body that transpires in the woman confronting them in angry tones pulls Peter off balance, reminding him of his own desire to grow up and become a beautiful woman: “I felt a sinking sensation, like the sidewalk had gone soft under my feet” (Fu 2014, position 2091).

The same feeling will overcome Peter when confronted with the “deep and rich” (Fu 2014, position 2460) voice of John, his new employer in Montreal after he breaks up with Claire: “I thought of the bar employee who had sent me and Claire across the street while we were preaching, her artificial falsetto, the way the pavement had melted” (Fu 2014, position 2460). The woman’s “artificial” falsetto and John’s deep voice mark both bodies as a result of a painful process of self-definition, and yet

John's "natural voice" (Fu 2014, position 2570) matches his muscular figure and light beard more than his original assigned female status, making Peter doubt that he could have ever been born a girl. Peter's change of perception—from "artificial" to "natural"—appears to be caused by a shift in listening practice: at the moment of the first encounter he perceives the high-pitched voice coming from a male body as "false"; while the second case represents a pivotal moment in Peter's road towards a queer utopia, as it is through John that he becomes acquainted with the practices and politics of the queer movement. The fact that Peter finds no discrepancy between John's almost hyper-masculine "veiny forearms [with] visible seams of muscle" (Fu 2014, position 2060) and his voice marks Peter's recognition of the many engendering possibilities of any body, including his own.

And yet, in some way, John and his partner Eileen's attitude towards Peter mirrors Chef's and Margie's, wanting to shape Peter into a person fitting their own desires:

[John and Eileen] beamed at me like proud parents. They'd made me into a project. [...] As soon as I said it, as soon as I said what they wanted me to say, everything would change. And I still didn't believe them—you couldn't just rename yourself, you couldn't tear down the skyline and rebuild and think there wouldn't be consequences. (Fu 2014, position 2754)

Peter/Audrey's queer utopia cannot be found here, not even in the overtly white-centred universe of queer activism the character is confronted with. The novel shows how it is impossible for Peter to fit seamlessly into the new family John, Eileen, and their friends have created. What separates them, in a way that the novel does not try to resolve, is Peter's experience as a Canadian of Chinese descent who lacks the cultural privilege of whiteness. Eng convincingly argues, in reference to Judith Butler's work, that "heterosexuality gains its discursive power through its tacit coupling with a hegemonic, unmarked whiteness" (Eng 2001, 13). This discursive power is supported by the emasculation of the racial other, and this emasculation is not a queer practice, as it repeats hegemonic narratives of racial difference and still casts femininity as a

diminutive subject position, and not as an empowering realm of bodily possibilities.

The gender binary that constructs femininity as a diminished masculinity is interrupted by racial difference when Peter dresses up as Audrey Hepburn: “There she stood, at last: the iconic Audrey, only with Adele’s almond eyes, her sloping cheekbones” (Fu 2014, position 2764). Adele, Peter’s elder sister and prominent icon of beauty during his early years, surfaces under the Audrey Hepburn’s costume as the actual model of Peter’s transition. Adele’s identification with Hepburn is explored earlier in the novel, when the four children go to the local cinema to watch Hepburn’s *Sabrina*: in the darkness of the cinema theatre, Adele “looked just like Audrey Hepburn—the gamine smile, the swan-necked beauty” (Fu 2014, position 2764). In the process of growing up as a beautiful woman, Peter/Audrey does not join a new family but returns to her own, as she migrates to Berlin to join with her sisters, ironically following her father’s footsteps.

The final passage breaks the flow of the novel, juxtaposing a scene from the past and one from the future in a narrative voice which does not feature the first person readers have by now become accustomed to. The first scene offers a brief flashback of Audrey’s father, leaving for Canada: “Guangzhou and Beijing. Father in an airport, after his father bribed a doctor and a bureaucrat and a friend in Hong Kong who pretended to be a relative. [...] Go, his father says. Go and be reborn” (Fu 2014, position 2897). The second, set in a dreamlike Germany, sees the four sisters finally reunited in a family picture: “‘We’re sisters’, Bonnie says. ‘*Wir sind Schwestern*. This is Adele, Helen, and Audrey” (position 2901). Migration seems here to be the ultimate queer utopia, so that Peter can “go and be reborn” as Audrey just as his father had been reborn as a respectable Western businessman in the move from China to Canada. Migration foregrounds Muñoz’s “concrete possibility of another world” to be always on the verge of happening, Antony’s “feminist future” to be always in the making. This also means queering masculinity to disempower its hegemonic narrative; Peter/Audrey’s father, his toxic masculinity resulting from the painful fracture of migration, becomes the locus where a queer utopia can start to be imagined.

4 Conclusion

For Today I Am a Boy coalesces different public fantasies—Bruce Lee, the Oriental woman, Audrey Hepburn—as possible points of identification for Peter’s self-fashioning. Among them, Antony is never mentioned if not in the title and epigraph of the novel, hinting in a subtle way to the journey through voices (Chef’s, Margie’s, John’s) and silences (Peter’s, but also his sisters’) spun by the novel. Through Antony’s voice, Peter’s *bildung* can be read as emphatically *not* a story of transitioning from one hegemonic model—masculinity, whiteness—to another—femininity, the ‘Oriental’—which would eventually end up reinforcing the first. On the contrary, the novel supports a notion of the fluidity of gender roles and personas and the truth of a voice that belongs to its own body, independently from its expected pitch or received gender assignation, such as Antony’s. Welded together by different cultural refractions, these two voices—one musical and embodied, the other literary and disincarnated—show the overlapping of gendered and racial discourses on the high-ranged male voice, marking its prominence as cultural signifier today. Antony’s voice shows the effortlessness of high pitch as one possible voice of an assigned male body, thus overturning the long story of ostracism and freakishness associated with it; starting from Antony’s echo, *For Today I Am a Boy* overturns and disrupts normative expectations on gender and racial identity by shaping a character whose effortless voice does not need vocal coaching or hormone therapies, but only the possibility of being breathed out.

Notes

1. Pronouns are a sensitive issue in transgender identity politics: Kim Fu’s novel does not address them directly, as the use of a first person narrator reduces references to the main character as he/she to a minimum. In discussing the novel, I will use the male pronoun for the main character when I discuss passages from the novel before the character starts her

transition; for passages coeval and following this moment I will use the female pronoun.

2. I am borrowing this expression from Adriana Cavarero's well-known insight on sound, and particularly the human voice, as a relational positionality opposed to the all-encompassing economy of the visual (Cavarero 2005, 121).
3. Fort Michel is the name with which the place is referenced in the novel, although the town in Ontario is actually spelled Fort Mitchell. This makes Peter's hometown an imaginary as well as a material place: the new name more explicitly expresses the negotiation between English (Mitchell) and French (Michel) in Canada, and thus references to the main character's own cultural predicament as a Canadian person of Chinese descent.
4. For example, see the opening sequence of the film *Transamerica*, which shows a voice training tutorial video for M to F transition: rather significantly, the only complete phrase—among many vocalizations—used to try out different inflexions in order to find the perfect voice for the newly gendered body is “This is the voice I want to use” (see *Transamerica*, dir. Duncan Tucker, USA 2005).
5. Yet, both McGeary (2000) and Helen Berry in her biography of the castrato Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci, who in 1765 eloped with an Irish girl from a wealthy family, convincingly argue that *castrati* were not just emasculated men who transgressed into femininity. More dangerously, they elaborated an alternative masculinity where their physical deficiency could be compensated by other qualities such as honour, reputation, and artistic taste—an emerging paradigm in the Georgian period, “a kind of polite masculinity to which castrati not only subscribed but acted as admired cultural leaders” (Berry 2011, 70).
6. For a thorough history of *castrati* in European theatres see Heriot (1956).
7. More recently, male altos have starred in the early music revival, a performance movement mostly stemming from Elizabethan and Restoration musical practices. Today, the rediscovery of early music has become a global phenomenon in Western classical performance, with more than one generation of singers—now called “countertenors” rather than the more culturally tainted “falsettists”—bringing the male high voice on the forefront of celebrity classical singing. For a thorough history of the movement see Haskell (1996).

8. Here I am purposefully not taking into account musical discourses that distinguish between falsetto and head voice as two different ways of producing a higher vocal pitch in men. This distinction is in itself controversial (see e.g. Ravens 2014, 11), and rests on the centuries-old disparaging of falsetto as inauthentic and effeminate. Moreover, even if applicable, this is a distinction that would not be necessarily perceptible to the untrained ear, and as the chapter moves into the realm of pop music this will become a major issue in my argument.
9. This connection between *castrati* and contemporary pop icons is drawn in the documentary *Heavenly Voices*, to which I worked as consultant alongside singer and performer Ernesto Tomasini. Although this contribution veers towards different textualities, I want to thank Ernesto for the inspiring exchanges we have had through the years, and for sharing with me his priceless insights on the issues of voice pitch and identity (gendered and otherwise) that he has been exploring in his performances; see *Heavenly Voices*, dir. Gino Pennacchi and Alessandro Scillitani, Germany 2013.
10. This approach resonates in the use of gendered pronouns for this artist, which has recently witnessed a notable shift. Antony has apparently never dictated any policy in this respect, and Hodgman does indeed use the male pronoun in his 2005 interview; yet in the recent controversy over her refusal to attend the 2016 Academy Awards ceremony the artist, under the gender-unspecific name of Anohni, is consistently referred to in the feminine in the press covering the issue (see e.g. Finger 2016; Walker 2016). In the communication explaining her refusal to attend the ceremony due to the fact that she was not asked to perform, Anohni straightforwardly defines herself as “an androgynous transwoman”, and ascribes her exclusion from the prestigious evening’s line-up to the “system of social oppression and diminished opportunities for transpeople that has been employed by capitalism in the U.S. to crush our dreams and our collective spirit” (quoted in Pitchfork 2006).
11. Gallimard’s blindness to cultural specificities as regards “the Orient” is actually made fun of in the play; as he praises her “convincing” performance of Butterfly, the Chinese singer retorts: “Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical

experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you” (Hwang 1989, 17).

12. Peter’s father, on the other hand, emancipates himself from the emasculated Asian male stereotype by endorsing an uncompromising masculinity he means to pass on to his son: this cultural self-fashioning includes both not allowing his children to learn Cantonese and taking a white mistress, in a landscape where the sexual politics of the Western nuclear family model tightly intertwine with the cultural clash experienced by Chinese migrants in North America.

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