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Non-Normative Masculinities in Carson McCullers's *The Ballad Of The Sad Café*

Carson McCullers'ın *The Ballad Of The Sad Café* Eserinde Normatif Olmayan Erkeklikler

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ABSTRACT
Normative masculinity has historically been defined as white masculinity staged by white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied men. This model has been exclusively based on the (able-bodied) male body, and therefore non-male and disabled men have been prevented access to privilege, and they have confronted the forms of social oppression. By drawing insights from masculinity studies and disability studies, this article analyzes Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951) and examines her portraits of non-normative masculinities through the non-male and the disabled men, revealing much about the limitations of hegemonic masculinity and the contradictions present in the American South. The article not only considers how McCullers replaces normative, white, able-bodied masculinity in the novel but also discusses how Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon construct their versions of masculinity, as each bypasses the assumptions surrounding their gender expressions. By rejecting normativity, avoiding heteronormative constraints, and disrupting gender binaries, Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon gain agency, authenticity, and independence and actuate positive change in a bigoted southern society that is no longer the prefecture of only white able-bodied men.

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Introduction

Originally published in Harper's Bazaar in 1943 and re-published as a hardcover novella in 1951, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* is McCullers's most critically and publicly well-received work. Edward Albee, the American playwright, later dramatized it as a stage play in 1963, and its film adaptation, directed by Simon Callow, came out in 1991. In her third full-length work, McCullers incorporates themes such as unrequited love, solitude and suffering, and the terror of a chaotic world. However, there is always eccentricity and distortion, a quirkiness that "levels a related attack [on] … gender/sexual normativity in the South" (Hutchinson, 2018, p. 279). *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* is the story of a love triangle that includes a large masculine woman, Miss Amelia Evans, a manipulative hunchbacked dwarf, Cousin Lymon Willis, and a despicable handsome deceiver, Marvin Macy. This love triangle is said to be a "reminiscent of [McCullers's] own experience" as

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McCullers was afraid of a possible affair between her husband and David Diamond, the couple's close friend, and feared this "might develop into a permanent relationship for the two of them that completely excluded her" (Carr, 1976, p. 171).

The novel centers around Miss Amelia, who operates her deceased father's store to maintain her financial independence and enhance her material assets. Being a hardworking, self-sufficient, and autonomous businesswoman who focuses only on her work, she is apathetic towards the people around her. By going back and forth between the past and the present, the narrative is recounted by a third-person omniscient narrator, who seems to witness, observe, and contemplate important events in the isolated small southern mill town, and for this reason, there is "very little dialogue to enable the characters to build their own discourses" (Bezci, 2018, p. 26). The novella begins with a short description of the town, which is dreary, boring and impoverished by the austerity of the Great Depression. A deserted house is located in the town center that leans right and is about to collapse. This is Amelia's house, part of which was once a store and then the town's trendy café. The narrator flashes back to the time when Cousin Lymon showed up on the porch of Amelia's store, claiming he was a distant cousin of hers. The two form a unique relationship, which is eventually ruined by Marvin Macy, an attractive infamous womanizer and criminal who was once married to Amelia for ten days. While Marvin Macy was in the penitentiary, Amelia's store transitions into the town's beloved cafe with the help and the presence of Cousin Lymon. After Marvin Macy is released from the prison, he arrives in the small town and schemes with Cousin Lymon to exact revenge on Amelia, who humiliated and emasculated him through their failed marriage. The tale culminates in a physical fight between Amelia and Marvin over Lymon, who betrays her, running away with the ex-con for whom he harbors romantic feelings. Amelia recedes into the cafe and becomes a hermit, with a heart broken by her beloved Cousin Lymon.

In *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, McCullers provides two different types of non-normative masculinity through Amelia and Lymon. While Amelia eschews conventional femininity for a powerful female masculinity, Lymon bypasses non-disabled assumptions (of asexuality and sexlessness) to construct his own disabled masculinity. In these two instances, masculinity "becomes legible ... where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 2). Amelia is a masculine, sexually ambiguous woman, and Cousin Lymon is a person with a disability who has same-sex desires. In short, they question the essentialist manifestation of gender and sexuality as stable, inert, and generic. Moreover, masculinity is not a sacred fort of heterosexual men to legitimize power, authority, and privilege in the novel, but a device employed by alternative identities "through a social construction rubric that disarticulates the normative wedding of sex and gender" (Wiegman, 2002, p. 50). Amelia uses her masculine power to maintain a higher place in gendered southern society and her masculine masquerade to avoid the burdens of femininity imposed by the American South. Cousin Lymon, on the other hand, holds power in the community by disrupting the traditional misconception of disability as a personal tragedy, failure, incompleteness, feeblemindedness, and weakness. As a result, Amelia and Cousin Lymon, as representatives of transgression, disavow normative hegemonic masculinity. By drawing insights from masculinity studies and critical disability studies, this article argues that performing non-normative masculinity becomes a technique to negotiate power in a gendered normative society. It also represents a strategic alternative to hegemonic masculinity and conventional femininity, while at the same time underscoring the constructedness of gender and providing a framework to dismantle discourses of otherness.

Non-Normativity and Female Masculinity

Judith Butler uses the word normative to "describe the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals" (1990/2007, p. xxi), referring to the acts, behaviors, and wording that construct traditional ideals of gender. For example, normativity compels women to wear feminine

attire or men to study male-coded subjects in school. In short, by serving societal expectations, normative ideals are "the norms that govern gender" (Butler, 1990/2007, p. xxi). Thus, non-normativity is an act of deviation and a form of unorthodoxy that denies traditionally and socially acknowledged norms as well as the formal specifications of gendered bodies and identity. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality and Gayle Rubin's sex hierarchy, gender and queer theorists have developed the term heteronormativity to define the attitude of those who believe and defend heterosexuality as the only sexuality. Barker defines heteronormativity as "rooted in a linked essential, dichotomous understanding of sexuality (a person is either heterosexual or homosexual) and gender (a person is either a man or a woman) and the perception that these things are fixed and unchanging" (2014, p. 858). With their adherence to social expectations in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality, cisgender masculine men and feminine women, who are attracted to each other sexually, are the most palpable examples of heteronormativity. When one violates the codes of heteronormativity, one also defies hegemonic masculinity, a dominant practice of masculinity defined by R.W. Connell as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2005, p. 77). In *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, Amelia clearly violates the social codes of normativity through her female masculinity and undermines hegemonic masculinity.

Much like any fictional town of McCullers, where sanity and normalcy are meant to prevail, the small town in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* is also normative in that it is "dreary," "lonesome," "sad," and "there is nothing whatsoever to do" (McCullers, 2018, p. 1). The town is rarely visited as when Cousin Lymon enters the scene, the narrator says, "It is rare that a stranger enters the town on foot at that hour" (McCullers, 2018, p. 5). In McCullers's fiction, places, and society in general, are almost always described as dull and soulless, and the overcast atmosphere anchors this normativity. However, non-conformist characters quickly disrupt the monotony with their deviation from normativity. In *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, Amelia's masculine body, behaviors, and disinterest in cis-gendered compulsive heterosexuality is the embodiment of a non-normative, nonconformist subjectivity that defies formal categorizations of gender, sex, and sexuality. Amelia lacks a normative female body; she is even defined as "sexless" (McCullers, 2018, p. 2). This is the first impression people have when they look at Amelia; her appearance is extraordinary and quite different from that of the rest of the townspeople. She is what queer theorists today call nonbinary or gender-nonconforming, as her gender expression is not exclusively masculine or feminine, though masculinity does dominate. Though sexless may refer to gender ambiguity, here, it may also signify asexuality and/or intersexuality given her lack of interest in sex and her obvious disdain for binaries. Amelia does not fit into descriptions of the traditional "southern belle" or "southern lady" since she is "a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man," and "her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead" (McCullers, 2018, p. 2). She is not pictured as a beautiful, delicate, feminine woman but has a "haggard quality" (McCullers, 2018, p. 2) in her face, which certifies a masculine image. Therefore, her gender, sex, and sexuality cannot be categorized in any definitive way.

Like Cousin Lymon, whose disability will be analyzed further with respect to masculinity later in this article, Amelia is also considered disabled according to society, once again uniting them in terms of their non-normativity. She has "two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (McCullers, 2018, p. 2). Her visual impairment indicates that she is not a fully able-bodied person. The narrator stresses fervently, "She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed" (McCullers, 2018, p. 2). Here, having crossed eyes is stigmatized through the norms of conventional beauty: handsomeness or attractiveness is connected with having "normal" eyes. Moreover, Amelia "had grown to be six feet two inches tall which in itself is not natural for a woman" (McCullers, 2018,

p. 13). Again, the narrator determines what is natural or unnatural for a woman; being tall contrasts with the normative female body and its petite stature. Furthermore, Amelia's inward eyes, or her looking in an inverted way into herself, suggests her queerness and her deviance from normalcy, normativity, and conventionality. Invert was "the accepted term for lesbians and gay men in the 1930s and early 40s" (Dearborn, 2024, p. 89). The narrator calls Amelia's crossed eyes "queer" in multiple instances (McCullers, 2018, p. 27; p. 40). Thus, according to the conventions of the time, Amelia can be read as a queer coded character. Furthermore, Amelia's inverted eyes echoes McCullers's self-identification as an invert who wants to love and be loved by women (Carr, 1976, p. 167).

Barker and Iantaffi claim that "for female-assigned people, even wearing entirely 'masculine' clothes and hairstyle may not be enough to stop them being read simply as 'woman'" (2017, p. 116). Therefore, Amelia's appropriation of masculinity should not only be read in relation to her appearance and clothing. Amelia is non-normative not only in her masculine physicality, appearance, and clothing but also in her profession, prosperity, prestige, power, and independence in the town. She transgresses the gendered boundaries southern women who are expected to stay indoors in the domestic sphere, engage in traditionally feminine indoor activities such as sewing, cooking, cleaning and childrearing, and behave in a gentle, modest, merciful, timid and pious way. In addition to dressing in men's attire, she is engaged in traditionally male-dominated jobs and hobbies and runs multiple businesses that make her affluent as "the richest woman miles around" (McCullers, 2018, p. 3), probably the reason why Lymon chose Amelia as his target. She operates her deceased father's store, which later transitions into the town cafe with the help of Lymon, and she is a bootlegger with a still that "ran out the best liquor in the county" (McCullers, 2018, p. 2). She also functions as the lay healer of the town and is "considered a good doctor" (McCullers, 2018, p. 15); she has the ability to heal the sick by allocating "different medicines which she had brewed herself from unknown recipes" (McCullers, 2018, p. 15).

People trust Amelia's doctoring skills and bring their sick children so she can heal them. Yet, there is one major exception in her healing abilities: she does not cure female reproductive health concerns. The narrator says

> If a patient came with a female complaint she could do nothing. Indeed, at the mere mention of the words her face would slowly darken with shame, and she would stand there craning her neck against the collar of her shirt, or rubbing her swamp boots together, for all the world like a great, shamed, dumb-tongued child. (McCullers, 2018, p. 15-16)

Her reaction toward women's diseases seems confusing, childlike, and ignorant. Being sexually disinterested, she has no knowledge of female health complaints or perhaps is afraid of them due to the criminality of abortion at the time. In patriarchal societies, women are expected to define themselves by their feminine bodies. Amelia, however, is wandering around the dangerous territory of not knowing how the "female" body operates. Her confusion about women's diseases thus can be interpreted in two ways: Amelia attempts to avoid the feminine throughout her life because she is genuinely clueless, or she is not acquainted with femininity because she is determined to identify herself with masculinity. A third possible interpretation is that as a closeted queer woman, she might be afraid to treat other women because it might compel her to face her own sexual identity.

Except for her inability to remedy female health concerns, Amelia "plays the beneficent role of a bucolic Vesta, presiding over the private and public heart" (Griffith, 1967, p. 48). She has a visible prestige deriving from her status in the town, both as the sole healthcare provider and store/cafe owner. Her determination to be independent and self-sufficient is an outcome of her efforts to minimize the problems she encounters as a genderqueer woman. She remains vigilant towards people and the incidents around her throughout the novel. She has a keen interest in lawsuits,

especially for money, and law in general for her personal protection, showing her at least as a person who contemplates justice. She produces her own medicine because she is unwilling to be dependent on other people. Thus, her proclivity towards independence, whether materialistically or spiritually, illustrates her distrust of others.

Although earlier scholars read McCullers's three tomboys, Frankie Addams, Mick Kelly, and Amelia, as "transvestites" who crossdressed in male clothing, a more accurate way of understanding them is through a nonbinary lens. Their gender flexibility and nonconformity went much further than mere clothing. Their behaviors, attitudes, and way of approaching the world were also part of their gender identity. Moreover, reducing their queerness to performing through costuming deprives them of a sexual identity. Yet, there are distinct differences between Amelia and the other two characters. Frankie (Frances) and Mick (Margaret) use nicknames traditionally associated with males, which reflect "their desire to be boys" (Gleeson-White, 2003, p. 70). On the other hand, Amelia's name is a traditionally female name, and furthermore, there is a formal title, "Miss" before the name. Here, the narrator highlights Amelia's marital status as a single woman, even though Amelia is a divorced woman in her thirties and should have been called Ma'am. In this context, Miss is a southern title of respect that reinforces Amelia's independent womanhood than her relationship to the patriarchy.

Amelia is also different in that there is an ambiguity regarding her self-identification, whether she defines herself as female or male. Unlike with Mick, who outright professes to wanting to be a boy, and Frankie who tries vainly to be more feminine, readers never know whether Amelia has a desire to be one or the other sex, which is how McCullers accentuates female masculinity. Amelia never names her sexuality or desires; thus, her gender positioning does not fit into any gender categories. The reader only knows that she seems odd in a red dress – "she put[s] on a dark red dress that hung on her in a most peculiar fashion" (McCullers, 2018, p. 23) – and she feels at ease when she wears men's overalls because "their careless androgyny allow[s] her to move easily and forget the social limitations of her sex" (Whatling, 2005, 91-92). Like Amelia Bloomer, who promoted loose clothing for women, or what was called "harem pants," in the nineteenth century, Amelia's "male clothing" can also be associated with freedom, which does not necessarily have anything to do with gender identity or sexual orientation. Moreover, Amelia uses her masculinity to defy heterosexual union and its rigid gender categories of wife and mother, which becomes an example of "nonce taxonomy," as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls it, or a process of "the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world" (1990, p. 23). Thus, Amelia offers a new categorization that does not force women into heteronormativity and heterosexual unions, and her gender becomes "a mere choice between authentic masculinity and femininity" (Gleeson-White, 2008, p. 54).

Tomboyism is considered a transition phase from childhood to adolescence, and it can be tolerated when it remains only in childhood and adolescence. Halberstam argues that tomboyism "is punished when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence" (1998, p. 6). Thus, tomboyism becomes non-normative when one sustains it through adulthood. Amelia exemplifies this as an adult as she is "thirty years old" (McCullers, 2018, p. 3). Westling defines Amelia as a "grown-up tomboy whose physical proportions symbolize her exaggerated masculine self-image" (1982, p. 465). Her tomboyism is not rooted in an early desire to enjoy freedom and mobility that is only accessible to boys, but in a firm belief in independence as an adult, which suggests that she is not actually a tomboy but someone far more subversive. Gleeson-White argues that "it is Miss Amelia Evans, the grownup tomboy of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, who threatens more seriously a status quo based on clear gender demarcation" (2003, p. 72). It is her determined gender intervention, non-normativity and non-conformity in a small southern town that render her more than a tomboy. Her female

masculinity is not a childhood phase or masquerade, it is "a lifestyle choice; it is not a temporary performance" (Gleeson-White, 2003, p. 72), aligning her closer to what today would be called transgenderism (and not transvestitism or crossdressing).

As an adult, seemingly without parents, siblings, or an extended family, Amelia is not bound to the familial institution in that same way as Frankie and Mick. Her mother is almost never mentioned (she most likely died in childbirth or when Amelia was a child) and she was "raised motherless by her father who was a solitary man" (McCullers, 2018, p. 10). This resulted in her early maturation, independence, and gender fluidity: there was no female presence to force her to act feminine, so she constructed her own gender norms. As Griffith conveys, "her pattern of life is both solitary and independent; she makes her own schedules…[and] ignores whenever she pleases the conventions of the community" (1967, p. 8). Her status as a self-made economically stable woman who does not need the patriarchy for anything allows her to oscillate between masculinity and femininity without much social disapproval, even though she clearly poses a profound challenge to southern gender codes. Amelia thus "appropriate[s] male power and… escape[s] the culturally inferior role of woman" (Westling, 1982, p. 466). Once again, this implies that her masculinity is not the temporary tomboy performance of an androgynous adolescent, but a deliberately crafted empowering lifestyle. She builds her physical and social appearance while carefully regulating her relationships in order to perpetuate the female masculine identity she has created. That is, until Cousin Lymon enters her life and through the obsessive love she feels for him, turns her world upside down.

As McCullers conveys, before Lymon arrived on the scene, Amelia was intolerant of external forces and influences that would destabilize her power, wealth, independence, and domination. This is the core reason why she was unwilling to surrender her subjectivity through heterosexual marriage to Marvin Macy, a virile, able-bodied, cis-gendered man. According to Gayle Rubin, American society is built around a "sex hierarchy," or a "sexual value system," which places heterosexual married couples in a "charmed circle" defined as "good, normal, blessed natural sexuality" (2006, p. 152-153). Heterosexual marriage is constructed based on the normative perception that it is natural and preferred. This is why Amelia can only tolerate marriage for ten days and it "proved a dismal failure" (Millichap, 1973, p. 334). More interested in selling the wedding gifts they received, she eventually rejects marriage, the sacred and institutional foundation of normativity. As a non-conformist and non-normative woman, she disavows marriage because it is not part of her worldview. She was particularly disturbed by his sexual advances during their wedding night and chose to isolate herself in her father's office and smoke his pipe, while wearing her overalls, instead. By divorcing Marcin Macy, she regains her financial and physical independence.

Marvin's efforts to win her heart are also an inevitable failure because of her condescending pride as a powerful masculine woman. In fact, she only agrees to the union for money in the first place, which becomes a reality when he "[signs] over to [Amelia] the whole of his worldly goods" (McCullers, 2018, p. 31). Despite her fondness for the almighty dollar, Amelia, does nothing to reciprocate Marvin's gesture of goodwill; she is unresponsive, uninterested, and unconcerned by his pitiful lovemaking. The townspeople hope that marriage will "tone down Miss Amelia's temper, to put a bit of bride-fat on her, and to change her at last into a calculable woman" (McCullers, 2018, p. 30). Marvin Macy is unable to do this, but Cousin Lymon is, for as McCullers repeatedly reminds readers, love, and not money, has the power to change people. Amelia becomes softer and generous in Lymon's presence, showering him with gifts, food, and drink, which is her way of expressing love. It is also why Marvin Macy seethes with jealousy when he returns to the town and eventually plots her overthrow with Lymon, the object of her affection.

Amelia is attracted to Cousin Lymon for numerous reasons, many of which, as McCullers admits, cannot be explained, much like love itself. For one, Lymon does not try to confine her to the social institution of marriage. Their relationship is "never threatening because he is not a real man who

sees her as female" (Westling, 1082, p. 466). Her attachment to Cousin Lymon is harmless until Marvin Macy returns to town. It is why she chooses to be the lover instead of the beloved. The lover controls the relationship and manipulates it according to his/her/their wishes: "The value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover" (McCullers, 2018, p. 26). Loving and controlling Lymon provides her with male power, authority, and agency. The more she controls Lymon, the more powerful she feels. The object of love should remain just that, an object. It is when the object starts to form an opinion, or begins to feel oppressed in the relationship, that it begins to unravel.

In Amelia's and Lymon's relationship, there is no sexual desire, no corporeal bonding, and no requital. After all, they are cousins, and are cohabitating, though the townspeople derive pleasure from thinking otherwise. It is a union formed by two non-normative outcasts, a comradeship that simultaneously resembles a familial relationship or kinship (like that between Alison, Anacleto, and Weincheck), with Amelia as mother and Lymon as child. Amelia provides care, attention, and love to Lymon, not just spiritually but also materially. Lymon substitutes for the family Amelia is missing in her life after growing up motherless and being left alone when her father died. As Westling articulates that Cousin Lymon

> represents no threat to her power. He is a sickly, deformed mannikin whom she could crush with one blow of her fist, and, from all we can see, he makes no sexual demands. His warped, childlike form clearly indicates his masculine impotence, just as Amelia's grotesquely masculine appearance expresses her inability to function as a woman. With Lymon she feels safe in revealing affection, for she can baby and pet him without any threat of sexuality. (1982, p. 470)

Cousin Lymon is "a man loved without sex, a child acquired without pain, and a companion which [Amelia's] limited personality finds more acceptable than a husband or a child" (Millichap, 1973, p. 335). While it is unclear whether or not Amelia and Cousin Lymon sexually consummate their relationship, it is worth mentioning that they spend three days upstairs in the store's living quarters when they first meet (exactly the same location where Marvin Macy was rejected on their wedding night). McCullers leaves the reader's imagination to contemplate what may have happened between Amelia and Lymon. Moreover, during the absence of the two for those three days, "the townspeople…would rather believe Amelia capable of murdering Lymon than having sex with him" (Verstrat, 2001, p. 115). The possibility of a relationship between two non-normative disabled bodies is beyond society's imagination. However, Amelia violates all the assumptions by engaging in the impossible, the non-normative, and the unthinkable by finding Cousin Lymon attractive. Furthermore, Lymon and Amelia reverse gender roles in this "grotesque" marriage, further queering the situation. While Amelia is the dominant partner, the breadwinner, and the money-maker, Cousin Lymon is "the pampered mate who struts about in finery, is finicky about food and accommodations, and gads about town socializing and gossiping" and "he functions as a hostess would in the cafe" (Westling, 1982, p. 470). Clearly, they both rewrite and reconstruct the rules of heterosexual partnership between a man and a woman.

While Amelia is almost always "dressed in overalls and gum-boots" (McCullers, 2018, p. 3), she has a red dress that she reserves only "for Sundays, funerals and sessions of the court" (McCullers, 2018, p. 53). She feels threatened when Marvin Macy moves into the cafe to live with them, which is when she begins to wear the red dress inside the cafe to attract Cousin Lymon's attention. She crossdresses to flaunt her femininity in situations where she needs to appropriate femininity, mimicking, when she feels she must, the conventions of heterosexual relationships. Her "occasional performances of a hyper-femininity denaturalize gender categories (Gleeson-White, 2008, p. 49). Consequently, Amelia's appropriation of femininity, as a form of convenience passing, shows the constructedness of gender, but it does little to prevent the inevitable collapse of the love triangle that comes in the novella.

Disability And Masculinity

Tom Shakespeare notes that Disability Studies "explores disability as a form of social oppression, defining disabled people in terms of discrimination and prejudice, not in terms of medical tragedy" (1999, p. 54). The public, social, and cultural representations of people with disabilities have traditionally been negative, one that causes discrimination, stereotyping, condescension, and a barrier for people with disabilities to participate in public, personal, and professional life. These representations "buttress an embodied version of normative identity and shape a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviors do not conform" (Garland-Thomson, 1997/2017, p. 7). Disability Studies critiques the identification of disabled people as tragic, weak, and vulnerable, and the medical model that sustains to "correct" these characterizations through intervention. McCullers's sympathetic depiction of disabled protagonists, and her choice to place them front and center in her main works (*The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, among others), aligns her oeuvre with the objectives of Disability Studies.

In American society, able-bodied normates, such as Marvin Macy, whose physicality and appearance fit the ideal masculine mode, are entitled to power, authority, and privilege that is not accessible to corporeally different people, such as Cousin Lymon. He is not the ideal American man; his body is a violation of gender norms. Yet, rather than categorizing him as a disabled figure doomed to misfortune, McCullers constructs Cousin Lymon a non-normative male with a disability, who does not conjure feelings of tragedy, pity, shame, and guilt. If anything, he is an *extraordinary* body (to use Rosemary Garland-Thomson's phrase), who has access to agency through his vivaciousness, popularity, and positivity. Besides, he is under Amelia's protection; no one has gumption to mock him. Moreover, he has the power to transform not just Amelia, but the locals, who come to accept him as one of his own—not an easy task in such an insular, isolated, impoverished small southern town.

In terms of his specific disability, Cousin Lymon is described in terms that would not be used today—a hunchback dwarf: "The man was a hunchback. He was scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, rusty coat that reached only to his knees. His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders" (McCullers, 2018, p. 5). He is also a consumptive with tuberculosis, signs of which are "the brightness of his gray eyes, his insistence, his talkativeness, and his cough" (McCullers, 2018, p. 56), as well as his thin skin spiderwebbed with purple veins. Cousin Lymon enters the novel as an intruder, an outsider, and an enemy who threatens the stability of the town. As Garland-Thomson asserts, "disabled characters with power virtually always represent a dangerous force unleashed on the social order" (1997/2017, p. 36). Cousin Lymon poses a danger because he is an unknown figure in this normative town. His body is unfamiliar; his age, background, family and hometown are ambiguous. Rootless and routeless like so many other Southern Gothic characters, Cousin Lymon says he was traveling when he is asked where he is from (McCullers, 2018, p. 6). His age is also unidentified; the narrator states, "No one in the town, not even Miss Amelia, had any idea how old the hunchback was" (McCullers, 2018, p. 65). Some people think that he is "about twelve years old, still a child," while others believe he is "well past forty" (2018, p. 65). While his age remains an enigma and the townspeople try to define and measure the hunchback's age and body, Amelia shows little interest in both, for it is the response he evokes in her that is more important.

At first, Lymon seems to be a stereotypical villain who disrupts the monotony and normativity of the town through his non-normative corporeality. Although teaming up with Marvin and destroying Amelia's cafe might be interpreted as a mark of his malignant spirit and his moral corruption, this action does not occur out of outright malice. Lymon does so to gain affirmation and to appeal to his object-desire, Marvin. He becomes greedy for a chance to be on the same side with Marvin. Therefore, his vicious deeds have nothing to do with an evil nature but are rather efforts to gain

Marvin's approval.

Cousin Lymon represents otherness due to his unorthodox corporeality, and the townspeople react with prejudice to the non-normative extraordinary body. Cousin Lymon causes wonder, curiosity, and fear, along with feelings of inertia. These feelings have, however, negative overtones. When Cousin Lymon begins to cry, the townspeople compare him to Morris Finestein, a Jewish person who "had lived in the town years ago" and "cried if you called him Christ-killer" (McCullers, 2018, p. 7). Conflating all forms of difference into one wave of bigotry, they add homophobia to their anti-Semitism and xenophobia, and direct these feelings towards Lymon, a disabled outsider: "Since then if a man were prissy in any way, or if a man ever wept, he was known as a Morris Finestein" (McCullers, 2018, p. 7). This exemplifies Garland-Thomson's argument that disabled people are "political minorities" (1997/2017, p. 5) who share the same burden as racial, ethnic, religious, gender and sexual minorities due to discourses of otherness constructed by normates in an attempt to maintain their social power.

The townspeople's stigmatization and dislike of Cousin Lymon, starting from the moment they saw him in the store's porch, continues with the spread of rumors that Amelia may have killed him during their three-day absence and the silence of the store. The possibility that Amelia, who also embodies non-normativity, harms Cousin Lymon, the object of stigmatization, comforts them, and some even "put on Sunday clothes as though it were a holiday" (McCullers, 2018, p. 12) in celebration of the event. Non-normativity, non-conformity, and deviation must be eliminated, and they would rather see him dead (and Amelia a murderer) than alive. According to Garland-Thomson, "the process of stigmatization thus legitimates the status quo, naturalizes attributions of inherent inferiority and superiority, and obscures the socially constructed quality of both categories" (1997/2017, p. 31). Consequently, the disabled figure almost always receives punishment from the status quo: "corporeal departures from dominant expectations never go uninterpreted or unpunished" (Garland-Thomson, 1997/2017, p. 7). This time, however, Cousin Lymon is not punished but rewarded by being loved and adopted like a child by Amelia. When the townspeople see that Cousin Lymon is alive, they are in shock as he "was not at all as had been pictured to them—not a pitiful and dirty little chatterer, alone and beggared in this world" (McCullers, 2018, p. 16). Cleaned up, well fed, and well rested, he was no longer an object to vilify. He becomes integrated into society and plants the seeds of a powerful sense of community.

Garland-Thomson argues that disabled characters have been used historically as narrative strategies in cultural and literary productions to evoke cultural anxieties rather than as a means to reflect on the experiences of disabled people (1997/2017, p. 9). In tandem with this view, Mitchell and Snyder propose the concept of "narrative prosthesis" to describe how disability operates in cultural productions including literature, media and film: "[D]isability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device. We term this perpetual discursive dependency upon disability narrative prosthesis" (2000, p. 47). As a result, disabled characters usually remain supporting characters, as "uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance" (Garland-Thomson, 1997/2017, p. 9). They usually contribute to the development of the protagonist but remain silent in addressing inequality and/or exclusion of disabled people from society. McCullers rebels against this tradition by deploying two disabled characters, Cousin Lymon as hunchback and Amelia Evans as crossed-eyed, as main characters in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. They are strong enough to tame the normative, prejudiced townspeople by transforming the store into a cafe that becomes a haven where feelings of unity, solidarity, and community, and not prejudice, dominate.

People with disabilities have almost always been considered less feminine or less masculine due to the perception that their bodies are insufficient and incomplete. Consequently, they have been

regarded as less attractive, "asexual, or a third gender" or sometimes even "oversexual" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 55; McRuer, 2016, p. 401). Cousin Lymon is none of these. In fact, he uses the selfhood strategies of normative persons to access agency, power and authority. He is desiring and desirable, which projects McCullers's view of love, that "the beloved can also be of any description" (McCullers, 2018, p. 25). When Lymon sees Marvin for the first time, he "stood somewhat apart from everyone, and he did not take his eyes from the face of Marvin Macy" (McCullers, 2018, p. 48). He becomes obsessed with Marvin, and he follows him everywhere, with his ears wiggling in excitement. There is no reciprocity in this male affinity; Marvin is frustrated with the presence of Cousin Lymon and even calls him "brokeback." Nevertheless, Cousin Lymon is relentless in his love and desire for Marvin, regardless of his nasty personality. He is confident in his new position as the lover and disregards the rising tension between Amelia and Marvin. Amelia likewise disregards Lymon's disabilities, which are invisible to the lover, who does not see his betrayal coming. Disability has "historically been seen as a disadvantage or a curse" (Garland-Thomson, 1997/2017, p. 40). In Lymon's case, there are no negative consequences or disadvantages associated with his disability. The townspeople accept him, Amelia adores him, and even Marvin tolerates him as part of his plan for revenge. While one can only imagine how Marvin will betray Lymon after they run away together, that remains speculation and beyond the framework of McCullers's novella.

Šėporaitytė and Tereškinas argue that the perpetual pressure of the discourse of "normality" urge disabled men to "embody as much as possible the main features of a normal man and ignore their distinctiveness and difference" (2006, p. 125). In the novella, Cousin Lymon is not overtly masculine and does not display an exaggerated form of masculinity to fit the rules of normalcy. He makes no effort to manifest his masculinity as hegemonic in any way. Rather, he embraces his masculinity as it truly is. He has no self-shame or self-pity due to his disability or lack of orthodox masculinity. For instance, he "evince[s] some stereotypically feminine habits [such as] his extreme sociability, his unselfconscious display of fear, his fondness for sweets, his attention to wardrobe, and his affinity for flamboyant dress" (Verstrat, 2001, p. 118). He does not attempt to hide these traditionally "feminine" qualities, thus offering a non-hegemonic alternative to the hegemonic modes of masculinity.

Disability has always been associated with disempowerment, weakness, and uncontrollability in society. Garland-Thomson states that "figures such as the cripple, the quadroon, the queer, the outsider, the whore are taxonomical, ideological products ... excluded from social power and status" (1997/2017, p. 8). Similarly, Šėporaitytė and Tereškinas argue that "a physically disabled person is considered as constantly requiring control and assistance" (2006, p. 124). The situation for men with disabilities has been much more challenging because they have been compared to men with non-disabled bodies, who, as top tier members in the gender hierarchy, maintain innate privileges and advantages in public and private life. Tom Shakespeare points out that disabled men "do not have access to physical strength or social status in the conventional way" (1999, p. 60). In contrast, Cousin Lymon controls the social space around him and the interactions that occur in the cafe. He has a magical spell on the people: "Without saying a word he could set people at each other in a way that was miraculous" (McCullers, 2018, p. 39). It is Cousin Lymon who contributes to the successful transition of Amelia's store into a cafe. The narrator states, "It was the hunchback who was most responsible for the great popularity of the cafe" and "the success and gaiety of the place" (McCullers, 2018, p. 39; p. 2). He wields power over the cafe and its patrons, who are pleased with his presence and enjoy chatting with him. As time passes, he becomes the main character of the cafe and the novella, despite the initial stigma around him. His presence is important, alluring, and captivating as he spreads joy and dispels the gloom in the depressing town: "Things were ever so gay as when he was around" (McCullers, 2018, p. 39).

Garland-Thomson claims that disabled characters are denied "any opportunity for subjectivity or

agency" in representations of disability (1997/2017, p. 11). McCullers's representation of Cousin Lymon once again contradicts this. Lymon has the utmost subjectivity, audacity, gumption, and agency. His position as a friend and the beloved of Amelia provides Lymon with the privilege to access Amelia's prized possessions. He "alone had access to her bankbook and the key to the cabinet of curios," "he took money from the cash register," and "he owned almost everything on the premises" (McCullers, 2018, p. 37). Cousin Lymon owns Amelia's heart and has her support in every way possible. Consequently, as a person with a disability, he does not suffer from public pity for she would not tolerate that. He is neither excluded from social life nor personal relations; he becomes her "peanut" and even has the confidence to form a pact with Marvin Macy, no matter how cruel and deceptive it might ultimately turn out to be.

Robertson et al. have expressed that "gender identity options open to men with impairments are seemingly left as 'failed,' 'spoiled' or in need of reformulation" (2019, p. 154). However, the experience of disability for Cousin Lymon is not deprecating as he is not defeated, nor does he fail as a subject of tragedy, but is triumphant throughout the story. In the end, he steals the hearts of Amelia and the townspeople, he actuates positive change in his environment, and he flees with his beloved, Marvin Macy. This is mainly because his agency is not related to his body or disability. It is his personality that creates a sense of community in the town and turns the store into a cafe. He becomes a beloved, popular figure, not because the townspeople pity him but because they enjoy spending time with him. Cousin Lymon, thus, highlights McCullers's overarching theme of love: that love, be it romantic, familial, or communal, does not discriminate between the disabled and the able-bodied, the feminine and the masculine, the non-normative and the normative.

The novella climaxes in a physical fight, or a queer duel, between Amelia and Marvin over the demure southern belle, Cousin Lymon. Marvin and Amelia appear at the cafe to box it out—a grotesque interpretation of the Old South in the New South by Carson McCullers. Identities clash and collapse into one another during the fight, which occurs on Groundhog Day (February 2) after a period of confusion and waste and ominous snow. Amelia seems to be winning when Lymon engages in the ultimate act of betrayal: he attacks her and teams up with Marvin to destroy the cafe. They run away together, leaving Amelia heartbroken and alone. She becomes a recluse, refusing to leave the cafe, the setting of her happiest and now her saddest moments. In the end, it is the men in her life—her ex-husband, Marvin Macy, and the love of her life, Cousin Lymon—who defeat her. While it may appear that female masculinity is disciplined and destroyed by hegemonic toxic masculinity, that is not the case. The reader sympathizes with Amelia, not Marvin or his accomplice, Lymon (who turned out to be a lemon), who will surely get his comeuppance sooner or later. The novella is a ballad because it is *Amelia's* swan song, and hers alone.

Conclusion

Non-normativity and non-conformity are the main subjects of *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, which is McCullers's attempt to explore the constructed nature of gender and sexual categories during the 1940s when the only acceptable model of behavior for women was to be a pretty, demure, meek, and well-mannered southern lady and for men was to be strong, unfeminine and physically fit. Miss Amelia repudiates conventional femininity, embracing female masculinity and living her life according to her own rules. She is not only a woman dressed in men's attire, but also a woman whose lifestyle expands beyond her physical appearance; she is the town's most popular and significant figure as she provides food, liquor, medical help, sustenance, and ultimately love to the town. Her constant and consistent performance of masculinity upsets the prescribed gender regime of the American South. Yet, she can withhold her masculinity to perform femininity, in her red dress, whenever she wants. The malleability of gender becomes powerful for Amelia, with her non-normative female body.

Cousin Lymon is a misfit hunchback dwarf who arrives in town to seek his alleged kin, Miss Amelia Evans. McCullers first positions Cousin Lymon as an example of a non-normative body in conflict with the townspeople, who, as agents of normativity, humiliate anyone with different identity markers. Cousin Lymon does not meet the expectations of an ideal American man due to his abnormal corporeality. Yet, he becomes successful in transforming the bigoted townspeople through his welcoming, warm, and sincere approach. Cousin Lymon challenges assumptions about disabled masculinity because he does not conjure images of weakness, helplessness, and invulnerability. In the end, however, his façade of sincerity is shattered. The object (the beloved) becomes the subject (the lover) and the tables are turned. The gendered power dynamics are upended, he betrays Miss Amelia and chooses Marvin Macy over the woman who has given all of herself to him. Ultimately, toxic masculinity proves to be contagious, socially transmitted as a prerequisite of traditional types of masculinity, thereby creating cycles of perpetuation.

Compared to her other works, Carson McCullers's recurring concern with gender, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, and non-normative bodies becomes more complicated in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. Nothing goes according to plan: a large masculine woman falls in platonic love with an effeminate hunchback, who is attracted to a dangerous, vicious male, who falls in love with the same large masculine woman. All gender and sexual identities, including disabled ones, are questioned in McCullers's project. Gender remains highly performative in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*; there is no innate masculinity only accessible to men, but a staged masculinity that can be accessed by everyone and used for different purposes.

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