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The Skins We Live In

I was thirteen years old when I first read the psychological thriller *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith. In the novel, wealthy New York shipbuilder Herbert Greenleaf requests Tom Ripley to retrieve his son, Dickie, from Italy and convince him to join the family business. Tom's ambiguous class-based and sexual desire regarding Dickie—as seen when Dickie spots Ripley wearing his clothes in his room—ultimately leads Tom to kill his friend and steal his identity. I was awestruck by the fact that a woman could write such a complex male character. It led me to realize that all reading and writing is inherently a type of total transvestism, in the sense that when we read, we must all assume other imagined identities: I was a gay teenager, reading about an adult male character, written by a middle aged lesbian woman. Does the sex, age, or race of the reader or writer matter when we engage in a story?

I never wanted to be a “gay writer” or a “gay director,” but somehow this is how I've always been framed. This is not only because of my subject matter, but also because of how my public life is viewed as a gay man. I just want to be a writer or a director. After all, gender dissolves in a work of art; inside of a work of art, all gender, age, and race-based tensions can be represented by anyone. Since gender dissolves in art, these subject matters and those who write about them should be viewed as universal—no different from any other ‘non-gay’ artist or the subjects they address

I love books because they allow me to inhabit other people's minds, skins, souls, and bodies. I can be an African American slave girl in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a Japanese prince in Japan's 11th century novel *The Tale of Genji*, or an Irish woman in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I get aroused by Molly Bloom's obsessions with her lover's penis, at the same time that I mourn alongside her when she remembers her dead son.

Literature creates a silent bond between two minds separated in time and space—an imaginary bond that begins with the opening letters of the page, and remains long after the book returns to its shelf. I can comfortably read *A Bend in the River* by Naipaul in my home in Argentina while spending time in that unnamed town in the interior of Africa.

My first novel is written from the perspective of a 14 year-old girl living with ex-president, General Perón after his wife's death, a sort of taboo in and of itself. My second novel is a novel of voices; the narrator oscillates between a fat boy, an old virgin lady, a 15 year-old girl, an aging widow of 80 who is losing her memory, and others. I had to mutate for each character, fine-tuning the reception antenna for each distinct voice. I had to embody them—give them my body, as a medium does—to make them talk. In film, I write mostly strong female leading characters and secondary male characters. Women's emotions enthrall me, and I explore their mystery when I write from their point of view, which allows me to showcase the machismo in my society. Though melodrama is sometimes considered a minor form, it allows me to complexly express heightened emotions and irrational passions. When I write, I start from my characters desires and frustrations in an attempt to understand them, which pushes me to break taboos and transcend my own sense of decency.

When I read, I feel like I'm making love with the writer. His words become part of my body. I hope this happens to my readers when they read me. This is how I read—to escape the narrow confines of identity. For me, writing is the most perfect, free form of transvestism. I can mutate in one single phrase from the adult man I am into a ghost, or even dissolve my being into a vaporous, abstract sentence like a line of poetry.