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# Deconstructing Identities: Vision and Revision in Edith Pearlman

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## Abstract

In ‘The Coat’, one of the stories from Edith Pearlman’s acclaimed collection of stories *Binocular Vision* (2011), the two protagonists speculate on the identity of the owner of the apartment that they have just moved into:

The apartment’s tenant was a woman, they thought - they judged partly from the four-poster’s silk spread, creamy yellow. Eggnog? There was a crumpled, lace-trimmed handkerchief in the back of one of the dresser drawers; it smelled of perfume. The tenant read German; German books were everywhere. ‘She is German,’ concluded Sonya.

‘Or Austrian or Swiss,’ Roland said. ‘Or Lithuanian’.

‘She’s no Litvak,’ Sonya insisted, helplessly remembering Baltic Persons shivering in Gruenwasser’s under-heated barracks. ‘She’s an aristocrat’.

In this passage the compulsion to categorise people - by gender, by nationality, by class - co-exists with an implicit recognition of the slipperiness and arbitrariness of such categorisations, and indeed of the epistemological problems of categorisation of any sort (hence the revision of the initial description of the silk spread as ‘creamy yellow’, which is then displaced by a provisional, alternative suggestion: ‘Eggnog?’). Pearlman has herself had to contend with the consequences of arbitrary categorisation and snap judgments. Before the belated recognition that *Binocular Vision* brought her she had seen her work largely ignored or marginalised in the way that short stories, particularly short stories by women, and more particularly short stories by women from ethnic minorities, often are: dismissed as being of ‘special interest’ or damned with faint praise for its ‘quiet’, ‘sensitive’ or ‘delicate’ representations of ‘domestic’ life. In this paper I will argue that Pearlman’s fiction defies categorisation, interrogating the processes by which categorical judgments - of all sorts - are conducted and deconstructing the very notion of fixed identities. Rejecting the parochialism and myopia of identity politics, Pearlman’s stories provide complex versions of experience which emerge through a series of (re)visions and which are multicultural, transnational and transgressive.

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