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HARD WIRE

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Sexual Diversity Studies

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Hardwire is the undergraduate journal of Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto. Our journal provides an academic platform for issues of sexuality and gender. It aims to promote Sexual Diversity Studies and showcase scholarly and creative work by students critically analyzing sexuality at the undergraduate level.

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The logo for Hardwire is written in a stylized, hand-drawn font. The word "HARD" is on the top line and "WIRE" is on the bottom line. The letters are connected and have a rough, sketchy appearance. There are small, sharp, barbed-wire-like protrusions at the ends of the horizontal strokes of the letters.

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Letter from the Editors

As we, the editors-in-chief of *Hardwire*, prepare to launch our fifth issue at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, we find ourselves pausing to consider how to respond to the events that have shaped and continue to shape our lives this publishing year. We feel acute tension as our communities and governments navigate the current moment of the COVID-19 pandemic; as some push for a “return to normal,” others ask “can we not build something different in its place?” We see great potential for change in how we relate to one another and the larger environments we exist in through these conversations. As an editorial collective run by volunteer undergraduate students, we aim to platform conversations that explore strategies on how to resist reproducing systems of oppression that likewise evolve in changing times. Following the teachings of queer and trans BIPOC scholars, activists, and artists, we invite our readers to join us intentionally sitting with and exploring how the pieces in this issue make us feel, situating ourselves in the named matrices of power, and imagining modes of relationality that might likewise adapt to resist new formations of oppression.

Writing this preamble is never an easy feat; we’re pressed to name only what few impactful events can be contained between two pages that give context for the works that follow. Rather than taking on the impossible task of naming all such events, we instead turn our focus to how imperialisms, nationalisms, and formations of what Achille Mbembe (2003) terms the *necropolitical* are reproduced throughout these events.

Several weeks ago in late March, the Ontario government removed many of the public health mandates set to curb the proliferation of COVID-19 which continues to cause death and disablement in our communities. The overwhelming narrative has framed this as necessary for economic growth. The most vulnerable among us, with disabilities or who are otherwise immunosuppressed, are told that our deaths are more profitable than our continued life. In the push for a “return to normal,” we ask;

how does this “normal” have us relate to one another? And can we push for an everyday relationality that centers community care over profit?

Almost two months ago, Russia escalated the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian war by invading Ukrainian territory, and the violence has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions more. We condemn Russia’s imperialist designs, and likewise reject the American exceptionalist claim that further militarization of NATO security states is the solution. We also take issue with the emergent narratives around this conflict that disavow violence in the Ukraine by claiming war belongs or is deserved “elsewhere,” implicitly — and in many cases explicitly — home to racialized and non-Western peoples. We call on our readers to consider: how can we condemn imperialism and warfare without also bolstering narratives that serve neocolonial agendas?

The past two years we have seen an unprecedented intensification of transphobic laws in the US, particularly those that further limit the autonomy of trans youth and criminalize support from their guardians. Again we find ourselves in a complex position; we both firmly condemn these attacks on bodily autonomy and gender-expansive ways of life, and are wary of co-optation of this crisis by nationalist interests. While we cannot always predict how oppressive logics will adapt to new contexts, we can look to Jasbir Puar’s (2007) observations of *homonationalism*, and emerging scholarship on what Aren Aizura (2016) calls *transgender exceptionalism*. There is a distinct tension between the urgently needed response to escalating institutional violence and the long-term work of resisting imperialist formations, and we ask our readers: how might we hold space for both these aims without sacrificing one for the other?

None of these questions have singular or simple answers, as the issues themselves are complex, nuanced, and messy. The pieces published in the fifth edition of *Hardwire* meditate

on such complexity by reflecting on a myriad of different approaches to building alternative futures: through critical analysis of systemic inequality; exploring the erotic and its liberatory potential; reflecting on embodiment, culture, and the self through aesthetics; and imagining liberatory methodologies that work with the messiness and practical reality of our current contexts.

Naba Khan, Miriam Panahi, and Elena Goldak each call attention to the relationships between sexuality, gender, and imperialisms across the globe. Naba Khan's *Queer Muslims in Canada* outlines how Canadian nationalist narratives mobilize the vulnerability of sexual and religious minorities, while simultaneously erasing the experiences of queer Muslims in Canada. Miriam Panahi discusses medicalized and institutionalized transphobia in Japan, while practising critical self-reflection on her personal biases around Japanese imperialism. Finally, Elena Goldak considers how imperialist propaganda is implicated in media representations of racialized masculinity and sexuality by analyzing the early film and television work of Ken Jeong.

Works by Bronwen Cox, Rion Levy, and Kassia Neckles all consider the various manifestations of the erotic in media and in lived experience. Bronwen Cox analyzes female homosexuality in surrealist art, emphasising how the positionality of an artist impacts how they depict sex between women. Rion Levy's poetry resists the romanticization of forced secrecy in queer relationships by meditating on how it feels in reality to live and love in secret, and Kassia Neckles' work makes poignant reflections on how the 2016 film *Moonlight* forwards an anti-colonial ethos by centring Black queer intimacy.

Anita Gairns, Li De-Yan Swoboda, and Kalliopé Anvar McCaul all explore embodiment through aesthetics. Anita Gairn's series of portraits depicts a messy, liberatory expression of sexuality, exploring self pleasure through the con-

sumption of fruit. The visual work by Kalliopé Anvar McCaul constitutes a self-reflective meditation on her feelings about her body in relation to both gender and an experience of sexual violence. Li De-Yan Swoboda's piece considers the classification of sound, seeking to destabilize socially constructed and gendered associations using historical and contemporary examples of vocalists that challenge normative expectations.

Finally, the works by Alfonso Ralph Mendoza Manalo, Lexi Martin, Maggie Kou, and Sarah Scholbeck attempt to grapple with the messy and imperfect realities of the now to imagine alternative futurity. Alfonso Ralph Mendoza Manalo explores representations of Filipino Boy's Love through written poetry and a linked virtual gallery. Lexi Martin examines the liberatory potential in the fanfiction subgenre of omegaverse femslash, and Maggie Kou reflects on gender, language, migration, and transitioning in their cross-cultural and intergenerational gender performance poetry. Finally, Sarah Scholbeck presents a zine outlining what they and their housemates learned from their unexpected experience of living in a queer co-op house.

We thank you for reading the fifth issue of *Hardwire: The Sexual Diversity Studies Undergraduate Journal*, and for supporting the work of undergraduate students. We extend our immense appreciation to our dedicated editorial board and the authors, as without their hard work and commitment to *Hardwire* and its ethos, this journal could not have been made. Finally, we thank the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies for continuing to support the journal through the mentorship and resources that sustain our platform. We hope you enjoy *Hardwire Issue 5!*

Kendra Smith and Ellithia Adams
Editors-in-Chief of Hardwire:
The Undergraduate
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Queer Muslims in Canada: Stuck Between Queerphobia and Islamophobia

Naba Khan (*she/her*) *Global Health and Political Science*

Content Warning:

This piece discusses discriminatory legislation against Muslims and queer people, descriptions of racialised discrimination, Islamophobia, and queerphobia.

Abstract

This essay explores the marginalization of queer Muslims in Canada, whereby historical and contemporary manifestations of Islamophobia and queerphobia overlap to push these individuals outside of state protection and acknowledgement. The Liberal Party's government depicts Canada as being "liberal and progressive" through their support of gay and queer communities and formal addresses towards Muslim-Canadians. However, these engagements have not acknowledged the intersection of Islam and queerness, likely in an attempt to prevent controversy. The Canadian government benefits from the separation of these communities, as it can appeal to mainstream representatives of those groups that are more advantageous as voter and consumer populations. "Traditional" Muslim-Canadians and married, white same-sex couples contribute to structures that advance consumer capitalist participation by emphasizing "nuclear family" reproduction and productivity as qualifiers for successful assimilation into Canadian society. Furthermore, this also functions to reinforce heteronormative immigration policies that prioritize heteronormative family reunification. Additionally, the recruitment and celebration of white queer Canadians in military services furthers the divide between religion and sexuality through Islamophobic mobilizations of the "war on terror." Justin Trudeau's insistence on the importance of diversity and inclusion within Canadian public service and national security contradicts his inaction towards laws such as Bill 21, which bans public sector employees from wearing religious symbols in Quebec. Ultimately, the lack of public acknowledgement of queer Muslims by the Canadian government is a deliberate choice that positions Canada as the liberal "safe haven" for conventional queers and Muslims, while simultaneously contributing to the marginalization of less politically valuable groups.

Content tags: Islamophobia; homonationalism; war on terror; institutional violence

Introduction

The simultaneous fear of religious discrimination in the West and fear of facing ostracism and queerphobia within the Muslim community, under the guise of proclaimed "Western gay influence," enforces the rigid heteronormative narrative onto Muslim immigrants within Western countries such as Canada. This double bind is further experienced and pronounced within the isolation of queer Muslims from being visible in either sphere. The surface-level support that the Canadian government currently offers to these individual communities functions to advance political and colonial agendas, rather than to create a

truly safe country for either. Despite representing itself as a liberal safe-haven for all religious and sexual identities alike, Canada's history of, and ongoing engagement in, Islamophobia and queerphobia manifest uniquely for queer Muslims. At the intersection between religion and sexuality, queer Muslims are pushed outside the margins of state recognition and public protection against discrimination due to the unaddressed, overlapping oppressions of Islamophobia and queerphobia in Canada.

This essay will examine the experiences of Canadian queer Muslims and their relationship with a heteronormative, settler-colonial

society. Political engagements in Canada with either queer or Muslim communities only accommodate homogenized mainstream representations of these identities and recognize them to be only *mutually exclusive*, marginalizing queer Muslims that are not guaranteed the rights and protections offered to both communities individually. This essay will begin by providing a historical background on Islamophobia and queerphobia in the Canadian context, and will describe how homogenized mainstream representations of both Muslim and queer communities have produced a system whereby state recognition of either group prioritizes the worth the *individual* offers to Canadian society. The first mode of recognition values productivity with an emphasis on the "nuclear family" which pressures queer Muslims to adopt a heteronormative family structure and lifestyle to avoid discrimination and appear as non-threatening Muslim immigrants. The second mode is through involvement in national security, whereby the recruitment of mainstream gay and queer individuals to public service further alienates Muslims by mobilizing Islamophobia as a pillar of Canadian patriotism.

Background

The current intersections of Islamophobia and queerphobia in Canada can be better analyzed by first mapping out the roots of these individual structures of oppression throughout the country's history. While the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom seemingly covers all identities in the freedoms and protections it offers, the histories of queerphobia and Islamophobia serve to illuminate the persistence of these discriminations. Until 1969, homosexuality was a criminal offense in Canada, with same-sex marriage becoming legalized in 2005. Following the partial decriminalization of homosexual acts via Bill C-150, the violent oppression of queer communities still occurred through police raiding of gay bars and saunas and the older age of consent for anal intercourse through Section 159 of the Criminal Code, which was eventually repealed in 2019 (Smith, 2020; Tremblay, 2015). While the Conservative government under the leadership of Stephen Harper avoided making any further reform to "downplay moral conservatism" (Rayside, 2011, p. 283), LGBTQ2 rights

remain a prominent component of Justin Trudeau's campaign (Liberal Party of Canada, n.d).

Over Trudeau's time in office, he has made a formal apology for "Canada's role in the systemic oppression, criminalization, and violence against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirit communities" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2017). This apology explicitly mentions the violence inflicted by police within queer bathhouses, or bawdy houses, as well as queerphobia that was perpetuated during and after the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This speech, while broadly apologizing to all LGBTQ2 Canadians, specifically addresses queer veterans and Canadians who were unable to enlist in the military or were discharged and intimidated due to their sexuality. This context in which queer rights are placed in direct relation to national security and militarization speaks to the persistence of *homonationalism*, which Puar (2006) coined to describe the "collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism" (p. 67). This concept can be expanded in the Canadian context to represent how gay and queer subjects fit within dominant norms and contribute in the deployment and reinforcement of Canadian nationalist projects.

The history of Islamophobia in Canada has a less documented past, due to the relatively recent, large influx of Muslims to Canada beginning in the 1990s (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018). In addition to being an unfamiliar religious group to Canada, many Muslim immigrants were also racial and ethnic minorities originating from the Middle East, northern and eastern Africa, and southern and Central Asia. In Canada, Arabs and Muslims were caricatured "as fanatical, violence-loving maniacs in the popular presses" (Bahdi, 2003, p. 304), even prior to the attacks on September 11th, 2001. Following the events of 9/11 in the United States, Islamophobia became widespread in Canada and globally, due to fears of Muslim extremism perpetuated by mainstream media (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018). Despite Muslims representing 3.2% of Canada's population (Statistics Canada, 2017), a survey from 2016 indicated that Canadians believe that about 17% of the population is Muslim, indicating

the dramatic overestimation of the "threat" of Islam (Ahmad, 2017).

Rahman (2010) characterizes the experience of being Muslim in North America as "antithetical to an American or Canadian identity" (p. 945), distinguished by the perceived incompatibility of values between Islam and "a progressive democratic secular West" (p. 945). Muslims became synonymous with terrorism, and racial profiling homogenized the image of the Muslim suspect. Muslim-sounding Arabic names also became the subject of suspicion, which affected surveillance of Muslims crossing national borders or accessing financial institutions (Bahdi, 2003). The involvement of Canadian troops in the United States' "war on terror," that were stationed in Afghanistan until 2014, materialized Canada's stance against religious extremism, and, as a by-product, fueled anti-Muslim hostility and stereotyping (Jamil & Rousseau, 2012). In almost all regions across Canada in 2011, Muslims are ranked lowest in terms of feelings towards various social groups, with the most negative attitudes coming from Quebec respondents (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018). The Islamophobic sentiment in Quebecois society is reflected in the province's discriminatory policies such as Bill 21, which bans all civil servants from wearing religious symbols, including teachers and lawyers. This legislation targets Muslims, amongst other religious groups, who choose to wear visible religious garments, including the *hijab* (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, n.d), and serves as province-endorsed religious discrimination.

Accommodation of Homogenized Mainstream Representations

Canada's reputation as a relatively progressive state has been reinforced through the Liberal Party's apology for discrimination against LGBTQ2 Canadians and various statements speaking out against Islamophobia. Justin Trudeau's government touts taking a stand against Islamophobia by creating "Canada's first-ever Anti-Racism Strategy" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2021), and proposing "a successful motion in the House of Commons to condemn Islamophobia" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2021). However, these actions taken by the Canadian government only address the mainstream Muslim and

queer communities, ignoring the diversity within and across both groups. Neither the apology issued to LGBTQ2 Canadians nor the Anti-Racism Strategy discuss the intersection of sexuality and religion, essentially interpreting these identities as being mutually exclusive to one another. Cathy Cohen (1997) describes this emphasis on a single perspective of queerness as solidifying "static, monolithic, bounded categories" (p. 441) of sexuality that disregard other characteristics that play into identities and oppressions. In doing so, other aspects such as religion or race are erased in the dichotomies between heterosexuality and queerness, and ignores power structures that isolate those at the margins.

The lack of state recognition of queer Muslims reinforces the divisions between both communities. While queer Muslims are often rejected from their Muslim communities, they are also not readily accepted into mainstream, Canadian queer spaces. Golriz (2021) defines mainstream organizations as upholding "accepted and often institutionalized ideologies and practises that are endorsed by large groups of people" (p. 359) that are resistant to identities that *contradict* the majority. The politicization of these two separate identities in Western countries often is to the benefit of parties and politicians that aim to secure votership from the dominant and most powerful members of either of these communities; whilst hesitant to rock the boat by recognizing queer Muslims who fall on the outskirts of this proclaimed political "support."

Queer Muslims can be seen as threatening the legitimacy of Muslim theology and bringing "shame and dishonor on their families and to Islam generally" (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021, p. 995). The majority of Muslims globally view sexuality, and in particular heterosexual marriage, as a sacred obligation within the faith, much like other Abrahamic religions do. Muslims are observed to attend religious ceremonies more frequently than other faiths, and despite there being a positive correlation between religious attendance and opposition to same-sex relationships, even amongst Muslims that do not attend religious ceremonies often, the level of opposition to queerness in community remains fairly high (Cochrane, 2013). Therefore, when addressing the Canadian

rights are rarely — if ever — brought up in order to avoid conflict with the mainstream beliefs that remain fundamental to conventional Muslim thought.

Simultaneously, mainstream gay and queer communities advocate for LGBTQ2 legal reform that “becomes bound up in the normalization of White middle-class same-sex couples, who are viewed as the same as straight couples, and thus deserving of full citizenship and recognition” (Smith, 2020, p. 67). Homogenized representations of the queer community are often centred around whiteness, namely accommodating white, cis-gendered, middle-class gay men within these images, since they are representing and reproduce mainstream, hegemonic norms of sexual citizenship and queerness in Canada. These images further paint certain queers as worthy members of the Canadian state, who are now qualified to stand at the vanguard of socially reproducing capitalism and militarization, since, as stated before, they represent the most powerful and influential members of the queer minority. Rahman (2010) suggests that gay Muslims challenge not only the category of Muslims, but the category of gay, whereby they represent an “impossible” identity that is perceived as being inherently contradictory to either category. This mentality is reinforced by a survey from 2011 that points out that “more than two thirds of Canadians perceive an ‘irreconcilable’ conflict between Islamic and Western society” (Cochrane, 2013, p. 148–149). Rahman (2010) goes on to describe the “sense in which LGBT people feel profoundly offended when [they] think other LGBT people are living a lie — hiding their true selves because of state and/or religious oppression or family circumstances” (p. 954), which can lead to mainstream queer groups questioning the authenticity of queer Muslims and their efforts towards advancing queer rights in Canada.

The state recognition of queer citizens who fall within the mainstream, privileged paradigm can therefore be considered a vital tool used by the state within the social reproduction of colonial hegemonic norms — namely nationalism and imperialism. The ideology of framing *all* queers as “just like other white, middle-class people” (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p.

135), who will then fight alongside the state in the “struggle for inclusion [of white queers] within the legal and social forms of spouse, family, marriage, the military, and even national security” (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 135), explains *why* Trudeau does not mention specifically the intersections of religion and queer identity in his apology to LGBTQ2 Canadians. His *deliberate* exclusion of acknowledging religious minorities in his speech speaks to who he is actively excluding — queer Muslims — as to not ruffle the feathers of the groups that can be beneficial to maintaining Canada’s national project.

Nuclear Families and Productivity

Justin Trudeau’s speech addressing Muslim Canadians during the National Summit on Islamophobia details the supposedly shared Canadian values of “family, generosity, community” (Prime Minister of Canada, 2021), emphasizing how family structures remain important in Canadian politics. Davies and Robinson (2013) explain how “the heteronormative nuclear family is pivotal to the constitution and regulation of the normative citizen subject, which encompasses western, white, middle-class, Christian values and morals, and is the foundational structure of western societies” (p. 39–40). The “nuclear family” is represented by a family structure with traditional father and mother roles, with the ultimate goal of reproduction. Reproduction, as a result, allows for further generations of citizens to be able to participate in the “neoliberal capitalist” (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 140) system by entering the labour force in adulthood.

Mainstream gay and queer communities have perpetuated the ideals of the nuclear family after same-sex marriage was legalized in Canada. These “advances in LGBTQ rights recognition privilege same-sex couples who are just like straights except for their sexual orientation” (Smith, 2020, p. 66), and use the experiences of heterosexual Canadians as a benchmark for queer rights. This “recognition” positions white, cis, middle-class, and married same-sex couples, especially those that have children, as still being able to contribute to the capital economy via the “pink market” (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 140). The “pink market” is accessed by wealthy gay men who have disposable incomes to engage in “consumer

capitalism" by "participat[ing] in commodity purchase, consumption, and display" (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 140) of wealth. The white, gay men who partake in this "pink market" then define queerness under these conditions, whereby queerness becomes an acceptable identity in Canada and garners state recognition and protection, as long as it contributes to the economic progress of the state.

Those that are excluded from this acceptance are those that cannot participate in the labour force or in consumer capitalism, and must strive to do so to gain state recognition. This process is seen in Canada's emphasis on marriage and common law relationships within the immigration law, where "heteronormativity remains a crucial tenet of the 'progressive' immigration structure of Canada" (Mathur, 2021, p. 60). Queer couples immigrating to Canada are therefore assessed under heteronormative relationship standards, dismissing the various ways in which queer people engage in relationships and families. Kosnick (2016) discusses the role of "heterosexual marriage and 'family' reunification" (p. 129) in immigration as "continu[ing] to be among the most promising avenues for legal migration around the globe" (p. 129). Canadian immigration policies, therefore, can be understood as a tool to enforce "normative sexuality and reproductive behaviour of their citizens" (Kosnick, 2016, p. 129), and queer Muslims in particular.

As mentioned earlier, Muslims in Canada are largely immigrants or children of immigrants (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018), and their worth has become tied to how much potential they have as a Canadian citizen. This expectation puts pressure on Muslims in general to fulfill immigration standards for skilled workers, maintain employment within Canada to potentially be able to sponsor others, as well as earn respect from other Canadian citizens to avoid discrimination. Despite often fulfilling heterosexual norms of reproduction, Muslims still grapple with hate and exclusion from mainstream Canadian society, which can be contextualized by Cohen's (1997) context of "*nonnormative* and *marginal*" (p. 438) heterosexuality. Cohen conceptualizes queerness to also include heterosexual individuals whose intersections of class, race, sexism,

and other identities, render them as outside heteronormative constraints, and therefore can contribute to a queer discourse that calls for a social, economic, and political transformation that challenges dominant structures of sexuality. Queer Muslims have the added pressure to maintain a heteronormative relationship and family structure to be seen as "productively" contributing to Canadian society, in order to attain standards for "social and sexual respectability and responsibility" (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 140). The politics of respectability gives the Canadian government the power to construct the ideals of who is seen as a "respectable Muslim" or "respectable queer" by tying the legitimacy of one's citizenship to their status as a tax-payer, consumer, or property owner. By these definitions, queer Muslims are not allowed to take up space that does not directly contribute to the state's goals or mainstream values.

National Security, Public Service, and Homonationalism

Justin Trudeau's apology to LGBTQ2 Canadians was placed within the context of the "patriotism" and "courage" of participating in public service and the military (Prime Minister of Canada, 2017). Trudeau apologized for seeing queer Canadians as a threat to national security, yet engaged in this same discrimination with Muslims. One might think that the fight against Islamic extremism would demonstrate allyship against religious queerphobia, yet "the homonationalist mobilizations of the 'war on terror' do not lead to any increase in acceptance for queers" (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 137). Ironically, the "war on terror" employs heteropatriarchal patriotism that reinforces national projects of assimilation towards a "Canadian identity." Consequently, Trudeau is not apologizing to queer Muslims per se, but rather the representatives of all queers, those who have an active participation in state-sanctioned practices such as military services, family values, public service, national security, and capital/wealth production.

After the events of 9/11, Canada enacted the Anti-Terrorism Act in December, 2001, which calls for police and other national security to respond to threats of terrorism in Canada. By not specifying what characteristics

terrorist may have, authorities are able to use their own interpretations of a "terrorist," which "supports racial and religious profiling" (Jamil & Rousseau, 2012, p. 372) that would "disproportionately target Muslims as a distinct group" (Jamil & Rousseau, 2012, p. 372). Furthermore, Canada's military presence in Afghanistan as a response to 9/11 has been framed as the country's "role in the ensuing international efforts to battle terrorism and help bring democracy to Afghanistan" (Veterans Affairs Canada, n.d.). This viewpoint undermines the social and political consequences that Canada's "war on terror" had domestically in perpetuating Muslims as a national security risk that need to be neutralized. Canada's involvement in the "war on terror" also has very few implications in Canada's own protection against terrorism. This futility is demonstrated by the fact that many members of the public felt as though it would be very unlikely for Canada to be targeted in a terrorist attack, and that the measures of the Anti-Terrorist Act would not be able to stop one regardless (Department of Justice, 2005).

Within the context of sexuality, progress within the queer rights movement in Canada fostered "a white settler homonationalism [which] grew within gay and lesbian communities" (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 139). Trudeau's apology emphasizes this partiality, as it represents "a top-down homonationalist celebration of political liberalism and homonormative family life" (Smith, 2020, p. 81). The apology emphasizes that everyone should have the right to commit themselves to public service and maintaining national security — regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity — despite these institutions still being a source of violence and surveillance for many minorities. The acceptance of mainstream queer Canadians into national projects generates "a racialized, heterosexual, masculinist patriotism" (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 137), that manifests as animosity towards Muslims. Trudeau acknowledged this hostility during his address to Muslim Canadians, stating that "from the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) to security agencies, institutions should support people, not target them" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2021).

The Liberal Party's statement of "support"

is contrasted by Bill 21 in Quebec that was passed with support from Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) and the Parti Québécois, which targets Muslims working in the public sector who wear *hijabs*, amongst other religious symbols. This law disincentivizes Muslims from entering these public service professions, which happen to be the same type that the Liberal Party apologizes for discriminating against LGBT2 Canadians. In December of 2021, Fatemeh Anvari was removed from her teaching position at Chelsea Elementary School in Quebec due to wearing a *hijab*, which violates Bill 21 (Molina, 2021). This contradiction shows who is accepted into public service and national security roles and who the threat is that they are protecting against. While Trudeau has indicated that he is against Bill 21, he refused to involve the federal government, citing provincial jurisdiction (Zimonjic, 2021). Trudeau's apology mentions that certain queer communities, such as queer people of colour, "suffer from intersectional discrimination" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2017), however it fails to acknowledge the Canadian government's own role in excluding queer Muslims from these discussions by perpetuating Islamophobia in spite of advocating for intersectionality.

Conclusion: The Enlightened vs. Oppressed Dichotomy

Canada's neoliberal agenda permits respectability and state recognition to those who are able to successfully reproduce its colonial, neoliberal and capital agenda. Be that through white-collar jobs or being elected to parliament, this narrative of "success" positions minorities under the limelight of the "successful" mainstream model minority. This performative representation and tokenism aligns the "dismantling" of margins of oppression — like queerness and religion — with Western "modernity," further reifying the dichotomy of "enlightened" West and "oppressed" East and erasing the conflicting religious and sexual identities of queer Muslims. Rahman (2010) argues that "gay Muslims occupy an intersectional social location *between* political and social cultures, and that they suffer oppression through this position" (p. 945), whereby they are forced to choose and conform within settler society by letting go of either their religious identity or

gender/sexual identity.

In addition, by positioning the East as the geographic location of oppression and violence against gendered and sexual minorities, the erasure of Islamic representation and values within their eventual migration into Western settler society in Canada is justified, as they are encouraged to let go a part of their identity that contributes to their "oppression" in their countries of origin. This misconception is reflected within the justification for Quebec's Bill 21, where their supposed "secular" legal frameworks could be interpreted as a means to encourage Muslim women to remove their *hijab* and to adopt "Canadian" values, to in effect undo "the supposed gender and sexual 'backwardness' of the Arab and Muslim world" (Gentile & Kinsman, 2015, p. 136). Queer and Trans Muslim Organizations have worked to break free from this system of colonial erasure and assimilation into "enlightened" Canadian society, where these spaces "can be thought of as safe spaces that challenge hegemonic ideologies and produce oppositional collective identities ... where LGBTQ Muslims can be free from the hostility of the mainstream and, instead, simply be their 'true' selves" (Golriz, 2021). Reflecting on the existence and need of these intersectional, diverse and decolonial safe spaces helps "illuminate the inconsistencies of apparently monolithic and oppositional cultures of East and West" (Rahman, 2010, p. 949).

In conclusion, despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's attempts to apologize on behalf of the Canadian government and promise protection for Muslims and queer Canadians, his avoidance of addressing queer Muslims illustrates their rejection from Canadian politics. Despite acknowledging that both Islamophobia and queerphobia are present and persistent in Canada, nothing has been done politically to account for queer Muslims who face intersectional oppression from both discriminations. In order for the Liberal Party to truly make Canada safe for everyone, the existence and oppression of queer Muslims needs to be addressed publicly in discussions of both Islamophobia and queerphobia.

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Limitations, Spaces, & Possibilities: Trans Livelihoods in Contemporary Japan

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Content Warning:

This piece discusses institutional transphobia in medical and political spaces and thus contains medicalized language, discussion of sterilization, and violence around transphobic state policies.

Abstract

This paper will focus on the livelihood of transgender individuals in contemporary Japan. Human rights violations against the transgender community in Japan hold institutionalized footing, thus showing the influence of transphobia on a structural level. The harms associated with the Gender Identity Disorder and Special Cases (GID) Act and its persistence presents a multitude of damages for transgender individuals. Despite this, booming subcultures of gender non-conforming performance have emerged and thrived in large Tokyo city wards. A double-edged sword of visibility is present as these subcultures focus primarily on entertainment and sex. Thus, escape from the transphobic hegemon produces a set quantity of transgender livelihoods and its representations. This piece will explore how limitations and possibilities exist in mainstream representations and trans subcultures. To acknowledge my positionality and research efforts, this paper begins with a personal anecdote of recognition of the analyzed content and distinctive bias.

Content tags: transphobia; policy; institutional violence; subcultures; medicalization

Introduction

Discussion of the present hurdles to legal and social acceptance for transgender individuals prove relevant as it is an issue that extends transnationally. The harms associated with a lack of legal and social acceptance bar transgender individuals from receiving the same opportunities and treatment as cisgender individuals. However, the pursuit of acceptance is not an easy task. Specifically in Japan, the Gender Identity Disorder and Special Cases (GID) Act presents an institutionalized hurdle. This paper will argue that Japan's GID Act perpetuates harm for trans individuals in multiple aspects of life, specifically through employment, mainstream representations, and subcultures. This paper will show this using discussion of the GID Act's requirements created for transgender individuals to gain gender identity acceptance, the harms associated with not meeting those requirements, the limitations of non-gender conforming Japanese subcultures, and the expansion of trans livelihoods in

Japan. In addition, I will position myself in this paper by discussing my experience as a person with Korean heritage and my previous biases towards Japan's government. This paper is one component of a larger process of unlearning bias.

A Personal Anecdote: Unlearning Biases and Understanding Animosity

As a person of East Asian heritage, I have a personal connection to the discussed material of this paper. My mom's side of the family hails from South Korea, meaning my childhood required many discussions of Japan's horrendous genocide and continuous denial of their actions. The Japanese occupation of Korea during the early 1900s and products of their colonial violence have existed as ongoing processes. I grew up listening to my own grandparents and great-grandparents recount how the Japanese invasion devastated their life, and how the effects after their intrusion left millions in distress. Even today, witnessing how Japan's government continues to deny

their war crimes, a very significant part of my life has been spent expressing frustration and disappointment towards their human rights violations and continued denial of these violations.

In connection, this paper was difficult for me to write as I felt almost apathetic. I am aware of how awful the GID Act is, and how prevalent the stigma of non-heteronormative genders and sexuality in East Asian countries — even in South Korea, as all my trips there have never been complete without witnessing an act of homophobia or transphobia. However, my own personal animosities towards the Japanese government felt almost vindicated while reading on the mistreatment of transgender people in Japan. I felt frustrated with myself because I placed my own frustrations over those who are directly impacted by the GID Act and its blatant legal upholding of transphobia. My animosity motivated me to write this paper because I wanted to further my knowledge on Japan's continued acts of mistreatment. However, I acknowledge my decision to pursue this paper's content matter was not out of pure curiosity and solidarity. Although I continue to feel upset with myself for this, I believe that it enhances my sense of responsibility to educate myself on the mistreatment of sexual minorities in East Asian countries.

Context

Gender Identity Disorder has been disavowed of its identification as a psychiatric disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (The Lancet, 2019). However, its removal was not enforced with new teachings on gender-affirming treatment and supports, leading to a large gap of possibilities that has been abused by some countries and their transgender representations (The Lancet, 2019). One discussed in detail through this paper, —Japan's GID Act — has been heavily criticized for its blatant human rights violations (The Lancet, 2019).

Japan's Gender Identity Disorder and Special Cases (GID) Act was brought into power over ten years ago and allows transgender people to legally change their gender

identification (The Lancet, 2019). On the surface, the act seems inclusive, influential, and relatively easy, but the act places a multitude of taxing requirements to legally change one's gender (Stewart & Doi, 2019). The requirements coerce Japanese transgender individuals to submit to a list of invasive and permanent medical procedures to be recognized by the state (Stewart & Doi, 2019). Despite multiple repeal attempts, Japan's Supreme Court has continued to uphold this act, specifically heralding its sterilization requirement, believing that if transgender people were allowed to procreate, it "may confuse the legal order as well as society" (Stewart & Doi, 2019). The law has led many transgender Japanese people to harbor resentment towards the tedious and drastic measures necessary to be legally accepted. Accordingly, social stigma, medical conditions, and financial disadvantages bar a person's ability to fulfill such requirements. This leads many to forgo the process of legally changing their gender, instead having to identify with the gender assigned to them at birth (Stewart & Doi, 2019).

Pursue or not to Pursue: The GID Act and its Effects on Trans Livelihoods

For individuals who are unable to change their legal gender, a life of misunderstanding and social humiliation persists as they become victims to acts of transphobic violence (Stewart & Doi, 2019). Identification forms are necessary to access travel, employment, education, leisure, and medical treatment — so when transgender individuals fail to identify with the set gender marker on their card, they often receive a slew of personal questions and frequent mistreatment (Stewart & Doi, 2019). Fear of this treatment has caused many transgender individuals to not seek necessary medical care or avoid places that require identification forms (Stewart & Doi, 2019).

This fear is also heightened in the context of Japan lacking any anti-discrimination laws that protect against the discrimination of gender or sexuality (Stewart & Doi, 2019). Thus, transgender people have no legal protection from transphobic harassment, violence, or discrimination.

Despite the overt fear associated with acts of physical or verbal violence, Japan's anti-trans sentiment extends far past such acts. Transphobia also persists throughout employment as any workplace is legally allowed to refuse employment to transgender people (Stewart & Doi, 2019). Additionally, strict pressure to find a job after completing post-secondary education pushes many to pursue a GID Act mandated transition before they finish their education to not jeopardize chances for employment (Stewart & Doi, 2019).

For individuals who decide to pursue a legal change of gender under the GID Act, the process is synonymous with struggle. To receive a diagnosis of GID, individuals must find an appropriate clinic; however, clinics outside Tokyo are rare. Thus, it becomes much harder for both individuals of rural Japan and for individuals within Tokyo, since constant referrals to different clinics becomes commonplace due to the lengths of transphobia in medical communities, as well as as a limited geospatial access for those in rural areas of Japan (Stewart & Doi, 2019). Receiving a diagnosis is also precarious with timing as it can take multiple months or over a year to be formally diagnosed (The Lancet, 2019). Additionally, post-diagnosis individuals must undergo forced sterilization and be of unmarried status for legal gender change consideration (Stewart & Doi, 2019). Transgender individuals in Japan are thus faced with the decision to pursue legal recognition or live life according to the untrue gender marker on a plastic card. We can see, however, how life extends past mere survival for sexual and gender minorities through observing the development of subcultures.

Performances of Survival: Prominence of Entertainment and Sex in Japanese Trans Subcultures

Transgender communities in Japan have largely been hidden since the 1960s, but shifts in mass media and a larger attention on sexual minorities in the late 1990s have increased visibility (Mitsubishi, 2006). Originally beginning with media fascination around cross-dressing, academic recognition soon followed suit (Mitsubishi, 2006).

Mitsubishi (2006) was an individual who focused academic attention on the transgender community in Shinjuku, a ward of Tokyo, during the nineties. Mitsubishi frequented bars, clubs, recreational facilities, and sex services to experience and immerse themselves in the Shinjuku transgender community. Mitsubishi also transcended observation in their ethnography by participating in cross-dressing and sporadically working in a popular cross-dressing bar. Cross-dressing bars served as a social safe space for non-heteronormative people, offering employment to cross-dressing individuals, while also allowing for their clientele to feel safe and freely converse with those of the same communities. Hostesses often experimented with makeup and clothing as many facilities were equipped with dressing rooms designed for employees to explore gender performance. Mitsubishi (2006) found that these social spaces also provided individuals with the potential of sex, as hostesses and individuals frequenting the bars frequently developed sexual relations. The creation and popularity of such bars has persisted as contemporary Tokyo continues to employ hundreds of people for bars, clubs, and cafes that focus on cross-dressing and drag (Ho, 2020).

The cross-dressing community fails to feel a burden akin to transgender individuals described by Stewart and Doi as the dango culture is able to access normativity while also negotiating performances of gender non-conformity (Ho, 2020). In connection to Ho's (2020) research on popular cross-dressing bars in Tokyo, employees of a studied bar Garcon chose not to identify with LGBT identities, instead opting to disavow a label. Employment at Garcon allowed for gender non-conforming employees like Ikki to access monetary stability, sociability, and form relationships while also expressing their desire to perform their gender as they wish. As Ikki operates in "neither an entirely normative nor anti-normative stance" (Ho, 2020, p. 114), they hold their freedom as a rejection of belonging to queer subculture or the mainstream. Individuals like Ikki who can work in entertainment and hospitality are given media attention that do not jeopardize

their safety or financial stability. However, within Japanese transgender subcultures, individuals who are overlooked by media and researchers fail to receive the same acceptance (McLelland, 2003).

Limitations: Futurities and Questions of Representation

The liveliness and plethora of cross-dressing facilities like bars, clubs, cafes, and performances create an appearance of a booming and safe subculture, but this does not reflect reality. These spaces focus the subculture on entertainment and sex, leading many clientele to associate cross-dressing or transgender identities with sexuality and performance (McLelland, 2003). Connections and possibilities for transgender people are then limited to spaces of entertainment and sex, failing to fully represent transgender life outside these prescribed niches (McLelland, 2003). The production of a binary is evident as those of gender non-conforming identity are faced with a decision: to fit one subculture of cross-dressing or attempt to exist and survive within the hegemon.

Individuals who were diagnosed with GID rely heavily on medical support to gain social and legal acceptance (Mitsuhashi, 2006). Some who undergo transitions choose to stray from the existing queer and transgender spaces as they wish to leave that subculture to assimilate into the hegemon (Mitsuhashi, 2006). This association of "deviance" with non-heteronormative subcultures compel some legally transitioned individuals to discriminate against cross-dressing and trans subcultures for adhering to a life of deviance (Mitsuhashi, 2006). Some fault individuals for pursuing gender noncompliance instead of seeking medical help to "return" their body to their original gender (Mitsuhashi, 2006). Outside of physical spaces, however, there has been a recent expansion in what trans livelihoods are shown to be possible, as representation has begun to broaden beyond performance and sex.

The internet and its online communities have made gender support resources more accessible, allowing transgender people

to more easily explore their own identities and seek guidance (McLelland, 2003). The creation of online profiles also allows for anonymity which proves important, as the stigma associated with transness is very prevalent. Expanding past the connection of transgender to cross-dresser, the internet has allowed for representations of trans individuals in modes of mainstream success including academics (McLelland, 2003). McLelland (2003) purposefully outlined how the internet has platformed transgender people and livelihoods outside of entertainment or sex work, "pioneering nonsexualized versions of transgender identity" (p. 221), optimistically pointing towards a more recognized and ever-growing discourse of trans identities in Japan.

Conclusion

The human rights violations committed in Japan against the transgender community continue to hold institutionalized footing, showcasing an influence of transphobia, the harms associated with the GID Act, and how its persistence presents a multitude of damages for transgender individuals. Despite this, booming subcultures of gender non-conforming performance have originated and persisted in large Tokyo city wards including Shinjuku, Nakano, and Shibuya. There is a double-edged sword of visibility, as there are consequences for how these more well-known subcultures focus primarily on entertainment and sex. Thus, escape from the transphobic hegemon produces a limited number of constrained transgender livelihoods and representations. Thankfully, the internet has offered a widened lens of trans livelihoods and presents the possibility of a bright future in online and physical spaces.

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“The smaller the penis, the bigger the box office”: Ken Jeong, Sex, and War¹

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Content Warning:

Descriptions of anti-Asian racism, descriptions of racist and sexually demeaning media representations.

Abstract

In American media, East Asian male sexuality has typically been represented and positioned as an object of comedy. Actor Ken Jeong's career-defining roles in *The Hangover* (Phillips, 2009) and *Community* (2009) exhibit such tropes of sexuality-as-comedy. In order to understand the impact of these representations, the sexuality of these East Asian male characters must be analyzed in relation to the white protagonists they support or surround. By paying attention to the role sex plays in creating hierarchies among men in American media, we can understand sex as a tool for racial distinction and subordination in white supremacist media. This phenomenon of sexually-informed racist discourse is not limited to film and TV, but can be linked to larger systems of imperialism, from the history of gendered immigration from East Asia to North America, to contemporary American war rhetoric. In this paper, I argue that the misrepresentation of East Asian male sexuality — which is exemplified through Ken Jeong's roles in *The Hangover* and *Community* — functions to promote and facilitate American imperialism, particularly in practices of war.

Content tags: Orientalism; fetishisation; American imperialism; racial hierarchies; gender and embodiment

¹Quote is by Ken Jeong in his stand-up special, *You Complete Me, Ho* on Netflix (Chu, 2019).

Introduction

Ken Jeong is an Asian-American comedy actor most famous for his roles in *The Hangover* (Phillips, 2009) and *Community* (Paez & Gordon, 2009) as Mr. Chow and Señor Chang, respectively. Both parts have similar comedic quality and effect; Chow and Chang are both hyperbolically manic, strangely threatening, and meant to be laughably eccentric. Importantly, these characters are not intended to be sexually desirable to the audience. Their ugliness and sexual incompetence is repeatedly emphasized, to the point that their entire sexuality is an object of comedy. This is critical to note given that Chow and Chang both have similar functions in relation to other characters in *The Hangover* and *Community*; Chow and Chang — specifically through their impaired, laughable sexuality — work to contrast the authentic,

desirable sexuality of the leading white man. In this way, these characters help to establish the white supremacist design of this media by implying that East Asian men are sexually undesirable compared to the normative, centralized sexuality and masculinity of the white protagonist.

In this paper, I will link Ken Jeong's signature characters to larger dynamics of white supremacy and imperialism. I will analyze Jeong's roles in *The Hangover* and *Community* in detail, paying specific attention to how they enhance the sexual power of the white male protagonist. To provide context for this particular sexual narrative, I will locate the desexualization of East Asian men within a history of gendered immigration from East Asia to the west coast of North America. I will then discuss why representations of sex are relevant to

imperialism and racially targeted violence, such as American imperial war. I will ultimately argue that the misrepresentation of East Asian male sexuality functions to promote and facilitate American imperialism, particularly in practises of war.

Ken Jeong as Mr. Chow

The Hangover (Phillips, 2009) is a film of competing masculinities. Every man in this movie performs a different articulation of masculinity, which all serve to contrast and promote the supreme masculinity embodied by the leading man, Phil (played by Bradley Cooper). Phil is white, conventionally beautiful and masc-presenting, heterosexual, sexually free and empowered, paternalistic towards other men, and is able to behave recklessly and violently without serious repercussions. His white counterparts — Alan and Stu — are both portrayed as sexually intermediate and conventionally unattractive, though due to their whiteness are still given agency for violent and reckless action. It must be noted that men of colour exclusively play cameo-type roles in the film, usually appearing only for one to three scenes. The Latino, Black, and Asian men are all illustrated as extreme, chaotic, and outrageous in comparison to the central white men, pointing to a veneration of Phil's white heterosexual masculinity.

In Jeong's first scene, he jumps out of the trunk of a car naked, threatening the white men with a primitive weapon. The shot shows that his entire body is significantly smaller than the other men. His genitalia is explicitly exposed, and not in an erotic way. Jeong is obviously intended to be the object of comedy in this scene — as the audience and main men react to him in surprise — yet he speaks only one line, which implies that his visual appearance is the expected humour. The audience is meant to laugh at how Jeong is visually emasculated next to the three white men: he is short, unmuscular, vulnerable (lacking clothing and a proper weapon), and his penis size is not prominent. Jeong's body here is a spectacle.

In Jeong's second scene we learn of Chow's wealth and power, as he appears wearing

expensive clothing and accompanied by bodyguards, demanding that the lead men pay him some gambling debt. He is framed as brutal and manic as he threatens the men with violence and reveals that he has kidnapped their friend for ransom. The white-centric power dynamic is again established when Phil learns that he had drunkenly called Chow his "lucky charm" and expressed wanting to "take him home" — Phil finds this funny and cute. Since Jeong speaks more in this scene, we see him use a performative high-pitched voice and a thick accent which Jeong does not have in real life. This high-pitched voice and distinctive accent can be read as both emasculation and racialization which again coalesce to illustrate Asian masculinity as outrageous and outlandish, relative to white masculinity as normative. Jeong's third and final scene — wherein he releases his hostage to the protagonists in the desert — is the first time that Mr. Chow is named in the film. Apart from a series of photos in the end credits, Jeong is the only man to appear explicitly naked in *The Hangover*.

Ken Jeong as Señor Chang

Sr. Chang is a Spanish teacher at Greendale Community College, marked again by his manic personality, unpredictability, and brutality as a teacher. Here I will focus on season 1 episode 10 of *Community* (Paez & Gordon, 2009), where Chang's romantic life is central to the plot, and a similar dynamic of sexual hegemony between white and Asian men is seen. The episode begins with Chang assigning the students an unreasonable amount of homework, and Jeff (our white male protagonist) resolving to dishonestly befriend Chang to get the homework cancelled. Jeff is invasive — he quickly deduces that Chang's wife has left him, and immediately takes on a paternalistic position in offering romantic and sexual advice. Chang shows an extreme emotional response by crying and wailing loudly on Jeff's shoulder and is emasculated for being so upset, compared to Jeff, who is emphatically emotionless and unromantic. Again, Jeong uses high-pitched squealing and crying to garner laughter from the audience. By the end of the episode, through Jeff's orchestration,

Chang is reunited with his wife at the school dance, though the scene is more comedic than romantic. His wife is significantly more conventionally attractive than Chang, insinuating that she is hilariously out of his league. Their dancing and kiss is portrayed as weird and messy, as we see onlooking characters react in discomfort or amusement. This episode simply tells the story of a man going through difficulty in his marriage and reuniting with his spouse, yet the entire thing is meant to be funny. It is worth questioning whether a similar narrative would be framed as comedy if it were following a typically attractive, white, heterosexual man, such as Jeff.

The Racial Politics of Chow and Chang's Sexuality

Ono and Cheung (2019) contend that performing Asianness according to white expectations is actually a performance of whiteness. When Jeong plays characters that align with white-created stereotypes of East Asians, it is whiteness that he is performing, *not* Asianness. To explore this further, Ono and Cheung (2019) analyze a photoshoot Jeong did for GQ with Kate Upton and a white male model, wherein Jeong is illustrated as emasculated, sexually inferior, and comedically unattractive in comparison to the white couple — much like his signature acting roles. In one photo Jeong wears Upton's bra while she covers her breasts with her hand, in another he wears a tiara, and in all photos his pale unmuscular torso is contrasted to the male model's tan six-pack. Because Jeong represents a contrast to the white romance and acts as an object of laughter, he is set up as "the antithesis of a sex symbol" (Ono & Cheung, 2019, p. 24). This narrative is seen in *The Hangover* and *Community*, in that Chow's naked unsexiness and Chang's romantic failure make them the sexual foils to the leading white men, who are the sex symbols. The effect of this narrative, Ono & Cheung (2019) write, is the implication that "authentic erotics are reserved only for whiteness" (p. 23). This demonstrates how sexual representations operate to uphold white supremacy.

Hiramoto and Pua (2019) also explore

the sexual power dynamic between white and East Asian men in the context of the James Bond movies. They argue that white masculinity is unmarked as the "normative referent for heterosexual desire" (Hiramoto & Pua, 2019, p. 542). East Asian heterosexualities however, are marked as "deficient" and "non-normative" in order to sustain the synonymous relation between whiteness and normativity (Hiramoto & Pua, 2019, p. 545). This sexual inferiority is often translated as asexuality for East Asian men. Hiramoto & Pua (2019) report that in 24 James Bond films, only 2 of the 24 East Asian male characters express sexual desire. For Jeong, we can think of Chow's unerotic nude scene and lack of sexual expression as an example of this. In the James Bond films, what constitutes "exemplary masculinity" is highly determined by race, as opposed to significance to the plot (Hiramoto & Pua, 2019). This is also present in *The Hangover* and *Community*, given that Chow and Chang are subordinate to "exemplary" masculinities despite being active plot drivers. Jeong's characters are concisely summed up in Hiramoto and Pua's (2019) analysis that "East Asian male sexual desire is depicted as either nonexistent or a mere imitation of the 'real' heterosexual masculinity of white men" (p. 558). The former describes Chow: asexual, his body an object of comedy, and sexually undesirable. The latter describes Chang: romantic and sexual, yet in a way that is meant to be comedically strange and inferior to Jeff's sex life. This desexualization of East Asian men is a tool used to emphasize the normalcy and supremacy of white male heterosexuality (Hiramoto & Pua, 2019). To show how this desexualization is historically rooted, I turn now to the era of East Asian male immigration to North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Historical Context for the Desexualization of East Asian Men

Racist discourse almost always includes a distortion and degradation of the sexuality in question, and for Asian men, this can be traced to the era of immigration to North America after the American Civil War. Chinese and Japanese men began immigrating to California and British Columbia

in the late 1800s, primarily to perform manual labour (Yu, 1998). Asian migrants were often recruited to break strikes, and were thus paid less than white workers (Ngai, 2005; Lee, 1983). This immigration was highly gendered, in that it was almost entirely men that made up these populations. For instance, Yu (1998) states that at the turn of the century, the Chinese population in America equalled 85,000 men and only 4,500 women. Yu contends that this lack of women immigrants functioned to discourage Chinese men from establishing their families and settling in America. Ngai (2005) examines a similar dynamic in early Filipino immigrants. After the Immigration Act of 1924, Filipinos began moving to the American west coast to work on farms (Ngai, 2005). At this time, Ngai reports that 93% were male, almost 85% were under the age of thirty, and 77% were single (Ngai, 2005). These last two points are incredibly relevant, as they provide the conditions for white anxiety toward racial miscegenation. As Ngai (2005) writes, "By the late 1920s, the most common complaint against Filipinos, in addition to their alleged displacement of white labour, was that they fancied white women" (p. 110). Anti-Filipino racism manifested as fear of Filipino sexuality, as Filipinos were painted as a "sexual menace to white society" (Ngai, 2005, p. 110). A similar narrative was applied to other East Asian men, who were homogenized as "Orientals" in North America. Since the late 19th century, "Oriental" sexuality was characterized as "ambiguous, inscrutable, and hermaphroditic" (Ngai, 2005, p. 113) and even as a "third sex" (Ngai, 2005, p. 113). Yu (1998) finds this same sexual discourse in pulp magazines and novels from the time, which illustrated Asian men as sexual predators and kidnappers. Fears of the "yellow peril" centered around the idea that East Asian men "posed a sexual threat" (Yu, 1998, p. 290) to white women. This historical context must be considered to understand why the "sexually abnormal Asian man" trope is so dependable for American comedic media today. Jeong's characters are rooted in the popular sexual suspicion that arose during this period of immigration.

All of this sexual suspicion materialized in historic anti-miscegenation laws targeting white-Asian relationships. Such laws were directed precisely at the Asian male immigrant workforce, aiming to prevent their incorporation into American society (Sohoni, 2007). Sohoni (2007) importantly points out that this legislation addressed concerns of miscegenation undermining "the distribution of economic and social privilege in a race-based stratification system" (p. 594). People who exploited East Asian immigrants for manual labour profited from racial hierarchy because they could pay their Asian workers less than their white workers (Lee, 1983). What Sohoni (2007) brings attention to is how this distinct racial hierarchy — something that profits the white elite and requires clear racial boundaries to function — could be threatened by intermarriage between white and Asian people. This clarifies how representing Asian men in popular media as sexually deficient, threatening, or unattractive was an essential part of sustaining a racially unequal economic system that was profitable for the white upper class. Therefore, when the writers of *The Hangover* expect us to laugh at Mr. Chow's penis, and the writers of *Community* expect us to laugh at Sr. Chang's marital struggle, we can see these narratives as reproducing historically established cultural narratives that draw on racism to generate material profit.

Opportunity for material profit through racist sexual representations continues to be acutely relevant. *The Hangover* in particular was outrageously profitable — and profit-driven — and Jeong's participation in its racist images cannot be separated from the capital reward they carried. In 2009, there were scarce acting opportunities for Asian-American men, and what roles did appear tended to be written and directed by white men (as is the case for both *The Hangover* and *Community*). IMDb cites a total of two American films released in 2009 that featured an East Asian protagonist: *White on Rice* and *Children of Invention*, and neither film grossed as much as 0.1 million US dollars (Asian American Films, 2019). By contrast, *The Hangover* grossed 44.9 million

dollars during its premiere weekend alone (*The Hangover*, n.d.). The fact that Jeong had such heavy material incentive to take on the role of Mr. Chow should be read as further evidence of a historically established economy of racist sexual imagery.

The Relation Between Sex, Imperialism, and War

Stoler (2010) writes that “no subject [is] more frequently invoked to foster the racist stereotypes of European society [than sex]” (p. 43). Sex has been and is used to create colonial power relations — its images “illustrate the iconography of rule” (Stoler, 2010, p. 44) and serve to depict social power distribution. Stoler explains that an essential mechanism of white supremacy is the demasculinization of colonized men alongside the hypermasculinization of white men. Sexual control was necessary in European colonies in order to maintain Europeaness as superior, because sexual or reproductive mixing between colonizer and colonized would challenge identifiers of whiteness, citizenship, and colonial status (Stoler, 2010). This is analogous to the anti-miscegenation laws directed towards Asian immigrants discussed earlier, and is symbolically reproduced through the narrative relationships between Chow and Phil, and Chang and Jeff, where sex is the marker of social power that elevates Phil and Jeff.

Masculine sexual discourse is particularly relevant in the context of imperialism. Hardy (2015) writes on the popular rhetoric surrounding the Vietnam war, specifically the “rescue narrative”: the idea that the Vietnam war was the USA’s paternalistic effort at saving the Vietnamese from communism. Hardy (2015) asserts that this entire narrative is reliant on “the assumption of Euro-American superiority, and in particular, the championing of Euro-American hegemonic masculinity” (p. 256). It is critical that we recognize the role that white heterosexual masculinity plays in the production of imperialist discourses, like the rescue narrative. Kimberly Hutchings (2008) contends that the relation between masculinity and war exists because dominant images of masculinity

(white, heterosexual, violent, powerful, etc.) provide grounds for war to be understood as “intelligible and acceptable” (p. 389). A specific ideal of masculinity is necessary for imperial practises including war, and this masculinity is often represented and created in contrast to bodies of colour.

For example, Hardy (2015) examined the film *The Quiet American* to uncover how sex and romance are used for war propaganda, specifically in creating a centered ideal masculinity that represents the imperial nation. *The Quiet American* tells the story of American CIA agent, Pyle, and British journalist, Fowler, who end up in a love triangle with Phuong, a Vietnamese woman during the Vietnam war. Hardy (2015) writes that representations of war such as this work to reclaim white American masculinity through a romanticization of the war. In this film specifically, the gendered sexual relationship between Pyle and Phuong functions to illustrate “America as a masculine, dominant world power” (Hardy, 2015, p. 261) compared to Vietnam: “a feminized, invaded country” (Hardy, 2015, p. 261). Representations like this make use of representations of the East as erotic and sexually charged — a place for sexual adventure and invasion (Hardy, 2015). Sexuality then — specifically white male heterosexuality — is an ideal that is incredibly relevant to nation-building for imperial operations. As articulated by Hardy (2015), “gender ideology operates not just at the individual level but symbolically to represent the power of the nation” (p. 257). They argue that representations of white heterosexual male protagonists do more than just represent white heterosexual males — they create the national identity with which war is made possible. Phil and Jeff’s masculinities construct a desirable American identity, and Chow and Chang help in this construction by representing the undesirable un-American identity. They personify the colonizer and the colonized. This speaks to Stoler’s point on sex iconography discussed earlier: white heterosexual male protagonists are effectively icons of colonial rule.

This iconographic male sexuality is

present in *The Hangover* and *Community*, and is made possible and more potent with the presence of Ken Jeong's characters. Both Phil and Jeff's aggressive masculinity, heterosexual freedom and agency, whiteness, dominance over other characters, and centrality to their stories all make them suitable for nation-building. First, centring white men in the movie/TV show serves to centre Americanness, and consequently, America in the world. Second, I want to draw attention to how violence is portrayed differently based on race in *The Hangover* specifically. The three white men in *The Hangover* engage in much violent, reckless activity, such as stealing, trespassing, property damage, and animal abuse. This violence is framed as simply chaotic, funny, and a natural product of masculine energy; "We tend to do dumb shit when we're fucked up" (Phillips, 2009). Violence coming from Mr. Chow or the Black men in the film however, is framed as quantifiably more brutal, seriously threatening, and unprovoked. Interactions between the white protagonists and Mr. Chow are portrayed as if the former are always and inarguably on the defensive. This is a microcosm of American war rhetoric; the idea that white violence is invisible, purely defensive, and even humanitarian, compared to non-white violence, which is draconian and atrocious. Every man in *The Hangover* functions to orchestrate this, and by playing Chow, Jeong participates in reproducing white supremacist war rhetoric. Third, the racial and colonial hierarchies in both *The Hangover* and *Community* are created through representations of sex, namely by painting non-white men as sexually inferior. Bradley Cooper's and Joel McHale's sex appeal and represented sexual power is a critical element in what makes them seem ideal, venerable, and like people we want to identify with. Sexual desirability creates the distinctions between good guys vs. bad guys, good violence vs. bad violence, and good dominance vs. bad dominance. For Phil and Jeff, sex is used to make white power and violence seem natural and normative; they are nation-building characters, and effectively war propaganda. To conclude, I argue that because Ken Jeong's characters serve to support these propagandistic white male protagonists, they too are war propaganda.

Conclusion: Ken Jeong's Characters are War Propaganda

In this essay, I have argued that the misrepresentation of East Asian male sexuality has social functions beyond comedy, and is implicated in larger systems of imperialism. By examining the service that Jeong's characters performed for *The Hangover* and *Community*'s white protagonists, I showed how white male sexuality is normalized while East Asian male sexuality is presented as perverse. In locating the desexualization of East Asian men within a history of anti-miscegenation and sexual anxiety towards immigrant male workforces, I provided a historical background to Chow and Chang's sexual narratives. In exploring why sexual discourse is relevant to colonial power relations and war, I asserted that sex iconography is a nation-building project that enables war. I have argued that white, heterosexual male protagonists whose sexual power works to erase their violence can be read as war propaganda.

Because Ken Jeong's characters are not so much representations of Asianness as they are negative space around whiteness, they are both products and producers of white supremacy, white imperial rule, and white violence. Considering their empowerment of white characters, their history in anti-immigration rhetoric, and their resemblance to the colonial sexual relations Stoler and Hardy describe, the characters Chow and Chang only further promote narratives that justify and legitimize American imperial war. The issue is not simply that jokes about Asian men having small penises is degrading; I maintain that the framing of East Asian male sexuality as laughable, non-existent, or perverse — as Ken Jeong has done as Mr. Chow and Sr. Chang — is part of a larger discourse used to facilitate and promote American imperial war.

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“The love that dare not speak its name”: Surrealism, Female Homosexuality, and Homoeroticism¹

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Abstract

This piece began as part of a larger project researching women artists who are from or connected to the surrealist movement, and the expression or influence of sexual pleasure in their work. By comparing work by these women with the work of men in surrealism, I reveal how these men artists often depicted women as archetypal muses rather than agents of their own pleasure. In this piece, I argue that by choosing self-representation as a mode of sexual expression, women artists placed their sexuality at the forefront of artistic and literary discussions, thereby defying norms of surrealist sexual expression. This piece looks at works linked by the theme of female homoeroticism, first by a select few menartists, then by several womenartists, most of whom were in fact queer themselves. The section draws largely from the work of scholars Whitney Chadwick and Xavière Gauthier, two of the few surrealist scholars to conduct large scale surveys on women artists and sexuality, respectively, and on various artist biographies, as there have been no scholarly studies dedicated to female homosexuality in surrealism. The radical differences between heterosexual men and queer women artists in their depiction of female homosexuality reveals the defiance of these women artists in choosing new ways to express non-normative identity.

Content tags: art history; queer studies; surrealism

¹The title of this piece comes from a quote from Claude Cahun, “L’Idée-maitresse,” *La Gerbe* 28 (Janvier, 1921),

In the 11th edition of surrealist publication *La révolution surréaliste*, André Breton (1928) launched a series of “Recherches sur la sexualité” in which he and various members of the surrealist group, all men, discussed various aspects of sexuality. In the first investigation, Breton (1928) expressed his profound disapproval of the homosexual community. He stated that “j’accuse les pédérastes de proposer à la tolérance humaine un déficit mental et moral qui tend à s’ériger en système et à paralyser toutes les entreprises que je respecte” (Breton et al., 1928, p. 33): I accuse homosexuals of offering a mental and moral deficit to human tolerance that sets itself up as a system paralyzing all enterprises that I respect. In the same conversation, surrealist poet Pierre Unik compared his disgust towards homosexuals with that towards excrement (Breton

et al., 1928). Certainly, not every member of the conversation responded so negatively, some expressing a tolerance or even acceptance towards male homosexuality. However, Breton’s oppressive presence loomed over the discussion, and when the speakers turned towards a positive or neutral discussion of homosexuality, he objected vehemently, forcing the conversation towards a different topic.

Despite their intolerant attitudes to male homosexuality, the group was much less condemning towards female homosexuality. Female homosexuality was neither shocking nor morally reprehensible to the surrealists. They viewed *amour entre femmes* as an instance of the transgressive, “free love” with which Breton so concerned himself and his idea of surrealism. Thus, in “Recherches sur la sexualité” the discussion of female

homosexuality was much briefer, reduced to sexual fantasies (Breton et al., 1928). In a discussion with no women present, the topic of female homosexuality revolved around heterosexual men's pleasure and heterosexual masculine perspectives.

Furthermore, the understanding of lesbianism and the forms of sex that accompany it was that these were not necessarily seen as "real sex." In *Surréalisme et sexualité*, Xavière Gauthier (1971) remarks that society at this time did not consider manual or lingual stimulation — acts associated with lesbian sex — as a veritable sexual acts, but simply precursors thereof. Penetrative sex was the only form of legitimate sex acknowledged by most heterosexual men at the time. It was also seen as an instance of power imbalance: penetrator (active) and penetrated (passive). In other words, sex between men made men of surrealism uncomfortable with the prospect of lost agency (which man would be the penetrated?) while lesbian sex posed no threat to their ego. Thus, the men of surrealism, like many of their contemporaries, understood and depicted sexual acts between women as charming or innocent — a feminine reflex rather than an act of conscious desire or sexual action. It is telling that Diego Rivera, the husband of Frida Kahlo (both of whom were involved with the surrealists in Mexico), enjoyed and even encouraged Kahlo's relationships with women, even while he was fiercely territorial and opposed to Kahlo's involvement with other men (Herrera, 2002).

Despite these problematically dismissive and androcentric ideologies around lesbianism, this tolerance and sexualization was also liberating to queer women at this time. Many prominent women artists in or around the movement were queer, most famously Frida Kahlo, but also Leonor Fini, Claude Cahun, and many others. Beyond surrealism, many other prominent artists from this era of Western art history were lesbians, such as Romaine Brooks and Tamara de Lempicka (Latimer, 2005). Paris, the centre of surrealism, was also a centre of lesbian presence and activity (Latimer, 2005). Lesbian culture was infiltrating general aesthetics of the "New Woman," or modern woman: cigarettes, cropped hair,

and masculine accessories were markers of both identities (Latimer, 2005). At this period of European history, lesbianism was finally entering into public awareness, fueled by the liberation of working women during World War One and early suffragette activity — where many of these activists and working women were lesbians (Latimer, 2005).

Nevertheless, despite the rising presence of lesbianism in Europe, heteromale attitudes towards lesbians was mirrored in lesbian imagery by menartists. Images of lesbians were unthreatening and even enjoyable to an audience of heterosexual men. Depictions of lesbians were geared to this heteromale gaze, not enjoyment for women themselves. To the heteromale gaze, images of multiple women were as enjoyable as those of single women, perhaps with added sexual thrill (Gauthier, 1971). Though modes of representation vary from artist to artist, depictions of female homosexuality by the men of surrealism generally remain extensions of the surrealist archetypes of woman and muse rather than a discussion of lesbian experience. We still see the same violently eroticized Freudian castrating women, or innocent, charming femmes-enfants. Further, the cut-up images of women and female sex organs — so characteristic of surrealism — are just as present. Despite the many scenes of sex between women, there is a lack of attention to women's pleasure, sexual agency, or experience. Women are still the object of desire, and even though no men are visually present, they are still the subject, as artists. There is a lack of seriousness taken in discussions or depictions of female homosexuality, and an unwillingness to treat lesbian experience as an identity and sexuality as opposed to a feminine impulse or amusement, or an act to please the heteromale gaze. Depictions are humorously perverse or unrealistically violent, as I will reveal in the next examples.

Images of female homoeroticism are present throughout the work of surrealist writer Louis Aragon. Aragon wrote various sexually transgressive bodies of work, including *Le con d'Irène* (1928) and *Le libertinage* (1924), both of which allude to lesbianism (Aragon, 2015). One of the short stories in

Le libertinage, "Les paramètres," revolves around a small cast of characters. The story comprises various fleeting and vague scenes, many psychosexual or vaguely erotic in nature. The story references both male and female homosexuality, including a scene of a "petite fille d'un voisin... les sœurs l'ont assise entre elles, l'ont caressée" (Aragon, 2015, p. 129): the neighbour's little girl... the sisters sat her between them, caressing her. Gauthier (1971) points out the homoerotic nature of the scene, in the proximity of the women in the story and the sensual language used to describe their actions. Though a brief image, and not explicitly sexual, the story alludes to an odd sort of relationship between the three. The sisters also consider sexual involvement together with a man. This scene, in its sexualization of a little girl (the neighbour's daughter is revealed to be just six years old), evokes surrealism's many images of childhood sexual awakening or *femmes-enfants*. Here, female homoeroticism is vaguely suggested — a playful, charming act between young girls, not an overt reference to sex, love, or even desire.

In contrast, the dark, fetishistic work of Pierre Molinier (1964) depicts extremely violent scenes of sex between women. *Le miroir*, for example, depicts two women, or perhaps just one woman mirrored, engaging in a sexual act. The bodies are disjointed, stylized and surreal, and are locked in a vicious embrace of legs, hands, tongues and fingernails. One head performs cunnilingus on a headless torso, which is either pierced by an enlarged, phallic tongue on her genitalia, or using an artificial phallus to penetrate her. A sharp thorn penetrates the torso through her stomach. Another head licks a taut, sensually curved ankle, characteristic of the leg fetishistic imagery visible throughout Molinier's work. Two roses create symmetry on opposite corners of the canvas, perhaps an indulgent play-on-words of *déflorer*. Its darkness and swampy colour palette, the sharpness of the figures' extremities, and the intensities of their gazes, lend a frightening quality to the painting. As opposed to two full female forms, the woman, or women, are broken up into duplicated genitalia and faces. While perhaps enjoyable to certain viewers, it is difficult to imagine real women eliciting pleasure from

enacting this sexually charged act of destructive violence.

This idea of duplicated female form was consistent in artistic depictions of sex between women by the men of surrealism. The arousing qualities of the presence of multiple women portrayed as lovers are present in the works of Picasso (1951), such as his etching *Female Love*. The print was the frontispiece for surrealist poet and artist Valentine Penrose' (1951) book *Dons des féminins*, which follows the love story of two women. Here, in Picasso's typical post-Cubism style, two women are locked in an embrace: a mess of jumbled, intertwined limbs, their faces drawn in strange angles and triangular lines, with emphasized sexual organs. Neither woman has a particular identity, they are both seemingly allegories of homoeroticism.

Many queer women artists use homoerotic imagery for sexual self-expression. For them, depictions thereof are radically different. Most include self-portraiture and references to actual lovers. Many evoke shared themes of peace, pleasure, isolation, and companionship, which likely mirror actual experiences of queer women. Peace and pleasure, both sexual and emotional, reflect the artists' ability to pursue their true identity. Isolation was a common reality for queer women at this time, usually having to engage in lesbian activity in secret. Companionship, and even collaboration, may be interpreted as referring to the relationships they had with other women. While sexual labels varied (some artists rejected the label of *lesbian* or *homosexual*, and would perhaps be considered *bisexual* today), these homoerotic preoccupations often appeared and reappeared throughout their work. Leonor Fini's sexually dominant feminine figures, Valentine Penrose's tender poetry about women lovers, and the constant coexistence of romantic and artistic partners Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore in their photography and life, are all important references to these artists' identity. The homoerotically inclined work by these artists varies widely. Either tender and subtle, sensual and powerful, or spiritual and transcendent, this variety of expression suggests personal experience rather than

sexual fantasy, like the work of men artists discussed previously.

Leonor Fini's art celebrates women's sexuality in a manner that is unparalleled in its openness by any other woman surrealist. Both in art and life, Fini's bisexuality, rejection of monogamy, and radical subject matter, showed her commitment to sexuality as a form of revolution (Chadwick, 1985). Even Chadwick, who generally downplays sexual qualities in the work of women surrealists, notes that her creation of a "new language that spoke directly to woman's experience of her own sexual reality... could succeed only by remaining independent of Surrealism" (p. 140). Indeed, unlike many of the women artists who were self-proclaimed surrealists, Fini's work clearly conveys the idea of personal sexual expression, unadulterated by the need to fit into Breton's narrow labels of surrealism. The heteromale gaze is nowhere to be seen in Fini's work, eschewed for her own pleasure. Chadwick (1985) states "Fini subverted the tendency to read the figures as abstract principles – dominant female, passive male – by basing the work on specific individuals drawn from life" (p. 87). Her nude portraits of effeminate, passive masculine lovers are equally suggestive of her sexual preferences as her dominant, beautiful, deified feminine figures, and both subvert the painterly norms of her contemporaries.

In Fini's (1938) *D'un jour à l'autre II* (*From One Day to Another II*), an abandoned, ruined temple is filled with eroticized, beautiful feminine figures — some nude, some partly clothed — in a pool. The figures interact with one another, clinging to each other or conversing. They ignore two masculine figures, one bandaged in the pool to the side; one by the side of the pool in a tiger skin; the other tied to a bench in the background is being pecked by birds. Another feminine figure stands under an arch isolated from the others. The most prominent woman, who stands while clothed, is likely Fini herself (Webb, 2009). The image appears to be an exaltation of women's sexuality, and perhaps an overt rejection of the presence of men: the feminine figures in the image ignore the passive and weak masculine figures in favour of each other's company. Here, Fini is central in this

scene of eroticized women, placing her own sexuality and sexual pleasure in the forefront of the canvas.

In Fini's (1940/2009) *Le radeau* (*The Raft*), two women rest on a wooden plank, floating upon a calm, deep blue sea, without land or another boat in sight. The two are isolated from the troubles of the world around them — this was painted during the peak of World War II in France (Webb, 2009). The woman in the green dress, Fini's own features visible in her face, sits upright, her hair voluminous, her expression dignified, her clothing luxurious and majestic. Her breasts are bare, and her hand rests on her knee, gripping it intensely. The other woman reclines on her companion's thigh, her dress soaked, clinging and translucent. Her hair is wet too, and her breasts are also bare. In the depiction of body language, the contextual isolation, and the sexually charged iconography of water — the woman in the wet dress is visibly drenched with passion — the image suggests sensual, erotic companionship, and even homoerotic pleasure. Furthermore, the calmness of the water and the relaxed positions of the women suggest a setting of solace and peace from the heteropatriarchal and war-torn world around them. Openly posing herself as a member of a homoerotic couple, Fini asserts the importance of her sexual attraction to women in her life and work.

Fini's later work, less inspired by surrealism, would go on to address sex between women in a much more explicit way. In the 1960s, she created a series of paintings, all scenes from a train compartment, in which two women engage in various sexual acts (Webb, 2009). Her dedication to non-normative sexuality, and openness about her own sexuality, would endure throughout her career.

In a similar image to Fini's, Frida Kahlo's (1939/2002) peaceful, affectionate, and coequal portrait of herself and her lover in *Dos desnudos en un bosque* provides a stark contrast for her representations of heterosexual love, often violent and anxious, or maternal and platonic in her paintings of Rivera. In her biography of Kahlo, Herrera (2002) notes that Kahlo's friends never heard mention of her sexual relationship

with Rivera, despite her openly strong sexual appetite and numerous affairs. Kahlo's paintings that most clearly evoke sexual pleasure are often autoerotic or homoerotic in nature. Amidst an arid desert and a stormy sky, two women rest in a fantastical, fertile jungle or forest setting. Here, nature is bursting with fecundity: roots are visibly sprouting beneath the women. Monkeys, part of Kahlo's typical iconography, play among the greenery. Huge leaves, bushes, and vines shelter the two figures from the external setting. The women, who are also featured on a sponge in *What the Water Gave Me* (Kahlo, 1938/2002a), are both completely nude, appearing calm and intimate. One sits upright, her skin darker, suggesting indigenous identity; the other, a white woman, lies on her lap, the seated woman cradling her head comfortingly. The seated woman appears to be cloaked in a red hood, which also provides a seat on the desert. Here, the monkey is suggested to be a symbol of lust (Herrera, 2002). The image was gifted by Kahlo to Dolores del Rio, a Mexican actress and one of Frida's lovers – a clear token of Kahlo's affection (Herrera, 2002). The image is similar to *Le radeau* in its peaceful, pleasurable depiction of women as lovers, and its open, self-referential declaration of love between two women.

Another artist whose work often eschewed surrealist sexuality for personally relevant accounts of female homosexuality was Valentine Penrose. Both the visual art and poetry of Penrose concerned itself with lesbianism (Chadwick, 2017). Penrose often had difficulties coming to terms with surrealist expectations of her role as surrealist woman – the “muse of Gascony” – and the societal expectations of women and marriage (Chadwick, 2017). Penrose was derisive of many of her masculine colleagues' sexism, and even her marriage had many difficulties due to her husband and fellow surrealist Roland Penrose's over valuation of their conjugal and sexual life (Chadwick, 2017). On her wedding day, the gift she gave him was a small, scrawled sketch-collage, titled *To My Husband, in Gratitude [as you might say]* (Penrose, 1925/2017). The image depicts

a standing nude, with thick pubic and armpit hair. In the corner, there is a scene between a bride and groom, in which the groom gropes the breast that has fallen out of his bride's wedding dress, whose head is thrown back, in “passive resistance or in a faint” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 21). Here, the evocation of marriage as unwilling servitude or even violent coercion is the first of many acts of resistance against the nuptial status-quo that Penrose would bestow upon Roland. The two divorced in 1940 (Chadwick, 2017).

Penrose also had relationships with women, most notably with fellow surrealist poet and painter Alice Rahon, with whom scholars generally assume she had a romantic and sexual relationship (Chadwick, 2017). During a stay in India, the two would form a close, intense bond — an intimacy that would translate to sexual attraction and shared poetic style. Penrose' style is clearly influenced by surrealist automatism, but much of her imagery lacks the violence and anxiety of surrealist poetry. Most of Penrose' other writings are much more peaceful, concerned with female desire, hermetic transcendence (especially Hindu and Tantric beliefs), and companionship between women. Additionally, much of her work, especially from the late 1930s onwards, would openly address female homosexuality, in poetry and prose such as her 1951 work *Dons des féminines* and her 1945 work *Martha's Opéra* (Chadwick, 2017).

Chadwick (2017) describes Penrose' idea of sexuality that is first articulated in “À une femme, à une route” as “based not on sexual difference, but on the coming together of two beings, now both female” (p. 52). The poem begins with the lines, “Ce corps ici féminin qui pend comme une goutte lointaine/vers l'autre ici cette fois féminin.../qui traversera des plaines avec ses hanches” (Penrose & Colvile, 2001): this body here feminine that hangs like a distant drop/towards the other here this time feminine.../who will cross the plains with her hips. Using thinly veiled sexual imagery and explicit reference to the presence of two women, the poem clearly evokes

female homosexual attraction. The key to sexual pleasure and transcendence for Penrose was same-sex desire, both in her real life and her work. Penrose's discomfort with the sexist societal and surrealist ideologies of femininity led her to create an entirely new poetic and visual language of women's desire and spiritual awakening. While influenced in style and imagery by surrealism, her discussions of sexuality are generally free of the violent surrealist treatment of women, making space for images of love, pleasure, and unity. Furthermore, like her many contemporaries' painterly or photographic self-portraiture, the poem is self-referential: the beloved *chataïne* of "À une femme, à une route" — To a Woman, To a Path — most likely references the chestnut haired Rahon, the object of Penrose's desire at the time (Chadwick, 2017).

The artists in whose work lesbianism is perhaps most central are lifelong partners and artistic collaborators Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore¹. Cahun's work's acclaimed *idée maîtresse* was same-sex desire: "The guiding principle to which I am wed...the love that dare not speak its name,...lies like a golden haze upon my horizon....I am in her; she is in me; and I will follow her always, never losing sight of her" (Latimer, 2003, p. 67). Both Cahun and Moore used this guide in their shared prolific oeuvre of photography. Their work, most of which was created in collaboration between the two, is comprised mostly of self-portraits, generally Cahun, as Moore was more often working behind the scenes. Using references from homosexual culture as well as their own experiences as inspiration, Cahun and Moore's dedication to lesbianism was present beyond their work, in personal revolution and political activism (Latimer, 2003). Cahun's cropped hair, the pair's preference for masculine clothing, their gender-neutral pseudonyms, even their dedication to each other, decried any labels of heteronormativity that may have been placed on them.

In one image, an untitled double portrait (Cahun & Moore, 1928/2003) and one of the few to depict both Moore and Cahun (Moore often remained behind the camera), Moore and Cahun stand on a balcony. Cahun, in the right frame, wears a dress and high heels, her head rebelliously shaved. Moore, wearing a typical bob and a sailor's blouse, occupies the left side. Their use of cropped hair, usually a style reserved for men, and masculine clothing are clear indicators of their sexual orientation. Tirza True Latimer (2003) also suggests the pair's use of the stereograph (a doubly produced, falsified double-portrait) as a "visual manifesto of lesbianism" (p. 71): If viewed through a stereoscope (a viewing device with a binocular eyepiece that simulates effects of depth) these two like — if not identical — portrait subjects would converge to form a single figure of apparent substance. The resulting composite — part Cahun, part Moore — substantiates a relational mode, as well as a model of co-authorship (Latimer, 2003). Here, self-portraiture is an open declaration of their shared love and career. Elements of both their collaboration and "guiding principle" are visible throughout their shared career. The playfully titled *Entre nous* (Cahun & Moore, 1926) depicts two masks resting on a beach, arranged as if two faces laying in the sand. Matches and a cigarette, symbols of lesbianism at the time, are present (Latimer, 2005). Though less overtly sexual than other queer women surrealists' work, the theme of lesbian companionship and collaboration in the *oeuvre* of Cahun and Moore is impossible to miss.

These women-centric scenes of female homoeroticism — generally peaceful, intimate, sensual, and romantic — are some of the images most expressive of women's pleasure made by women surrealists. Whether explicitly sexual or simply evocative of feminine love, the works by women that we have discussed tend to be much more realistic and less fetishistic than those by men artists. As in most men artists' depictions of women's sexuality, the experience, pleasure, and agency of women are not important concerns

¹ I hesitate to label Cahun simply as a "woman artist"; she claimed "neuter is the only gender that always suits me" thus she would most likely be considered nonbinary by today's standards. However, due in part to her being socialized as a woman, and to her important contributions to surrealism and the histories of women and lesbian artists, I have felt it necessary to include Cahun in this study.

in depictions of female homosexuality. This is contrasted by the work of queer women surrealists, which are most often self-representational in nature, placing the experience and pleasure of women at the forefront. It seems to be no coincidence that these instances of sexuality, devoid of masculine presence, represent women's sexuality from the perspective of women's experience, enjoyment, and pleasure.

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It's Almost Erotic

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Artist Statement

"It's Almost Erotic" is a poem about the prevalence of the dangers of being openly queer. In much of the world, loving a same-gendered partner has to happen in private. This poem explores the ways in which the tension of remaining private is far from romantic, but rather an unfortunate reality for many queer people. Even so, there is a cultural romanticization and fetishization of the secrecy that results from forced privacy. I resist the glamorization of the forbidden love that many queer individuals, including myself, experience.

Content tags: homophobia; fetishization

It's almost erotic.

How no one notices
and I pretend not to
as you too hide behind formalities
as we act oblivious in public and private.

It's almost erotic.

How we exist in moments
and our own minds
and it is hardly *real*
but we dare never say anything.

It's almost erotic.

How those defiant giggles
our stolen glances
our secret worlds
our separate existences really suggest nothing at all.

It's almost erotic.

How in this age
we remain afraid of the very things
we might avoid if
we only stay in place at the border and only joke about visas when no
one's around.

It's *almost* erotic.

How we know we won't let us *be* erotic.
How we know we can't be more than silent.
How we know the dangers too well.
How we know it would mean too much when it ends.

It's almost erotic.

How we know that really, it's not,
No matter how hard we wish it to be.

“There Are Black People Everywhere”: Assessing the Focalization of Black Queerness in *Moonlight* as an Anti-Colonial Project

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Abstract

While queer cinema ought to be an area of film that is diverse, it unfortunately often recapitulates the exclusionary tactics of dominant, normative cinema. This exclusion is apparent in the way that many entries in queer cinema entirely erase people of colour from their narratives. Barry Jenkins' (2016) *Moonlight* defies the elision of people of colour that is so often seen in mainstream queer cinema, as a film that not only stars a Black queer character, but that features an entirely Black cast. Furthermore, *Moonlight* plays with the cinematic medium on a visual and temporal level to complicate our understanding of what constitutes a legitimate or worthy film. In this paper, I discuss how this winner of Best Picture synthesizes unfettered Blackness, distinct use of colour and sound, and unconventional temporality in order to create a decidedly anti-colonial vision. As such, *Moonlight* posits a world that destabilizes normative conventions — Jenkins imagines a landscape where, not only Blackness and queerness dominate, but human connection effectively usurps the trappings of time.

Content tags: anti-colonial, historicism, collective memory; mention of anti-Black racial slur in song title

Queer cinema is a particular avenue in which non-normativity reigns. However, even within this non-normative form of cinema, Black queer people are frequently elided. As such, *Moonlight* (2016) is a particularly topical moment in queer cinema, in that it privileges an explicitly queer romance between two Black men among an entirely Black cast, thus defying the whiteness of cinema in general, and of queer cinema more specifically. *Moonlight* synthesizes unfettered Blackness, distinct use of colour and sound, and unconventional temporality in order to create a decidedly anti-colonial vision. Consequently, *Moonlight* posits a world that destabilizes normative conventions — Jenkins imagines a landscape where not only Blackness and queerness dominate, but human connection effectively usurps the trappings of time.

To situate this essay, it is necessary to acknowledge that cinema is an overwhelmingly white medium. In “What is the Cinema for Us?” Med Hondo (2004/2014) claims:

...when people use the terms cinema, they all refer more or less consciously to a single cinema, which for more than half a century has been created, produced, industrialised, programmes and then shown on the world's screens: Euro-American cinema. (para. 1)

Queer cinema is not exempt from the erasure of Black people. In 2016, the year that *Moonlight* was released, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) — a media-monitoring organization founded in 1985 — reported that only 20% of the LGBTQ+ characters featured in films were people of colour (GLAAD, 2019, p. 9). While this number has increased in recent years, a notable discrepancy between the representation of white queer character and queer characters of colour remains. In the few cases that Black queer people are present and, even more rarely, focalized in queer cinema, it is rarely without the presence of white people alongside them. For instance, Cheryl Dunye's (1996) *The Watermelon Woman*, the first feature film to be directed by a Black lesbian and a crucial entry in Black queer film,

features a predominantly Black queer woman cast and stars Dunye herself as the protagonist. However, despite the multiple Black queer women present in the film, a white woman portrays Dunye's love interest. While an entire trend cannot be extrapolated from a single film, *The Watermelon Woman* is hardly the only film of its type to feature this type of coupling, nor is the coupling it features unique when considering real-life statistics about queer relationships. Zach Stafford illuminates how widespread interracial coupling in the LGBTQ+ community is in his 2015 article, "The black, gay community may be out – but it's not proud." Stafford (2015) quotes Dr. Gary Gates, who concluded in his 2013 study that "same-sex couples [are] twice as likely to be in interracial relationships than different-sex ones" (para. 7) and, furthermore, that "23% of same-sex couples were in a minority group, meaning that the vast majority of married same-sex people are white, with minorities most likely marrying a white partner" (para 8). This is to say that not only is interracial queer coupling — such as the one featured in *The Watermelon Woman* — common, but it is in fact the norm for most Black queer people. While interracial relationships in and of themselves are not harmful, this does not discount the harmful ideological function that their rampant presentation can connote. The pervasiveness of Black characters being paired with white characters in queer cinema is an attempt to mitigate the perceived threat of Blackness — which queerness compounds — by approximating it to the ideal of whiteness. In short, this type of coupling aims to make both Blackness and queerness more palatable, in turn suggesting that Blackness and queerness are inherently undesirable.

Moonlight forgoes such attempts at palatability by focalizing a Black queer protagonist amidst an entirely Black cast and pairing him with another Black queer man. *Moonlight* is based on "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue," an autobiographical work written by openly queer Black man Tarell Alvin McCraney (Jenkins, 2016). The autobiographical dimension of this project establishes Black queerness' inheritance to

the work — Black queer people are intrinsic to the fabric of this created world. This Black queerness also exists irrespective of whiteness, with the film touting an entirely Black cast. Additionally, the representations of queer sexuality in this film are explicit, signifying the film's adurance for unabashed focalizing of Black queerness. For instance, about halfway through the movie, Chiron, the film's protagonist, and Kevin, his love interest, kiss while they sit on the beach. Kevin then proceeds to give Chiron a handjob, a 45-second-long scene scored by Chiron's moans, that culminates in Kevin wiping Chiron's semen off of his hand in the sand. While we do not see Chiron's penis, nor the actual act of foreplay, there is no denying that it happens. The scene's explicitness makes it implausible to ignore the film's inherent nuance: a vision of queerness that is Black, as well as a vision of Blackness that is queer.

The use of colour in the film further accentuates its Black queer meditation. In "Colour Patterns," Hannah Beachler (2017), *Moonlight's* production designer, speaks extensively about the meticulousness of the film's colour scheme — she describes how the colour scheme shifts throughout the film to signify transitions in Chiron's life. While Beachler (2017) primarily focuses on the usage of pastel colours, such as light yellow or pink, I am most interested in Beachler's usage of the colour blue, the colour of "Juan's soft blue car" (p. 19) and the "water where Juan teaches Little to swim" (p. 19) among other things. The significance of this colour is especially expressed in the film's most infamous line — and the original title of the work upon which the film is based — "In moonlight, Black boys look blue" (Jenkins, 2016).

The colour blue is present throughout many of the film's most significant moments: Kevin wears a blue shirt during all three segments of the film, Juan drives a cerulean Chevrolet Impala, Chiron wears a blue backpack during the segments in which he attends school. However, the most crucial scene that uses this colour is the one wherein Juan teaches Chiron how

all three segments of the film, Juan drives a cerulean Chevrolet Impala, Chiron wears a blue backpack during the segments in which he attends school. However, the most crucial scene that uses this colour is the one wherein Juan teaches Chiron how to swim, which Jenkins himself deems as the scene wherein the two become “intimately bonded” (Coggan, 2016, para. 3). How this scene is filmed is particularly resonant: the camera sits atop the water, causing the entire scene to be composed of low-angle shots that point toward the blue sky and Chiron and Juan in equal measure. The water from the Atlantic Ocean — where the scene was shot — consistently, and unpredictably spills onto the camera, creating a distinctive *swishing* lull alongside Nicholas Britnell’s classical score. Consequently, Chiron, Juan, and the blue water and sky become joint, inseparable forces in this scene — these two Black characters are not under the mercy of the environment or vice versa, but dwell in a perfect composite equilibrium with their blue environment. Thus, the synthesis of the scene’s blue setting and its enactment of the connection between two Black men contributes significantly to the film’s anti-colonial ethos.

In the colonial trappings of patriarchal, white supremacist society, intimacy is only viewed as legitimate if romantic, and between a cisgender heterosexual man and cisgender heterosexual woman. Additionally, the only legitimate family is presumed to be nuclear, containing a mother, father, and children who are biologically related to each other and their parents. The scene in which Juan teaches Chiron how to swim disrupts these heterosexist notions of intimacy on two principal fronts. First, the moment is shared between a Black man and a Black boy who ostensibly share the same gender identity and who function in a way akin to a father and son, despite not being biologically related. Second, the colour blue is integral to the scene, a colour that often connotes masculinity, a construct that discourages emotional vulnerability at all, let alone that between men or boys. This two-fold disruption as signified by the colour blue therefore grounds the ethos of *Moonlight*’s anti-colonial project.

Moonlight’s score adds another layer

to its anti-colonial ethos. Despite the film’s inclusion of musical choices that align with contemporary of Black musical culture — such as Boris Gardiner’s (1973) “Every Nigger is a Star” and Jidenna’s (2015) “Classic Man” — the score is largely classical. While Black classical composers surely existed, classical music is nonetheless a genre associated with whiteness. In his article, “Am I Not a Minority?” Lebanese Druze composer, Nepal Maysaud (2019), argues that western classical music is inherently rooted in white supremacy:

The romantic idea of the composer-genius has been successful in keeping Western classical music a whites-only field. The conflation of “genius” and “white man” means that no minority will be viewed as a real genius, and hence not a real composer. (para. 11)

The fact that it is so difficult for people of colour to be seen as legitimate in the field of classical music exemplifies how entrenched the believed whiteness of classical music is. Similarly, in his highly controversial article “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” Black music theory professor Philip A. Ewell (2020) claims, “Music theory is white [...] which manifests itself in the composers we choose to represent our field inside and outside of the classroom, and in the music theorists that we elevate to the top of our discipline” (p. 1). The fact that music theory — the very study of classical music — is also a field that is overwhelmingly white, further exemplifies the extent to which whiteness is attributed to classical music. Maysaud and Ewell’s contentions reveal how intrinsic the association of classical music with whiteness — right down to the study of its foundations — is.

Considering the whiteness that tends to be projected onto classical music, Fariyah Zaman (2006) argues that *Moonlight*’s usage of such a classical score is an act of purposeful dissent: “The soundtrack alone exemplifies a general rebellion against expectation, as Jenkins refuses to subscribe to the rule that when telling tales from the hood, you play music that your character would listen to themselves” (p. 42). While Zaman’s claim

holds bearing, the film's music choices are more complex than just acting as a means of rebellion against stereotypes. The overwhelmingly classical score instead imagines an unfettered reality for Black existence, wherein one is unencumbered from stringent boundaries, such as those of musical genres. As such, the film's soundscape further accentuates the film's anti-colonial ethos. This soundscape disrupts the binary logic that renders Blackness solely compatible with genres such as hip-hop, and incompatible with classical music, thus articulating Blackness as far more nuanced and expansive. Consequently, the film's soundscape denotes its focalization of Black queer men, amidst a world that tends to dismiss the idea that Blackness and queerness can co-exist.

The temporal style of *Moonlight's* narrative is also paramount to its anti-colonial ethos. The film is broken down into three different moments in time, as signified by different names by which Chiron is referred to throughout the story. The first section of the movie is "Little," which focuses on Chiron as a young child, and ends with him discovering that Juan sells drugs to his mother; the film's second section, "Chiron," focuses on Chiron's teenage years and ends with him being arrested after assaulting his homophobic bully; and the film's third and final section, "Black," focuses on Chiron as an adult, and ends with him cathartically embracing Kevin. The film is void of any time stamps that situate us within a calendrical context of years, months, or days — the signifiers for the transition in time are not through the colonial codification of time, but are indicated by emotional markers instead, as dictated by significant moments in Chiron's life. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), an historian and post-colonial theorist, speaks extensively about time and *historicism*. He notes that time, as we currently understand it, is a wholly colonial construct; clocks, the notion of a 24-hour day, time zones are all constructs created to align with capitalist productivity, fashioned by white supremacy. Historicism — which Chakrabarty (2000) coins in "The Idea of Provincializing Europe" — "posit[s] historical time as a measure of the cultural distance [...] that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West" (p. 7). As such, time

privileges white history and white ontologies, which are inherently unaccommodating of Blackness. Therefore, *Moonlight's* irreverence for inscriptions of time is intrinsic to its centering of Blackness and is subsequently at the heart of its anti-colonial project.

Similarly, in her piece, "Clocks for Seeing: Cinema, the Fantastic, and the Critique of Homogenous Time" Bliss Cua Lim (2009) meditates upon "the existence of multiple times that fail to coincide with the measured, uniform intervals quantified by clock and calendar" (p. 2). While Lim's writing primarily engages with this concept of time being uncontainable by colonial measurements in respect to the supernatural or fantastic, it still resonates with *Moonlight*. In the aforementioned beach scene that sees Kevin and Chiron be physically intimate, Kevin wears a watch, one with a band so large that it dangles off his wrist. While the camera closes in on Kevin's wrist and his watch when he wipes Chiron's semen off in the sand, we never see what time it is — the time is irrelevant in the face of intimacy. Consequently, I read this scene, the most explicit scene of queer intimacy, as an outright challenge of the idea of time as the basis for contextualizing and legitimizing moments. Chiron and Kevin's intimacy collapses colonial understanding of time and renders it void.

The renouncement of clocks and calendars is particularly evident in the film's final segment. In this portion of the film, Kevin asks Chiron exactly how long it has been since they have last seen each other. Chiron, whether because the last time they saw each other was traumatic or because he genuinely does not remember, cannot come up with an answer. Kevin does not seem to remember either and does not prod further. This haziness of time and memory calls to mind cultural historian Tavia Nyong'o's work. In his 2018 piece "Deep, Dark Time: Archaeologies of Blackness and Brownness," Nyong'o speaks extensively about memory as it relates to Black history, with one type of memory that Nyong'o (2018) describes being *collective memory*:

The model of collective memory I employ is one in which recollection gathers up the past with its present in disjunctive synthesis. By "disjunctive," I mean the fabulative process by which any act of recollection branches off in all directions, foiling any effort to cohere the narrative of the past into a single stable, and linear story. [...In] the process of recollecting the story of the past, we repeatedly lose the plot. (p. 99)

Nyong'o claims that collective memory — or the process of recollection — rebuffs the idea of linear time as the memory subsists upon and leads to various other memories or moments in one's life. We do not measure memories by hours on a clock, and sometimes are unable to even recall the date that it might have occurred; the proof of a memory's existence is the very act of remembering it, irrespective of exact times or dates.

Nyong'o's notion of collective memory manifests in Chiron and Kevin's memorialization of their previous moments of shared intimacy. Chiron and Kevin's love for each other is not substantiated by enmeshed histories of togetherness, but by a shared intimacy that defies inscription. At a later point in this section of the film, Chiron assures Kevin, "You're the only man who's ever touched me," which also act as the final words of the film (Jenkins, 2016). Kevin simply stares back at Chiron, smirking. The two characters seem to revel in this silence, uncaring about how much more time is passing between them, or how much time *has* passed between them, only caring about the memory of their shared touch. The penultimate scene of the film that follows sees Kevin and Chiron share a silent, cathartic embrace. The final scene of the film ostensibly takes place at a prior time, when Chiron was much younger, thus bearing no causal link to the scene that precedes it: Chiron stands on the beach at night, bathed in blue from the moonlight, then turns to the camera. This ending sequence, notably coloured in blue, suggests that time collapses amidst intimacy and that Kevin and Chiron's love for each other is what connects the narrative, as opposed to linear time. It is this ending that ties the whole film together, demonstrating

that moments are not measured by seconds, minutes, hours, years, but by touch — and specifically, the shared touch between two Black queer men.

Moonlight intervenes into the overwhelmingly white space of queer film, as a film that is unabashed in its Blackness. Jenkins' film features an entirely Black cast and, even more crucially, centers a relationship between two Black men, forcing its viewers to become enveloped in a wholly Black narrative. The film's unwavering Blackness is accentuated by its formal elements, namely its centralization of the colour blue and its largely classical score, as well as its episodic narrative structure. *Moonlight's* intervention is therefore anti-colonial in nature, as it challenges a film culture and overarching society that not only derides Blackness, but derides *Black queerness*, making this relationality its very foundation. In the film, Juan assures Chiron that "There are Black people everywhere," a consideration that Jenkins (2016) forces the audience to acknowledge in their viewing of this film. It is impossible to ignore how much this film revels in the omnipresence of Blackness, especially against a culture that so actively attempts to render it invisible.

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Eat Pretty

Anita Gairns (*she/her*) *Architectural Studies*

Model credit: Emma Findlay

Artist Statement

Eat Pretty removes the context of a woman's sexuality from being in relation to others. Without a counterpart, she explores the messiness, play, joy, and worship of self satisfaction for only her own benefit and expression.

Even when she acknowledges the audience or the presence of another, she does not change her behaviour to become more palatable for consumption, negating any external gaze.

This shoot was done with fruit not only because of the prevalent association in media between eating and sexual subtext (the two types of "hunger"), but because women's eating habits are similarly policed to be neat, tidy, graceful, and appealing. Further, the inclusion of "unladylike" clothes denies the viewer access to her body, to the nudity associated with sexuality, and the expectation of feminine dress.

In indulging only for herself, we the audience bear witness to a broader scope of what sexuality can look like or mean to an individual, and she frees herself from the demands of others.

Content tags: food; eating

Image 1 Description:

A person with pink hair sits on the floor in front of a pink background of a similar hue. Their hair is cut into a layered mullet, and they are wearing pink tinted sunglasses, a backwards white cap, white muscle shirt, and athletic shorts. Spread all over the floor between their parted legs, covering their arms, and staining their white vest is the remains of a pomegranate, which has been ripped apart. The model is licking the pomegranate juice off of their forearm, making direct eye contact with the camera. Between their legs rests a halved papaya placed in front of their crotch, cut side out, its shape carrying a yonic connotation.

Image 2 Description:

The same model is posed against the pink background. Their clothing is no longer stained, the shirt a crisp shade of white, and the shot is closer, more directed towards their face. The model is biting into a half of a mango, which has been scored into cubes while still attached to the outer skin of the fruit, their eyes are scrunched shut and the fruit covers the majority of their nose and mouth.

Image 3 Description:

The same model is sitting on the floor, posed against the same pink background. This time, the shot has been taken from further back, allowing us to see the entirety of their body. They sit with their legs crossed, just above the ankles, knees angled up, with their elbows resting against their left knee as their hands reach up. Cradled in their hands is a half of a pomegranate, its juice running down the models arms and legs onto the floor. The model peers down at the juice on the floor.

Image 4 Description:

The fourth photo features the same model, sitting on the floor and holding the pomegranate in their outstretched hands. The half of the pomegranate has been broken into two smaller pieces, and juice is running down the model's forearms. They have their arms covering their face, their head turned down so as to block us from seeing their expression. Only their white hat and pink hair is visible around their forearms. The juice which has run down their arms has begun to stain their white shirt. As their face is not visible, and the camera is focused on their hands, the rest of their body is blurred, with the image ending at their knees.

Image 5 Description:

The same model is posed against the pink background, the remains of the dismantled pomegranate once again between their feet, the halved papaya resting between their spread legs. Their arms, legs, and shirt are stained with the pink pomegranate juice. Their head is turned to the side, and their left arm rests upon their knee. They are licking the pomegranate juice off of their outstretched index finger, tongue extended and a relaxed, open-mouthed smile across their face. Most of their body is pictured in the shot, with only their feet cut from the image.

Image 6 Description:

The same model is pictured at a closer range, from the hips up. Their clothing and arms are no longer stained with pomegranate juice, and in their left hand they are holding up a half a mango, once again biting into it. Unlike the second image, less of their face is covered by the fruit, so we can see their nose, which has a septum piercing. Their eyes are open and turned upwards, tinted pink due to the pink tinted sunglasses they are wearing.

Image 7 Description:

The same model is pictured from a "birds eye view" perspective, showing the mess of fruit remains which now covers the pink floor. Both the pomegranate and the papaya have been torn apart, their fragmented pieces intermixed with each other, black seeds covering most of the floor. The model crouches in the upper half of the frame, their right arm outstretched over the mess of fruit they have created. Their head is downturned and their shoulders hunched, shielding their face from view. Their left arm extends out from their body, bent at the elbow, and they rest their arm against their left knee. Compositionally, the figure and the fruit remains take up equal portions of the frame. Pieces of melon are plastered onto their right arm.

Image 8 Description:

The model is pictured from the front once again, the frame shot from the ankles up. The mess of pomegranate and melon rests between their legs, covering the pink floor. In their left hand is the half eaten remains of a papaya which had previously rested against their crotch. The model is looking directly at the camera, smiling widely. They have braces and the pink sunglasses are lower down on their nose, thus their eyes are no longer tinted pink.

















Sounds Queer: Gender and the Voice

Li De-Yan Swoboda (*they/them*) *Women & Gender Studies, Religious Studies, and Sexual Diversity Studies*

Abstract

"Sounds Queer: Gender and the Voice" unpacks the relationship between gender and voice, and considers the question of whether the voice has a gender at all. Using various contemporary and historical examples of music history, I explore the ways in which voice and sound can be used as a means of perpetuating, multiplying, and dismantling cultures of gender. Further, I explore how sound and voice can be manipulated by transgender performers, or performers who forward a trans erotic, to invoke and undercut our expectations of body and sex, and therefore complicate our efforts to gender the voice in the first place. Basing my arguments on the inherent mutability and unreliability of sound, I seek to demonstrate the instability of gender classification itself and the inherent queerness that resides in all things outside our human systems of classification.

Content tags: music history; gender; performance

Introduction

Gender is generally believed to reside within the body. However, as most feminist theory finds, gender is a human construct that is hegemonically naturalized through cultural forms that reproduce it through performances, gestures, and acts intended to demonstrate its existence. Structures of cisnormativity organize bodies, human and otherwise, into classifications of gender which have no natural origins—only cultural ones. In a similar vein, part of our collective human experience includes attempting to organize the inherently disorganized world of sound into classifications according to our interpretations of what we hear. We believe we can deduce and classify what certain sounds are and where they are coming from. We use what we hear, for instance, to identify that there is construction happening up the road, that we can hear birds across the street, or whether we are listening to a man or a woman speak. However, our experiences of the world are filtered through our own biased expectations of what we think we hear, and our classifications of sound are therefore culturally inflected. As I will demonstrate here, transgender performers, or performers who forward a trans erotic, call upon the inherent queerness of all sound to transgress our gendered classifications and expectations

of it. In undermining our classifications of sound, both transgender performers and performers who forward a trans erotic expose how sound can be manipulated to signify embodiment, and disintegrate the body in the process.

For the purposes of this paper, I do not extensively draw on race as a site of analysis, however it is important to acknowledge race, accented or culturally inflected voices, and soundscapes as significant factors that play into how we connect voice with gender across identities and cultures. My analysis is not dependent on a "baseline" understanding of the voice (which would inevitably revert to a universalistic understanding that is inherently coded white), and acknowledges that race is inseparable from how voices become gendered through these cultural processes of classifying sound. This area of analysis presents an opportunity and a need for further investigation into the ways in which voices are marked differently along lines of race and culture, in addition to gender.

The Queerness of Sound

Given that we prescribe meaning onto sound, and that our human classifications of sound have not natural origins, but *cultural* ones, our expectations can be

undermined when we seem to be deceived by what we hear. In "All Sound is Queer," Drew Daniel (2011) discusses our human attempts to organize the inherently orderless soundscape of our world, arguing that in spite of our classifications, all sound is inherently queer. As Daniel (2011) writes, "to hear and 'to know what one hears' are in a constant battle for priority, and there is no possible neutrality here" (p. 9). What Daniel means by this is that we cannot always trust what we believe we are hearing to be correct, and that our interpretations of sound are inherently filtered through our biased expectations. For instance, he uses the falsified vocalization of an orgasm, where we might be betrayed by what we presume we are hearing, as an example of the inherent unreliability of sound to tell the truth (Daniel, 2011). In realizing the unreliability of sound, our human efforts to organize the soundscape of our world according to our own culturally determined modes of classification become visible, and it becomes apparent that such classifications are not based in nature, but hegemonically naturalized by humans themselves.

The Proliferation of Gendered Meanings in Music

In addition to his discussion around the inherent queerness of sound, Daniel (2011) draws attention to the ways in which music has been a space for the outliers of dominant society, such as queer folk and racialized minorities, to coalesce around a common identity. Music has reinforced identity politics in that it has allowed otherwise disparate groups of people to become united by their differences and attain visibility. However, as Daniel (2011) critiques, music does not engender identity, belonging or community, but perpetuates the oppressive process of *hailing*, wherein individuals are classificatorily called into existence, becoming identifiable (and more easily contained/exploited) according to their shared differences. Without downplaying the important role that music has played in allowing isolated or similarly marginalized individuals to not only access community, but to bolster significant political movements, Daniel raises an important

point: music genres, much like identity categories, constrain the subjectivities of individuals who have now been classified according to their shared differences.

In connection with Daniel's critique, Norma Coates' (1997) "(R)evolution Now?: Rock and the political potential of gender," discusses the hegemonically gendered space and sound of rock music, arguing that rock is a technology of gender in which masculinity is constructed and multiplied. As Coates (1997) contends, masculinity in rock is built atop the unreliable foundation of gender, and therefore "depends upon the development and reiteration of tropes and signifiers which have become tightly associated with both rock and masculinity" (p. 56). Much like gender itself, rock music relies upon the continued reinforcement of stylistic performances of masculinity. As Coates finds, the coherence of rock music — organized around this conceptual idea of masculinity — becomes jeopardized as women begin to enter the masculinist space of rock. To mitigate this perceived encroachment, the gatekeepers of rock music, such as those authoring rock magazines and articles and the male rockers themselves, employ strategies of containment where femininity is maintained as excessive (Coates, 1997). For instance, Coates argues that male rockers who appropriate femininity in their dress, makeup, or stylistic performance do so to assert power over it. Male rockers appropriate femininity for the purposes of containing it within their otherwise hyper-masculine performance.

Another example of the containment of femininity in rock is the designation of female rockers as "women in rock," using this classification to relegate women to a subgenre of rock as opposed to incorporating them into rock music as a whole. Coates (1997) uses Judith Butler's notion of the abject, describing that which is expelled or held separate from the main body, to illustrate her point. By promoting the idea of "women in rock," the cultural gatekeepers of the genre attempt to contain femininity by abjecting it from the main body (Coates, 1997). In spite of her problematization of

the phrase "women in rock," Coates finds political potential within this designation, as it allows us to draw our attention to the masculinist construction of rock music. To refuse this title would only reinforce the naturalized assumption of "men in rock" (Coates, 1997). As Coates' text indicates, music genres like rock are used as technologies of gender that perpetuate and multiply meanings of masculinity or femininity, coding certain stylistic performances and sounds according to hegemonic classifications of gender. It is therefore important that we do not fall complicit to the naturalization of certain sounds as masculine, and remind ourselves of the incoherence of sound by, for example, identifying the ways in which women remain abjected from and within the gendered technology of rock music.

Deconstructing Gender through the Voice

In "Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato," Joke Dame (2006) frames his discussion of voice and gender around the historical figure of the *castrato* in Western classical music. The *castrati* were individuals who had undergone castration before puberty for the purposes of interrupting the maturation of the larynx and achieving a voice of a higher register. The figure of the *castrato*, as Dame finds, opens up a compelling conversation around the relationship between gender and voice, forcing us to ask whether the voice has a gender at all. Given the constructed nature of gender as identified by feminist theorization, Dame argues that voice categories such as *soprano*, *alto*, etc. are not fixed according to notions of sexual difference, but rather categories that are subject to change as well. Much of his text cites the work of Roland Barthes, a French theorist whose writings on the *castrati* trouble classifications of bodies according to biological sex, arguing that our understanding of the sexes must instead be pluralized (Dame, 2006). Dame specifically follows Barthes' writings on the characters featured in Honore de Balzac's 1831 novella entitled *Sarrasine*, which follows the confused love story of Sarrasine and Zambinella — Zambinella being a *castrato* for whom Sarrasine has mistaken

for a woman. As Dame (2006) writes with respect to the voice, "what you hear is not simply a certain pitch, you also hear a body. As Barthes would say: you especially hear a body" (p. 143). Recalling Daniel, we prescribe cultural meanings of gender and bodily sex onto the voice that we hear. However, as exemplified by Balzac's story, the voice remains an untrustworthy piece of evidence for deducing what kind of body we believe it comes from. In other literary texts by musicologists, Dame (2006) notes that terms such as *androgyny*, *hermaphroditism*, and *sexual ambiguity* have been used to attempt to describe the figure of the *castrato*. Revered for the unique quality of their singing, the *castrati* trouble our attempts to gender the voice and dissolve the gendered categorizations we project onto bodies in general. A historical figure outlawed by our contemporary society, the *castrato* exposes the incoherence of gender classification itself.

By utilizing the mutability of the voice and calling upon the inherent queerness of sound, performers have continued to subvert our expectations of their bodies through their music. In "Michael Jackson, Queer World Making, and the Trans Erotics of Voice, Gender, and Age," Francesca T. Royster (2013) analyzes the performances of Michael Jackson to illustrate the capacity of the voice to undermine, transform, and queer our expectations of gender and the body. In agreement with Dame, she describes the throat as an *erotic* space that can both encode and subvert gender (Royster, 2013). In other words, the throat can be used to signify embodiment as well as dissolve it altogether. Citing Audre Lorde's idea of the erotic, Royster (2013) identifies Jackson as a figure of becoming whose performances produce a trans erotic that incite a feeling of potential for a gender otherwise. Through Jackson's varied inflections in his voice, his stylized whispers, whines, and grunts, he complicates the legibility of his body and expands our notions of gender, age, and race. As Royster (2013) writes, "Jackson forces us to think about the ways that the grain of the voice can be counterintuitive, and never fully describable or known" (p. 120). Jackson's

performances complicate not only his gender, but his gender in conjunction with his race. His stylistic use of his voice is counterintuitive to the patriarchal paradigms of an "authentic" black masculinity that seek to contain his body and his identity. By mobilizing his voice in unexpected ways — singing in falsetto and crying out in "hee's!" and "hoo's!" — Jackson transgresses dominant paradigms of black masculinity and forges new spaces of intelligibility that accommodate black subjectivities outside this monolithic frame. As Royster (2013) concludes, Jackson's artwork has been especially important to queer audiences for voicing and performing embodiments that extend beyond hegemonic, cisnormative conceptions of binary gender. The voice is therefore a space of trans erotics because it can be used to manipulate sound to cite our cultural classifications of gender and extend beyond them. Performers who forward a trans erotic make use of sound to expose the human constructed nature of these classifications, and demonstrate the incoherency of the cisnormative structures that uphold them in the process.

Trans Musicality, Power and Resistance

The queering of gender norms through music and sound is perhaps most evident in the work of trans artists themselves. Sophie Xeon, more widely known as SOPHIE (who sadly passed away in January of last year) was a prominent trans musician and producer in the *hyperpop* scene, and played a major role in popularizing the genre. Sophie's use of distorted sounds, heavy baselines, and heavily manipulated voice tracks not only queer our expectations of voice and gender, but of popular music in general. The subject matter of her songs deal heavily with queerness and push back against dominant understandings of gender and gender roles. Songs like "Ponyboy" (2017), "Faceshopping" (2018), and "HARD" (2014) explore themes of queerness, kink, and gender play while using heavily manipulated and layered voice tracks to express a transcendence of binary gender. Other prominent trans musicians whose work undermines dominant expectations of gender include Big Freedia, who emphasizes her deep voice in her music; Chase

Icon, whose lyricism explodes trans femininity and sexuality; Shea Diamond, whose music celebrates her identity as a black trans woman and vocalizes her experiences of trans misogyny and racism; and Laura Jane Grace, whose lyricism pushes back against dominant paradigms of womanhood, extending beyond them to embrace trans femininity. Artists like Robin Daniel Skinner from Cavetown or Cleo Tucker from Girlpool also offer us trans erotics, allowing us to think about not only the mutability of sound, but of the body, as we have listened to their voices change in their music over time. Vocal training, hormone replacement therapy, lip syncing, and contemporary voice changing technology in music are just a few examples of the ways in which transgender performers can call upon the mutability of sound to achieve particular significations of embodiment, and expose the socially constructed nature of these significations in the process.

Conclusion

In summary, transgender performers, or performers who forward a trans erotic, make use of the inherent queerness of sound to expose our falsified prescriptions of gender. In utilizing the mutability of the voice, transgender performers can manipulate sound to achieve particular significations of embodiment, and in doing so, expose these significations as human concepts that are not inherent to the body, or to the world outside human culture. In spite of our efforts to organize and classify our surroundings and our soundscapes according to our own cultural biases, the inherent queerness of the world and of sound remains. Genres such as rock music demonstrate the ways in which sound and music can be used to naturalize, multiply, and perpetuate hegemonic conceptions of binary gender. Performers who undermine our expectations of sound, whose voices seem to present a disconnect between gender and body, demonstrate the inherent queerness that can be found in all things, in all bodies, outside our social conditionings.

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DON'T TOUCH MY pillow talk flirty swarovski crystal clit mini massager

Kalliopé Anvar McCall (*she/her*) *Diaspora & Transnational Studies, Sexual Diversity Studies, and Women & Gender Studies*

Content Warning:

This piece is a reflection on personal experiences of sexual harassment and gender dysphoria. It includes a clear description at the beginning of an encounter where the writer experiences sexual harassment.

Artist Statement

DON'T TOUCH MY pillow talk flirty swarovski crystal clit mini massager is a painted self-portrait born out of my rage against You — not you, dear reader — but You, who put your hands down your pants on the metro while staring directly at me and smirking; and now as much as I try, I can't seem to make You, and your hands, and your dick leave the back of my mind.

So I painted You. Well, me. As You have no doubt forgotten me in your routine harassments, I too have forgotten what You look like in the banality of sexual violence. The memory I am left with is the outline of your body, your stare, and the carefully concealed terror across my face. So I painted a figure with my deadpan face and your dagger body. My memory has blurred You and me together into a misshapen and grotesquely distorted being, a disassociated, disturbed, vengeful monster. I am misshapen by my rage towards You.

To make matters worse, You trespass on my already complicated relationship with my body, my gender, my queerness. You make my body yours, with ease. You leave me confused about who or what my body is. I wish I had wide shoulders, large legs, like in this painting. I wish I had less body hair. I wish I had thin facial bone structure and bigger boobs. I want a dick. I want to find my clitoris. I want to understand my body — why won't You let me?

I painted You and me so that I can have a second chance at our encounter. This time, there are witnesses watching You in the background, and they won't let You get away with it. This time, I ridicule You by making You me. This time, I oppose your gaze. I looked away then, but now I look straight back at You. My gaze is forever unflinching.

Content tags: sexual violence; gender dysphoria; sex toys; gender and embodiment



Image 1 Description

The image is a painting on canvas depicting a figure sitting on a subway car. The figure is staring towards the viewer, body facing forward and slouched into a seat in the subway car, knees spread. They are light-skinned with curly brown hair, and have visible arm and leg hair. They wear a short-sleeved, light grey t-shirt, and blue shorts with a white waistband and white drawstrings. The figure holds their shorts away from their body with their left hand, and their right hand is inside their shorts. There is a bulge in their shorts where their legs meet, and part of a hot pink sex toy — a handheld personal massager/vibrator — sticking up from between their legs, presumably held in their right hand. The figure is not smiling. There are dark silhouettes of figures standing in the window of the subway car, their features unclear.

**Image 2 Description**

On the left side of the frame, a person — the artist, Kalliopé herself — sits on a stool next to the painting described above, which is hanging on a wall to the right of the frame. She is light-skinned, has brown curly hair, and is looking into the camera face relaxed, face neutral. She is wearing a light off-white, short-sleeved shirt tucked into belted, stylistically ripped and faded blue jeans. Her pose is relaxed, with her knees slightly spread as her feet rest against the bar of the stool, and her arms relaxed with elbows slightly bent and to the side, hands on her upper thighs. Her head is slightly tilted back and towards and painting, the lower half of her body slightly tilted away from the painting.

Filipino BL (Boy's Love): Liberating or Tightening the Cinematic Representation of Gays and Bakla in Philippine Cinema?

Alfonso Ralph Mendoza Manalo (*he/him/siya*) *Public Policy, Global Asia Studies, and Critical Migration Studies*

Artist Statement

In this poem and virtual gallery, I explore how Filipino BL has revolutionized the cinematic portrayal of *baklas* and gays in the Philippines. I had chosen to do this project as I was curious about the cultural differences and nuances between the terms *bakla* and gay despite the former being the Tagalog (Filipino) translation of the latter, and to determine if my understanding of these labels were informed by my consumption of Philippine media. This, compounded with the fact that I had witnessed a surge in Filipino BL during the COVID-19 pandemic, inspired me to explore its impact on queer Filipinos like me. Growing up watching mainstream Filipino romantic movies that featured heterosexual celebrity couples instilled a hope in me that I would find love similar to what was portrayed there; this poem is a product of my hope for the impacts on Filipino BL and the future of Philippine cinema.

This poem accompanies a virtual gallery which can be found at:

<https://www.artsteps.com/view/618dca935e87e45e34e7ff8a/?currentUser>.

The gallery is split up into three parts, which are accompanied by an excerpt from the poem. The three sections are *Setting the Frame: Problematic Cinematic Tropes in Mainstream Philippine Cinema*, *Read the Script: Origins and History*, and *Reimagined: Filipino BL*. It is highly advised that you use the guided tour to peruse this gallery, a short instructional video on how to navigate the gallery can be found at: <https://youtu.be/8k94KCaxVgk>



Content tags: homophobia; colonialism

SET THE FRAME: PROBLEMATIC TROPES

Bakla bakla bakla, how do you imagine me?
Taunt after taunt, laugh after laugh?
Is this who I am, is this all there is to me?
Am I viewed at the whole or do you think I live at the half?

Half man, half woman, am I non-binary?
Is it attraction, do you view me as predatory?
Nails done, pitch high, are we all Vice Ganda
Or can some of us be the next Boy Abunda

How do I fit into your imaginary?
Direk, direk what do I wear what should I carry?
Bakla, bakla when the camera's on don't show your worries
Smile, laugh, tease, you're taking up too much space, the storyline is now blurry

READ THE SCRIPT: ORIGINS AND HISTORY

Has the frame made you reimagine me?
Babaylan, that's what they used to call me.
Valued, Praised, I Belonged in the Barangay
Then they came and changed it all, why, oh, why?

They saw and they conquered,
claiming that we were the ones who were backwards
Fast forward, fast forward how do they view me now?
Well, I'm here and now my country is relearning to love me, oh wow

My blessings are now a curse,
Dignity and Pride, that's not what they give me to carry
What's in my bag of props, is just a purse
Always on the sidelines, can I be the main character who marries?

REIMAGINED: PINOY BL

What if my story is told, can I show you the real me?
Will I be strong, will I be meek? Am I the jock or am I the geek?
Sneakers up, bow ties on, lights shining down on me
Will I find my true love, tune in to find out this week

Observation, deliberation, which one is me?
Bakla, Bakla, Bakla, this is now my story.
Like you there are many sides to me.
How will I dress, how will I act, at least now it's up to me

Now it's up to me, will I show you what I dream?
Will I show you my aches, my doubts, my fears
Have I pushed myself into the mainstream?
Or was I just an experiment for this year

JC Alcantra and Tony Labrusca
Alex Diaz and Kokoy De los Santos
Which one is me, which one is bakla?
This time, it's not how the story always goes

I Am the Alpha and the Omega: Transfem narratives in omegaverse femslash

Lexi Martin (*she/they*) *Sexual Diversity Studies and Cognitive Science*

Content warning:

This piece contains explicit descriptions of sexual acts, lesbophobia, and transmisogyny.

Abstract

The omegaverse (also called A/B/O, short for “alpha/beta/omega”) is a subgenre of erotic fiction that focuses on a set of power relations between humans with speculative biology based on popular misinterpretations of wolf pack hierarchies. The A/B/O genre encompasses tens of thousands of works on popular fanfiction sites across a wide variety of pairings and fandoms, as well as a growing body of original work from niche romance publishers and self-published stories. While omegaverse works are overwhelmingly focused on M/M or *slash* relationships, shorthand for relationships between men (with some amusing recent examples of straight A/B/O fiction making legal headlines), lesbian omegaverse fiction occupies a unique niche within the genre. These works reproduce the alpha, beta, and omega hierarchy onto women as well, and as a result, alpha women tend to be written with penises in addition to or instead of vaginas.

While these characters are not explicitly transfeminine, femslash (centering same-gender relationships between women) omegaverse works act as a unique locus for liberatory and empowering fantasies that portray a society in which women with penises are socially valuable and desired both as people and as romantic partners, rather than as a fetishized object for the satisfaction of their partner with a normative body. Lesbian omegaverse erotica uses the flexibility of the fanfiction medium to depict non-normative bodies in ways that, while implausible, mirror real bodies that have been consistently ignored or objectified in the wider media landscape. These works create new schemas for transfem existence in a world that where we and our bodies are desirable for our own sake, rather than a sexual novelty in a world where we are otherwise rejected.

Content tags: porn studies; erotica; transphobia

There exist as many transgender experiences as there are trans people, yet even by the early 2020s, few trans narratives are available in popular, high-profile media – and those few typically appeal and cater to the tastes and understandings of cisgender (cis) audiences. Other stories are relegated to the counterculture: feminist and queer media outlets, niche interest publishers, self-publishing platforms, and more. In these spaces, neglected queer narratives can flourish, often in surprising ways. Fantasy and speculative fiction are versatile vehicles for deploying such narratives, in which real people with non-normative

bodies can relate to characters with fantastic attributes like magic, superpowers, or even stranger traits. In particular, fictional biology is a place of interest, where marginalized individuals in the real world can find common ground with fantasy characters with nonhuman, or even monstrous attributes, whose characteristics place them in similarly marginalized fictional societal strata. While the use of nonhuman characters as metaphors for marginalized groups has been rightfully problematized, these stories still remain a fertile substrate for liberatory narratives. In this essay I will explore how one of these niche subgenres

— the omegaverse — fits into historical media and pornographic discourses, and how it creates liberatory potential for a trans narrative often ignored: transfem lesbians.

Omegaverse (also referred to as A/B/O, short for alpha/beta/omega) is a genre of erotic BDSM fanfiction defined by a central conceit of speculative biology. Unlike most fanfiction, where the underlying characterization and world are based on a single published work, the omegaverse began as a prompt for a single work of *Supernatural* fanfiction and exploded from there. Because the omegaverse's tropes and dynamics are not derived from a specific parent work, it has spread far and wide throughout fandom spaces, spanning a vast variety of genres, characters, and media. The omegaverse is typically considered an "alternate universe" (AU) applied to extant works, much like "coffee shop" or "regency era" AUs, wherein characters are transposed from their original work into a completely different setting while retaining their core personality traits. Omegaverse works featuring original characters in a variety of settings are also popular, with several distributed by romance novel publishers, and exponentially more self-published as ebooks (Noble, 2018).

The omegaverse takes its name from one of the three sexual roles or *dynamics* that it posits as an alternative human biology. These dynamics — the alpha, the beta, and the omega — are loosely based on a now widely-disproven study about wolf pack structure, and form one of the sole commonalities across the genre's myriad works. Similar to our world's estradiol-dominant and testosterone-dominant puberties, characters typically *present* as a dynamic in their teenage years, and develop commensurate primary and secondary sex characteristics in the process. A character's dynamic influences their genitalia, sexual preference for dominance or submission, their size and stature, their scent, and more. Alphas tend to be larger, stronger, sexually dominant, aggressive, and are capable of penetration and insemination. Betas are the most similar to modern humans; their anatomy is

commensurate with cis individuals of their gender, and have no predilections for sexual role besides a level-headedness when compared to alphas and omegas. Omegas tend to be smaller, sexually submissive, and can bear children whether or not they have a vagina (if not, impregnation occurs via anal intercourse). In addition, they enter *heat* several times a year, where they are overcome with an insatiable need to mate with an alpha.

Omegaverse fiction typically overlays these three dynamics on top of existing human constructs of gender and sexuality, rather than substituting for them wholesale. This creates a fascinating system where the familiar Western gender binary of male and female is complicated by the dynamic ternary. Six genders emerge from this system, each with different social roles and connotations: male alphas, male betas, and male omegas; and female alphas, female betas, and female omegas. Omegaverse *femslash* (featuring erotic relationships between women) is uncommon compared to slash (men-loving-men) or het (straight) content, but is the subject of this essay because the figure of the female alpha uniquely parallels a trans narrative that pornography — and indeed, media in general — neglects: that of the transfem lesbian.

To understand the value of this seemingly marginal subgenre of erotic fanfiction, we must first consider the alternatives on offer. To put it bluntly: they are not great. Matte (2016) traces the history of modern mainstream transfeminine pornography — both in film and in print — back to the 1970s, when countercultural movements began to advertise erotic "female impersonator" magazines:

...a small industry of consumers, editors, readers, advertisers, contributors, publishers, and models all contributed to somewhat of a niche pornography market specializing in many variations of male feminization, (male-to-female) transsexuality, and other variations of what might now be termed transfemininity (p. 156)

However, because of the profitable nature of playing into societal stigmas, this content largely refused to accommodate trans audiences. Various long-running themes and campaigns in these magazines “contributed to a broader public discourse in which transsexual political power was presented as a pornographic joke and transfeminine people were considered bizarre, outlandish, and highly sexualized fantasy characters” (Matte, 2016, p. 169), and so “[b]y the early 1980s, market-driven, mass-produced pornography often fetishized trans women, transfeminine people, and ‘shemales’ as gender, sexual, and racial transgressions” (Matte, 2016, p. 174). The following decades only saw these tropes more strongly codified. In mainstream pornography, transfem bodies — specifically, the bodies of women with penises — are portrayed exclusively as objects of fetishization, undesirable in every way except for the exoticized appeal of our non-normative genitalia.

Tobi Hill-Meyer (2013), herself a performer in and producer of feminist trans porn, eloquently summarizes these tropes: “wearing makeup and high heels, shaving one’s legs, appearing traditionally feminine, getting and keep-ing a strong erection, ejaculating, and either penetrating someone with your genitals or being penetrated” (p. 157). Because pornography was one of the only places that trans women could be seen in any form of media until recently, modern constructions of transfem identity are inextricable from these tropes and histories, especially with regards to how we are perceived by cisgender society. When most people’s first contact with transness is through fetish porn that refuses to acknowledge that we have desires and agency of our own, these scripts become archetypes and stereotypes that then shape the mistreatment of transfem people in wider society. Transfem people who do not fit this incredibly restrictive mould are excluded from popular conceptions of transfem identity.

Because the fantasy presented by mainstream transfem porn is intended to appeal to men (much like mainstream lesbian porn), the real desires of transfem people — especially transfem lesbians — are made both invisible and irrelevant. The best we can hope for is to be accepted as the occasional sexual partner

and dirty secret of a cis man — not permitted to have a sexuality outside of fulfilling their taboo desires. We are starved for schemas that liberate or empower us as a glut of objectifying, fetishizing, and medicalizing narratives is rammed down our throats both in pornography and the media as a whole. However, this state of affairs is neither inevitable nor inescapable. While the overall fight for better representation in mainstream media continues, other queer communities have managed to carve out spaces for their own voices and stories to be told, both in erotic content and elsewhere in the media landscape.

Cis lesbian erotica — specifically BDSM — is a powerful example of how some queer communities have managed to create unique countercultural erotics to confront material oppression. Zanin (2016) locates one specific nexus of this resistance in 1990s Canada, surrounding erotic BDSM magazines that for a time were censored by the Canadian government during an anti-gay moral panic:

...following a centuries-old tradition of using sexual and sadomasochistic imagery as a tool for resisting state oppression, the magazines served as a manifestation of the Canadian queer anti-censorship activism work that peaked in the 1990s... shifts in Canadian gay publishing and the rise of Canada Customs censorship at the US border converged to consolidate a vital, S/M-positive dyke sexual culture (pp. 185–186)

One of the most famous anti-censorship actions in this regard surrounded the 1993 *R. v. Scythes* court decision, in which lesbian BDSM erotica was seized by police from Glad Day Bookshop in downtown Toronto, citing local obscenity laws (Ross, 1997). Ross (1997) was called as an expert witness to defend the bookshop’s sale of pornographic materials, and while the court’s decision ultimately came down in favour of the seizure, Ross compellingly argues that this is the result of “a moral panic reminiscent of anti-VD [venereal disease] campaigns, postwar purges of homosexuals from the Canadian civil service, and the citizens’ lobby to ban romance literature and crime comics in the 1940s and 1950s” (p. 153). This seizure, while far from a victory, shows just how powerful queer

erotics can be, posing such a challenge to hegemonic cisheteropatriarchy that the state is forced to demand their censorship and found entire police divisions to quash them. Glad Day Bookshop remains open to this day, still proudly selling a wide selection of queer and trans erotica.

By following in the footsteps of previous communities, we can create trans lesbian erotics that are liberatory and empowering. The key is taking the production of erotic content into our own hands. By writing, publishing, and distributing our own stories, queer communities can shift the narrative to critique hegemonic regimes and show each other that a better world is possible. While feminist, lesbian, and queer countercultural producers have ignored us in the past, Hill-Meyer is at the forefront of transfems creating pornography for transfems. Hill-Meyer's (2010) film *Doing It Ourselves* broke barriers, claiming erotic space for trans women and establishing an inspiring foothold from which transfem representation in queer porn has only grown. However, as a medium, film is difficult to break into. Making pornography with high production values requires actors, expensive cameras, a film crew, distribution teams, and more — largely inaccessible to the vast majority of queer and trans creators.

Fanfiction, on the other hand, has an incredibly low barrier to entry: an aspiring fanfic author needs nothing but a keyboard and free time. This allows marginalized authors to write the stories they are interested in telling, without the structural barriers of capitalism, white supremacy, and cisheteropatriarchy that prevent them from accessing the resources of the mainstream publishing industry. Authors can freely tell stories about societally stigmatized topics, opening the door to narratives that are uniquely affirming to groups that mainstream media has neglected. Within fanfic, erotic fiction and femslash are both powerful sites of resistance to dominant narratives, and Julie Russo (2018) argues that authors and fans of femslash fanfiction alike form a unique force for change in queer media and representation:

To agitate for their interests as lovers of queer women, fans have collectively developed both brash guerilla tactics (like flooding tabloid polls and rapid-response Twitter storms) and sophisticated forms of critique, which increasingly generate enough impact to gain mainstream attention (p. 161)

Unlike the slash community's large population of straight women authors, the femslash community consists largely of people who share the same identities as its subjects: women who love women. The sharing of sexual and gender identities between authors and characters provides a direct opportunity for claiming space; these sites of cultural production contain narratives written by queer and trans women, about queer and trans women, for queer and trans women — rather than by cisgender men, about queer and trans women, for cisgender men.

At first glance, omegaverse works seem like they might act as an extension of existing problematic trends. However, fascinating new phenomena appear in the realm of omegaverse femslash, as its fictitious dynamics give rise to characters with recognizable physiologies and preferences that mirror real-world queer and trans identities. Because it lies at this nexus of femslash, BDSM smut, and the subversion of gender norms, its relevance re-emerges; we can already see liberating narratives in omegaverse femslash that are directly poised to counter the mainstream's damaging stereotypes about trans women. Female alphas are unequivocally recognized as women within omegaverse femslash, regardless of their genitalia. They may have penises, but their womanhood is never in question — a refreshing change of pace from our deeply transmisogynistic society. Furthermore, the social status conveyed upon alphas as a whole carries over to alpha women as well as alpha men. Female alphas are openly desirable, and desired by other women in ways that are not shameful, objectifying, or fetishistic. Omegaverse femslash presents a compelling fantasy in which women with penises are in control of our sexual lives, rather than subject to the whims of a culture that wants us at best invisible and at worst as sexual objects with

no agency or personhood of our own.

Aspidities and RaeDMagdon's (2018) *Heatstruck*, a work of omegaverse femslash featuring Clarke and Lexa — two characters from the 2010s TV show *The 100* — presents an erotic story about Clarke and Lexa hooking up through a dating app. Clarke, an omega, enters one of her heats and is told by her friend to download AlphaMatch, a dating app akin to Grindr. On AlphaMatch, Clarke can find an alpha to help her through her heat. She messages Lexa after seeing nothing but an attractive dick pic, and invites Lexa over while knowing nothing else about her. Lexa finally arrives, and Clarke's reaction is a welcome surprise:

Clarke forgot all her plans. She stood, struck absolutely silent, stunned by the sight of the alpha who stood there. They weren't at all what Clarke had expected. First of all, her guest was female — last night, she hadn't cared enough to check the gender on CommanderHeda's profile. Guess that explains those smooth hands. She was also stupidly good-looking... *Is this goddess really as gorgeous as I think she is, with those big green eyes and to-die-for cheekbones?* (Aspidities & RaeDMagdon, 2018)

Clarke's positive reaction to learning that Lexa is a woman inverts the all-too-real transfem experience of disclosing your genitals to your partner (and fearing all-too-common reactions of disgust). Rather than looking for a woman and becoming disgusted once the woman reveals she has a penis, Clarke is looking for an alpha, and then is even more excited once she realizes that the alpha is a woman. Lexa is valued even more for her womanhood than she is for her genitals — practically the best case scenario for a pre-op trans woman in the queer dating world, saturated as it is with chasers (cisgender people who sexually fetishize transgender people rather than acknowledging our personhood) and transphobes.

Similarly, in JD_Riley's (2019) *Tarantella*, the presence of an alpha is used to legitimize a relationship. *Tarantella* is set in a Victorian alternate universe with entirely original

characters, featuring a female omega named Florence, and a female beta named Olivia, in forbidden love — as omegas in the work's Victorian England are only permitted to marry alphas. The two decide to solve this problem and remain together by finding an alpha who can marry one of them, but accept both Olivia and Florence as a package deal. The two work together to seduce Alex, a female alpha, and eventually succeed. Florence first describes Alex to Olivia thus:

"An Alpha, my darling," she blurted happily. "The very one Hannah spoke of. I met her tonight and she was lovely. I cannot wait for you to meet her at your sister's party... you will no doubt find her just as lovely as I did... She is a gentlewoman... with a sun-kissed face and kind eyes. She thinks that all women are worthy of any Alpha they could wish... and that Alphas hardly ever are." She giggled. "A strange Alpha... but a good one. I think I wish to have her, Beta. I think I wish to see her open you before me and tease you and rut you until you're dripping with her" (JD_Riley, 2019)

Once again, Alex is valued as a woman, not merely as a vehicle for a penis. This fantasy is compelling because it presents an alternative to trans women as a shameful secret in a relationship, and inverts how the presence of a trans woman in a relationship is used to delegitimize it. Rather than her anatomy needing to remain hidden lest it destroy the potential respect they could garner from society, her alpha status legitimizes the relationship and protects the three of them from being torn apart by the world they live in. Whereas transfem people worry about such invalidation from governments, families, and even queer communities — which are often riddled with exclusionists and transphobes — the status afforded to female alphas is a much-appreciated escapist fantasy from a bleak reality. These omegaverse works open up potentials for us to see our bodies as worthy and deserving, rather than something to be concealed at all costs.

In the omegaverse, femslash, fanfiction, and BDSM erotica combine to create a genre where liberatory narratives can be found in the most unlikely of places. Not only can it

deftly skirt around depicting often triggering depictions of real-world transphobia, it also can act as a backdrop for stories of characters with struggles eminently relatable to real transfem lesbians underserved and invisibilized by the wider media landscape. By using a hypothetical world and speculative biology to portray characters whose bodies mirror ours, yet whose lives are transformatively different, transfem readers can use omegaverse femslash to envision new narratives and erotics that transcend the stories we have been told all our lives.

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面对面: face to face - a letter from child to mother

Maggie Kou (*they/them*) *Engineering Physics, Environmental Engineering*

Artist Statement

This piece explores cross-cultural and intergenerational gender performance through its intersection with my immigrant experience under cis-patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. I wrote this piece as a reflection on the unspoken words between me and my mother, from moving to Canada and through starting Hormone Replacement Therapy — a treatment that some trans people decide to undergo as a part of medical transition. This piece draws on imagery of transition, both in gender and culture. I sought to explore how much of my mother's identity was consumed by her gendered social "duty" by connecting it to how under cis-patriarchy, our safety is often dependent on hiding ourselves from each other. A large struggle and cause of alienation for my mother was learning English. In this piece, I wanted to explore language as both a culturally and self-imposed tool of oppression, and as a means of liberation. The language we use to associate social power — and oftentimes shame — is closely tied to physical and gendered bodily expressions (our "voices," our "face"). As a reflection on these themes, I draw a comparison between finding or redefining my "voice" and my "face" with my two transitions — in language and gender.

Content tags: self-image; identity; gender; race; immigration; transitioning; white supremacy; Anglocentrism

I found my voice two times in my life.

The first was in elementary school, when my grasp of English came from cartoons;
I struggled with h's, how to say dough, how to notate shhh;
You told me 面, dough.

It's funny how 面 means both dough and face,
How you were always concerned about losing yours,
How it took me decades to recognize my own.

In the Chinese tradition, you give your children ugly names to protect them from evil,
You always called me 妞, 女 — female, 丑 — clown.
We shared this identity for years, until it became us.
And when you came to Canada, you renamed me after your favourite actress. So much of our names are to protect us from letting others know our true selves.

I grew up understanding how to speak from you.

The two worlds of you:

1. The competent you, the unshakable you, the mathematical you, the master's student you;
2. The you who struggled with English, the you who couldn't complete your thesis because you couldn't find your voice.

I am piecing you together from these little moments;
How you learned to love through the same algorithms that you programed,
How service seemed to define you,
How you cried that night when you told me you hated yourself.

I wanted to protect you the way you protected me,
From a world where both our senses of self revolved around a performance of necessity, of
safety;
But I learned love from you.
So I simply rubbed your back the same way you used to wash mine and say, **Time
will work things out.**

I watch time pass through you as your creaking bones signal an irreversible change.
There's so much I want to say to you but this mechanical barrier between us prevents me.
How I wish I could bottle up 10 mL vials of you,
Defrost it under my armpits when it got too cold during Canadian winters,
Inject it into my thigh and let it wash through me.

The second time I find my voice, it's without you by my side. It's hard to find me without you,
when you are how I learned to exist. It's terrifying to tread on this icy path, uncertain of what
lies beneath the snow, But just as spring melts the cold, it brings new life.

To transition is to deconstruct, to transcend.
Maybe this is a path we need to sojourn to rediscover ourselves.

It's been too long, I don't know if you'll still recognize me, my voice, my face.
But if there's anything left for me to say to you, it's this:
Let not our selves be defined by our fears;
Let us 面对 it together.

Pass the Lavender Joint: Life in a Queer Co-op House

Sarah Scholbeck (*they/them*) *Sexual Diversity Studies, Women & Gender Studies, and Critical Studies in Equity & Solidarity*

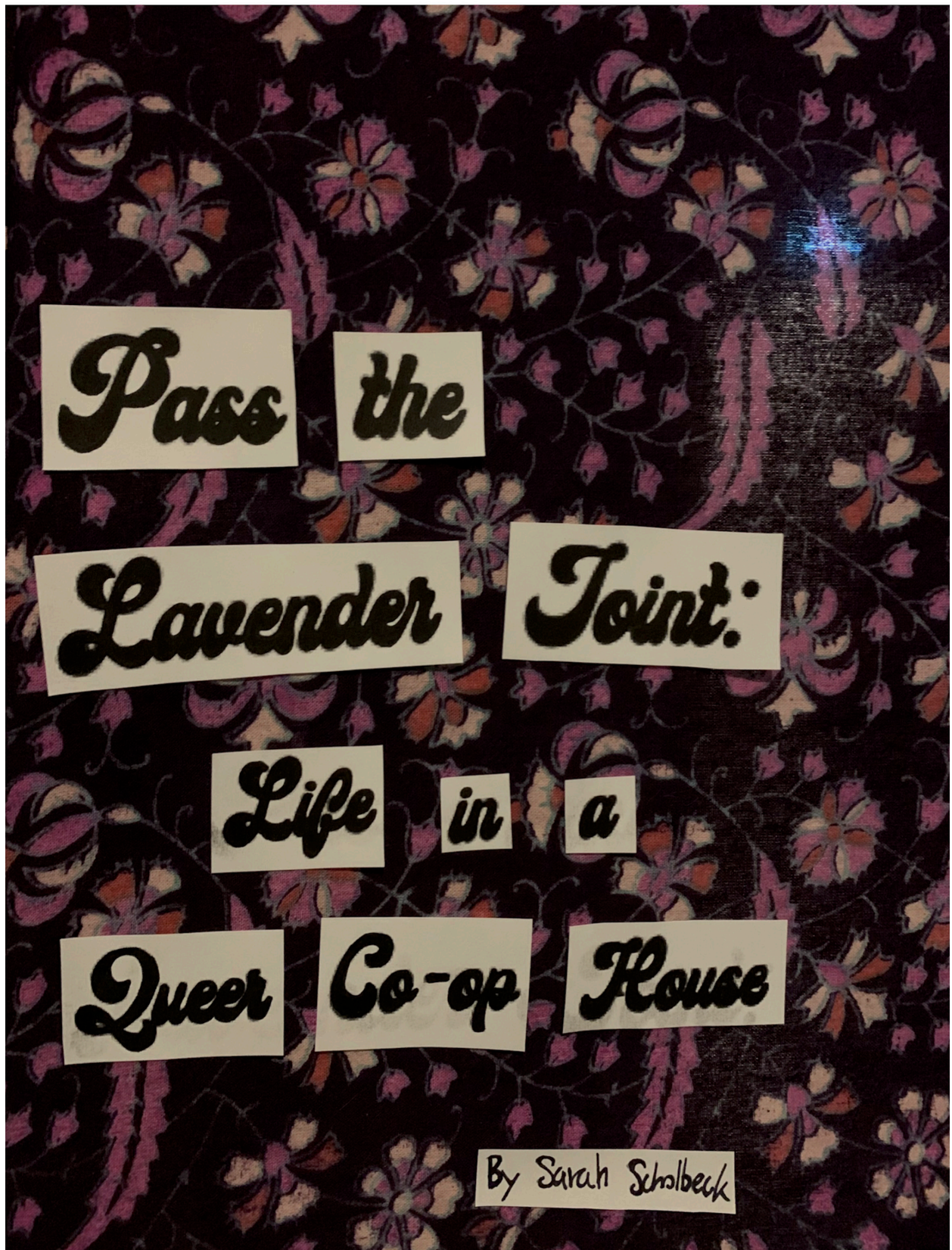
Artist Statement

"Pass the Lavender Joint: Life in a Queer Co-Op House" is a mixed media collage zine. This piece documents me and my housemates' experiences living in our queer co-op house during the 2020–2021 school year. This zine engages with the topic of identity exploration as well as the queering of relationality and of the public/private divide. Documenting the destabilizing potential of queerness felt in the everyday, this zine is intended to offer an exploration into the possibilities that queer collective living can hold for both individual and communal understandings. While the written content is inspired by the discussions held between myself and my five housemates, each member of the household also offered their own individual contributions throughout the zine-making process; from brainstorming, to taking photos, to editing, to getting supplies, to cutting and pasting together the physical copy. Much like queer collective living, this zine would not have been created without the collaborative effort of each individual. This zine seeks to explore questions around the ways in which we come to live with each other, how we relate to one another, and how those relationalities enable us to explore ourselves in both individual and collective senses. Overall, "Pass The Lavender Joint," represents a physical manifestation of the collaborative nature of my home.

Content tags: sex toys; smoking & marijuana accessories

Page 1 Image Description

The words "Pass the Lavender Joint: Life in a Queer Co-op House By Sarah Scholbeck" are set in black against beige blocks on top of a dark, black background with stylized floral patterns in pinks, reds, and beige.



Pass the

Lavender

Joint:

Life

in

a

Queer

Co-op

House

By Sarah Scholbeck

Page 2 Image Description

Black on white text is cut and set atop a pale blue background illustrated with some inked designs of flying insects and their flight paths, and pasted with several clippings of objects. Objects include from top to bottom and left to right; three playing cards (all the ace of spades) which have diagonally mirrored and edited photos of a different person on each card in the style of face cards; a green and yellow weed killer spray bottle with illustrated spray coming from the nozzle; a bunch of yellow bananas tied with a purple "Organic/Biologique" ribbon, the bottom piece of the middle banana is missing; a "Jelly King: Dry Hopped Sour Ale, Bellwoods Brewery" dark brown, glass beer bottle, the label has an artistic geometric design with pink, yellow, grey, and black, the missing banana piece is attached to the bottom right corner of the bottle; two more playing cards with the same card and style with two new figures, and one additional card is face down with a red back. The text sections say the following:

"Queerness is such an expansive and fluid concept, with so many different experiences held within in [sic]. Naturally those of us within this house belong in that, we have our own unique queer experiences so everything we experience belongs in that byt what we experience not all of that. We do not represent so many facets of being queer, and this isn't all there is of queerness; this is enough but it's not all"

An experience of finding joy / with each other in the everyday, / even through the seemingly / impossible, bizarre banality / of life in a pandemic lockdown

Unlike many of the queer co-op houses before it, our household on Huron street wasn't an intentional creation. An accident of random house assignments, lockdown-prompted departures, and COVID bubble maintenance pushing friends into housemates, our co-op just kinda came together by chance. After 4 of the original 9 people living in our student co-op house left due to the Toronto lockdown in October and a friend of one of the existing housemates essentially moved in (and later literally moved in) we were left with our queer co-op house of 6 people (plus 1, and later 2 cats).



“Queerness is such an expansive and fluid concept, with so many different experiences held within in. Naturally those of us within this house belong in that, we all have our own unique queer experiences so everything we experience belongs in that but what we experience is not all of that. We do not represent so many facets of being queer, and this isn't all there is of queerness; this is enough but it's not all”

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Page 3 Image Description

Clippings of letters from various different sources are pasted together on a lavender background to read: "a Queer Relationality" — the "Q" is particularly large and cut out of an image of strawberries. There are four small polaroid photos pasted on the page with a much larger image of a light-skinned figure sitting in a chair while braiding the hair of another light-skinned figure sitting between their legs. There are pressed, purple flowers pasted onto the page covering part of these two figures. The first polaroid shows a group of 6 people outdoors posing together. The second shows 4 people in a dark setting posing together, they may be sitting. The third polaroid shows 4 people sitting and lying down on a couch side-by-side. The fourth polaroid shows 3 people posing with their heads leaning together in front of a large, red, circular design on a dark background. There is a cut and pasted quote from Audre Lorde's (1984) poem "Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power" across the page that says: "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (p. 50).

a Queer

Relationality

"The sharing of joy,

whether physical, emotional,

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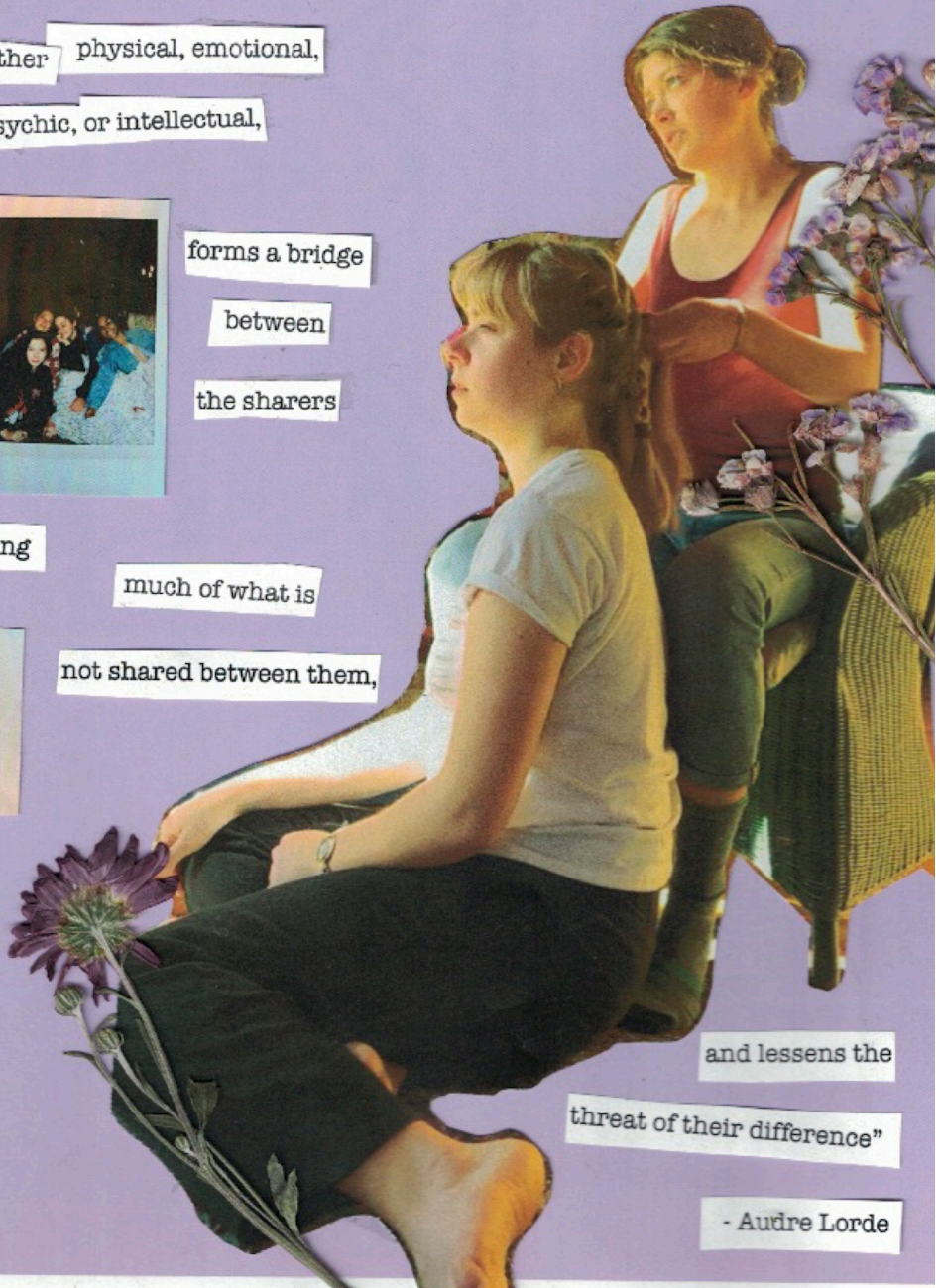
much of what is

not shared between them,

and lessens the

threat of their difference"

- Audre Lorde



Page 4 Image Description

There is a hand-drawn page title of white lettering, bordered with black ink on a yellow background that reads "Flowers in Bloom" on top of the page's lavender background. There are several cutout images, the most prominent being a dark metal candlestick that holds two tall, white, lit candles, and has a figure of a winged cherub playing a bowed instrument between the two candle holders. There are also the following cutouts: a red bottle of Campari; two strawberries; a pile of fruit including lemons, red apples, red grapes, green grapes, and yellow-brown pears; a pile of raspberries with a single green leaf. The following text has been typed, cut out, and pasted on the page into columns:

Functioning in a way which destabilizes the restrictive, normative categories of relationships, within our queer co-op we aren't just housemates, friends, family [this part is a cutout from another source], or lovers; [lovers is also cutout from another source] our relationality simply cannot be defined as statistically and one-dimensionally as that. Almost undefinable in its fluidity & expansiveness, the way in which we relate to each other has no better word to describe it than queer [queer is set distinctively apart from the rest of the text]. Embracing queerness as a method for liberation and disruption, the ways in which we relate to one another, feel with one another, and care for each another [sic] within our home resist normative ideas regarding what is "acceptable" or "normal" ["acceptable" and "normal" are positioned on a red background block illustrated to appear as though just broken in half, while "or" is in the space between the two broken halves] for certain kinds of relationships. falling [sic] asleep together, sharing hugs and cuddles, and crying on each other's shoulders, the physical intimacy we take part in exhibits a "queering" of relationality which has aided our ability to form such strong bonds with one another and to truly begin to rely on each other.

There is this very queer moment of movement and instability within our house; a sense of knowing that we can (and do) fluctuate between and outside of various different and overlapping forms of attraction and relationality. Our feelings cannot be neatly fit into a binary division of (romantically or sexually) "interested" in each other or not, there is much more complexity and fluidity than that. At one point or another, several of us have experienced complex forms of feeling for other household members that blur and twist the lines between sexual, romantic and platonic attraction. This has sometimes resulted in long negotiations that waver between the painful and the joyous. In our house we hold space for that fluidity in attraction and relationality, and there is a queer quality, I think, in building a "friendship", [sic] or a relationship off of that kind of instability.

Flowers

in Bloom

Functioning in a way which destabilizes the restrictive, normative categories of relationships, within our queer co-op we aren't just housemates, friends,

FAMILY, or

Lovers;

our relationality simply cannot be defined as statically and one-dimensionally as that.

Almost undefinable in its fluidity & expansiveness, the way in which we relate to each other has no better word to describe it than

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Embracing queerness as a method for liberation and disruption, the ways in which we relate to one another, feel with one another and care for each another within our home

resist normative ideas regarding what is

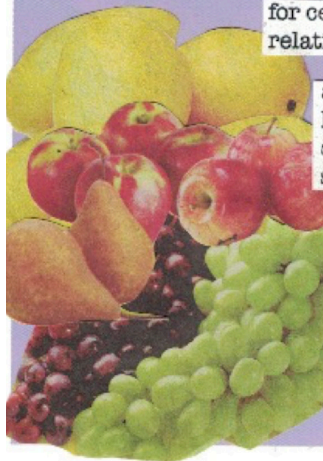
'acceptable'

or 'normal'

for certain kinds of relationships.

falling asleep together, sharing hugs and cuddles, and crying on each others' shoulders,

the physical intimacy we take part in exhibits a 'queering' of relationality which has aided our ability to form such strong bonds with one another and to truly begin to rely on each other.



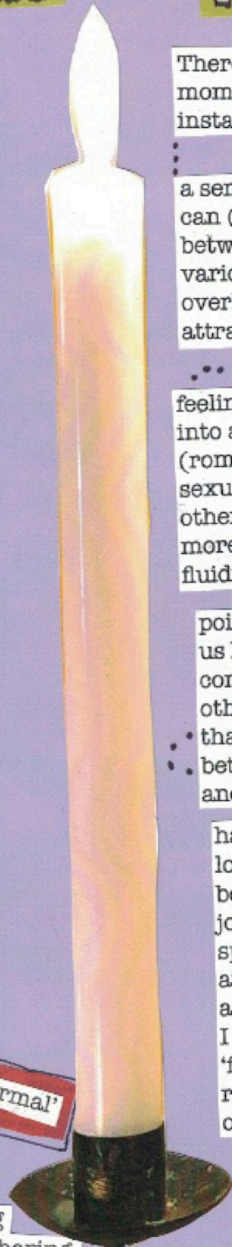
There is this very queer moment of movement and instability within our house;

a sense of knowing that we can (and do) fluctuate between and outside of various different and overlapping forms of attraction and relationality.

Our feelings cannot be neatly fit into a binary division of (romantically or sexually)'interested' in each other or not, there is much more complexity and fluidity than that.

At one point or another, several of us have experienced complex forms of feeling for other household members that blur and twist the lines between sexual, romantic and platonic attraction.

This has sometimes resulted in long negotiations that waver between the painful and the joyous. In our house we hold space for that fluidity in attraction and relationality, and there is a queer quality, I think, in building a 'friendship', or a relationship off of that kind of instability.



Page 5 Image Description

Clippings of letters from various different sources are pasted together on a lavender background to read: "Let's talk about the public/private divide" with a smaller typed out black on white background quote below that reads, "I don't know what that means" and below it, "cuz there isn't one" [sic]. There are several cutout images on this page including: a green and blue ashtray(?) shaped like a marijuana leaf; a tea light candle; a blue handheld vibrator sex toy; a metal incense holder with a stick of incense(?); a metal Zippo brand lighter with a metal pipe for smoking; a 2021 bound organizer atop a pile of other books and paper, part of another image visible underneath the organizer is a blue page with the partially-covered title: "Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer" in orange. The text on the page reads as follows:

Within our home there is a queering of the so-called public/private divide. The traditionally-considered-private space of the bedroom is a perfect example; while bedrooms frequently function as shared, public space, there is an underlying understanding that it can once again be made private at a moment's notice. Operating publicly, housemates' bedrooms are regularly used as study areas or spaces to just hang out, even when the housemates themselves aren't home. Bedroom doors are usually left open so people can duck their heads in for a quick chat or simply pause for a hello as they walk past. The "publicness" of these bedroom spaces functions to imbue a sense of openness and casualness into our home, allowing us to exist in spaces that simultaneously and at different points feel like all of ours and only one of ours. The kitchen at [REDACTED] Huron is another site where this socially constructed division is dissolved: painted yellow and decorated with plant posters, polaroids, ducks, and fairy lights, it operates as a public space of gathering and community but also as a private space of deep talks and meaningful moments between housemates.



Let's Talk About

The Public

Private

Divide

"I don't know what that means"

"cuz there isn't one"

Within our home there is a queering of the so-called public/private divide. The traditionally-considered-private space of the bedroom is a perfect example; while bedrooms frequently function as shared, public space, there is an underlying understanding that it can once again be made private at a moment's notice. Operating publicly, housemates' bedrooms are regularly used as study areas or spaces to just hang out, even when the housemates themselves aren't home. Bedroom doors are usually left open so people can duck their heads in for a quick chat or simply pause for a hello as they walk past. The "publicness" of these bedroom spaces functions to imbue a sense of openness and casualness into our home, allowing us to exist in spaces that simultaneously and at different points feel like all of ours and only one of ours. The kitchen at [redacted]

Huron is another site where this socially constructed division is dissolved: painted yellow and decorated with plant posters, polaroids, ducks, and fairy lights, it operates as a public space of gathering and community but also as a private space of deep talks and meaningful moments between housemates.

Page 6 Image Description

Clippings of letters from different sources have been pasted together to read, "gender fuck!" on top of a black triangular background. The full background of the page is lavender, and there are black and white cutout images across the page including; the torso and head of a light-skinned and short-haired figure with a dark mustache, dark pilot sunglasses, and a cigarette in their mouth, with a small pendant necklace, a thick, spiked bracelet, and an open, short-collared shirt; the non-binary/genderqueer symbol overtop a figure wearing an open vest tucked into dark, belted bottoms; a figure in a raglan short sleeve shirt, dark underwear, a thick, studded belt, an high heels posed with the head replaced by the head of the Quaker Oats man; a heart locket with the words "fuck a binary" in cursive; a black mustache; a cutout of numbering with a larger "6" and a smaller "9" just beside it; a small bust of a figure smiling with a speech bubble that reads, "If any of you needed, you know I would peg you" in the bottom right corner. The text on the page reads as follows:

It was really important to me to get this mullet, and to feel that I'd wanted it for a while, that was a pretty deep moment, it was a game changer, you weren't just there for it, you did it, that's [sic] a deep thing, you had a really big hand in helping me affirm my gender.

our queer co-op is a space where exploring one's gender, ones [sic] sexuality, and one's self is made easy by the inherent queerness of our home. The freedom and ease with which I have been able to explore my gender identity this year has be [sic] a result of living in this house; a house where trying out they/them pronouns is as easy as a casual conversation over breakfast.

Though still a work in progress, we attempts [sic] to resist gatekeeping which often feels like its asking us to be gay a certain kind of way, instead of choosing to center an expansive and fluid notion of queerness. In our house we strive to confidently explore and exist in our queerness in whatever ways we want.

References

Lorde, A. G. (1984). Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 49–55). Crossing Press.



"It was really important to me to get this mullet,
 and to feel that and I'd wanted it for a while, that was a
 pretty deep moment, it was a game changer,
 you weren't just there for it, you did it,
 thats a deep thing, you had a really big hand
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 my gender.

**GENDER
 FUCK!**

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If any of you
 needed, you
 know I would
 peg you

fuck a
 binary

69

