# PANIC AT THE DISCOURSE

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Non-Normative Sexuality and Popular Culture

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# Volume 2, Issue 1, February 2022

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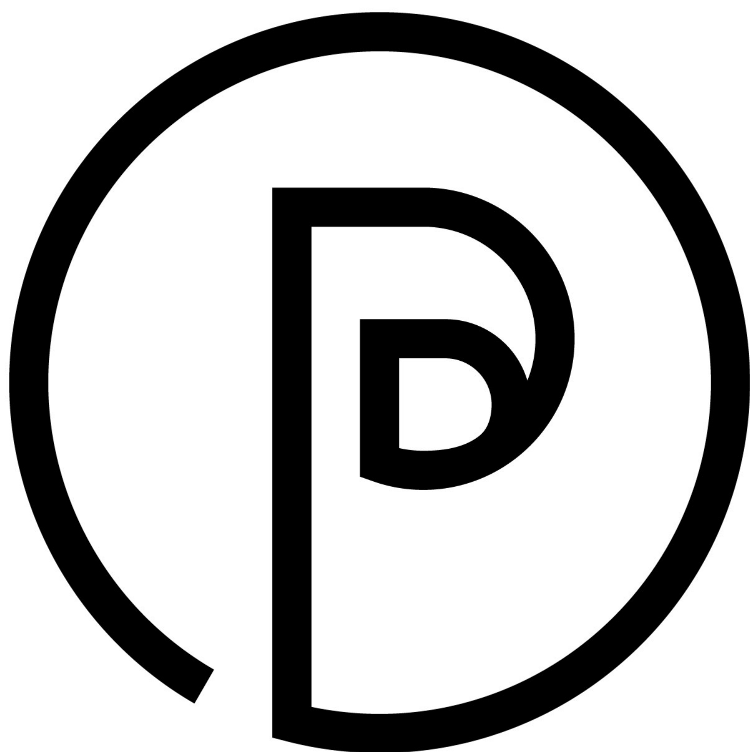

# Foreword: Creative Representations and Fucking Possibilities

*Morgan Oddie and Michelle Smith*

Fucking up oppressions *through fucking* is truly a radical act. By examining representations of non-normative sexuality with particular attention to popular culture, this issue examines challenges to entrenched systems that circumscribe possibilities of pleasure and dictate a regime of privileged access to sexuality. Normative sexuality and its expressions are rooted in the forces of cisheteropatriachy, reinforced by settler colonialism and white supremacy. These systems buttress the violence of racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, and the ways that violence is lived out in the politics of desire and the organization of sex and bodies. Representations of non-normative sexualities purposefully push back against these very systems of power and oppression. And the greater creative and queer potential for pleasure and erotic joy help us imagine and discover more avenues for bodies and their expressions.

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the way we engage in labour, sex, and almost all aspects of life. Some established communities of sexual practitioners turned online, changing the inherent expression of sexual embodiment. In 2021, we saw online kink conferences, Zoom leatherdyke meetings, the expansion of online sex toy sales, and other creative outputs as we reimagined the implications of safety for safer sex. It also seems that many, vanilla mainstream or otherwise, turned to popular culture for distraction, entertainment and escape, solidifying it as an even more important representation of the worlds we exist in because of limitations to other access and interactions. Representation has always been essential in how those who encounter it are able to imagine themselves in worldbuilding and are sometimes even exposed to the language they might use to express themselves.

In this issue, the authors have taken up the representations of non-normative sexuality in a wide variety of ways. There are definite tensions to mainstream representations of topics that challenge cultural norms. "Reconciling Identities in HBO's Room 104" reminds us that religiosity is another force that may impact sexualities. In a discussion of the HBO anthology's exploration of Mormon missionaries, Chris Miller unpacks how cultural tropes of Mormon sexuality are reinscribed through the sensationalist representations of polygamy and repression. But Miller goes on to complicate the depictions of the missionary young men's exploration of sexual taboos by centring the discussion on the real-life Church's reactions to "same sex attraction."

Like the critiques of failures in representing non-normative culture that Miller makes about Mormonism, Liz Borden's "On Baring One's Breasts" tackles popular culture

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representations of non-monogamies and the systems of privilege that reinforce sexual and relational normativity. Settler colonialism and racism have shaped the moral acceptability of non-normative relationships and by extension the way they are presented and engaged with in public discourse. Borden begins with an autoethnographic account of their own interactions with non-monogamy in popular culture as a polyamorous academic. Importantly, Borden asks who is represented in the evolving framework and how do these representations maintain and legitimize social privileges and inequalities along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and nationality to form a new kind of polynormativity that is the least threatening to dominant culture?

Theorizing representation through re-reading previous texts is another strategy undertaken to disrupt conventions of bodies, identities, and desires. A postmodern reading of the Dinosaur as the principal heroic figure in *Jurassic Park* (1993), is undertaken by Alex Ventimilla in "Becoming-Dinosaur." By disrupting and resisting facets of binary biopower, argues Ventimilla, the Dinosaur becomes the hero of the entire film. As such, it moves away from normative heterosexism and anthropocentricism towards a reimagining of what may be, or rather become.

Turning towards queer identity formations, authors also took up subversive elements of desire and political needs. The do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) necessity of non-normative sexuality has bred countercultural belongings that disrupt normative expectations of sexuality under late capitalism. Borrowing from Elizabeth Freeman's notion of chrononormativity, Amy Keating's "Taking a Moment" provides an autoethnographic and affective reflection on a personal encounter with the band *Hunx and His Punx*. Reflecting on this multifaceted "queercore concert," Keating argues that 'a queer sense of belonging' was fostered within the temporal space through a combination of elements, such as the D.I.Y. punk aesthetics. Specifically, it created a queer timeline outside of chrononormativity that allowed all those in the moment to share in a sense of relief of the capitalist and heteronormative time.

"Micro-activist Affordances meets Disidentification" theorizes the disruptive potential of crip sex. Disabled bodies are degendered and desexualized, so the very acts of sex, masturbation, and participation in kink could be recognized as micro-activist affordances by merit of their discursive disruption. As Quinn Valencourt goes on to point out, this political power has the potential to force ableist confrontation with the sexuality of functional diversity. The D.I.Y. queering of everyday objects has long been a strategy in kink that takes on new forms when considering crip potentials.

In "'Playing' With Race: BDSM, Race Play, and Whiteness in Kink," Morgan Oddie takes up race play as a BDSM to discuss racial privilege in kink spaces. While BDSM is often assumed to be automatically subversive of cultural norms, they examine how race play forces a confrontation because it disallows the concealment of the presence of unequal racialized

relations in BDSM practices precisely because it draws on real historical and contemporary relations of racism as a tool for constructing power dynamics.

Queer pleasure is radical. It creates possibilities that confront normative limitations and provides wider alternatives, which means that fewer bodies are denied pleasure. This is not to solely equate pleasure with only sex, as there are other-than-sex potentials that should not be ignored, at the risk of reinforcing conventional hierarchies.[1] As Michel Foucault concluded in the first volume of the History of Sexuality,

> It is the agency of sex that we must break away from if we aim—through a tactical reversal if the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasurers, and knowledges in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.[2]

Creative reimagination turns pleasure away from the oppressive structures of heteronormative patriarchy and disrupts investments in colonialism, white supremacy, and ableism that restrict the expressions of sexuality. How non-normative sexuality is represented and experienced in and through popular culture is an important area of analysis because "[culture is a] critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled."[3]And therefore, it unsettles the established structures as it reimagines the cultural lens to be more representative of the world it reflects.

## ***Notes***

[1] Morgan Oddie, "BDSM and Women's Gendered Embodiment: Other-Than-Sex Pleasure, Pain, and Power," PhD Diss. (Kingston, ON: Queen's University, 2020).
[2] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), 157.
[3] James Procter, *Stuart Hall* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

# Reconciling Identities in HBO's Room 104: LGBTQ2S Mormons and Shifting Mainstream Perceptions

*Chris Miller*

**Abstract**

A 2017 episode of the HBO series *Room 104* (2017–2020) revolves around two Mormon missionaries spending a night in the titular motel room. Throughout the evening, the pair progressively push the envelope of rebellion through booze and pornography, with the episode culminating in a suggested sexual encounter between them. *Room 104* departs from typical depictions by complicating what audiences 'know' about Mormons and expanding the possibilities for Mormon sexual relationships beyond heterosexual polygamy. Using Lynn Spigel's concept of 'popular memory' and David Feltmate's 'ignorant familiarity,' this article examines how media shapes what audiences know about communities. The episode also importantly juxtaposes LGBTQ2S and Mormon identities. This article places the episode in conversation with real-world organizations that offer competing visions for how these two seemingly conflicting identities can be reconciled.

**Keywords:** Mormons, LGBTQ2S, Popular Culture, Identity, *Room 104*

The HBO anthology series *Room 104* (2017–2020) centres on a motel room that has new occupants each episode. In a 2017 episode, two Mormon[1] missionaries (Noah and Joseph) take up lodging for the night.[2] The episode starts with their venting frustration over the lack of success in their mission. They soon turn to broader irritations with the Church, like feeling excluded from 'normal' activities and difficulty ignoring certain urges. Curiosity eventually takes over as the pair drink beer, masturbate, and party through the night. The final scene ambiguously suggests the pair will also explore a sexual relationship.

This episode departs from past programs depicting Mormons and complicates what audiences 'know' about Mormons. It is rare to find any program depicting Mormons. Shows that *do* feature Mormons, like *Big Love* (2006-2011) or *Sister Wives* (2010-), often fixate on polygamy. The missionaries' battle between faith and sexuality expands mainstream depictions to include LGBTQ2S Mormons. This article examines how this episode potentially expands and re-shapes mainstream knowledge about Mormonism; it also places the show's ambiguous ending in conversation with real-world possibilities that exist for LGBTQ2S Mormons.

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Official Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS) orthodoxy states, “While same-sex attraction is not a sin, it can be a challenge,” which encapsulates the Church’s outlook on LGBTQ2S identities.[3] Although official literature occasionally employs more specific (and less stigmatized) terms like gay and lesbian, the Church often defaults to the term same-sex attraction (SSA). Church policies assert that the Lord’s ‘law of chastity’ forbids “sexual relations outside of a marriage between a man and a woman,” reinforcing heteronormativity, in which heterosexuality is the presumed default sexual orientation.[4] Describing non-heterosexuality as a ‘challenge’ reinforces that the Church considers gay identities to deviate from idealized norms.[5] Organizations like ‘Mormon and Gay’ and ‘North Star’ encourage LGBTQ2S Mormons to adhere to Church principles. They offer information and support to help ‘integrate’ LGBTQ2S Mormons into the mainstream Church but condemn physical expressions of non-heterosexuality as sin. In contrast, groups like ‘Affirmation’ support LGBTQ2S Mormons who seek to reconcile these identities.

Matthew J. Grow calls for more scholarship analyzing modern Mormon developments.[6] Many scholars examine Mormonism’s earliest years (1820–1850),[7] transformations at the turn of the twentieth century (1880–1920),[8] or assimilation in the mid-twentieth century (1930–1990),[9] leaving modern issues comparatively underrepresented. Studies of contemporary issues are not wholly missing, but Mormon Studies has historically emphasized these earlier periods.

Twenty-first century developments are underrepresented, and LGBTQ2S Mormon experiences are especially lacking.[10] Studies of LGBTQ2S Mormons are not entirely missing, and there is important research about this community.[11] However, scholars often examine LGBTQ2S Mormons as a subculture presumed to be wholly distinct. Largely missing is research in which sexual orientation represents another facet of identity, akin to gender or race. While this article is similarly guilty of an exclusive focus on LGBTQ2S Mormons, one reason why *Room 104* is a significant mainstream Mormon depiction is that these missionaries are not sensational like other typical depictions of Mormons. They are not law-breaking polygamists (à la *Big Love*), nor do they break into song to express their faith (à la *The Book of Mormon*). As part of an anthology series, they are simply one vignette within a wider tapestry of the people that stay in this motel room. These characters also importantly resist clear labels. The episode’s ambiguous ending leaves us unsure whether they are gay, bisexual, queer, or straight. Ambiguity complicates what viewers know about Mormons and strengthens these characters’ potential to complexify Mormons in mainstream reception.

Guillermo Avila-Saavedra argues that analyses of LGBTQ2S media representations must consider gender, class, and race, but ignores religion’s role in identity construction.[12] Discussing *Will & Grace* (1998-2006; 2017-2020), Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow argue, “viewers are congratulated for their acceptance of gays and lesbians, but without any real consideration of the compromised lives of gays and lesbians within our heteronormative culture.”[13] *Room 104* highlights the stakes should these missionaries pursue queer relationships.

Recognizing the need for intersectional analyses of media depictions, this article highlights the dual importance of the characters' sexual and religious identities.[14] These characters occupy Mormon and LGBTQ2S spaces but do so ambiguously. Is this a coming out story? Will they leave their faith? The episode brings multidimensionality to character tropes often defined in single dimensions.

## Episode Summary

Early in the episode, the frustrated missionaries pray for a sign they are on the "true path."[15] At first, Noah appears rebellious while Joseph represents commitment to Mormon values. Noah confesses that he recently tried coffee. Joseph freaks out and demands they pray for forgiveness. As they consult their scripture, Joseph unknowingly sits on a remote and miraculously turns the TV to a channel showing pornography. Horrified, Joseph rushes to unplug the TV. Noah asks what this 'sign' could mean, says he wants to explore these possibilities, and *questions* God, asking, "why would He create those urges in the first place?"

Partway through, their roles flip, and Joseph seems discomforted by 'urges.' When Noah inadvertently puts his hand on Joseph's thigh, Joseph quickly pulls away. Later, when Noah exits the shower, Joseph catches himself peeking at his naked companion. After they go to bed, Joseph sneaks out and buys beer. Joseph persuades Noah to indulge by arguing that St. Augustine's faith was made stronger *because* he committed sins.[16] He suggests that by 'letting go' for one night they can resolve their incessant doubts and deepen their commitment. This begins a montage of laughing, drinking, dancing, and masturbating.

The next morning, Joseph suggests they charge into deeper exploration by blowing off their duties and seeing a movie instead. When Noah admits his regrets about last night, Joseph responds, "I definitely wanna go further before I even consider going back." Joseph tries to initiate a kiss, but Noah pulls away. Whenever he inches closer, Noah shoves him back. Eventually, Joseph is thrown to the ground, hits his head, and falls unconscious. Noah tries to revive Joseph, but eventually gives up and sits dejectedly on the ground. He asks God in prayer if these events have been a sign or a punishment. In the middle of Noah's monologue, Joseph emits a loud gasp and is conscious again.[17] The pair declare Joseph's revival a miracle, hug each other, then pray. Seemingly back to their senses, they prepare to resume their proselytizing. Noah says, "48 more days to go." Joseph responds, "We'll get one, Elder." Before they are fully dressed however, they pause and look at each other. Noah says, "you thinking about…" Joseph proposes, "shall we offer it up to St. Augustine?" and the boys jump across their beds towards each other.

**Mormons in Popular Culture**

Media shapes our knowledge about subcultures. Books, TV shows, movies, and other media present basic presumptions about diverse communities to mainstream audiences. Lynn Spigel defines popular memory as "a form of storytelling through which people make sense of their own lives and culture."[18] Popular memory shapes in-group identities *and* what groups assume to know about others. However, such impressions are rarely accurate. Popular memory (unlike 'official history') is less concerned with 'accuracy' than memory's uses for the present.[19]

By constructing realities that may not be accurate but are *useful*, popular memory shapes what we know about others. David Feltmate defines "ignorant familiarity" as "widespread superficial—and often erroneous—knowledge about groups" that people "use to facilitate social interaction."[20] Audiences may not know much about any particular group but assemble stereotypical identifiers to navigate encounters with diverse others. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin suggest, "most people simply don't have the time to think deeply about" Mormons, allowing stereotypes (reinforced through media) to fill these gaps.[21] Mormonism in popular culture is defined by three persistent themes: deviant sexuality (usually framed as polygamy); suspicion of institutions; and the model minority.[22] "Codes" assigned to Mormons in popular media, (multiple wives, missionary uniforms, oddly devout) reinforce assumptions that Mormons are distinctly different.[23]

HBO's *Big Love* and TLC's *Sister Wives* both feature polygamist families living in the Intermountain West. Many crime procedurals similarly feature episodes in which polygamists (often Mormon, though sometimes unstated) represent that week's 'villain.'[24] Tanya D. Zuk suggests *Big Love* is part of a broader discourse in which Mormons are rejected by mainstream culture and "relegated to running jokes."[25] Michelle Mueller takes this further, classifying Lifetime's *Escaping Polygamy* (2014 -) as a "Reality TV Atrocity Tale."[26] Fitting the mold of nineteenth-century anti-Mormon atrocity tales,[27] Mueller argues that *Escaping Polygamy* homogenizes all Mormons and highlights "the most culturally shocking aspects . . . to provoke moral outrage in the audience."[28] Shows rarely depict members of the LDS Church (the largest body of Mormons), but characters' denominations are immaterial since mainstream viewers are often unaware that any diversity within Mormonism exists.[29] While *Escaping Polygamy* is more strongly anti-polygamy than shows like *Sister Wives*,[30] I conceptualize all programs in which Mormons are defined by polygamy as TV atrocity tales, since Mormonism is reduced to a single stereotype.

Zuk compares how *Big Love* accepts 'suburban' polygamy and rejects 'compound' polygamy.[31] Mormons are still coded as weird (they have multiple wives), but *partly* resemble 'us' (unlike compound polygamists, they are not abusive). Although normalizing 'suburban' polygamists, *Big Love* also distorts the percentage of polygamists in the Mormon subculture.[32] Additionally, 'compound' polygamists reinforce associations of Mormonism and authoritarian

institutions. Such shows therefore only *partially* redeem Mormons. Viewers walk away seeing Mormons as family-oriented, but also get the impression that they are all polygamists.

Mormon sexuality still pervades *Room 104*, but the missionaries' sexuality is not polygamous, nor is it coded as deviant. Discussing connotations surrounding 'Mormon' sexuality, Brenda R. Weber writes, "In some cases, 'Mormon' means sexually chaste; in other contexts, it denotes sexual lasciviousness; in other uses still, the term means sexually bizarre."[33] Mormon sexuality rarely translates to 'normal.' *Room 104* breaks this mold in that the missionaries' sexuality is, frankly, rather ordinary and unexciting. One glances at the other exiting the shower, they masturbate (separately and clothed) on their respective beds, and they *perhaps* kiss. *Room 104*'s depiction of Mormon sexuality is quite plain compared to the religion's traditional associations.

Another Mormon-centric production was the Broadway sensation *The Book of Mormon*, which uses songs and jokes to parody Mormon beliefs. Mormons are only redeemed after extensive mockery. Referencing this play to summarize Mormonism's position in mainstream culture, Grow explains, "Mormons are mainstream enough to be mocked by the wider culture . . . but remain outsiders."[34] A similar evaluation of Mormonism shapes the *South Park* (1997 -) episode "All About Mormons." Mormons are admired as *people*, but their *beliefs* are mocked.[35] Deriding Mormon beliefs highlights the 'suspicion of institutions' code. *Room 104* (largely unconcerned with Mormon theology) also avoids this trope. We see that the missionaries *have* a religion, and that it may cause them to act certain ways (polite) or to abstain from certain things (beer, sex). However, the episode does not *mock* their theology.

*Room 104* still employs stereotypes, with missionaries representing ignorant familiarity about Mormons.[36] We note their shirts, ties, and black nametags immediately, which foregrounds their religious identity. The show also plays into what audiences expect from such characters. Discussing Mormons on reality TV, Karen D. Austin suggests, "Mormons are generally perceived as strait-laced, friendly, repressed, and naïve," which aptly describes *Room 104*'s depiction.[37] The missionaries avoid swearing and say 'identification' (instead of ID) to hyperbolize their politeness. Even their night of rebellion is relatively tame. One of Joseph's grand boasts of rebellion is raising his hands at the top of a rollercoaster. This exaggerated civility represents the model minority stereotype. However, the pair breaking rules over the course of the episode—and perhaps even leave the Church behind—subverts this stereotype and emphasizes Mormons' 'normalcy.'

Chase Burns adds that Mormon missionaries in a gay love story is another cliché, citing this stereotype's popularity in pornography.[38] Queer missionaries offer the creators "an easy and readily available idea."[39] While this trope may be popular in pornography, by adapting it to television, *Room 104* shifts what mainstream audiences may expect from Mormon characters, diversifying the possibilities of Mormon identities.

Media codes are socially constructed and change over time.[40] The show initially uses ignorant familiarity but expands how viewers may think about Mormons by shifting to new themes. The missionary experience is a stressful journey that thousands of Mormons have endured.[41] Young Mormons leave home for two years, have limited contact with family, and are paired with a companion around the clock. Loneliness, failure to gain converts, or frustration with one's companion exposes viewers to different 'Mormon issues.' The on-screen pair's venting also gives viewers a different glimpse into Mormon lives. They are devout, but not unquestioning. While the musical *The Book of Mormon* offered a glimpse at similar issues, *Room 104* differs in *how* Mormons confront issues. The missionaries simply talk through their concerns, and are far less sensational in this universe, which helps normalize Mormons.

*Room 104* also stands in contrast to Mormon-made productions. Shows and movies produced (or broadcast) by official Mormon networks (e.g., Latter-day Saints Channel or BYUtv) offer programming that is explicitly devotional or implicitly promotes Mormon beliefs. Other 'Mormon-made productions' include media that feature Mormon writers, actors, or directors, often distributed by companies that promote Mormon/Christian values. Programs like *The Mormon Bachelor* cater to Mormon audiences and offer more realistic representations, but do not generally attract wide audiences.[42] Some programs produced by insiders give more accurate depictions of Mormon life, but use references deeply rooted in the Mormon subculture that "may be lost on non-Mormon audiences."[43] Movies like *Heaven is Waiting* (2011),[44] *Minor Details* (2009),[45] or *Forever Strong* (2008),[46] which promote Mormon writers, actors, and themes, lack wide distribution, hindering their ability to affect *mainstream* perceptions of Mormonism.[47] Shows promoted by the Church are also unlikely to show queer Mormon characters, which reinforces Church orthodoxy and heteronormativity as the way all Mormons are presumed to behave. *Room 104* broadcasts its more balanced, diverse depiction to a wider audience.[48]

Other examples of mainstream Mormon-made productions include the *Twilight* saga, written by Mormon author Stephenie Meyer. These books are the source material for the popular movies, and by extension, promote the Church's heteronormative ideals.[49] However, characters are not *coded* as Mormon, meaning this connection might elude viewers. *Room 104*, despite having little formal input from Mormons,[50] has protagonists that explicitly represent this religion.

*Room 104*'s construction of Mormon sexuality makes these characters more likely to evoke positive responses from audiences. Richard Allen argues that viewers require a set of traits they can admire for identification with characters to resonate.[51] Jennifer M. Bonds-Raacke et al. asked participants to identify a gay character they recalled from media, then measured their overall outlook towards 'homosexuality,' finding that media can greatly influence overall outlooks.[52] Combining Mormon and LGBTQ2S identities, this episode constructs Mormons as more mainstream. LGBTQ2S-identified viewers can empathize with the characters' 'coming out story.'[53] Straight viewers may also empathize with Mormon characters who only desire one

sexual partner (unlike other shows where protagonists desire several). *Room 104* rejects Mormonism's restrictive rules and celebrates the characters following their desires. Recognizing media's role in shaping mainstream perceptions, *Room 104* has the potential to alter what audiences know about Mormonism and how audiences feel about the community.

In addition to subverting traditional depictions of Mormons, *Room 104* also subverts traditional depictions of LGBTQ2S characters. Battles and Hilton-Morrow argue that shows like *Will & Grace* reinforce heteronormativity by defining gay characters as the humourous absence of heterosexual masculinity.[54] Further, while *Will & Grace* prominently features gay characters, the titular characters' relationship allows creators to avoid discussing gay relationships.[55] Ana-Isabel Nölke suggests that advertisements featuring LGBTQ2S persons are similarly biased and reductionist, ultimately reinforcing heteronormativity.[56] Robert Alan Brookey argues that traditional depictions of LGBTQ2S characters diminish the sexual nature of same-sex relationships "to avoid the alienating aspects of deviant sexuality."[57] Characters are often coded as gay, and this identity is referenced, but such characters' sexual attraction is rarely explored in-depth. In contrast, the 'urges' Noah and Joseph describe and experience (towards men *and* women) are prominent throughout the episode. We may not see their implied kiss, but the show foregrounds them navigating their sexuality.

The show doubly subverts expectations through the juxtaposition these missionaries represent. Mormons onscreen are often defined by polygamy and are always straight and devout. LGBTQ2S characters are often defined by flamboyancy.[58] *Room 104* presents non-polygamous Mormons who question their faith and sexuality. Their sexual orientation is explored, but neither labelled nor confirmed. This episode complexifies characters traditionally relegated to stereotypes.

**Mormon Approaches to LGBTQ2S Identity**

At the end of the episode, it is unclear what Noah and Joseph do immediately, and what happens *afterwards*. Will they try to hide (or forget) this relationship and remain active Mormons, or have they abandoned their faith? This ambiguity parallels the dynamics of real-life LGBTQ2S Mormons. Summarizing the Church's complex outlook, Lauren J. Joseph and Stephen Cranney note that distinguishing between "LGB as a sexual orientation *identity* and LGB-related sexual *behaviour* . . . allow[s] members to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual yet remain religiously orthodox."[59] The Church forbids any sex outside of straight marriages (constituting grounds for excommunication), but the Church does not officially condemn anyone based on orientation.[60]

Condemning certain sexual activities, while accepting gay members, creates many challenges. Mckay S. Mattingly et al. find that family responses to children coming out are marked by such myths as attraction being a "phase, choice, or rebellious act," or that orientation can be "changed through reparative therapy."[61] LGBTQ2S individuals "raised in religiously

conservative environments" often report internalized homophobia, resulting in "guilt, shame, self-injury, [or] aggressive denial."[62] The Church's view towards (and treatment of) gay Mormons is constantly evolving, which further complicates gay members' position in the Church, and how they must navigate relationships. As recently as January 2020, the BYU Honor Code[63] asserted that "Homosexual Behavior" was a violation, although "same-gender attraction" was not.[64] Condemning 'homosexual behavior' was removed in February, but a letter from Church officials re-asserted that "same-sex romantic behavior" is "not compatible" with Church principles.[65] Officials suggest gay Mormons can remain in the Church, but expressions of sexuality are severely restricted.

Diversity in Mormonism and evolving policies creates different approaches to LGBTQ2S identities. Mark Kim Malan notes that while "doctrine remains unchanged," definitions of sin are tempered by new interpretations from Church officials.[66] This applies to sexuality and other aspects of Mormon life. For example, although the Church's Word of Wisdom encourages abstention from alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine (another well-known media stereotype about Mormons), 60% of 'active Mormons' drink caffeinated soda.[67] Some Mormons who are 'somewhat' or 'not too active' even drink alcohol and use tobacco.[68] Mormons have diverse beliefs, levels of commitment, or adherence to orthodoxy, and therefore approach sexuality in ways that may not conform to official doctrines. Mormon belief in ongoing revelation also means orthodoxy itself is constantly redefined. This was most notably seen in renouncing polygamy (1890) or opening the priesthood to Black Mormons (1978), but also shapes outlooks on sexuality.[69] Further, the importance Mormonism places on personal revelation means official pronouncements intertwine with personal experience, producing diverse understandings of sexuality.[70]

Elijah Nielson suggests 'inclusivity' is socially constructed among Mormons.[71] LGBTQ2S Mormons reframe their understandings of the seemingly condemnatory LDS Church. The Church also attempts to convince such members that it *does* welcome them. Referencing Mormonism's reversal of other exclusionary policies, Weber adds, "this very capacity for not only fluidity but downright reversal . . . allows outlying Mormons to be ever hopeful that divine revelation might allow for their legitimate inclusion in what they perceive to be the One True Church," suggesting why some LGBTQ2S Mormons belong despite current condemnatory policies.[72]

Through discourse analysis of three organizations dedicated to LGBTQ2S Mormons—Mormon and Gay, Affirmation, and North Star—this section analyzes diversity across Mormon outlooks. Each organization offers various resources, like FAQs, discussion groups, and stories from members sharing how they reconciled their faith and sexuality. These narratives outline possible futures for Noah and Joseph.

*Mormon and Gay*

The website "Mormon and Gay,"[73] (officially sponsored by the Church), offered support for those who were committed to upholding Church principles, but "struggle[d] with same-gender attraction."[74] The following section explores stories offered by 'Jessyca' and 'Laurie' to outline how some members reconcile their sexuality with commitment to orthodoxy.

Growing up, 'Jessyca' became 'close' to female friends, but never considered these romantic/sexual attractions.[75] Realizing the sexual nature of her feelings was devastating. "I knew we were going down a road that I didn't want . . . a road that would keep me from serving a mission," something she had dreamed of since childhood.[76] This realization brought feelings of guilt and the challenge of coming out to friends and family. Jessyca looks forward to her future, but this is ultimately uncertain as the Church's only 'prescriptions' are celibacy or straight marriages.[77]

'Laurie' was attracted to women since her teen years. She was drawn to sports because this allowed her to spend time with friends "who were lesbians."[78] By second year of college, she had stopped attending church, started drinking, doing drugs, and dating women. After several years, she finally returned to the Church. She briefly entertained the prospect of celibacy but felt she should "work on" dating men.[79] While initial dates convinced her she "could never be with a man," she eventually met and married her husband.[80]

Laurie's sexual orientation is never pinned down. Although married to a man, it is unclear if she identifies as straight, queer, or lesbian. Her lack of identification parallels Church patterns in discussing LGBTQ2S issues. Elder Dallin H. Oaks writes, "*homosexual, lesbian,* and *gay* are adjectives to describe particular thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. We should refrain from using these words as nouns to identify particular conditions or specific persons."[81] Laurie uses lesbian as a noun when referring to friends, and *speculatively* about her own identity, but her attraction is mostly treated adjectivally. Since Laurie's story appears on the official LDS website, it unsurprisingly lacks explicit details about her sex life (only that she has three children). She omits potentially significant information, like whether she is attracted to her husband or enjoys sex with men.

The website's updated format now also includes testimonials from spouses, friends, and Bishops. A story shared by Laurie's husband 'Dallas' reflects on a phrase from Laurie's autobiography that reveals the worldview some LGBTQ2S Mormons attempt to reconcile: "It doesn't matter how comfortable, how convenient, or how contented your lifestyle is; if it doesn't bring you closer to the Savior, it doesn't matter where else it is taking you."[82] Although Laurie acknowledges being happy in lesbian relationships, being closer to Christ is more important.

Including her husband's story also performs important boundary work for the Church. Mattingly et al. explain that families with gay children "often worried more about the child leaving the church than about their child being nonheterosexual."[83] Discussing the connection

between family support and self-esteem, Joseph and Cranney suggest, "if someone perceives their family as accepting, they may project this positive expectation to the rest of the Mormon community."[84] LGBTQ2S members may be more likely to *remain* Mormon if their community is supportive. Sharing narratives from accepting Mormons may shape how those questioning their place in the Church view the broader religious community.

Jessyca's celibacy or Laurie's straight marriage may strike outsiders as denying one's true identity, but both consider commitment to "His sacred plan" more important.[85] Mattingly et al. note that straight marriages among "SSA individuals" have very high divorce rates and remaining celibate may lead to "low scores on measures of quality of life."[86] One could therefore dismiss LGBTQ2S LDS Mormons as being oppressed by a homophobic institution. However, Lori Beaman finds that stay-at-home Mormon mothers—seemingly subject to institutionalized patriarchy—consider themselves fulfilled through other facets of their lives.[87] In their study of 'LGB and SSA' Mormons, Joseph and Cranney find that "active- and ex-Mormons reported the same self-esteem."[88] Although this likely reflects the emotional toll experienced upon leaving one's social support network (rather than highlighting the support that active LGBTQ2S Mormons receive), this finding suggests that some LGBTQ2S Mormons find ways to negotiate self-esteem despite these seemingly conflicting identities. The narratives the Church shares aim to emphasize other ways in which LGBTQ2S members find fulfillment.

These stories offer one possibility for what may happen to Noah and Joseph. They 'succumbed' to their attraction momentarily, but it is possible they never mention it again. Noah saying '48 more days to go' could refer to the remaining time they must battle their sexual tension before going home and finding wives. *If* they tell family and friends what happened, these stories demonstrate that *some* queer Mormons are accepted by the Church (provided they repent). Laurie demonstrates that even if they pursue gay relationships for years, they might be welcomed back.

### *Affirmation*

Another possibility is that Noah and Joseph continue their relationship, but still seek to identify as Mormon. Both clearly value their faith, interpreting pornography on TV as a sign from God (rather than a random coincidence) and their partying as following in 'St. Augustine's footsteps' (rather than just a night of fun). They interpret life through a Mormon lens, and simply find some restrictions too harsh. The term 'jack Mormon' represents a spectrum, including non-Mormons living among Mormons, Mormons who are not strictly observant, and excommunicates.[89] 'Jack Mormons' can also apply to those who enter gay relationships but still consider themselves Mormon.

Excommunication removes one from the LDS Church, but not from Mormonism. The largest organization asserting that Mormon and LGBTQ2S identities can co-exist is Affirmation,

which provides "face-to-face community for LGBT Mormons" and "foster[s] . . . positive engagement with LDS Church leadership that enables/enhances LGBT participation" in the Church.[90] Affirmation offers advocacy for the future and a formal community in the present.

'Lauren' knew she was gay in high school, but adds, "I was terrified of it."[91] She avoided coming out in university due to BYU's Honor Code but discovered a supportive community of gay friends. Lauren started dating women after college but did not tell her devout parents until she was thirty. Illustrating the spectrum of beliefs within Affirmation, Lauren does not "really have a 'faith' anymore," but values Affirmation as a way to support others.[92]

In another personal narrative, 'José' describes serving on a mission, during which he met a woman, "with whom [he] thought about having [his] eternal family."[93] Doubts about whether this was 'right' surfaced upon returning home. He asked himself, "Will I lie to my wife . . . about who I really am?"[94] He eventually told his family he is gay and married 'Carlos,' but both lost friends and were excommunicated.

'Blaire' shares the difficulties reconciling her queer identity in this heteronormative Church.[95] Growing up hearing family use the word 'queer' derogatorily, she reflects, "it was easy to pretend those homophobic remarks weren't meant for me because I liked men too. Surely, I wasn't 'really gay.'"[96] As a pansexual, Blaire differs from other stories as she could presumably find romantic/sexual fulfillment in a straight marriage. However, a spouse's gender does not define her sexuality. Blaire writes, "My LDS community says 'I love you,' yet their actions, rhetoric, and policies suggest otherwise," critiquing the Church's outlook towards her identity.[97]

We do not know if Joseph and Noah are gay, straight, or queer. If they are bisexual, they *could* return home and enter Church-sanctioned marriages. William S. Bradshaw et al. find that based on the available, desirable options, bisexual Mormon men are "more likely to accommodate norms of acceptable religious behavior than exclusively gay men."[98] However, straight marriages do *not* resolve the Church's stance on one's identity. What are the emotional costs of belonging to a Church that stigmatizes and condemns one's identity?

Identifying as *Mormon*, but not *LDS*, is the path followed by some in Affirmation. While the LDS Church is most often recognized as Mormonism's sole face—and often asserts itself as much—it is not the *only* way to claim a Mormon identity.[99] As a parallel example, the RLDS (a Mormon off-shoot) announced in 1984 that women could be ordained. Over the next six years, "at least 200 dissenting organizations came into existence."[100] Official orthodoxy regarding gender and sexuality create divisions in Mormonism, yet no changes definitively deny one's claim to a Mormon identity. Affirmation includes members who have been excommunicated, some who are still officially Church members, and those like Lauren who are not religious. Affirmation shows that regardless of institutional affiliation, Noah and Joseph could maintain their religion without compromising their identity.

*Evergreen and North Star*

Evergreen International represents a more condemnatory response to LGBTQ2S identities. This now-defunct organization targeted those "who want to diminish their attractions and overcome homosexual behavior."[101] Writing when Evergreen was still active, Jennifer Sinor explains, the organization "puts gay Mormons in touch with trained therapists who use . . . reorientation therapy to 'diminish' same-sex attraction."[102] Describing broader LDS actions, Mattingly et al. add that the Church previously supported "aversion therapy (including electroshock therapy) to treat homosexuality" in BYU students.[103] Evergreen has since been subsumed by North Star, which offers "positive and balanced alternatives" for LGBTQ2S persons.[104]

North Star describes its constituents as "those striving to live gospel standards," and demonizes the non-LDS world as "a turbulent sea" of "sexual politics."[105] Gay relationships are described as "paths inconsistent" with Church teachings.[106] This language suggests a careful re-branding to distance North Star from Evergreen, conversion therapy, and outright denunciation.

'Ben' discusses the role he thought his mission would play in overcoming his attraction to men: "Surely my mission would cure me . . . God would see my honest efforts . . . and I would be rewarded with a wife to whom I was genuinely attracted."[107] Bradshaw et al. find this outlook is common among gay Mormon men. Many expected missions to 'fix' their attraction, but most participants' orientation remained unchanged.[108] Discovering blogs from gay BYU students helped Ben feel less alone, but he noticed a dismaying pattern as most bloggers eventually left the Church. Ben's inspiration for ignoring his attraction comes from the Book of Alma, which helped him recognize that "sacrificing for a time really wouldn't be a long sacrifice when viewed in the eternities."[109] Mormonism pathologizes Ben's orientation but assures him that adhering to Church principles is a worthwhile sacrifice.

'Deb' recognized she was gay during her mission. Her biggest fear of "doing anything gay" was realized with her companion.[110] She did not immediately confess to Church officials due to fears of losing her status as missionary and BYU student. She was only removed from the uncomfortable situation with her companion after breaking her foot.[111] While she now sees her injury as allowing much-needed reflection, she initially considered it "punishment from God."[112] After eventually confessing, she was sent home early. This created additional anguish, seeing friends come home with posters announcing they had "returned with honor."[113] Frustrations with her sexuality were compounded by feeling she failed her Church and family. Deb shares that she has gone on some dates (presumably with men, but it is not specified), and concludes with an ultimately positive outlook: "trusting that God loves me and has a plan for me brings me immeasurable comfort."[114] Like Ben, her faith condemns her sexuality but also offers reassurance.

Advising counsellors how to better serve LGBTQ2S Mormons, R. David Johns and Fred J. Hanna explain the importance of helping clients recognize that "damaging [religious] beliefs"

can cause depression and anxiety.[115] They add that counselors should not divorce LGBTQ2S Mormons from their faith, but help clients find understanding in the Church's "deeper teachings."[116] North Star demonstrates religion's role in shaping understandings of sexuality. However, whether Deb or Ben have accessed 'deeper understandings' of Church teachings, or if they suffer from anxiety and depression, is unclear.

North Star's testimonials indicate that if Noah or Joseph share details of their night, they will likely be sent home (but not necessarily excommunicated). Upon return, prescribed solutions include celibacy or straight marriages. The other possibility (which North Star disavows, but which the Church previously endorsed) is conversion therapy. Utah state legislature recently banned conversion therapy for minors. This was notably supported by the Church.[117] However, Juwan J. Holmes suggests such measures, which only protect *minors*, are incomplete.[118] Elena Joy Thurston adds that while leaders claim to no longer support conversion therapy, the Church pays for some members' conversion therapy.[119] Evergreen and North Star highlight a stronger aversion to LGBTQ2S identities. Some Mormons see (and treat) queerness as a direct transgression against Church principles, encouraging members to silence this part of their identity.

*Re-Evaluating Mormon Approaches to Sexuality*

Reflecting the ideological structuring of public debates, all organizations examined select testimonials that best represent their beliefs.[120] The Church and North Star promote testimonials from people who experienced gay 'attraction,' but did not 'succumb' to it (or, if they pursued gay relationships, they eventually returned to the Church). Kevin Randall, who managed the transition from 'Mormon and Gay' to its new home on the Church's website, was instructed to not include stories from those "not living (according to) doctrine," considerably shrinking his sample of stories.[121]

Mormons often try to avoid condemning sexual orientation as a sin, but nonetheless erase such members' lived experiences. Church Elder David A. Bednar was asked at a meeting 'how can homosexual members of the church live (and remain steadfast) in the gospel?' Mormon writer D. Christian Harrison quotes Bednar's response: "I want to change the question. There are no homosexual members of the Church . . . We are not defined by sexual attraction. We are not defined by sexual behavior."[122] Harrison argues that such responses negate people's feelings, experiences, and identities, adding that the Church would never deny, for example, that there are Black, single, or female members.[123] Describing the 'advice' the Church offers LGBTQ2S members, Elijah Nielson writes, "Although the Church condemns all sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman, the Church does *not* encourage mixed-orientation marriages nor does it counsel or require Gay Mormons to marry."[124] However, through the testimonials offered—especially those in which gay Mormons enter straight marriages—the

Church implicitly encourages mixed-orientation marriages. In a document describing 'The Divine Institution of Marriage,' the Church explains, its "affirmation of marriage as being between a man and a woman 'neither constitutes nor condones any kind of hostility towards gays and lesbians.'"[125] Although the Church claims to be accepting and non-judgemental, its heteronormative outlook and restrictive definition of marriage create a hostile environment for LGBTQ2S members.

In contrast to the other two organizations, Affirmation promotes testimonials from individuals who believe Mormonism is a valuable institution, and believe Mormonism condones gay relationships.[126] Some LGBTQ2S advocacy organizations make few references to religion, but Affirmation foregrounds religion as a key aspect of one's identity. Armand Mauss explains that although some Mormons protest Church stances on gender and sexuality, the more typical response is leaving Mormonism.[127] However, Affirmation demonstrates that some LGBTQ2S Mormons are actively working towards reform.[128]

## Moving to the Mainstream

*Room 104*'s ambiguous ending highlights the range of Mormon responses to LGBTQ2S identities. Will Noah and Joseph follow the path of North Star, Affirmation, or just leave Mormonism altogether? Only certain options are LDS-sanctioned, but Affirmation asserts there are other ways to be Mormon. Of course, the ambiguity also suggests the possibility that they are neither gay nor bisexual, and would not turn to any of the 'support' such groups offer.

Like *Big Love* or *Sister Wives*, *Room 104* is not a wholly accurate resource for understanding Mormonism. It reinforces stereotypes through the trope of polite missionaries. We do not actually learn that much about Mormon beliefs or daily life. Ignorant familiarity shapes what viewers understand about Mormonism, and even Christianity more broadly. The pair begin their night of partying after Joseph persuades Noah that Augustine became "one of the greatest saints of all time" because he sinned. Not only does Joseph misrepresent Augustine's teachings about sinfulness, but it is unlikely a Mormon would call this Catholic figure 'one of the greatest saints.' However, the deeper theology at play is unimportant. *Room 104* simply seeks to convince us that the pair's outlook is rooted in religion, accomplished by making a saint the motivation for the night's events (not to mention 'offering it up' to said saint before the episode cuts to black). We are unconcerned with what *particular* beliefs Mormons hold, but leave the episode reassured that religion *in general* is important to Mormons.

Ignorant familiarity also shapes the depiction of LGBTQ2S characters. Gregory Fouts and Rebecca Inch find that in sitcoms, gay characters make significantly more off-hand comments about their sexuality than straight characters.[129] This reinforces a perception that gay characters are preoccupied with sexuality.[130] By highlighting these missionaries' 'coming out story'—compared to a more mundane day in their lives—*Room 104* perpetuates this damaging

stereotype. However, that a LGBTQ2S Mormon perspective is included at all in this anthology marks an important shift in mainstream representations. The show explores common concerns that many Mormons (and non-Mormons) confront while acknowledging the importance of the characters' religion.

Juxtaposing LGBTQ2S and Mormon identities is significant for Mormon perceptions. Mormon on-screen relationships are no longer restricted to polygamy. Marking a shift from TV atrocity tales, Mormons become a vehicle for more diverse and relatable sexual representations. Including an LGBTQ2S perspective—or simply teens who want to explore rebellion—makes Mormons a community to which wider audiences can relate. Further, while Mormons are often stereotyped as rigidly adhering to orthodoxy, *Room 104* highlights the conscious navigation of faith that members experience.

Finally, the episode's ambiguity highlights the complexity of Mormon sexual politics. Mormon on-screen relationships are no longer exclusively heterosexual. Mormons cannot be labelled as simply 'pro-gay' or 'anti-gay' either.[131] Nielson suggests that a spectrum of inclusivity exists in the Church. Some gay Mormons find the Church intolerable, emotionally violent, and damaging. Others find "satisfaction, belonging, and great peace through their Church membership."[132] *Room 104* encapsulates this spectrum. By ending ambiguously, it is unclear if these characters are gay, bisexual, queer, or straight. We are also unsure about their relationship with the Church. Do they abandon the Church instantly, gradually drift away, or perhaps work to make the Church more accepting? These myriad possibilities can potentially expand viewers' perceptions of who Mormons are, what they believe, and what they do.

Complex on-screen possibilities mirror what is happening for real-world Mormons. The number of LGBTQ2S Mormons—or rather, those who feel comfortable sharing this identity—is likely to grow. Several organizations promote different outlooks on how LGBTQ2S persons should be integrated into Mormon life. These diverse approaches suggest that scholars who study Mormonism should devote more attention to this demographic. *Room 104*'s sympathetic depiction of two questioning missionaries suggests that awareness of LGBTQ2S Mormons may also start to permeate mainstream awareness.

***Notes***

[1] A brief note regarding nomenclature. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly shortened to LDS Church) is the largest corporate body of what are traditionally described as Mormons. Mormonism is a diverse faith community, with followers belonging to many different groups. For example, some continue to practice plural marriage as a religious rite and call themselves as Mormons, while the LDS Church officially renounced this

practice in 1890. Throughout this article, the term 'Mormons' will be used in a more general sense, while 'the Church' refers to members of the LDS Church.
[2] *Room 104*. "The Missionaries." Directed by Megan Griffiths. Written by Mark Duplass. HBO, September 8, 2017.
[3] "Same-Sex Attraction," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/official-statement/same-gender-attraction. Using terms like homosexual and same-sex attracted (SSA) or treating these sexual identities as a 'challenge' is not my preferred terminology. I use this language throughout the article to highlight how LGBTQ2S identities are discussed by the LDS Church and other organizations. When discussing LGBTQ2S identities in Mormonism, it should also be acknowledged that "the terms 'same-sex-attracted' ('SSA') is used within the Mormon community and refers broadly to individuals who acknowledge their same-gender attraction but do not identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual." See Lauren J. Joseph and Stephen Cranney, "Self-esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 20, no. 10 (2017): 1031. This generally stigmatizing term is the preferred terminology for *some* Mormons, since it allows them to maintain their standing in the Church.
[4] "Chastity and Fidelity, 38.6.5," *General Handbook: Serving in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number102.
[5] In some Mormon organizations, queerness is even further pathologized. Describing its history, the now-defunct Evergreen International explains, "support groups were formed for men and women struggling homosexuality." See "History," *Evergreen International*, https://web.archive.org/web/20041209130109/http://www.evergreeninternational.org/about_us.htm). Although Evergreen International was not officially affiliated with the LDS Church, its mission stated "we sustain the doctrines and standards of the Church without reservation or exception." See "About Us," *Evergreen International*, https://web.archive.org/web/20041209130109/http://www.evergreeninternational.org/about_us.htm.
[6] Matthew J. Grow, "The Modern Mormon Church," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism,* ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 55.
[7] Many books focus on the important scriptures that emerged in this period, or figures that played key roles in this developing religious community. See for example: Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Random House, 2005); and Terryl Givens and Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[8] This period saw substantial transformations in this community, including major building projects, changes in Mormon social life, Utah's quest for statehood, and significant theological proclamations. Books that examine Mormonism during this period include: Leonard J. Arrington. *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1890* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1958); Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[9] Due to Mormon Studies' long preoccupation with history, many books bridge Mormonism's founding, re-organization, and its history in the twentieth century. See for example: Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985); and, Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard Lyman Bushman, *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[10] Jana Darrington et al.'s study of singlehood and frustration among young Mormons offers one example of how scholarship overlooks LGBTQ2S identities. See Jana Darrington, K.W. Piercy, and Sylvia Niehuis, "The Social and Cultural Construction of Singlehood among Young, Single Mormons," *The Qualitative Report* 10, no. 4 (2005): 639–661.The study's criteria for participants does not even explicitly mention heterosexuality and only that they must be single LDS members between 20–29 (Ibid., 645). Heteronormativity therefore shapes this study. The study finds that for some, Church pressure "triggered feelings of frustration with their single status," but fails to probe whether LGBTQ2S identities were a factor compounding participants' frustration (Considering abstinence is one of

the Church's proscribed 'solutions' for LGBTQ2S members, gay members presumably comprise a percentage of 'single Mormons,' but this consideration is wholly absent in a study of this demographic).

[11] See for example David Johns and Fred J. Hannah, "Peculiar and Queer: Spiritual and Emotional Salvation for the LGBTQ Mormon," *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 5, no. 3–4 (2011): 197–219; William S. Bradshaw, Tim B. Heaton Ellen Decoo, John P. Dehlin, Tenee V. Galliher, and Katherine A. Crowell, "Religious Experiences of GBTQ Mormon Males," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (2015): 311–29; and Mckay S. Mattingly, Renee V. Galliher, John P. Dehlin, Katherine A. Crowell, and William S. Bradshaw, "A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 12, no. 4 (2016): 386–409.

[12] Guillermo Avila-Saavedra "Nothing Queer About Queer Television: Televised Construction of Gay Masculinities," *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (2009): 8.

[13] Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19, no. 1 (2002): 102.

[14] Ahir Gopaldas and Glenna DeRoy, "An Intersectional Approach to Diversity Research," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 333–64. Gopaldas and DeRoy build on the concept of intersectionality first put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw who used it to describe how "race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color." See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244.

[15] All quotations in this section refer to: *Room 104*, "The Missionaries," Season 1, Episode 7 (September 8, 2017), directed by Megan Griffiths, HBO.

[16] As will be discussed, this reference to Saint Augustine is part of the show's wider use of ignorant familiarity. Whether or not Joseph accurately describes St. Augustine's teachings, or whether a Mormon would even reference this Catholic Saint, is irrelevant. This reference assures the viewer that faith informs the decisions that Mormons make.

[17] It is *implied* that Joseph may have been dead for a brief moment. After he regains consciousness, he asks Noah, "did I just…" then adds, "and then I just came back?" to which Noah nods his head. Whether Joseph was actually dead or simply unconscious is never made clear, since all we see is his body lying on the ground. God's intervention in reviving Joseph is also not explored. That Joseph regains consciousness in the midst of Noah's monologue is telling, but it comes in the middle of a sentence, as opposed to during the long, dramatic pause one might expect in such cases.

[18] Lynn Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Television Reruns," in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 363.

[19] Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age," 363.

[20] David Feltmate, *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in* The Simpsons, South Park, *&* Family Guy (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 4–5.

[21] Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, "Introduction," in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, eds. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University, 2010), 2.

[22] Jana Riess, "Mormon Popular Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 439.

[23] Anne Makus, "Stuart Hall's Theory of Ideology: A Frame for Rhetorical Criticism," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54, no. 4 (1990): 499.

[24] Tanya D. Zuk provides a more comprehensive discussion of these shows which feature 'polygamy' episodes, including *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, *CSI*, and *Numb3rs*. In Tanya D. Zuk, "'Proud Mormon Polygamist': Assimilation, Popular Memory, and the Mormon Churches in Big Love," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, no. 1 (2014): 93–106.

[25] Ibid, 93.

[26] Michelle Mueller, "Escaping the Perils of Sensationalist Television Reduction: A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy* as a Reality TV Atrocity Tale," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 22, no. 3 (2019): 60–83.

[27] Atrocity Tales circulated widely in America and Britain during the nineteenth century. These novels (often purportedly authored by victims who had managed to narrowly avoid the clutches of the 'Mormon cult') served as anti-Mormon propaganda. The genre cemented such stereotypes as Mormons' depraved sexuality and authoritarian

leadership. For a more detailed examination of such stories' themes, see Tammy Heise, "Marking Mormon Difference: How Western Perceptions of Islam Define the 'Mormon Menace,'" *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 82–97.
[28] Mueller, "Escaping the Perils of Sensationalist Television Reduction," 62.
[29] While the LDS Church does not have sole claim to the title of 'Mormonism,' with over 16 million members, this organization by far represents the majority of Mormons worldwide ("Worldwide Statistics," *Newsroom*, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics). Although the LDS Church is often recognized as Mormonism's sole face, there are many schisms within this broader tradition. Other denominations include the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now known as The Community of Christ) and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. William D. Russell suggests a "fissive tendency" is built into Mormon theology. That individuals can receive revelation, and the belief that modern Churches occasionally fall into apostasy creates a remarkable number of schismatic divisions in Mormonism. See William D. Russell, "Understanding Multiple Mormonisms," *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[30] Mueller, "Escaping the Perils of Sensationalist Television Reduction," 62.
[31] Zuk, "Proud Mormon Polygamist," 95. Zuk is here drawing on Dick Hebdige's concept of hegemony. See Dick Hebdige, "From Culture to Hegemony; Subculture: The Unnatural Break," *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden: Blackwell, 2006).
[32] Although some groups such as the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints continue to practice polygamy, the LDS Church discontinued the practice and excommunicates members who enter plural marriages.
[33] Brenda R. Weber, *Latter-day Screens: Gender, Sexuality, and Mediated Mormonism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 15–16.
[34] Grow, "The Modern Mormon Church," 58.
[35] Riess "Mormon Popular Culture," 439. See also Chris Miller, "New Religious Movements in the Town of South Park: Separating the Mainstream from the Marginal," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 32, no. 2 (2020): 99–120. I should note that Trey Parker and Matt Stone are the creators behind both *South Park* and *The Book of Mormon*, explaining why these productions have such similar evaluations of Mormonism.
[36] John-Charles Duffy suggests that the stereotype of missionaries makes Mormons instantly recognizable onscreen, comparing them to "black-habited Catholic nuns" or "buggy-riding Amish." See John-Charles Duffy, "Elders on the Big Screen: Film and the Globalized Circulation of Mormon Missionary Images," in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, eds. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University, 2010), 113.
[37] Karen D. Austin, "Reality Corrupts; Reality Television Corrupts Absolutely," in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, eds. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University, 2010), 187.
[38] Chase Burns, "*Room 104*'s 'The Missionaries' Is the Best Coming Out Story in Recent TV," *The Stranger,* September 17, 2017, https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2017/09/17/25419256/room-104s-the-missionaries-is-the-best-coming-out-story-in-recent-tv.
[39] Chase Burns, "*Room 104*'s 'The Missionaries' Is the Best Coming Out Story in Recent TV." Co-creator Mark Duplass acknowledges that as a straight, Catholic male, he is "twice removed from being an authority" on the subjects explored (Jude Dry, "'Room 104': Straight Guy Mark Duplass Wrote the Year's Sweetest Gay Love Story," *IndieWire*, September 15, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/2017/09/mark-duplass-room-104-lgbt-best-gay-1201876596/).
[40] Makus, "Stuart Hall's Theory of Ideology," 499.
[41] In 2007, the Church celebrated its one millionth missionary being sent out to evangelize. See Reid L. Neilson, "Mormon Mission Work," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 188. At any given time, there are approximately 70,000 missionaries serving missions worldwide ("Missionary Program," *Newsroom*, https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/missionary-program).
[42] Riess, "Mormon Popular Culture," 450.
[43] Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2007), 273.
[44] *Heaven is Waiting*, directed by Michael Flynn (Salt Lake City: Cosmic Pictures, 2011), DVD.
[45] *Minor Details*, directed by John Lyde (Salt Lake City: Mainstay Productions, 2009), DVD.

[46] *Forever Strong*, directed by Ryan Little (Montreal: Go Films, 2008), DVD.
[47] In her expansive study of Mormon media depictions, Weber raises a number of Mormon-made productions from BYUtv such as the TV show *Granite Flats*, adding that BYU's TV and radio network "are now staples on most expanded cable or satellite packages" (Weber, *Latter-day Screens*," 24). Weber offers further examples of movies and books that centre Mormon experiences, like *The Other Side of Heaven*, *The Book of Mormon Girl*, *Confessions of a Latter-day Virgin*, and *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance*. However, there is little indication that such media impact mainstream consciousness.
[48] For a more in-depth discussion of Mormons in the mainstream eye, see JB Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially the chapter "Familiar Faces: Mormons and American Popular Culture in a New Millennium."
[49] Weber, *Latter-day Screens*, 24.
[50] As mentioned, writer Mark Duplass is Catholic. The episode's director Megan Griffiths does not appear to be Mormon. Duplass shares that one of the show's producers has a Mormon background, and offered insights throughout the episode's development (Ariana Bacle, "*Room 104*: Behind the HBO Series' Twisty, Wild First Season," *Entertainment Weekly*, September 2, 2017, https://ew.com/tv/2017/09/02/room-104-behind-scenes/). Griffiths adds that creators reached out to Mormon friends who could advise on the missionary experience. Although Duplass and Griffiths sought to make an accurate, sensitive, and informed depiction of Mormons, it is clearly not a Mormon-made production.
[51] Richard Allen, "Identification in the Cinema," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52, no. 2 (2012): 199.
[52] Jennifer M. Bonds-Raacke, Elizabeth T. Cady, Rebecca Schlegel, Richard J. Harris, and Lindsey Firebaugh, "Remembering Gay/Lesbian Media Characters: Can Ellen and Will Improve Attitudes Towards Homosexuals?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no. 3 (2007): 29.
[53] Chase Burns, (writing for a *non-Mormon* website), calls it: "the best coming out story in recent television." I should note that *Room 104* as a 'coming out story' is only Burns' personal interpretation.
[54] Battles and Hilton-Morrow, "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces."
[55] Ibid, 94.
[56] Ana-Isabel Nölke, "Making Diversity Conform? An Intersectional, Longitudinal Analysis of LGBT-Specific Mainstream Media Advertisements," *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 2 (2018): 224-255.
[57] Robert Alan Brookey, "A Community Like *Philadelphia*," *Western Journal of Communication* 60, no. 1 (1996): 50.
[58] The other popular means by which gay characters are coded is what Nölke calls the 'Neil Patrick Harris' type, which represents a composite of the attributes most commonly ascribed to gay men, namely, "stylish and successful, always dressed in a suit or smart trousers and shirt. They are well-groomed, lean, and confident 'metrosexuals'" (Nölke, "Making Diversity Conform," 236–37). In an admittedly more dated analysis of LGBTQ2S media representations, Larry Gross argues that during the AIDS epidemic, gay characters were similarly relegated to two media 'roles' as either victim or villain. See Larry Gross, "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media," *Journal of Homosexuality* 21, no. 1–2 (1991): 30. Although stereotypes have changed, LGBTQ2S characters being defined solely through stereotypes (rather than fully-developed characters) remains constant.
[59] Joseph and Cranney, "Self-esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons," 1029.
[60] A statement from the Church reads: "God expects us to uphold and keep His commandments regardless of divergent opinions or trends in society. His law of chastity is clear: sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife" ("Same Sex Marriage," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, March 2014, https://www.lds.org/topics/same-sex-marriage?lang=eng).
[61] Mattingly et al., "A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints," 400.
[62] Ibid, 388.
[63] All BYU students are required to sign the Honor Code. Violations can result in suspension or expulsion ("Church Educational System Honor Code," *BYU University Policies*, https://policy.byu.edu/view/index.php?p=26&s=s1164). BYU is "founded, supported, and guided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," making the school an official extension of the Church ("About," *Brigham Young University*, https://www.byu.edu/about).
[64] This section banning "Homosexual Behavior" was "quietly removed" in March 2020 (Courtney Tanner, "BYU Students Celebrate as School Removes 'Homosexual Behavior' Section from its Online Honor Code," *The Salt Lake*

*Tribune* February 19, 2020, https://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2020/02/19/byu-appears-remove/). Since this section was redacted from BYU's Honor Code, it is no longer available, but a comparison of the original and amended version can be found here: https://www.diffchecker.com/QqrwFHRz.
[65] This response was shared in a letter from Elder Paul V. Johnson, Commissioner of the Church Educational System, sent via the official BYU Twitter Account (BYU (@BYU) "Today this letter from Elder Paul. V. Johnson…," March 2, 2020, Tweet). In 2019 the Church also reversed a 2015 policy barring children of gay couples from being baptized. Although gay marriage is still considered a "'serious transgression,'" it is not "definitively apostasy," meaning children of gay couples can be baptized (Emma Green, "The Mormon Church Tries to Create a Little More Space for LGBTQ Families," The Atlantic, April 7, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/04/lgbtq-mormons-latter-day-saints-apostasy-childbaptism/586630/).
[66] Mark Kim Malan, "Understanding Methods of Change in Mormon Cultural Attitudes Beyond 'Official' Doctrinal Views and Popular Public Image - A Reply to Christensen," *Sexuality and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2006): 108. Malan's comments are based on Mormon approaches to masturbation, but equally apply to sexual orientation as members navigate the ambiguity created by changing doctrine.
[67] John E. Ferguson III, Benjamin R. Knoll, and Jana Riess, "The Word of Wisdom in Contemporary American Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 1 (2018): 52.
[68] Ibid. Of those Mormons who are 'somewhat active,' 34% drink alcohol; 47% drink coffee; 22% use tobacco; and 11% use marijuana. Of those who are 'not too active,' 42% drink alcohol; 64% drink coffee; 24% use tobacco; and 17% use marijuana.
[69] Regarding birth control, for example, David Holland outlines that while official doctrine *against* birth control has never been repealed, a letter in the Church's magazine advised that contraception is *sometimes* acceptable. See Holland, "Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism,"156–7. This outlook went from a letter in the Church magazine, to being printed in an official Church manual on marriage, outlining how doctrines may gradually change.
[70] A deeper discussion of how Mormonism's 'open canon' shapes the evolution of orthodoxy is found in David Holland, "Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism," *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[71] Elijah Nielson, "Inclusivity in the Latter-days: Gay Mormons," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19, no. 7 (2016): 752–68.
[72] Weber, *Latter-day Screens*, 29.
[73] In the last year, the Church slightly revamped how it addresses 'SSA' online. No longer hosted on a separate website (formerly found at https://mormonandgay.lds.org/?lang=eng) the main Church website now has a section dedicated to SSA ("Same-Sex Attraction," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/gay/). This section still provides roughly the same information as 'Mormon and Gay,' such as FAQs, advice for individuals and families, and a 'Member Stories' section.
[74] The outlook of 'same-gender attraction' being framed as a 'struggle' is encapsulated in a letter from Church Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, "Helping Those Who Struggle with Same-Gender Attraction," *Ensign* October, 2007, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/10/helping-those-who-struggle-with-same-gender-attraction?lang=eng.
[75] "Jessyca's Story," *Mormon and Gay*, accessed June 7, 2019, https://mormonandgay.lds.org/articles/jessycas-story?lang=eng. Since research for this project began, Jessyca's story has been removed, although the other story analyzed from 'Mormon and Gay' did migrate to the Church's new site.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid. Jessyca's story's sub-headline reads: "She's not sure she will ever find a guy she can be attracted to," which demonstrates the uncertainty created by Church policy which stipulates that SSA individuals should either enter heterosexual marriages (whether or not they are attracted to their partners) or remain celibate (in spite of the depression and anxiety that this 'solution' has been found to cause).
[78] Laurie, "Laurie's Story," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/gay/videos/lauries-story?lang=eng. Throughout her narrative, Laurie notes that she has friends who were lesbians, but never applies this term to herself, instead noting that she 'dated women.'
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

[81] Emphasis in original. Dallin H. Oaks, "Same-Gender Attraction," *Ensign*, October 1995, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/10/same-gender-attraction?lang=eng.
[82] Dallas, "Dallas's Story," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/gay/videos/dallas-story?lang=eng.
[83] Mattingly et al., "A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints," 397.
[84] Joseph and Cranney, "Self-Esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons," 1032.
[85] "Jessyca's Story."
[86] Mattingly et al., "A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints," 390.
[87] Lori G. Beaman, "Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter Day Saints Church," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 1 (2001): 68.
[88] Joseph and Cranney, "Self-esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons," 1038.
[89] For a brief discussion of the evolution (and multiple meanings) of 'Jack Mormon,' see Pat Bagley, "'Jack Mormon' Once Meant Something Else," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, January 13, 2008, https://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/ci_7958006.
[90] "Our Vision and Values," *Affirmation*, https://affirmation.org/who-we-are/our-vision/.
[91] Lauren Neeves, "Fear of Being Gay Led Me to Be More Devout until I Couldn't Anymore," *Affirmation*, May 18 2018, https://affirmation.org/faces-of-affirmation-lauren-neaves/.
[92] However, Lauren adds that her name is still on the Church's official records. (Neeves, "Fear of Being Gay Led Me to Be More Devout Until I Couldn't Anymore.")
[93] "In Search of My Identity: Who Am I Truthfully?" *Affirmation*, October 15, 2018, https://affirmation.org/in-search-of-my-identity-who-am-i-truthfully/. Mormon marriages (sealed in a temple) enjoin couples and their offspring to 'eternal' families. For a brief overview of eternal families, see Samuel Morris Brown and Kate Holbrook, "Embodiment and Sexuality in Mormon Thought," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[94] "In Search of My Identity."
[95] Blaire describes herself as a gender variant, sexually fluid pansexual, but often describes herself as queer. Blaire Ostler, "I'm Not Going to Pretend I'm Anything Other Than What I Am: Mormon and Queer," September 25, 2018, https://affirmation.org/blaire-ostler-mormom-queer/.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Bradshaw et al., "Religious Experiences of GBTQ Mormon Males," 326.
[99] As mentioned, other prominent organizations include the Reorganized and Fundamentalist LDS Churches. Many other local congregations consider themselves Mormon without any institutional affiliation. To further understand the major historical schisms in Mormonism (and the theological justifications behind these disputes, see Russell, "Understanding Multiple Mormonisms."
[100] Russell, "Understanding Multiple Mormonisms," 86.
[101] "About Us" *Evergreen International*, accessed November 9, 2020, https://web.archive. org/web/20041209130109/http://www.evergreeninternational.org/about_us.htm.
[102] Jennifer Sinor, "Out in the West: The Mormon Church Is Going Mainstream - And Leaving Its Gay Members Behind," *The American Scholar* (2011): 85.
[103] Mattingly et al., "A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints," 390.
[104] "Introduction," *North Star*, https://www.northstarlds.org/introduction.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ben, "Voices of Hope – Ben," *North Star*, https://www.northstarlds.org/voh-profile-ben. Emphasis added. The language Ben uses in coming out – "For as long as I can remember I've been attracted to men *instead of women*" – further reveals North Star's heteronormative outlook.
[108] Bradshaw et al., "Religious Experiences of GBTQ Mormon Males, " 324.

[109] "Voices of Hope – Ben." The Book of Alma is one of the books within the Book of Mormon.
[110] Deb, "Voices of Hope - Deb," *North Star*, https://www.northstarlds.org/voh-profile-deb.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] R. David Johns and Fred J. Hanna, "Peculiar and Queer: Spiritual and Emotional Salvation for the LGBTQ Mormon," *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 5, no. 3–4 (2011): 214.
[116] Johns and Hanna, "Peculiar and Queer," 215.
[117] Bethany Rodgers, "'Conversion Therapy' Ban OK'd by LDS Church and Advocates, Announces Gov. Herbert," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, November 26, 2019, https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2019/11/27/gov-herbert-announces/.
[118] Juwan J. Holmes, "Conversion Therapy Survivor Says the Mormon Church Pays for its Members to Undergo it," *LGBTQ Nation*, December 31, 2019, https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/12/conversion-therapy-survivor-says-mormon-church-pays-members-undergo/.
[119] Holmes, "Conversion Therapy Survivor Says the Mormon Church Pays for its Members to Undergo it."
[120] Makus, "Stuart Hall's Theory of Ideology," 507.
[121] Erin Alberty, "LGBTQ2S Mormons: Stories of Personal Raith Should Not Be 'Trafficked' to Serve an Agenda," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 28, 2019, https://www.sltrib.com/news/2019/09/28/lgbtq-mormons-stories/.
[122] D. Christian Harrison, "In Our Lovely *Oubliette*: The Un/Intended Consequences of Boundary Making and Keeping From a Gay Mormon Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 2 (2016): 56.
[123] Harrison, "In Our Lovely *Oubliette*," 57.
[124] Nielson, "Inclusivity in the Latter-days," 759.
[125] "The Divine Institution of Marriage," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* accessed November 13, 2020, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/the-divine-institution-of-marriage.
[126] Alberty adds that the way groups like Affirmation share 'coming out' stories often leave individuals feeling trapped by their initial choices, highlighting that pro- and anti-gay groups select stories that strengthen their organization's overall outlook. See Alberty, "LGBTQ2S Mormons."
[127] Armand L. Mauss, "Authority and Dissent in Mormonism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terrl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 397.
[128] Mauss adds that the Church has adopted a more tolerant stance towards various dissenting sites (Ibid., 398). Although the Church doctrinally objects to the idea that LGBTQ2S and LDS identities can co-exist, the Church does not attempt to silence Affirmation or related sites.
[129] Gregory Fouts and Rebecca Inch, "Homosexuality in TV Situation Comedies: Characters and Verbal Comments," *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 1 (2005): 41.
[130] Ironically, other studies of LGBTQ2S media depictions argue that gay characters are rarely framed as possessing any overtly sexual desires. Although characters are coded as gay (and they may repeatedly state as much), their overtly sexual *desires* are rarely emphasized, thereby rendering homosexuality "stereotypical, comical and therefore harmless." See Avila-Saavedra, "Nothing Queer About Queer Television," 13.
[131] Reflecting Affirmation's outlook, I wish to highlight that while the LDS Church can certainly be labelled anti-gay, the Church does not have exclusive domain over 'Mormonism.'
[132] Nielson, "Inclusivity in the Latter-days," 761. Although Nielson only examines the perspectives of gay Mormons, this spectrum of inclusivity also applies to the broader Church. Some members promote intolerance and emotional (at times physical) violence against LGBTQ2S persons, while others welcome their belonging.

# On “Baring One’s Breasts”: Representations of and Interactions with Non-Monogamy in Pop Culture

*Liz Borden*

**Abstract**

While representations of non-monogamy have grown in the last decade, non-monogamous lives and experiences remain extremely underrepresented in popular culture, political discourse, and academic research. Additionally, present representation is characterized by systems of privilege that are constructed by heteronormativity (and to a related extent, homonormativity and polynormativity), settler colonialism, and racism. Through an autoethnographic narrative and a critical reading of *Wanderlust*, *Newness*, and *Black Mirror* “Striking Vipers,” I address some of these gaps by considering various overlapping structures of hetero-/mono-/polynormativity, race and racialization, LGBTQI2S+ in/visibility, and the machinations of neoliberal capitalism and colonial sexuality embedded in the stories we tell (and are told) about non-monogamies in Western popular culture.

**Keywords:** Non-monogamy, Popular Culture, Heteronormativity, Autoethnography, Queer Theory

Popular culture is arguably one of the most powerful vehicles of public knowledge, humour, fashion trends, celebrity, and consumer demand; it is a powerful generator of our collective memories, a seductive and shocking mirror of society, and virulent incubator of social trends. As one of the main sites of public discussion of sexualities, and a central source of how people imagine themselves and others as sexual beings, popular culture is a valuable tool for how people build their sexual identities and practices. In the last decade, mainstream popular culture appears to have developed an appetite for topics relating to non-monogamy, and more specifically, polyamory in very particular ways. Non-monogamy is an umbrella term used for the social practice or philosophy of consensual and ethical non-dyadic intimate relationships which do not strictly adhere to the standards of monogamy, particularly that of having only one person with whom to exchange sex, love, and affection. More specifically, non-monogamy indicates intentionally undertaken forms of relating, in which demands for exclusivity (of sexual interaction or emotional connection, for example) are attenuated or eliminated and individuals may form multiple and simultaneous sexual, romantic, intimate, and/or domestic bonds.[1] In Western culture, ideas about what constitutes a normal relationship have been expanding for decades: queer families have become more visible; people are more likely to live together before

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marriage; and the age when people first get married has risen considerably. Younger people are approaching marriage and relationship structures as self-determined, flexible, and negotiable. As part of this shift, non-monogamy appears to have entered public discourse as something most people can casually discuss over breakfast and polyamory trend pieces seem to be everywhere.[2]

In response to representations and my own interactions with non-monogamy in Western popular culture, I offer anecdotal and personal experience beginning with an autoethnographic account, entitled "Baring One's Breasts," which connects to broader cultural, political, and social understandings in the public discourse of non-monogamy and popular culture. "Baring One's Breasts" is an unapologetic spoken-word poem—a universalizing rather than a minoritizing move, as Eve Sedgwick would call it[3]—with the aim of not just thinking unsayable things but speaking them and refusing the demands of normativity on those who relate, and create kinship, in a myriad of other ways, by writing myself into the narrative.[4] By telling my story and reflecting on my own lived experience in relation to the representation of non-monogamies in popular culture, I make my invisible, visible—by talking to myself and others—which "open[s] up possibilities for questioning identities, make[s] the unfamiliar familiar, and bring[s] the peripheral, the taboo, the visceral, the private to the center of academic conversations"[5] to ask: What are the ideological labours that representations about non-monogamies and polyamory in popular culture doing? Whose identities are represented? Whose are not? How do these representations maintain, legitimize, and/or challenge hetero-/ mono-/polynormativity? How do these representations maintain and legitimize social privileges and inequalities along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and nationality? What constitutes living a happy life? Pursuing answers to these questions contributes to the interrogation of normative ideologies and hegemonic paradigms; furthers social justice aims within queer and feminist discourses, practices, and publics; as well as makes space to reflect on the potential impact of these institutions and organizations (and those they serve).

**Baring One's Breasts**

I am wild woman.

I am grand/mother. I am teacher and mentor.

I am devout student and captivating lover.

I am epiphany, aesthetic moment, and intuition.[6]

I am recklessly beautiful, intentionally provocative, and confrontational.

I re/claim and take up space. I am loud.

I show up in the world refusing to lie down.

I speak inconvenient truths; "Love's Not Colour Blind."[7]

I am relationship anarchist [8] in the age of Professor Marston and the Wonder Women,

Savages, The Magicians, and Unicornland.

I am polyamorous in a culture of #MeToo, enthusiastic consent and body positivity,

shame and trauma awareness, and 2SLGBTQIA+ parenting.

I am sex positive in a world of infinite love.

I am feminist killjoy[9] and un/happy queer.[10]

I am threat to polite politics, settler-colonial sexuality, and pedestrian fantasies.[11]

I spit out status quo bullshit when it becomes too sour.

I am love's tender rampage: "The Hella Problematic Slut."[12]

I loathe to ride relationship escalators built by the fruits of colonial imperialism

and reeking of Indigenous dispossession.[13]

I sew dangerous coats, made of pockets and sedition.[14]

I refuse to cultivate fragile masculinity.

I am not more radical than thou. There are no free passes here.

None of this will be a simple story of subjects, subjectivity,

transcendence, or self-indulgent re/telling.[15]

None of this will be un/comfortable. None of this will be un/familiar.

I am hurting and healing, articulate and uncertain.[16]

I am unresolved conversations and interrupted arguments; strange dialogue.[17]

Here, I disrupt taboos, break silences, and reclaim lost and disregarded voices.[18]

Here, I ask the unanswerable, seek indeterminacy, and consider my own unforeseen.[19]

Here, omissions and failures, disappointments, tensions, and exclusions

are transformed into stories—of resistance, reproduction, and oblivion[20]—

to help clear the way for a

full-throated feminist futurity.

r*EVOL*ution!

While depictions of non-monogamous relationships in popular culture have increased over the last decade, the stigma about being non-monogamous is far from gone. Many non-monogamous lives and experiences remain extremely underrepresented in all aspects of social life.[21] Myriad movies, TV shows, and news stories hinge on the idea that the ideal relationship is one where two people are loving, mutually exclusive partners. In *Polyamory, Monogamy, and American Dreams: The Stories We Tell about Poly Lives and the Cultural Production of Inequality*, Mimi Schippers states, "The stories told about intimacy, kinship, and family in … popular culture and other media are, with few and isolated exceptions, decidedly mononormative in that they consistently portray monogamous coupling as the very definition of happily-ever-after and non-monogamy including polyamory, as titillating but also difficult and dangerous."[22] Thus, contemporary representations of non-monogamy, and in particular polyamory, can further reinforce and (re)constitute various sites of privilege leaving unaddressed the intersections between gender, sexuality, race, ability, and class. This trend allows monogamy to remain the unchallenged model for healthy and normal adult relationships—even in stories about non-monogamy. And so, I—as a queer, feminist, polyamorous scholar—remain highly cautious of efforts to normalize non-monogamies into mainstream popular culture, particularly when the forms of non-monogamy that are getting the most airtime is one that is the least threatening to dominant social norms.

Broader discussions about non-monogamy and polyamory have emerged across a range of scholarly disciplines and within various advocacy circles addressing a variety of topics ranging from anarchist politics and polyamorous identity,[23] communication in polyamorous communities,[24] BDSM in polyamorous communities,[25] diversity within polyamorous communities,[26] safe-sex practices,[27] infidelity as polyamorous practice,[28] sexual hierarchy,[29] theology and sexuality,[30] and theoretical contestations of monogamy.[31] While these contributions frequently offer conceptual tools to explore the intersections between non-monogamy and race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age, they often do not "provide a framework for understanding the ways intersecting identities are conflictual or harmonious between and within groups, in addition to emphasizing the need for the analysis of power dynamics."[32] In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to provide language for how Black women are oppressed by race and gender.[33] As Crenshaw indicates, "Intersectionality has roots in feminism, with its most complex interactions with institutions and social practices first articulated by minority racial and ethnic or multicultural feminists."[34] In contemporary feminist theory, intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct multiple identities and social locations in hierarchies of power, privilege, and social inequalities. The concept of intersectionality is not an abstract notion, but a description of the way multiple oppressions and privilege are experienced. Intersectionality is the systematic analysis of the ways multiple social identities interact in different contexts over time. The term references the "critical insight that

race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena."[35]

Normalization, particularly within popular culture, resides in the way that we speak, the ideas that get refined, reworked, and is encoded in ordinary words until they seem harmless enough. It is the ability to fit things into an accepted narrative, and like any normative model, works in concert with a range of other normative models to create a full—if rarely explicit—picture about who counts and who does not, and about what is real and what is not worth considering. Normalization is the process through which configurations of sexuality, race, gender, nation, class, and ethnicity are reframed to fit into heteronormative ideologies. This reframing is used primarily to justify and rationalize broader race, gender, and sexual regimes of domination and oppressive perspectives which slam against the intersection of a multitude of marginalized identities and queer possibilities.[36]

The importance of representation has underpinned a large bulk of academic work about diversity as represented in popular culture and across the fields of media studies, media sociology, and gender and sexuality studies.[37] Observing contemporary representations of non-monogamy in media, Niko Antalffy states, "The media sustains a deep interest in polyamory and there is a definite segmentation in the representation of this phenomenon, ranging from acceptance, to ambiguity, to outright hostility. The last two betray underlying tensions about multi-partner alternatives to the cultural conformity of monogamy."[38] Commenting on the lack of diversity in the representation of non-monogamy in popular culture, Andrea Zanin writes:

> Add the mainstream media's desire to show images of poly people who are cute, young and white and we are getting a very narrow picture indeed … It's a crying shame, because the stories of poly people who are in their sixties and seventies would be amazing to hear. And no, not all poly people are white, but when white is the only image people see of poly, it sure does create a barrier discouraging people of colour from understanding themselves as potentially poly … in addition to questions of race and age and orientation … and of gender … it holds hands with other problematic ideas. Ideas of what family is or should be, and of how kids can or should work into the equation; questions of illness/health and ability/disability, including STI status; questions of class and economic position; and a range of others.[39]

For instance, in the television series *Wanderlust* (2018),[40] I am confronted with white privilege and Western notions of coupledom—where everything can look as close to monogamy as possible and where a third (or forth) relationship is not about being its own autonomous relationship but exists only to serve the primary couple—where couple privilege is, at its core, considered normal. This normalization of couple privilege is presented as socially sanctioned

pair-bond relationships involving only two people and thus inherently more important, real, and valid, than other types of domestic, intimate, romantic, or sexual relationships.

The series gets off to a very risqué start, with the pilot episode featuring a masturbation scene, sex scene, and the first ever female orgasm shown on the BBC. Episode 2 saw a sex scene in a bathroom, Episode 3 was a steamy romp in Joy and Alan's car which is followed by, in Episode 4, Joy masturbating while Alan, her husband, watches. In the fifth episode of *Wanderlust*, Joy, who is embarking into an ever increasing chaotic "open marriage," is counselled by her therapist, Angela. She takes Joy through every emotional trauma and sexual experience, seemingly, that she has ever had—relationship fumblings, fucking strangers in her office, failed orgasms, dead pets, her (emotionally absent) father, funerals, and the suicide of a client—to get at the underlying reason why Joy is orientated towards (former and new) intimate partners. Her therapist believes her toxic relationships with men may have contributed to her decision to open her marriage.

In a dizzying array of sub-plots that follow Joy's therapy session, Alan falls in love and moves in with Claire (following the inevitable consequence of the open relationship agreement trope). There is a classic confrontation between wronged older wife and challenged younger girlfriend (Alan is positioned as normal and even objective and is therefore unquestionable and desirable to both women). After experiencing the cold fury of Joy, Claire seems guilty about taking another woman's husband and reconsiders her choices and as the exotic Black 'other,' she gets eliminated to re-establish the rule of white mononormativity. Alan moves out of Claire's love nest and decides he would rather live in his nice comfortable Victorian detached home, thereby re-establishing his social capital, Joy makes a move on her ex-lover, Lawrence, but is rebuffed and he gets to keep his current wife. Claire then starts dating one of Joy's rejected lovers, presumably making Claire no longer sexually available to Alan. Alan moves back in with Joy and the reunited couple ends the series where they began: standing at the foot of their bed, about to have sex, and (at the risk of sounding facetious) everything is neatly tidied up—as if by magic and free of all consequence—all by the power of heteronormative monogamous marital bliss.

On the surface, I read *Wanderlust* as having an appeal to fantasy. There are a lot of steamy sex scenes involving a pair of attractive people rediscovering the excitement of intimacy with someone new. There is double-dating action with Joy, Alan, and their respective partners, which is, for me, sheer bliss (it just sets my kitchen-table poly-heart aflutter). It also makes an admirable effort to subvert gender stereotypes, although not between the main characters, but rather in a subplot involving Naomi, Joy and Alan's older daughter, who can be read as non-heteronormative. However, the last two episodes of *Wanderlust* resonate the strongest with me, and I feel they accomplish two things. Firstly, they exemplify what many non-monogamous individuals may experience when accessing and navigating the mental health care system and conventional counselling therapies that are both colonial and imperialist systems embedded in

dominant values and cultural norms "where heterosexual monogamy has been historically promoted as the most widely accepted and advocated ethical/moral relationship option available."[41] Secondly, I feel the episodes are representative of all too familiar narrative tropes that implicitly and explicitly suggest that once you 'fix' what is wrong with you, you will abandon your disruptive, deviant, and immoral behaviours, and return to living a good life and your "happy" ending.

In "The Monogamous Couple, Gender Hegemony, and Polyamory," Mimi Schippers highlights dichotomous understandings between "normal" and "unconventional" relationships in popular culture. These narratives reinforce the notion that non-monogamies are only temporary before one abandons these kinds of interactions for more permanent and serious relationships. She states:

> the discursive construction of the monogamous couple supports, legitimizes, and naturalizes white, middle class, and Western constructions of gender and intimacy as superior to those of non-Western, non-white populations…in order to secure race, ethnic, or national superiority and to legitimize colonial, imperialist, and racist policy…if we look closely at Western or white supremacist discursive constructions of the ethno-sexual abject other, they often rely upon the monogamous couple [or the closest thing to it] as normal, moral, and natural in order to cast imagined or real sexual practices as deviant or immoral.[42]

For example, *Newness* is a 2017 American romantic drama film directed by Drake Doremus.[43] The film taps into a topic historically thought of as a taboo in mainstream popular culture: exploring other relationships or openly having other partners. Newness is fun in the beginning, as are most relationships. The story follows Gabi and Martin—two millennials navigating a social media-driven world, and the strains couples face in relationships—who meet on WINX (a Tinder-like dating site) and begin a relationship quickly after. The couple becomes engrossed in each other until the first time, after a double date, that Martin says "I'm so tired" when Gabi wants to make out—and both roll over to opposite sides of the bed, each illuminated by a glowing phone. Suddenly, the allure of infinitely available casual sex reasserts itself into their lives and honesty begins to disintegrate into lies (of omission). After Gabi and Martin disclose to each other that each of them has had an affair, they attend a couples therapy session in which they are told the solution to their problem is radical honesty and transparency. From that tiny gem of guidance, Gabi and Martin embark on finding other partners, together and separately, by way of an open relationship. They seek out threesomes and orgies. They create their own secret sex game where they act as voyeurs, watching each other flirt and go on dates with other people. They openly talk about their experiences having sex with others. They ritualistically delete their personal WINX apps. After their break-up, and a series of abysmal experiences dating other people, the couple reconcile their differences, and decide to abandon their pleasure-seeking adventures for a sexually and emotionally exclusive relationship (read as a promise) with each

other. The closing scene depicts Gaby and Martin, sleeping in bed, holding hands, peaceful and serene, the embodiment of monogamous happiness.

I read *Newness* as a cautionary tale about the indecisiveness, insatiability, sexual/gender inequalities, and dangers of hookup culture whereby non-monogamy is equated to promiscuity inevitably constructed as a reserve of many unwholesome things such as irresponsibility, hedonism, failure to care or love, gender inequality and even sexual exploitation. The failure to care or love/sexual exploitation trope can be evidenced in the interaction between Gabi and Larry when he describes their relationship as a "transaction."[44] Further, the contemporary binary opposition between monogamy/non-monogamy tells a story of what is meant (and not meant) to constitute as genuine and meaningful relationships. The permutation of (unrestrained) jealousy, possessiveness, anger, microaggressions, and (sexual) violence—presented in this film as normal—is expected in much of normative Western culture whereby the idea of sexual exclusivity is held up as the epitome of love and commitment, and hence any real or imagined digression from this path is constructed as if it should be met with distrust and jealousy. Further, the strict dichotomy between monogamy/non-monogamy is part of the dominant narrative that tells us that "when love and intimacy are considered…the dyad or couple remains a definitional or assumed feature of intimate and sexual relationships."[45] This narrative is evidenced in Esther Perel's private conversation with Gaby and Martin during the book signing in which Esther states: "Just so we are clear I am not recommending [open relationships] but that doesn't mean it's not valid. So, if you think of it as the thing that doesn't kill us but makes us stronger, then yes. But I really want you to imagine it less as a destination and more as a layover."[46]

In North America, the culture of privilege found in polyamorous communities is aligned with multiple intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression. In "Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective," Diane Raymond notes:

> The increasing appearance of GLBT major and supporting characters acknowledges the very real changes that have occurred in the constitution of the character's populating television's worlds. [*These characters*] offer the potential for subverting heterosexist norms and assumptions. I argue, however, that how these shows resolve tensions often results in a reinscription of heterosexuality and a containment of queer sexuality, that is, that the resolution these programs offer enables viewers to distance themselves from the queer and thereby return to their comfortable positions as part of the dominant culture. Such a dynamic enables power to mask itself, making it all the harder to pin down and question.[47]

While individuals involved in non-normative relationships and activities risk social censure, people unprotected by social advantages are more vulnerable to the discriminatory impacts than those shielded by race and class privileges. For Christian Klesse, the constitution of polyamory (and other non-monogamous identities) is a site of privilege that intersects with other forms of

social power.[48] This insulation provides greater social latitude to engage in and redefine their lives and experiences than what is available to those burdened by racism, poverty, inadequate education, limited job prospects and other forms of discrimination. The problem, then, is not just that what is broadcasted in the media portrays the practice of non-monogamous relationships in particular ways, but rather, it is the limited sample that focuses on people with privileges in marital status, race, class, gender and sexual identity. For these reasons, it is crucial to acknowledge the ways in which systems of privilege and oppression shape the everyday realities—and representations—of those who practice non-monogamy.

A number of scholars have argued that attempts to address the intersecting and interlocking nature of gender, race, sexuality, class, and disability have taken an additive approach that has continued to normalize some experiences while marginalizing others.[49] While effective in disrupting some hegemonic narratives, these ideological moves have had multiple and contradictory effects. For example, in *Studying Sexualities: Theories, Representations, Cultures*, Niall Richardson, Angela Werndly and Clarissa Smith contend that mainstream representations—especially in relation to race, gender and sexuality—play a significant role in the naturalizing forms of relationships while demonizing others and have a continuing role in creating perceptions of non-monogamy as a racialized and classed phenomenon.[50] Here, heteronormative non-monogamy is, for the most part, a homogeneous enclave of privileges, including gender, race, and class privileges, offers important insights towards ways of bringing together feminist, queer and critical race theories into dialogue with non-monogamies, and polyamory specifically, both in terms of symbolic meaning and embodied practice. For example, in "Disability and Polyamory: Exploring the Edges of Inter-Dependence, Gender and Queer Issues in Non-Monogamous Relationships," Alex Iantaffi observes that in the dominant landscape of non-monogamies and gender non-conformity, there is little representation of disabled, queer, non-white bodies. Within a complex counterculture imbued with privileges, life as a queer, disabled, non-monogamous person, identity and sexuality becomes a messy (sometimes incoherent) challenge to dominant understandings of disability, gender, and sexuality:

> Disability, polyamory, gender non-conformity, and queerness have the potential to defy the binary systems to which we have become so accustomed in the white, Anglo-American overculture that surrounds us … Despite being seen by some as the ultimate proof of an imperative, biological, and innate binary construct, queer people, including those of us who do not conform to the overculture's gender expectation, have reclaimed the body as a site of resistance.[51]

From this perspective, the multiplicity of desires and identifications unsettle many taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, class, and disability.

A number of scholars have engaged with the ways race and class are bound up with gender, sexuality, and non-monogamous relationship structures.[52] They argue, in different ways, that the current, popular understanding of race and ethnicity does not accurately account for the multiple ways people self-identify and any critical inquiry of non-monogamy requires thinking about how it is co-constructed within colonial, white supremacist, hyper-capitalist spaces, histories, and structures (institutions) that confer privilege within and at the margins where poly struggles are seen. For example, In *Love's Not Color Blind: Race and Representation in Polyamorous and Other Alternative Communities*, Kevin Patterson examines white privilege, racism and prejudice and their impact of people of colour and other marginalized individuals practicing non-monogamies in everyday life.[53] For Patterson, polyamory, however compassionate an alternative to monogamy, still operates and is rooted in a racist society. According to Patterson, the prevailing problem is that the representation of polyamorous relationships in the media and popular culture resides in a standard of whiteness. While this standard of whiteness may make polyamory more accessible and acceptable to the mainstream, it also erases the experiences of POC in poly-life. In *Fraught Intimacies: Non/monogamy in the Public Sphere*, Nathan Rambukkana examines how non-monogamies are represented in the public sphere, and points to the differential treatment of white polyamorists and culturally polygamous immigrants in Canada.[54] Rambukkana's analysis reveals how some forms of non-monogamy are tacitly accepted, even glamourized, while others are vilified, reviled, and criminalized.[55]

Further integrating anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, critical race, and feminist theories into the study of non-monogamies and polyamory, a number of scholars have considered the social protections afforded by race and class privileges that can provide buffers to particular individuals —and dissuade POC, sexual minorities, and other marginalized groups from—participating in polyamory and non-monogamous relationships to navigate the myriad of potential negative outcomes related to sexual and relational non-conformity. Commenting on the politics of Black respectability and white homonormativity in popular culture, Iyana Robertson writes:

> For many bisexual Black men, a falsified reputation precedes them, and most mainstream images of Black male sexuality do very little to help … In essence, because of the stigmas surrounding Black male bisexuality, many Black bisexual men are living covertly—or on the "down-low"—without the support of one other, to lessen the likelihood of being abandoned by their immediate communities … Heteronormative relationship concepts also threaten to diminish the experiences of bisexual Black men … The stress of constantly toeing the lines of heterosexism and hypermasculinity, naturally, poses a threat to the mental health of bisexual Black men.[56]

For example, *Black Mirror* (2011–2019) is a British dystopian science fiction anthology television series created by Charlie Brooker.[57] It examines modern society, particularly regarding

the unanticipated consequences of new technologies. Episodes are standalone, usually set in an alternative present or the near future, often with a dark and satirical tone, although some are more experimental and lighter. In season five, the show tackles how disconnected people are because of modern technology. The episode "Striking Vipers" remains one of the series' rare explorations into queer desire. One of the best things about *Black Mirror* is its capacity to surprise viewers. Many of the program's finest episodes trick the viewer into making certain assumptions or sympathizing with certain characters before revealing things are not what they seem. While "Striking Vipers" represents the very real struggles many Black bi+ (bisexual, bi-curious, pansexual, fluid, queer, MSM, no labels, etc.) men face, there are many complex and nuanced questions raised in this episode, such as Black masculinity, transgender identities, normative ideas around maleness, internalized biphobia and homophobia, and Black bodies, violence, and the police state that are not explored despite its contemporary relevance.

But in order to get to the nuance and specificity about the characters and the world in which this story takes place, the reader is required to have an understanding of how a person's overlapping identities—including race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and disability status, for example—impact the way the characters experience oppression and discrimination. The reader is also required to know how fragile masculinity plays out in oft complicated and complex ways, the trivializing of trans-experiences in popular culture, normative tropes of Black men as liars, cheaters and sexually insatiable, and societal advantages and privileges afforded to heterosexual, monogamous coupling. For instance, when the main characters, Danny and Karl, agree to meet in real life—not to fight but to kiss—to learn if their feelings for each other in the game universe translate into real life, their reaction can be read as evidence of fragile masculinity. The subsequent physical fight between Danny and Karl signifies the precariousness of socially constructed notions of manhood which can create anxiety among males who feel that they are failing to meet cultural standards of masculinity—with predictable consequences.

After they kiss and reveal they felt no desire for each other (read as a refusal to have characters who explore bisexuality to ever acknowledge it), they argue and in the midst of a highly emotional and physical fight, police arrive, and they are arrested. The scene ends with Theo, Danny's wife, bailing her husband out of jail and, on the car ride home, demanding to know what is happening between him and Karl.[58] As the credits roll, we are treated with Della Reese's "Not One Minute More," Theo is aware of her husband's cheating and the virtual relationship with his best friend. The couple has come to an agreement: once a year (on his birthday), Danny can spend the night in the game with Karl and Theo is free to enjoy a one-night stand on the down-low—their happy ending.

The term "on the down-low" is a "colloquial term that emerged in the African American lexicon to refer to any covert sexual behavior and was picked up by the mainstream media to refer specifically to African American men who identify as heterosexual, maintain relationships

with women, and secretly have sex with men."[59] Keith Boykin writes, "For white America, the down low is a way to pathologize black lives. And for the media, the down low is a story that can be easily hyped."[60] As a media-constructed narrative that casts Black bi+ men as liars, cheaters and sexually insatiable, specifically racialized and sexualized cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities can be read in "Striking Vipers." In this text, the narrative of the down-low connects at the intersections of queer and Black. Danny's (and by extension, Theo's) choices are constrained by compulsory monogamy. Framed differently, in the mononormative world in which this story takes place, "the unintelligibility of polyamory, as well as a heterosexist conflation of homoerotic desire with inferiority" [61] force Danny and Karl to keep their love and desires a secret.

Racism, imperialism, and colonialism are deeply interconnected systems that construct regimes of normalcy, including the normative power of whiteness and the binary of the self and other. Colonialism is the historical and on-going process of conquest and exploitation of people, land and resources.[62] Racialized constructions of normalcy are a violent process, and rest on the invisibility of the colonizer.[63] Sherene Razack as referred to whiteness as the colour of domination describing how it shows up in discursive moves of innocence and the repetitive denial of white dominance and complicity in systems of domination.[64] Whiteness has also been described as profoundly spatial.[65] In *The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of "White Privilege*," Zeus Leonardo explains:

> In order for white racial hegemony to saturate everyday life, it has to be secured by a process of domination, or those acts, decisions, and policies that white subjects perpetrate on people of color. As such, a critical pedagogy of white racial supremacy revolves less around the issue of unearned advantages, or the state of being dominant, and more around direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it.[66]

For Leonardo, pointing out white racial hegemony involves more than just noting racial privileges and advantages or viewing racism as an unfortunate by-product of everyday thought and practice unconnected to subjects but, instead, requires a critical pedagogy of white racial supremacy that is deeply connected to socioeconomic, legal, and spatial acts and processes that secure domination.

Hookup culture, as depicted in *Newness*, is a visible, public, and performative system: it is a system that works through, is enacted by, and embodied by individuals and individual bodies. It is a system that is rooted in larger systems and structures of white supremacy, *gender inequality*, classism, misogyny, homophobia, etc.[67] For example, it is depicted during the scene in which the character Martin and several male acquaintances discuss their experiences using the Tinder-like app, WINX. Presented as male bonding, Martin's friends jokingly laugh and share stories about all the non-white women they have hooked up and had sex with and how the app

meets their tastes, preferences, and sexual appetites with women. In this scene, white male sexuality is left unmarked and unproblematized. Non-white women are fetishized and presented as exotic sex objects to temporarily satisfy the desires of white men and whiteness shows up in declarations of innocence, the repetitive denial of white dominance and racism, and complicity in systems of dominance.[68]

Racialized bodies, and the ways in which they express power through sexuality, formal authority, and through kinship relationships are limited in the white Western imagination. While Black women are more visible than ever in popular culture, "there is still a need to pay attention to the subtle messages in which racism and sexism are so often embedded in this era of supposed diversity and multiculturalism."[69] When Black women's experiences are visible, they often lack the full range of real-world experiences. For Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, "While most people of color, and African Americans in particular are perceived through a distorted lens, Black women are routinely defined by a specific set of grotesque caricatures that are reductive, inaccurate, and unfair."[70] Imagery of the de/sexualized, colonized Black woman not only has its roots in modern media but is also rooted in the history of (sexual) slavery. Jane Ward writes:

> Ideas about the difference between black and white sexuality, and female and male sexuality, were also used by whites to justify white supremacy…with one consequence of this strategy being that white men were posited as the paragons of proper heterosexual agency. Whites defended racial segregation as a means of protecting passive and vulnerable white women from sexually violent black men, and, less commonly, from the corrupting influence of hypersexual black women. In this formulation, white male sexuality…is visible only as that which was properly positioned vis-à-vis women.[71]

For example, in the television series *Wanderlust*, the character Claire can be read as the younger, single, educated, pot-smoking, vulgar and angry feminist who is positioned as simultaneously privileged and marginalized. She accepts Alan's proposal of an "it's just sex" dynamic which reinforces cultural stereotypes of the hypersexual Black female, who yearns for sexual encounters with white men. When Alan becomes excessively emotionally invested and attempts to inject domesticity into the relationship and, by extension Claire's living space, she is repulsed and subsequently removed from the dynamic. Her abrupt exit repositions the monogamous marriage and domestic arrangement between Joy and Alan as central. The character Angela, on the other hand, can be read as Claire's counterpoint. She exists in the series perpetually sitting in her therapist office chair, intelligent and professional yet sexually and socially conservative, assertive yet unassuming, and strong and detached. In some ways, I read Angela as the substitute for the socially constructed white woman conditioned by hegemonic values and norms—monogamous, virtuous, morally superior, feminine, and desexualized—a guardian and purveyor of moral and ethical respectability.

For scholars such as Bridget Byrne, "intersectionality loses its critical power when race becomes something only relevant to women of colour rather than also being used to examine the construction and maintenance of structures of power, including whiteness."[72] According to Byrne:

> Scrutiny of the production of whiteness relies on attention to the ways in which raced, gendered, classed and other norms are used to construct an Other considered unintelligible and unworthy of subjecthood. It involves questioning what technologies of looking, labelling, categorizing and failing to see or silencing are utilized to recognize the subjecthood of some people and to cast others into what Judith Butler (1997) calls the 'abject zones of sociality.'[73]

One way in which the centrality and dominance of whiteness is maintained is through the figure of the person of colour. The person of colour is presented as an added extra thus "re-securing the centrality of the subject positioning of white [people]."[74] In order to explore the possibilities of decentering whiteness in non-monogamies, scholars must consider how whiteness and sexual citizenship are intersectional to the extent that they are raced, gendered, classed and heteronormative.[75] The intention here is not to re-center or reify whiteness, but rather to destabilize it by making it an object of analysis.

A number of critical social theorists take up the social construction of gender and sexuality and argue, in different ways, that the supposed naturalness of the sex/gender binary is the basis of heteronormativity and the systematic privileging of heterosexual identities over others.[76] In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler explains "abjection" and how it plays a role in creating the subject. For Butler, this process is crucial in "constituting a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject." [77] Butler also explains that this process is present in homophobia, racism, and sexism, which involves expulsion, exclusion, and repulsion from society when certain identities become and symbolize the Other. Since abjection helps in understanding part of the creation of the subject it can also serve as a way to understand Butler's idea of gender performance. In her analysis of the discursive limits of sex, sexuality and gender are not natural but rather, discursively produced, and have "a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies [it] controls."[78] From abjection, we can see that the boundaries of the subject's inner and outer worlds are truly unfixed and are not innate but created by the subject.

Understanding that representations of gender and sexuality become more diversified once we leave traditional modes of production, representation of non-monogamies in popular culture is not only about a lack of visibility, but what has been presented thus far has been deeply embedded in a transnational process referred to as homonationalism. Originally proposed by Jaspir Puar, homonationalism is an enactment of LGBTQ performances, identities, and relationships that incorporates them as not only compatible with but even exemplary of

neoliberal imperialist ethics and citizenships.[79] Homonationalism refers to socio-spatial and political processes that strategically incorporate certain privileged queer bodies into nation-building projects. Homonationalism can be understood as a fourth dimension of homonormativity—an imperialist dimension—alongside its class, gender, disability, and racial dimensions. In the participation of homonationalism, we become blinded by our privileges and actively work against the well-being of the most vulnerable members of our community "rather than show solidarity with those who are also oppressed by monogamous and heterosexual familial forms."[80] For Puar, homonationalism can be evidenced in the essentializing of gendered dynamics in intimate relationships, the erasure of queer ethical non-monogamous configurations, "othering," and how mononormativity plays out in nation-states, found in cultural, discursive, performative and aesthetic configurations, and political performativity of texts in popular culture. Homonationalism "is more than the processes of patriarchy, heterosexism, and compulsory heterosexuality. It is also colonial nation-building projects—instruments of imperialist and colonial ideologies—reinforcing specific (white) kinship structures (nuclear family, monogamy, and so on) as a way of erasing other cultural ways of engaging."[81]

In *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz states:

> Disidentification is [a] mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counter-identification, utopianism), this working on and against is a [survival] strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local and everyday struggles of resistance.[82]

Disidentificatory practices allow individuals to neither completely identify with the normativity of monogamy nor completely reject them. Disidentification is the process by which one reworks identities and cultural practices, so they simultaneously retain that which is edifying and pleasurable while also rejecting and confounding socially prescriptive norms.

In search of the radical potential of a queer politics within non-monogamies, it is a paradox to practice a philosophy centralized on the critique of normativity, when the politics normalizes what it means to be queer. Similar to Cathy Cohen's radical critique in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" I choose to focus on the idea that "if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of such politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin."[83] The

manifestation of non-monogamies in contemporary Western culture alludes to the multitude of ways non-monogamies and queerness can be expressed and articulated. As Anna Storti states, "These various embodiments contribute to an array of difference, one that if viewed non-hierarchically, serves as an opportunity for queer politics to productively refrain from attaching to any normalized expression of performance, whether [*non-monogamist*] or queer."[84]

For me, the emergence of non/monogamies into mainstream consciousness and popular culture has meant filtering out various levels of vitriol aimed at individuals who choose not to navigate normative relationships and "every relationship which does not represent this pattern, is being ascribed the status of the other, of deviation, of pathology, in need of explanation or is being ignored, hidden, avoided and marginalized."[85] Even when there is a "good" portrayal, storylines largely suggest that polyamory is just means fear of commitment or that it is easier than monogamy, because it's only about sex. This lends to a general resolve with a move towards a monogamy-redemption arc. Agreeing with Sara Ahmed, as a queer subject, "I[sic] feel the tiredness of making corrections and departures; the pressure of this insistence, this presumption, this demand that asks either for a 'passing over' (a moment of passing, which is not always available) or for direct or indirect forms of self-revelation".[86] Ahmed tells us that "in the intentional shaping of our stories, amidst the surfaces of individual and collective bodies—norms—we might even have other stories to tell."[87] And so, I say, yes! To make things queer, view things from a queer angle, emphasize disturbance, disorientation, fluidity, impermanence, and other ambiguous emotions and perspectives and embrace the accompanying feelings that are unpleasant or downright painful.

Wishing neither to aspire to current iterations of non-monogamies in popular culture (via assimilation) nor abandon mainstream popular culture (via resistance) altogether—as in doing so I miss the potential to search for, see, analyze, and archive the ideological labours current representations of non/monogamies are doing—I will answer the call of imagining the futurity of non-monogamies and in which ways stories about nonmonogamies could be different. I do not want to limit what 'counts' as non-monogamous representation but to further contribute to the social and political potential of non-monogamies to reveal alternative ways of loving a good and happy life—via transformation.

## *Notes*

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# Becoming-Dinosaur: Life's Resistance Against Binary Biopower in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993)

*Alex Ventimilla*

**Abstract**

This article discusses how the cinematic classic *Jurassic Park* (1993) is often represented in a negative light in the critical literature that surrounds it. This paper will argue that these paranoid readings are not necessarily productive, and a different, more reparative reading of the film is warranted. Through combining an extensive list of theoretical approaches by many postmodern philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, the Dinosaur comes into being as the most important and impactful character of the film. With a focus on the affective and the animal turn, this study is a pointed reparative analysis of how the Dinosaur becomes a force of resistance against multiple facets of binary biopower; ultimately becoming the hero of the entire film.

**Keywords:** Becoming-animal, Reparative Reading, Affect, Resistance, Biopower

Feminist critics Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca begin their analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) with a familiar quandary among those who enjoy and study popular media. On the one hand, they argue, popular arts like Hollywood cinema are "clearly a product of the dominant culture."[1] On the other hand, and despite its oppressive shortcomings, people continue to enjoy them.[2] As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in her chapter "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," in a world rampant with self-evident systemic oppression, "to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant."[3] By paranoid, she does not mean to diagnose a pathology inherent to a form of critique; instead, she considers paranoid inquiry to be a kind of theoretical stance that makes the search and signaling of the dominant culture's oppression its primary aim. Sedgwick believes that this has become coextensive with critical inquiry rather than one among several practices.[4] This alleged coextensiveness between paranoid inquiry and critical analyses of popular culture is evident in several readings of *Jurassic Park*.[5]

*Jurassic Park* is one of the most iconic, popular, and successful cinematographic works of all time.[6] However, there is relatively sparse academic literature on *Jurassic Park*, much of which points to several problematic elements in the film. Americanist Paul Lauter makes this Spielbergian work the object of an account that details the evolution of numerous theoretical "shifts" and the new modes of critical interpretations of popular culture these turns have


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elicited.[7] For example, Laura Briggs and Jodi Kelber-Kaye suggest the film is exemplary of how "the opposition to genetic technologies expressed in contemporary popular culture is grounded in a profound anti-feminism."[8] Indeed, feminist criticism of the film appears to be a constant feature of the critical literature that surrounds this film. Lauter points to psychoanalytic interpretations of "bad mothers," such as Lisa Yaszek's compelling argument that the film's dinosaurs "indicate a very real anxiety about the ways that advanced technologies threaten normative understandings of sexual identity."[9] But even though academic interpretations have found *Jurassic Park* to be the product and bolster of a dominant culture that oppresses and alienates those deemed to be the "other," its popularity among audiences and critics remains undeterred.[10]

What are scholars of popular culture to do in this scenario? Must we continue to engage in what Sedgwick refers to as "paranoid hermeneutics," that is, the project of detecting, exposing, and denouncing hidden patterns of violence she believes has become "the common currency of cultural and historicist studies"?[11] Further, should we discard works that have been found to be in bed with the dominant culture's systemic oppression? Or is there another way? Arbuthnot and Seneca's answer is straightforward: "it is insufficient simply to expose and destroy."[12] Their view is reminiscent of Sedgwick's call for *reparative readings* that focus their efforts on pleasure and amelioration,[13] open to experience surprise,[14] and whose impulse is additive and accretive.[15] Thus, my reading of *Jurassic Park* focuses on what is most enjoyable about the film:[16] the Dinosaur.[17] This text will explore the different ways the Dinosaur 'becomes' a force of resistance against a dominant culture of binary (animal, economic and gender) politics. Such a reparative reading of *Jurassic Park* offers a refreshing viewpoint of an often-neglected part of the film: the Dinosaur as the hero.

I draw from two unfolding theoretical turns to advance this argument. The first, and perhaps most readily relevant of the two, is the "the animal turn."[18] Born of the necessity of thinking about the role played by living beings beyond the human in the study of media,[19] this turn to move away from an anthropocentric view of the world has led to the development of (Critical) Human-Animal Studies. Anthrozoologist Margo DeMello defines this as "an interdisciplinary field that explores the spaces that animals occupy in human social and cultural worlds and the interactions humans have with them."[20] Sociologist David Nibert adds that this framework allows for examinations of the "entangled oppressions of humans and other animals" while recognizing the role of capitalism in promoting systemic oppression of all types.[21] A growing number of scholarly works set on decentering the human from the study of popular media have implemented this framework.[22] But as Brett Mills argues in his book *Animals on Television*, the tools employed in these scholarly examinations to explore and make sense of representations "are themselves speciesist" and predicated on the binary distinction between human and animal.[23] Scholars Randy Malamud and Cary Wolfe have voiced similar criticism. The former argues that human representations of animals "are inherently biased and self-

serving,"[24] and Wolfe bemoans what he considers to be "humanist approaches to posthumanism" and calls instead for a "reconfiguration of what philosophy is" to respond to the challenge at hand.[25]

I look at the "affective turn" in search of this reconfiguration of philosophy. Originally derived from Baruch Spinoza's philosophical formulation of *affectus*, I follow Brian Massumi's definition of affect as "the ability to affect and be affected."[26] In his text *The Politics of Affect*, however, Massumi complicates the deceptively simple definition by stipulating that affect requires a reconceptualization that understands it "not as fundamentally individual, but as directly collective."[27] Furthermore, he argues, affect must be understood as "*involving feeling in thinking,*" and vice versa, which makes this theoretical approach particularly receptive to being implemented in a reparative reading.[28] Coupled with Claire Colebrook's characterization of the affective turn as the spark of "a revolution in a history of Western thought dominated by Man as the center of knowledge," the concept becomes relevant to works seeking to destabilize human dominance in a text.[29] To better grasp the applicability of affective notions to a film like *Jurassic Park* and how it may offer a novel way of understanding it as a politically-productive text, I turn to Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. The work is composed of a collection of free-floating essays on diverse but interrelated subject matters (plateaus). One of these, "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible," begins with the authors' recollection of the "B" movie *Willard* (1971),[30] and their interpretation of the protagonist's journey of "becoming-rat" in the film.[31]

Becoming-animal is a notoriously intricate notion whose unwillingness to be demarcated is in accordance with its conception within the indeterminate philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. Nevertheless, their utilization of *Willard* as a point of departure for their exploration of the concept at hand, and its relation to their attempt at philosophical reconfiguration, is remarkably useful to my argument. Their choice to use Mann's film for these purposes is already noteworthy as its similarities to Spielberg's in form and content are significant. Both have made American mainstream cinematographic adaptations of relatively obscure novels. More important, however, are the affinities in their content. Both films are, in essence, monster movies in which the creatures that haunt the screen are, in truth, animals. And even though *Willard*'s "monsters" ultimately tear the film's human protagonist to shreds, Deleuze and Guattari consider that "the heroes are rats" in this film. This is key. Their characterization of the proliferation of rats in *Willard* as combative and admirable sets an interpretative precedent that recognizes animals in films as a potential locus of resistance against oppression. Likewise, I argue that in *Jurassic Park*, the Dinosaur is the hero.

My interpretation of the Dinosaur as the hero of this affective-reparative reading of *Jurassic Park* requires a redefinition of what the Dinosaur is and how it functions in the film. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "a becoming-animal always involves a pack" or

multiplicity.[32] Malamud interprets this to mean that "becoming-animal is about the whole animal and its life rather than its iconically reductive cultural representation."[33] Likewise, media scholar Steve Baker sees this proposition as stemming from Deleuze and Guattari's "suspicion that in handling animal form, artists are merely imitating the animal from a safe distance," in a way that has little to do with the intensities and potentialities of their lives.[34] This theorizing contributes to the constitution of becoming-animal as a formulation capable of envisioning animals as dynamic and fluid entities that eschew human-sanctioned individualist and speciesist boundaries. Furthermore, this approach resonates with Massumi's stipulation that affectivity is directly collective and pertains to relations.[35] Thus, the Dinosaur in *Jurassic Park* shall be understood not as a particular individual or species, at least not exclusively, but as a multiplicity of affects circulating between interrelated nonhuman forms and brought together into communal becoming by an eventuality. As Massumi adds, affects are implicated in an operativity that "pertains more fundamentally to events than to persons."[36] Thus, it is the events that comprise *Jurassic Park*'s narrative that assemble into a becoming-Dinosaur.

Deleuze and Guattari write that "a becoming is always in the middle,"[37] and *Jurassic Park*'s becoming-Dinosaur seems to adhere to this prescription. The opening scene takes place at night and in the midst of what appears to be an industrial operation. Dimly lit and cross-cutting shots alternate their focus between images of cargo breaking through a jungle and a crew of technical personnel clad in hard hats and jumpsuits awaiting its delivery. The camera's focus on the men's faces denotes their weary watchfulness over the large metallic crate that has just arrived at their facility, a gated installation bulwarked by high-intensity floodlights and armed guards. Once the reinforced container is positioned at the gate, a man outfitted with khaki hunting clothes and a shotgun issues carefully orchestrated instructions in a British colonial accent. In short, the materiality of the mise-en-scène and casting are all connotative of what film scholar Elena del Rio describes as the "technologically mediated forms of killing, surveillance, and security procedures that maintain a state of permanent terror."[38] This inferred terror devolves into horror when the cage's reinforced bars—designed to contain the creatures inside—are hardly able to conceal their violent attack on their handlers. Thus, *Jurassic Park'*s opening scene establishes, as the audience later learns, that the Dinosaur is already in the process of becoming. Further, it is already a force of resistance.

Subsequent scenes offer clues regarding the ontology of the circulating impersonal affects implicated in both the Dinosaur's process of becoming and the oppressive power against which it resists. First, human characters corporate lawyer Donald Gennaro and miner Juanito Rostagno convene at a Dominican amber mine to discuss the events of the opening sequence. Their dialogue pertains to "a $20 million lawsuit by the family of that worker" whose life was lost in the incident, ensuing questions of liability raised by insurance underwriters, and anxious investors demanding an on-site inspection. This is telling because as Brian Massumi writes, both "worker and capitalist are *figures of* capital," rather than its perpetrators.[39] Indeed, the lack of

concern expressed for the loss of the worker's life beyond the financial implications of his death resonates with Massumi's argument that "the worker personifies the potential for the capitalist relation to continue to appropriate productive forces."[40] The dialogue's implication of capitalist interests seeking to mitigate and contain the Dinosaur's process of becoming is emphasized by the locality. Because even though there is no mention of the captive creature involved in the incident in which the worker was lost, this scene plays out against a background of workers endeavoring in the extractive practices by which the Dinosaur has become a commodity.

The process by which the Dinosaur is made the object of capitalist capture in *Jurassic Park* is itself seized in a single close up shot of a mosquito encased in fossilized amber. As Deleuze and Guattari stress, the multiplicity of an animal becoming.[41] They argue for an understanding of these multiplicities as rhizomatic,[42] referring to their potential to establish horizontal relationships either through symbiosis, like orchids and wasps, and/or through contagions, such as between a virus and a host.[43] As is explained through an animated expositional montage in a later scene, it is through one such relation of contagion that the disembodied Dinosaur survives to the present day. A relational rhizome extends from the Dinosaur to the mosquitoes, whose thirst drives them to feast on the former's blood, and then from the mosquitoes to the trees on which they perch, and, in whose sap, they are entrapped and fossilized: "Bingo, Dino-DNA!" The rhizome's extension from the Jurassic to the fossil-thirsty Capitalocene, however, catapults it yet again into another relation; a relation not of contagion, but of capture. For in *Jurassic Park*, extirpation from Juanito's amber mine is but the first of several processes and technologies of extraction, confinement, and control bent on taking the Dinosaur as its object.

The aforementioned animated montage is played out for a team of 'experts' flown to an island, the site of the opening scene's incident, with the intent of convincing them to 'sign off' on the work being done there and placate the investors' anxiety. After detailing the rhizomatic relation through which the fossilized Dinosaur's becoming-mosquito has devolved into an object of desire for capital and its logics of extraction, the montage further elaborates on the operational details. The disembodied Dinosaur, it is explained, has been further subjected to "sophisticated extraction techniques" developed by the multinational biotechnology firm InGen. Once captured, the Dinosaur has been manipulated, replicated, and re-embodied by InGen's scientists through the use of virtual-reality displays, genetic hybridization, and cloning technologies, for the purpose of surplus-value production. John Hammond, the park's CEO, generously describes the site as "an island preserve," but the laboratory, park rangers, and electrified fences more closely resemble a zoo. Malamud characterizes zoos as both sites of captivity[44] and "a vivid symptom of our anthropocentrically degraded environmental epistemologies."[45] Similarly, Mills argues that these physical barriers that separate visitors and animals reassert the binary opposition of *wild* animals/*civilized* people, "whereby animals must be imprisoned for the safety of visitors".[46] Furthermore, he likens the constant "zooveillance" of these captive populations in order to carry

out and legitimize regimes of control to the patriarchal gaze deployed in media to reassert heteronormative dominance.[47] Indeed, the regime intended to control the Dinosaur in Hammond's park is invested in an anthropocentric and patriarchal understanding of sexuality.

The film follows the experts as they are granted access to the park's genetics lab to seek answers regarding the site's feasibility and contingency measures. In the following scene, the mise-en-scène is loaded with mechanisms of surveillance/zooveillance (cameras, sensors, screens) and technical staff. The atmosphere of control and containment is maximized through the sterile immaculacy and computerized mechanization of the lab. It is in this regimented and controlled environment that a Dinosaur 'becomes' in a stroke, or perhaps show, of "perfect timing." In a scene designed to emphasize the newly-regained vitality of these prehistoric beings, a hatching velociraptor breaks through the robotically-monitored eggshell. The eggshell encased an expression of pure, immanent life force, and the velociraptor was in immediate defiance of a paternalistic captor who pathologically insists on being "present for the birth of every little creature on this island." When questioned about how that can be, the full extent of the park's imposition of their power over life is revealed. Dr. Wu, the park's chief geneticist, proudly proclaims: "population control is one of our security precautions. There's no unauthorized breeding in Jurassic Park." Wu explains, that this has been accomplished by ensuring that "all the animals in Jurassic Park are female" through hormonal engineering, even boasts that "it's really not that difficult" since "all vertebrate embryos are inherently female." But as chaotician Ian Malcolm skeptically explains in the film, this form of power over life is not possible.

Brad Evans argues that when power takes life to be its object "resistance to power already puts itself on the side of life and turns life against power."[48] As has been shown, *Jurassic Park* depicts a regime of captivity and zooveillance that takes life as the object of its gaze, eliciting the Dinosaur's physical resistance as evidenced in the opening scene. I argue that this is a regime of biopower, as it is exemplary of "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations."[49] In the film, this is accomplished through Wu's genetic techniques of embryonic manipulation and sexual discipline and with the intention of safeguarding the welfare of the park's human visitors. The biopower implemented by the park in their attempt to maintain an exclusively female population, however, is predicated on absolute and determinist sex/gender binary, an "anthropocentric cultural norm."[50] Indeed, Lori Gruen and Kari Weil note that there is a conceptual link between the "logics of domination" that operates to reinforce heteronormativity and the logic that supports the oppression of nonhuman animals.[51] As Deleuze asserts, however, "when power becomes bio-power, resistance becomes the power of life, a vital power that cannot be confined within species, environment or the paths of a particular diagram."[52] In *Jurassic Park*, the Dinosaur—in Deleuze's words—refuses to comply with anthropocentric sexual diagrams, and becomes a force of resistance against the park's binary biopower.

The organizational rigidity of the park's biopolitical system is emblematic of Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the continual work of organizational powers "to plug the *lines of flight*" and reconstitute its subject.[53] In the context of becoming-animal, Malamud interprets lines of flight as transgressions beyond boundaries that embody a process of life and serve to "highlight the animals' mobility and agency. They are paths of escape from captivity and inertia."[54] In *Jurassic Park*, two lines of flight converge and allow the Dinosaur to escape biopolitical oppression. First, a disgruntled employee sabotages the park's automated electrical grid to stake his capitalist claim on the Dinosaur via embryonic abduction in an act of industrial espionage while the experts and Hammond's grandchildren tour the island. An ensuing scene in which the tyrannosaurus breaks free from its physical barriers is thrilling and thorough in its visualization of this becoming-Dinosaur's line of flight. I argue that even though this escape deterritorializes the park, the potential for reterritorialization remains, as the system of domination—though temporarily hacked—is simply awaiting its reinstitution. In Hammond's words, "this is just a delay." However, a secondary line of flight is encountered by paleontologist Alan Grant, one of the regretful invited experts, while he and Hammond's grandchildren stumble upon a clutch of cracked eggshells in the wilderness on their trek back to the visitor's center following the tyrannosaurus attack. Immediately recognizing that "the dinosaurs are breeding," Grant proceeds to explain to the children: "On the tour, the film said they used frog DNA to fill in the gene sequence gaps. They mutated the dinosaur genetic code and blended it with that of frogs. Now, some West African frogs have been known to change sex from male to female in a single-sex environment."

I began this article by briefly referencing how other critical analyses of this film have interpreted the park's biopolitical regime of population control, the Dinosaur's rebellious reproductivity, and their relation to the film's perceived themes. Lauter suggests that psychoanalytic frameworks find the Dinosaur to be "terrible mothers" whose unwillingness to subject to normative familial relations is the primary cause of horror in *Jurassic Park*. Briggs and Kaye read them as metaphorical "Third World females" whose insistence on reproduction threatens the existence of the film's white children.[55] Lastly, Yaszek considers that by allowing the Dinosaurs to "become temporarily 'male' for the purposes of procreation," the film becomes indicative of a "very real (if displaced) anxiety about the ways that advanced technologies threaten normative understandings of sexual identity."[56] These are all viable readings of the film. Yet, they all confirm Sedgwick's stipulation regarding the prominence of paranoid stances in scholarly analyses of texts and their deployed rhetoric continues to rely upon the same binary logic used to uphold anthropocentric and heteronormative dominance. In other words, their paranoid interpretation of the Dinosaurs and their sexuality remains both binary and normative. And as Deleuze and Guattari write, it is "as deplorable to miniaturize, internalize the binary machine as it is to exacerbate it: it does not extricate us from it."[57] Let us thus move away from

normative heterosexism and anthropocentrism and turn our focus toward the Dinosaurian line of flight and imagine other ways in which it may be interpreted.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that sexuality "is badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes, and just as badly by a bisexual organization within each sex."[58] Instead, they argue for an understanding of sexuality as "the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings."[59] Feminist scholar Myra Hird seemingly agrees. Hird has written extensively about the numerous ways in which sex diversity found in nonhuman beings challenges the prevalent notion of sexuality as composed of two distinct, opposite, and complementary morphs. In her monograph *Sex, Gender, and Science*, Hird argues that although biologists are routinely called upon to reify the sexual dichotomy—as Grant certainly does in *Jurassic Park*—these assumptions are not backed by evidence derived from studies of nonhuman sex.[60] Through descriptive examples of what she provocatively calls "intersex, transsex, and transvestism among nonhuman living organisms," she demonstrates how sexuality is far more diverse than what anthropocentric notions typically allow.[61] Taking this into account, the view that the Dinosaur's ability to breed reinforces anthropocentric prescriptions of normative sexuality falls short. Rather, it is a line of flight through which it overcomes a material realization of what Colebrook deems the "affectless, lifeless, disembodied Cartesian prison" that is the gender binary;[62] and expression of the many ways in which nonhuman species have increasingly led human culture to realize that "there are not really 'two sexes' at all."[63] Further, it is a trans-gression against a regime of biopower that seeks to limit and dictate the Dinosaur's life capacities based on speciesist and heterosexist assumptions of normativity, and it is demonstrative of affective notions of life's power for political resistance.

The link drawn between nonhuman sexuality and the deterritorialization of rigid molar powers in Deleuze and Guattari's reading of *Willard* is telling.[64] They consider sexuality's unpredictable and uncontrollable diversity of conjugated becomings to constitute "an entire war machine."[65] Literary scholar Ella Brians theorizes these machines as mechanisms that address differential interactions and thus labor to undermine (binary) oppositions such as human/animal, natural/unnatural, and male/female.[66] Similarly, Evans understands affective war machines as aphoristic becomings, imperceptible to conventional political registers, that only appear in the form of an antagonism directed against all forms of capture and overcoding once appropriation has occurred.[67] Thus, the Dinosaurs' fluid (trans)sexual becoming can be read as a war machine that is only *perceived* as antagonistic by the anthropocentric and heterosexist forces that seek to capture and appropriate them. As Brad Evans explains, "since life resistance combats the forms of confinement and technical strategies so essential to forms of species manipulation, it equally refuses to accept the dangerously unfulfilled categorization which power necessarily imposes in order to control and transform existence."[68] By refusing to adhere to what biopower dictates and breaking through its physical and categorical boundaries, the Dinosaur in *Jurassic Park* becomes demonstrative of how "the life which exceeds expectations becomes a life of resistance."[69]

Unlike the industrial sabotage mentioned above, this line of flight-by-transsexuality subsequently becomes the basis for a deterritorialization that resists biopower's attempts to regain control over the park.

Deleuze and Guattari assert that organizational forces are "always trying to plug the lines of flight" by stopping or interrupting movements of deterritorialization, weighing them down and ultimately restratifying them.[70] These tendencies toward reterritorialization manifest themselves in *Jurassic Park* through human attempts to reassert their biopower regime over the island. In yet another scene of expositional dialogue, the film reveals the existence of "the lysine contingency," a faulty enzyme inserted into the Dinosaurs' genome that renders them lysine-deficient and, unless they are supplied, causes them to slip into a coma and die. This emergency protocol is reminiscent of Evans's reconceptualization of bare life, who argues that in a biopolitical sense, bare life begins with the promotion of others, in this case, the humans.[71] The clutch of eggs in the wild, however, suggests that this attempt at reterritorialization through biopolitical elimination has already been forestalled by the Dinosaurs' transsexual becoming.[72] Indeed, the notion that the Dinosaur pack is proliferating is accentuated in the scene following the discussion of the lysine contingency. The tyrannosaurus preying on the gallimimus flock recalls Deleuze and Guattari's proclamation that only "liberated elements can enter into the new relations from which the becoming-animal, and the circulation of affects within the mechanic assemblage, will result."[73] Their predator-prey relation is both a refusal of the physical boundaries erected for the pretext of protection and a visualization of the movement, engagement, and ecosystemic interactivity that Malamud considers distinctive of becoming-animal.[74]

Further attempts to plug the Dinosaur's lines of flight and reterritorialize biopolitical dominance over the park are similarly resisted and prevented as the proliferation of the liberated Dinosaur unfolds. Offscreen, a velociraptor pack dispatches Ray Arnold, the park's systems engineer, when he ventures to the maintenance shed to reboot the sabotaged operating system. The raptors then outsmart and take out game warden Robert Muldoon when he goes after them to provide enough cover for paleobotanist Dr. Ellie Sattler,[75] another expert recruited by Hammond, as she similarly attempts to reach the shed and reboot the system. And even though she ultimately accomplishes her goal, Sattler's efforts prove largely futile as the velociraptor pack forces her to retreat to the visitor's center. Indeed, this pack spends much of the remainder of the film consistently exceeding expectations and challenging, as Malamud writes, "the conventional segregation between human and animal sentience."[76] But despite cornering the human survivors, the velociraptors' final blow is abruptly halted by the tyrannosaurus, ensuing in one of the most visually stunning and iconic battles in the history of popular cinema. Though spectacular, this Tyrannosaurus-ex-Machina is symptomatic of the kind of escapist, family-oriented cinema characteristic of Spielberg. This appears to undermine any possible readings of *Jurassic Park* as engaged with notions of political resistance.

I return to Sedgwick to overcome this apparent impasse. Sedgwick affirms that interpretative and epistemological practices beyond paranoia do not, in themselves, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression.[77] Lauter builds a strong case to support his diagnosis of films like *Jurassic Park* as works that serve the primary cultural purpose of "making visible contradictions within commodity capitalism, and then emotionally grounding them in a microcosm of spectacle and pleasure."[78] This suggests that the visually impressive conclusion to *Jurassic Park*'s cinematic narrative is part of popular culture's imperative to perpetuate the consumption of its productions and the cultural notions of normativity, dominance and oppression that it promotes. Lauter does not address how other works of art differ in this regard. Brian Massumi hypothesizes that "every move made anywhere, from the farthest corner of the earth to the most intimate depths of the soul, is susceptible to capitalist capture," meaning that there is no position to critique it from outside, presumably, even in works of art.[79] Instead, Massumi argues, constructive critiques must come from within the collective field. Accordingly, this reading of the film has focused on the Dinosaur, as an agential animal and, most importantly, as a multiplicity of affective relations pertaining to the events of the film, in an attempt to add and accrete to that which is enjoyable in this text and what has been overlooked in prior interpretations. I posit that by bringing the focus back onto the Dinosaur and its affective relations, *Jurassic Park*'s final scene and its position in the film can be understood away from capitalist specularization. For this, I resort to the anomalous.

Deleuze and Guattari claim that every animal has its anomalous. Likening this concept to *Moby Dick*'s whale and *Willard*'s Ben the rat, they consider the anomalous to be an exceptional individual with whom "an alliance must be made in order to become-animal," and that sometimes appears as "the higher Power of the band."[80] It is noteworthy, then, that the human experts fail to fully denounce the island's biopolitical regime until the tyrannosaurus—an exceptional individual within the park's Dinosaur multiplicity who has been at both the border and forefront of its lines of flight—demonstrates the Power of the band against its kin. This chain of events recalls Deleuze and Guattari's elaboration on affect's disposition:

> ... it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel. Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one's bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline? A fearsome involution calling us toward unheard-of becomings.[81]

Their words suggest a tendency or an invitation to attune and allow the self to be affected by the animal's vitality, its capacities of resistance, and the accomplishments of these powers. In this view, the tyrannosaurus's obliteration of the velociraptors is the very becoming-Dinosaur of this heterogeneous pack, much in the same way an orchid and a wasp are a becoming-pollination, or a cheetah and a gazelle form a becoming-fast. Further, it is a reflection, or contagion, of the mechanism Deleuze and Guattari consider is "the only way Nature operates – against itself."[82]

The affective power of the altercation reaches Grant and the other experts when the tyrannosaurus becomes the allied anomalous, the terrifying member of the Dinosaur pack who turns against her brethren simultaneously allowing the survivors to escape and obliterates any remaining semblance of anthropogenic control. Uprooted from their humanity and its tendency towards biopower, the experts and the audience become-Dinosaur, recognizing the Dinosaur's unwillingness to be contained and agreeing "not to endorse the park." The final shot then returns to the anomalous—the tyrannosaurus—its roar the triumphant culmination of its line of flight.

It is through the powerful realization of the Dinosaurs' line of flight that *Jurassic Park* redeems itself as a work of popular cinema. Certainly, this reading of the film resonates with Colebrook's assertion that life without a centered dominant consciousness is sufficient and becomes distorted with the addition of binary logics that distinguish between separated and separating intellects.[83] But it can be most productively understood as a depiction of an irreversible deterritorialization that overthrows a binary biopolitical regime that sought to dominate and take life as its subject. The Dinosaurs' fluid trans-sexuality and trans-gression of speciesist boundaries embody what Malamud considers animals' ability to locate paths to escape the captivity of inertia and along which we "must learn to see animals and to follow them."[84] Certainly, Lauter would see it otherwise. Anticipating interpretations that focus on *Jurassic Park*'s prescription that "life finds a way," he finds them to be loaded with "a primitive hopefulness" that passes for progressive politics while refusing to do the work.[85] But what is this work? What can a cinematic body accomplish, politically speaking? It is as Sedgwick states, that the work is done from within in the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture "whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."[86] Perhaps cases like Dr. Victoria Arbour's,[87] who cites *Jurassic Park* as inspiration for becoming a paleontologist, are a testament to the affective relations that films like Spielberg's can draw out. Unheard-of becomings can shatter binary biopolitical boundaries like those that once made paleontology a western, anglophone, and exclusively-male field.[88] It is time to pay closer attention to the becoming-animal, in popular culture and beyond, and look for how it may have led Others to pursue new lines of flight, that is, how its affects may have and do lead to hitherto imperceptible political becomings. It is time to see the reality of the becoming-animal: "that it is affect in itself."[89]

## *Notes*

[1] Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca "Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 112.
[2] Ibid.

[3] Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 125.
[4] Ibid, 126.
[5] *Jurassic Park*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1993), Amazon Prime.
[6] "*Jurassic Park* Critics Consensus: 91%," *Rotten Tomatoes*, Oct. 8, 2020, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/jurassic_park; "AFI's 100 YEARS...100 THRILLS: The 100 Most Thrilling American Films," *American Film Institute*, June 12, 2001, https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-thrills/; "Top 100 Films of All-Time," *Film Site*, Oct. 1, 2020, https://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice3.html.
[7] Paul Lauter, *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).
[8] Laura Briggs and Jodi I. Kelber-Kaye, "There is No Unauthorized Breeding in Jurassic Park: Gender and the Uses of Genetics," *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 3, (Fall 2000): 92.
[9] Lisa Yaszek, "Of Fossils and Androids: (Re)Producing Sexual identity in 'Jurassic Park' and 'Blade Runner'," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 30, no. 1/2, (Spring 1997): 54.
[10] It should be noted that while the film has been largely panned as anti-feminist in academic literature, feminist scholars have offered more positive critics in other media. Most notoriously, Dr. Hannah McGregor makes an argument similar to that made in this paper in *Secret Feminist Agenda*, "Jurassic Park!," Season 3, Episode 1 (October 5, 2018), https://secretfeministagenda.com/2018/10/05/episode-3-1-jurassic-park/.
[11] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 143.
[12] Arbuthnot and Seneca, "Pre-Text," 123.
[13] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 144.
[14] Ibid, 145.
[15] Ibid, 149.
[16] Though they largely ignore their relations in the film, both Yaszek and Lauter consider that the dinosaur is what is memorable and enjoyable about *Jurassic Park*.
[17] This text will use the capitalized word "Dinosaur" when making general references to the 'pack' of dinosaurs present in the film and not as a reference to specific/ individual dinosaurs. When referring to specific dinosaurs the uncapitalized word "dinosaur" will be used.
[18] For a brief explanation see, Harriet Ritvo, "On the Animal Turn," *Daedalus* 136 (2007): 118–22.
[19] Brett Mills, *Animals on Television: The Cultural Making of the Non-Human* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 11.
[20] Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4.
[21] David Nibert, "Foreword," in *Defining Critical Animal Studies: An Intersectional Justice Approach for Liberation*, eds. Anthony J. Nocella II, John Sorenson, Kim Socha and Atsuko Matsuoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), xi.
[22] See for examples: Tim Gadd, "Human-Animal Affiliation in Modern Popular Film," in *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Popular Culture*, eds. M. Pollock and C. Rainwater (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 247–60; Henrik Brumm, "Biomusic and Popular Culture: The Use of Animal Sounds in the Music of the Beatles," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 1 (2012): 25–38; and, Claire Molloy, "Animals, Avatars and the Gendering of Nature," in *Cinema Beyond the Human*, eds. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 177–93.
[23] Mills, *Animals and Society,* 65.
[24] Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 6.
[25] Cary Wolfe, "Flesh and Finitude: Thinking Animals in (Post)Humanist Philosophy," *SubStance* 37, no. 3 (2008): 8.
[26] Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), ix.
[27] Ibid, 91.
[28] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[29] Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 30.
[30] *Willard*, directed by Daniel Mann (Los Angeles, CA: Rysher Entertainment, 1971).
[31] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 233.
[32] Ibid, 239.
[33] Malamund, *Animals*, 46.

[34] Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 139.
[35] Massumi, *Politics*, 91.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 293.
[38] Elena Del Rio, "Bare Life," in *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 78.
[39] Massumi, *Politics,* 89. Emphasis in original.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 242.
[42] Ibid, 8.
[43] Ibid, 10–11.
[44] Malamund, *Animals*, 116.
[45] Ibid, 53.
[46] Mills, *Animals on Television,* 119.
[47] Ibid, 121.
[48] Brad Evans, "Life Resistance: Towards a Different Concept of the Political," *Deleuze Studies* 4, (2010): 146.
[49] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* (Vintage Press, Reissue ed. Apr. 1990), originally published in 1976, 140.
[50] Mills, *Animals on Television,* 46.
[51] Lori Gruen and Kari Weil, "Animals Others - Editors' Introduction," in *Hypatia* 27, no. 3 (2012): 479.
[52] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. S. Hand, (London: Continuum Press, 1999), 77.
[53] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 270. My emphasis.
[54] Malamund, *Animals,* 46.
[55] Lauter, *Walden Pond,* 92.
[56] Yaszek, "Of Fossils," 54.
[57] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 276.
[58] Ibid, 278.
[59] Ibid, 279.
[60] Myra J. Hird, *Sex, Gender, and Science* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 99.
[61] Ibid, 99-117.
[62] Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Open Humanities Press, 2014), 214.
[63] Hird, *Sex, Gender, and Science,* 99.
[64] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 233.
[65] Ibid, 278
[66] Ella Brians, "The 'Virtual' Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman," in *Deleuze and the Body*, ed. Laura Guillaume (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 134.
[67] Evans, "Life Resistance," 152.
[68] Ibid, 146.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 270.
[71] Evans, "Life Resistance," 154.
[72] The sequels do indeed establish that the Dinosaurs overcome their lysine deficiency through their becoming into ecosystemic relations.
[73] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 260.
[74] Malamund, *Animals,* 58.
[75] It is noteworthy that no scholarly analyses of the film have dealt significantly with Ellie Sattler as a character. It seems to me that, from a feminist perspective, she embodies many of the qualities often said to go lacking in popular culture representations of females in action films, science fiction, and popular culture as a whole.
[76] Malamund, *Animals,* 36.
[77] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 127.
[78] Lauter, *Walden Pond,* 113.
[79] Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 110.
[80] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 243.
[81] Ibid, 240.

[82] Ibid, 242.
[83] Colebrook, *Deleuze,* 31.
[84] Malamund, *Animals*, 46.
[85] Lauter, *Walden Pond,* 106.
[86] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 151.
[87] "Curator of Paleontology: Dr. Victoria Arbour." *Royal British Columbia Museum Learning Portal*, Oct. 8, 2020, https://learning.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/author/victoriaarbour/.
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[89] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus,* 259.

# Taking a Moment: Embodying Temporality and Finding a ‘Queer Sense of Belonging’ through Live Performance

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**Abstract**

Using Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of chrononormativity, I show that a capitalist and heteronormative society can manifest in queer embodiment through the extra work required by queer subjects in order to adhere to these expectations. Following this, I provide an autoethnographic and affective reflection of a personal encounter at a “queercore” concert of the band *Hunx and His Punx* in Brooklyn, New York, in 2019. During this live performance, I felt a queer moment of ease and comfort. Through an unpacking of the multifaceted components of the performance, I argue that the concert fostered a temporal space to allow the embodied tension and discordance of queerness to dissipate: thus offering what I call a ‘queer sense of belonging.’

**Keywords:** Chrononormativity, Queercore, Live Performance, Queer Belonging, Queer Embodiment

Despite what appears to be the contemporary burgeoning of mainstreamed queerness, I find myself, as a queer subject, searching for a moment in time and space that allows my embodied tension to dissipate. I contend that queer subjects *feel* an embodied discordance in the face of chrononormativity. I borrow the term “chrononormativity” from queer temporal theorist Elizabeth Freeman, to explain how temporality is valued in our Western context[1]. This definition undergirds my claim that a capitalist and heteronormative society can manifest in queer embodiment through the extra work required by queer subjects in order to adhere to these expectations. Following this, I reflect upon a personal encounter at a “queercore”[2] concert of the band *Hunx and His Punx* in Brooklyn, New York, in 2019.[3] During this live performance, I felt a queer moment of ease and comfort. Through an unpacking of the multifaceted components of the performance, I argue that the concert fostered a temporal space to allow the embodied tension and discordance of queerness to dissipate: thus offering what I call a ‘queer sense of belonging.’ The performance achieved this sense of belonging through the illumination of components that revalue our notions of temporality by eschewing Western chrononormativity. I use this experience as a case study to show how live performance has the capacity to become a space that revalues temporality in a way that can be coherent and meaningful to queer subjects. This paper begins by unpacking the notion of temporality as valued in North American as heteronormative and capitalist and how this is uniquely embodied by queer subjects. An autoethnographic

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description of my encounter shows that through DIY (do-it-yourself) punk aesthetics, the temporality of live performance, 'inefficient' body language, and narration of past trauma, this particular performance was an opportunity to rid participants' bodies of the bind of chrononormativity and momentarily feel at ease: to take a moment for a queer sense of belonging.

## Embodying Temporality

My discussion rests on the notion of queer bodies feeling the visceral implications of temporality. When I use the terms 'queer bodies' or 'queer subjects,' I am referring to an identity or mode of being that can be described as non-normative with particular reference to gender and sexuality.[4] I posit that queer subjects experience embodied discomfort due to the prevalence of contextual chrononormativity and thus show how chrononormativity has an embodied valence. Freeman's text *Time Binds: Queer Histories, Queer Temporalities* conceptualizes chrononormativity as the dominant temporal measurements within which our social and political contexts are structured, giving value to specific temporal rhythms. Weekdays and weekends, the calendar year, prescribed holidays, and the amount of work scheduled in a day are all organized through temporal rhythms. Chrononormativity encompasses the socially reinforced expectations and norms of how we *spend* our time.[5] In a North American capitalist context, for example, an individual is expected to work at *least* forty hours per week. Any time spent outside of these work hours is time to rest in order to return to work. I concede alongside Freeman that chrononormativity has visceral profundity as it binds our very flesh.[6] Bodies in this temporal structure are expected to adhere to these rhythms; rhythms that prioritize the capitalist work schedule and thus their capacity for labour. Through this chrononormative context, subjects must spend their time in ways that continue to value production, and thus, I argue, a linear and forward-looking timeline. Subjects are constantly expected to produce, signifying that there is no reachable end at which point goals of production are definitively met. Perhaps the imagined end of this work is, like Lauren Berlant suggests, a cluster of promises that we never achieve in order to keep workers as docile citizens,[7] in a capitalist time of "not stopping".[8]

The incessant expectations of forward-looking capitalism continue to increase rapidly, binding bodies to a *hyperproductive* context. Freeman writes "in the eyes of the state, this sequence of socioeconomically 'productive' moments is what it means to have a life at all.[9]"Value is attached to bodies that move through time efficiently to maximize production. This expectation is heavily related to productivity in labour forces, but is also expected through many, if not all, of the capitalist subject's activities outside of work. We are expected and encouraged to have a teleology of something we can achieve or overcome: the ideal body, the perfect family, the job promotion.[10] Our respectability and participation in society is framed by how much we are contributing economically. North American time, then, is always forward-

reaching and goal oriented. As the gap of economic distribution widens and the cost of living continues to rise, not only are we valued by how much we can contribute economically through our labour, but our survival is often dependent on it. As the North American capitalist context is inextricably cisnormative and heteromasculine, any negation of this temporal valuation, then, is undeniably queer. Furthermore, to work to adhere to the illusory "natural" temporality in order to survive in this context is then a site of visceral discordance for the queer subject.

In order to analyse how the *Hunx* concert performance offered a 'queer sense of belonging,' I take how bodies are bound by chrononormativity alongside Jose Esteban Muñoz's discussions of the "utopian performative." Particularly relevant is Muñoz's discussion and usage of the "ornamental" in aesthetic modes[11] as the ornamental "has an indeterminate use value that challenges the protocols of capitalism."[12] Unlike maximizing bodily efficiency for production and contribution to capitalism, ornamental aesthetics challenge "use" and "efficiency." A body moving through time without an explicit capital goal is queer. Freeman also follows how chrononormativity deeply affects queer subjects to the point of asynchronicity. When these temporal rhythms are expected to feel "natural" through social discipline,[13] queers tend to fail[14] when attempting to fit into gender/heterosexual/capitalist expectations. While the queer does not often line oneself up for traditional familial linearity, they start to veer away from the expectation of maximum labour and maximum efficiency in a capital context. My point, along with Freeman, is that queers still tend to stutter in the face of chrononormativity. Persistent chrononormativity such as this was challenged directly through the live performance, providing a queer reprieve, which I refer to as a 'sense of belonging.'

Like Freeman, Sara Ahmed references the linearity of a heteronormative world. This is echoed through the use of the term "straight," as it refers to sexual orientation by evoking the embodiment of a straight line. Ahmed writes that the spatiality of the term is not coincidental: "bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space. The body orientates itself in space, for instance, by differentiating between 'left' and 'right,' 'up' and 'down,' and 'near' and 'far,' *and this orientation is crucial to the sexualization of bodies*"[15] [emphasis in original]. A straight line is a straight path. For Ahmed, a body on this straight path does not take any detours; it does not stumble away or stutter here and there, ideally it does not look backward either. This path dovetails with the linearity of chrononormativity, as Ahmed also writes, "In other words, to be 'in line' is to direct one's desires toward marriage and reproduction; to direct one's desires toward the reproduction of the family line."[16] Both capitalism and heteronormativity, then, encompass future-oriented temporal rhythms.

To emphasize the embodiment and physicality of this straight path, Ahmed argues that by virtue of living in a heteronormative context, heterosexual objects and pathways are made readily available to us.[17] Continuing down this straight path is made accessible and easy. The world is curated in such a way where we do not have to search for straightness. Yet, queerness necessitates looking elsewhere.[18] For Ahmed, this is a "turning away" from the straight path,

finding things oblique or aslant from the linearity we are taught is the only option.[19] Queers must seek out options that are sometimes hidden, sometimes ephemeral. Nonetheless, I suggest that trying to adhere to a chrono- and heteronormative path when you no longer are attuned to it, by virtue of a consistent stepping "offline" into queerness, becomes a physical moment. Working to orientate yourself toward heteronormativity when you tend to veer off into queerness is a physical effort. Many queer theorists reflect on this idea by addressing the stuttering or stumbling, or even failure associated with being queer, the moment we try to return to the norm, we have lost our skill of adapting to it.[20]

In my view, this visceral discordance is further exacerbated when being queer in a labour-centric world of hyperproductivity and capitalism. The intertwining of these forces strains the queer body. I think of this when queers must take on the world of customer service. Customer service positions in the hospitality field exemplify the multilayered experience of a queer subject stumbling throughout chrononormativity. Emma Dowling provides an analysis of her embodied experiences working as a server through a methodological use of affect theory.[21] She accounts for the various ways that working in customer service requires a certain type of performance—the balancing act of the expectations from her managers, the level of personal attention and authenticity expected from the customers—with the reality that her paycheck is very much dependent upon how smoothly she manages these elements. Describing a trial shift at a new restaurant she writes, "I feel the multiple gazes of management, of the male and of the guest, fall upon me and bring me into existence, validating my body and its affective resonances."[22] Her level of success rests upon how she manages her embodied actions under the scrutiny of a fast-paced business. Much of these expectations as a server include performing femininity through flirtation and possessing awareness of the femininity of her affective labour. She provides sympathy and care to the demands of the customer, but as a strong server, also works to cultivate a certain experience: "I perform for you, yet I am not simply on display. I create in you not just a state of mind, I create a feeling in your body, invoking or suppressing my own feelings in order to do so."[23] The server works beyond moving through the appropriate steps of service by attending to the affective moments in order to create a comfortable atmosphere or *feeling* for the customers. She is also hyperaware of the realities of employment in the hospitality industry, especially under the demands of capitalism, as being in a position where she is dispensable to her employers.[24] If the server fails to provide the comfortability to the guest, efficiency to the managers, and comradery with co-workers, then the server is of no use to the company. Her performance is constructed to fulfill these criteria, because as she concedes, she is there for the paycheck.

Under the threat of capitalism, there are particular and heteronormative ways queer workers must act in order to keep "stuttering off-courseness"[25] to a minimum. For example, workers will often feign friendliness in the face of queerphobia at the risk of being reprimanded by a supervisor. When the other option is being unable to survive due to income loss, the

worker's power is deeply compromised. Contorting one's body in order to fit into capitalism's—and the greater public's—expectation of normativity has an added layer of labour for queers or people who tend to deviate from the linear path of capitalism and heteronormativity. The worker must provide a smiling face to a customer, alongside presenting as non-controversial, or perhaps even neutral. I consider here Muñoz's discussion of "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling" in *Cruising Utopia.* He writes about growing up queer as a constant policing of his own actions and states: "I was a spy in the house of gender normativity, and like any spy, I was extremely careful and worried that my cover would be blown."[26] For a queer proletarian subject, this is not an easy task. When a fellow server makes a homophobic comment, the queer server is expected to ignore this (or perhaps respond in agreement) and continue to bring the table of hetero couples their desserts, and revel in their engagement celebration, or baby announcement, or job promotion.

I argue, then, that the pressures of trying to maintain this supposed "natural" temporal rhythm is unique extra work for those of us who are queer. This might be evidenced through the reality of social stigma and minority stress that further exacerbates mental illness in LGBTQIA folks, and that barriers for us to seek help are often greater.[27] We spend a great deal of time trying to keep up with everyone and everything under the threat of cisnormative and hyperproductive capitalism. I yearn for the possibilities to exist in a queer time of our own, to feel rather than straining and discomfort, a sense of belonging.

### A 'Queer Sense of Belonging' in A Queer(core) Time

Muñoz reflects on a punk show he attended whilst discussing the queer potentialities of stage performances and art. Expecting to feel as though he was not a part of the 'proper' crowd gathering at the shows, he was moved by another feeling. Muñoz writes:

> I remember the Cat's Cradle in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and seeing my favorite bands there during the relentless social tedium of graduate school. That is where I started to feel too old to go to shows yet nevertheless felt the show and stage*, the transformation of time and space* offered by the performance, as forgiving and still permitting me access to this network of *queer belongings*.[28] [emphasis added]

Rather than feeling too old, Muñoz felt that he belonged in this setting. He credits his ability to access this "network" as a result of the performances' shifting of temporalities. I suggest that this feeling of "belonging" is the possible reprieve for which I, as a queer subject, have been searching, and ultimately found through attending and participating the live performance of *Hunx and His Punx.* In this quote, Muñoz mentions that the performance transformed "time and space," and as a result, not allowing his age to become a barrier for participation.[29] A traditional temporal measurement, such as age, was not a hindrance to his inclusion in the space. Rather, this space was "forgiving."[30] Through art, members of the audience had access to a different

value of time, likely outside of the chrononormative ideal. Freeman argues that "the discipline of 'timing' engenders a sense of being and belonging that feels natural."[31] In his expectations of the performance, Muñoz was expecting to feel out of place, unnatural in that time and space. Muñoz's experience was made comfortable by reframing his relationship with time. Had this not occurred, he might have indeed felt "too old." But this queer time offered him a comfortable fit. A queer sense of belonging is thus connected to existing on a different timeline where we do not value time for a linear futurity through heteronormativity or through maximizing our labour and efficiency. In these spaces, perhaps we feel our bodies—always at the mercy of trying to "keep up" with chrononormativity—ease a little.

I suggest that I was a participant of a similar queer space-time as that of Muñoz's through my attendance of a "queercore" concert. *Hunx and His Punx* played a sold-out show at "Elsewhere" concert space in Brooklyn, New York in the summer of 2019. Multiple elements of the concert reflected Muñoz' discussion of ornamental aesthetic forms,[32] thus directly challenging north American chrononormativity and fostering a 'queer sense of belonging.' These elements, however, were apprehended through my own embodied subjectivity as a queer participant and researcher. My perspective is singular and incomplete. As such, I provide an autoethnographic retelling of my encounter through my own embodiment as a queer academic whose whiteness allows me to move through many spaces with ease.[33] Consequently, I outline aesthetic and performance elements that fostered a temporal experience that defied any chrononormative logics and linearity for my *own personal subjectivity*. Reflecting on these moments allows me to use my experience to "engage with [myself], others, culture(s), politics and social research,"[34] while allowing room for shifting perspectives and reinterpretations.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge the ways in which enjoying a concert space in a heavily gentrified area is relevant to my experience. The performance, while showcasing a DIY, punk, ethos, also consisted of a band with white members taking up space in a venue in Brooklyn, New York notoriously known for displacing People of Colour.[35] Gentrification is a capitalist and colonialist tool that is not negated by virtue of the space being 'queer.' Dereka Rushbrook argues that cities will flaunt their "diverse" neighbourhoods in order to attract tourists by prioritizing 'queerness' as an example of diversity.[36] Scholar Rae Rosenberg also notes how queer spaces can often be unsafe and explicitly exclusionary for LGBTQ People of Colour.[37] White queers become objects of consumption for tourists further vilifying and displacing racialized LGBTQ populations. Thus, my whiteness indeed plays a role in my feeling of comfort in this time and space. Nonetheless, I want to emphasize the importance of shifting temporalities in the face of capitalism. Perhaps the modes of doing so at this time were not resonant with all subjects in attendance present, yet I am showing that live performance has the potential to do so in important ways for deviant and queer bodies. In response to Lee Edelman's "No Future,"[38] Muñoz argues for the importance of futurity for queerness. Queer utopia is futurity, according to Muñoz, because the present moment of racist colonial heteropatriarchy creates a framework

within which utopia cannot exist, and that a future for queers of colour is resistant to the status quo.[39] As such, I do not claim that this instant encapsulated a moment of utopic anticipatory illumination for futurity, but rather a momentary reprieve for particular bodies (namely, my own). Like Muñoz, the time and space contexts were shuffled, but they are imperfect and partial, not offering a prescriptive ideal for queer utopian performance, but an analysis of elements that allowed me to 'take a moment.'

As a member of a sweaty and animated crowd, I absorbed the live performance of the band fronted by queer multimedia artist, Seth Bogart.[40] We watched Bogart make his way to the stage in full pleather and black sunglasses. His jacket had been hand-painted: a large emblem of a wildcat and the words "man-eater" covered his back. His "*Punx*" were in similar outfits that also included lots of p/leather, patches, and refashioned garments with painted-on anarchy symbols. Bassist Shannon Shaw was crowned with an extravagant platinum bouffant updo and bold winged eyeliner visible from the back of the venue. Erin Emslie drummed to the fast-paced instrumentals in a patched vest with Winehouse-esque beehive hair. Audience participants screamed alongside one another, singing along to the campy lyrics. Between songs, we cheered for Bogart as he finished a can of beer and stripped off his pleather pants to reveal a leopard-print thong. Feeding off of the excitement materializing between the audience and performers, Bogart yelled to the crowd: "who here is queer?" which was met with uproarious and affirmative hollers. Seth effeminately floated and danced around the stage in his thong singing and showcasing his bandmates. The set-list included the simple yet queerly poignant hit: "Everyone's a Pussy, Fuck You Dude," in which the lyrics only contain the title scream-sung multiple times. Although this is but a fraction of the event, I engage with these elements of the performance as I personally found them to be especially resonant. In my view, these facets facilitated stepping outside of the friction felt by queer bodies in the face of chrononormativity.

I consider the genre of music to be pertinent to this temporal discussion and to provide a foundation for many of the relevant threads I reflect upon. Queercore developed as a reaction to the evolution of the punk music movement in the late 1980s.[41] Punk began as a movement against any type of establishment, including gender, capitalism, normativity, and corrupt governing bodies, but eventually became saturated with white heterosexual men who quickly took the message of punk for their own gains. Further subcultures of punk diverted into white nationalist and masculinist movements making certain streams unsafe for women and queer people. As a result, 'riot grrrl' feminist punk bands emerged, such as Bikini Kill and L7. Concurrently, an intersecting but different project took form: queercore.[42] Much like "punk" more broadly, queercore scorned industrialism, capitalism, authority and mainstream success. However, queercore artists and their projects specifically targeted heteronormativity and normative gender roles. They prided themselves on DIY (do-it-yourself) culture, "regardless of skill and resources,"[43] making the means of creation and publishing available to the masses. Music was self-produced and visual art and writing were distributed through homemade zines.

Queercore clothing and art embraced the "salvaging and repurposing refuse of the working class" to reuse the waste of capitalism and create modes of "low-barrier participation."[44] Thus, the aesthetic of queercore reaches beyond barriers of accessibility to wealth and skill to pointedly defy capitalist elitism. During the concert I attended, *Hunx and His Punx* encompassed many of these values through both their visual presentation and their music. This specified genre also plays a role in uniting a crowd containing many subjective threads of experience; indeed, these attributes of a queercore band likely attracted the attendance of the concert goers. This suggest a personal resonance to many audience members as well, a point to which I will return.

A live performance offers a unique embodied experience in the interaction with other participants as well as a visual spectacle. The band's DIY and "punk" aesthetic, I argue, is not only anti-capitalist in its message, but in the nature of its production. Handmade decorated pieces, such as those worn by *Hunx and His Punx*, discourage buying everything brand-new, the logic often touted in this hyperproductive capitalist world. Simultaneously, valuing a DIY aesthetic, such as brandishing hand-painted, stitched, patched garments, encourage spending more *time* on a single item than ought to be allotted in a chrononormative context. Rather, the performers are repurposing old items. Unethical fashion production is practiced for the purpose of turning over as many items as possible. An original design, however, painstakingly done by oneself or a friend is defiant against the forward march of hyperproductivity. The audience, then, has the opportunity to savour in taking "too much time" to create something. This is an example of how the performance challenged a traditional temporal framework, therefore, the deviant queer might find a little wiggle-room to pause in this moment and space. Not only is time not capitalized, but enormous wealth is not necessary. Creating these outfits and art does not hinge on one's social status or monetary ability to buy one-of-a-kind pieces. Rather, you are making these pieces yourself with the materials you already have. This aesthetic requires little money or skill.[45] Thus, the queercore fashion flaunted by the band in the particular live performance created a space that valued a timeline outside of chrononormativity; defying the linearity that so often causes embodied tension in the queer subject.

The genre of music also converges queerly with the unique temporality of a live performance. Perhaps all members of the audience identified with queerness in some way and were attracted to the 'queercore' potential of the concert. Although I can infer this might be likely, I cannot say this with certainty. Jill Dolan writes of "Utopian Performatives" arguing "that live performance provides a place where people come, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning-making and imagination."[46] In these moments, whether we are all "queer" or have a shared history or intent, in our participation, our interactions with one another and the performers indicates and forms what is *valuable at the time*. While we all come from undoubtedly different subjectivities, there is kernel of connection bringing us together. Through the embodied and physical excitement performed by the crowd, I *felt* at this time that the participants were valuing a time and space that makes room for the extravagance of a queercore

band. The concert is occurring immediately, and all the present members of the performance—both the performers *and* the audience members—are participating at once from various perspectives. There is also an emphasis of audience participation as part of the art form; this is seen as the performers engage with the crowd, by asking questions like "Who here is queer?" In the venue of the concert, the bodies present are converging on one timeline, coming from various threads and places. Discussing queer subjectivities and live performance, Lisa Blackman highlights this unique element to performance, "the shows are live and take on characteristics of liveness, which might include their immediacy, their ephemerality and irreproducibility." [47] The concert is immediate. I suggest that this situates all participants in the same *time*, a specific time that is queer. That is, we are all immediately absorbing the band's performance through the music and sights, and our bodies are relating to one another as we dance and sing along to the vibrations.[48] The art is subjective, but we all become participants in its co-creation and work to create a meaning together *at this time*. Grounding and connecting participants in the ephemerality of a moment resists the ever-forward march of linear chrononormativity again. Live performance allows participants to pause and *take a moment*; in this moment participants create new meanings and new values.

As the audience and performers bring forth their subjectivity to the live experience and converge to create new meaning, we are bodies that interrelate to one another creating a new meaning from a shared history. I argue that this was emblematic during the performance of the *Punx*'s song "Everyone's A Pussy, Fuck You Dude." I am interpreting its meaning through my own partial lens, but this was not a meaning I created alone. Blackman also writes that "the performer is not simply expressing their own 'symptoms' but is connected to a shared history or counter-memory that exists inter-generationally and is felt inter-corporeally.[49] The art produced by the band and co-created with the audience members, while working to form different webs of temporalities, is still a 'symptom' of lived experiences. Bodies valuing queerness at this time are still emerging from a queer history, whether or not it is personally shared between attendees. The music and the visual aesthetics work together to create a *feeling* within the present bodies, or, perhaps, an affective moment. Siegworth and Gregg write: "At once intimate and impersonal, affect accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between "bodies."[50] As the participants sang along and laugh defiantly to the "in-your-face" music and lyrics, I interpret this encounter to be a re-imagining of a past moment of queerphobia, presently being enacted on a different timeline with a different valuation.

I attach a meaning to the performing of this song that comes from my own relational knowing and experience as a queer person. I understand and have felt the monitoring of gender-non-conformity on a visceral plane, all too frequently in our chrononormative context. I can imagine Bogart walking in a queer manner, speaking with a feminine lilt, being the object of bullies, at any age. He walks similarly across the stage but instead, he is screaming in the

foreground of a punk song claiming a queerphobic slur in the imagined face of his bullies whilst embodying effeminate body language to a crowd of queers delighting in this moment. Embodying this movement in a space where it is valued by participants works to reconstitute a relationship with our bodies and one another. As we create this new meaning, we might feel at ease. We realize that we can strut in a way that defies expectations of gender or sexuality. This embodiment also has a temporal valence, in that when we stutter and flit around, we do not walk on a straight line.[51] Thus, Bogart is also challenging bodily efficiency along with challenging gender norms. Again, this is a step defiant to chrononormativity, but also mirrors Ahmed's image of deviating from the "straight" path.[52] To move excessively and with exaggeration is to deviate from the norm of straightness and onto another queer path. This, again, provides for the participants a new opportunity to where our bodies do not feel contorted into heteronormativity.

To further reflect on the temporal nature of the content of this song, I want to bring forth the work of Heather Love. Discussing "camp" Heather Love writes:

> Many negative or stereotypical representations from the past have been reappropriated through the mode of camp…images that have been reclaimed tend be those that reflect, in an excessive or ambivalent way, values that are acceptable or even desirable in a contemporary context.[53]

As we can imagine a time of marginalization for being too effeminate, this same characteristic has become celebrated in an excessive way as Bogart himself sings those words, dancing across the stage in only a thong. In the context of this concert, a venue full of queers embraces an effeminate man prancing around the stage. Therefore, by recreating these characteristics of the past in this moment through this exaggeration, effeminacy is being reclaimed and a new narrative occurs presently. Acknowledging the "present" moment in opposition to reflecting on the past or looking to a future, means to dally or linger.[54] Not only do we connect to one another by being on the same timeline, but we are recreating a moment for now, one that does not have an expectation for our future productivity. Dolan further writes, that the performance-based "performative is not a metaphor, it's a doing" that "construct[s] a temporary public."[55]. In this specific moment amongst one another, we are working to co-create a moment of meaning, where performing this effeminacy is real and valued in a way that is not done within the constraints of chrononormativity.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have argued that elements of the live performance that I experienced as resonant worked to revalue and reshape our embodied relationship with temporality. As such, the discomfort felt by virtue of working to keep up with capitalist and heteronormative time was given a moment to dissipate. By valuing "taking too much time," defying the forward-march of productivity, and dwelling by looking backward and inward, I argue that this performance

palpably concocted a queer timeline outside of chrononormativity. Rather than contorting to fit into the constraints of conventional temporality, this sense of relief through the celebration of these elements provides for its queer participants a potential sense of belonging. We are enacting a shared history by taking part in and relating to the band's attire, and Bogart's songs and body language. Therefore, we are all participating, and despite our differing subjective threads, there are symptoms that we share and meanings that we create in that moment. An embodied sense of ease was palpable, and queer bodies belonged. As I have also stated, I acknowledge that this perspective is derived from my partial subjectivity and is open to being revisited through the affective and temporal experiences of others.

### *Notes*

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# Micro-activist Affordances meets Disidentification: *ACSEXE+ and the Deconstruction of Hegemony*

*Quinn Valencourt*

**Abstract**

This article puts Arseli Dokumaci's theory of *micro-activist affordances* in conversation with Jose Muñoz's theory of *disidentification* in support of forms of disability activism that are more sustainable to a long-term deconstructive-hegemonic project. Using the Fédération de Québec pour le planning des naissances (FPQN)'s ACSEXE+ multimedia project as a case study, the present objective is to demonstrate how one can combat systems of marginalization that seek to degender and desexualize the disabled body.

**Keywords:** Micro-activist Affordances, Disidentification, Crip-theory, Critical Disability Theory

This article advances a critical understanding of non-normative sexuality as experienced by people living with functional diversity. In doing so, it aims to examine the ways in which the merger of queer theory and critical disability theory in communication studies can facilitate the interrogation of processes of ableism that function to desexualize the disabled body.

## The Present Trajectory:

As a conceptual study, this article puts Arseli Dokumaci's work on *micro-activist affordances*[1] in conversation with Jose Muñoz's notion of *disidentification*,[2] in support of forms of disability activism that are more sustainable to a long-term deconstructive-hegemonic project. This article is meant to serve as an intersection between the identity politic of Muñoz's queer theory and the embodied politic of Dokumaci's disability theory. The objective of putting these two theories in conversation is to identify how everyday instances of isolation within the lived experience of disability can be conceptualized as part of a universal politic, which is not to be conflated with a politic of universalism. By understanding micro-activist affordances as a form of disidentification—that is, as survival strategies that recycle and rethink the encoded meaning of cultural texts and artefacts—we can identify ways in which the minority subject can transform ableism's logic from within. As part of a new ecology for critical disability studies, we must consider how *anyone* can enact permanent structural change while at the same time maintaining the value and recognition of everyday struggles of resistance. Based on these concerns, this article will proceed with two main sections. The first consists of a literature review that


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elaborates on the concepts of micro-activist affordances, disidentification theory, and the intersection of queer theory with critical disability studies. The second section involves a case study and textual analysis of the Fédération du Québec pour le planning des naissances (FQPN) and their multimedia project: ACSEXE+, which addresses sexuality, access, and disability in Quebec. This case study will exemplify both the power, diversity, and world-making capability of micro-activist affordances, as well as the situation of micro-activist affordances and their performative foundations in a complex historicity of marginalization. Accordingly, ACSEXE+ serves as an example of how one can combat systems of marginalization that often degender and desexualize the disabled body. To conclude, this analysis will apply the established body of literature to what is identified here as a universal politic and deconstructive-hegemonic project.

**From Gibson to Dokumaci on Micro-Activist Affordances:**

Fundamental to Dokumaci's work on micro-activist affordances is its ecological approach to understanding disability.[3] As a re-theorization of James Gibson's 'theory of affordances,'[4] Dokumaci is concerned with the power of everyday performances by disabled people as a form of 'affordance creation,' that is, "the multiplications of the conditions of possibility of living, when life becomes devoid of resources."[5] As she acknowledges in her own research, Gibson uses the term 'affordances' to identify a relationship between the environment and the organism "in a way [that] no existing term does."[6] As an extension to this, Dokumaci states: "The term affordances refers precisely to this single 'compound invariant' which emerges through the interlocking of multiple properties of the environment and of the individual. They are possibilities of action ensuing from the reciprocity of organism–environment relations."[7] To illustrate this concept, Dokumaci uses the example of a surface on which she would be able to sit. Hypothetically speaking, let us assume that this surface is a chair. Based on her subjective relationship to this object, its flatness or height might only render it 'sit-on-able' based on her own bodily properties. And yet, despite the chair's retention of the very same physical properties, this surface becomes 'bump-into-able' in relation to a blind person, or 'climb-on-able' in relation to a child.[8] Pertinent here is the notion that, although any one 'thing' is of the same concrete reality across all subjects, that it can derive a multitude of meanings depending on the subject put into relation with it. As Gibson further suggests, this relational nature does not render affordances as solely a quality of subjective experience. Rather, by being 'invariant,' the object is always there to be perceived, whether interacted with or not .[9] In reference to Gibson's work, Dokumaci states: "it resides neither in 'the world of matter' nor in 'the world of mind.'"[10] What is being outlined here is not the object and its flat, knee-high surface, but the possibility of 'sitting,' which is embodied by the chair and its material composition.[11] Considering the seemingly infinite number of affordances in our environment then, Dokumaci suggests that it is worth distinguishing which of these affordances are already being utilized—and those that are not. Or, more broadly speaking, those affordances that are being shared with others—and those

that are not.[12] In order to do this, she employs Gibson's notion of 'niche'[13] as a means for both historicizing and socializing affordances in our environment.[14]

*Enter micro-activist affordances.*

By mapping Gibson's affordances onto critical disability theory in the conceptualization of 'micro-activist affordances,' Dokumaci stresses that rather than fitting into a prescribed environment that already exists, the subject bends the environment in ways that makes it fit themself.[15] Such processes reject the notion of fitting—or 'misfitting'—in favour of retrofitting the environment in a way that carves out a niche for the disabled subject. From this perspective, Dokumaci repurposes the negative connotations of 'lack' or 'tragedy' that is often coupled with disability[16] in favor of a concept that is aligned with Alison Kafer's work on "'reckoning' with loss, limitation, inability, and failure."[17] For Dokumaci, this takes the form of people's repurposing of tools and existing materials in a creative choreography that enables the completion of the 'simplest' of daily tasks. These are micro-activist affordances; "ongoing, and (often times) ephemeral acts of world-building, with which they [the disabled subject] make the world offer affordances that are otherwise unimaginable."[18] Crucial to distinguishing micro-activist affordances from other theories of disability that address the subject's ingenuity, namely 'crip technoscience'[19] or 'engineering at home,'[20] is that micro-activist affordances embody a creativity that is situated directly within the temporality of the performance itself. In Dokumaci's words:

> The microactivist theory of affordances, lying at the crossover between disability and performance, is concerned less with what is given durable form than with the dissolution of that fixity toward new horizons of possibility […] Microactivist affordances point to how action-possibilities can be exponentially multiplied rather than how they become ossified in the seeming fixity and inanimacy of things. Either because of the ephemerality of an action (as in the dance of buttoning a shirt), or because of how solid things are gradually unmade over lengthy performances, affordances created in and through performance remain in a perpetual state of creation, making the concretization of any form, action, or claim impossible.[21]

Important then for Dokumaci is this shift away from matters of disability that have been overtly concretized to differentiate her understanding of micro-activist affordances from crip-technoscience. If crip-technoscience proposes taking a sledgehammer to the concrete curb, then micro-activist affordances propose a new way of using that curb altogether.

In this context, Dokumaci advocates that her work is not merely a convalescence of Gibson's existing theory of affordances; rather, it is the development of an entirely new critical disability theory that effectively queers our understanding of affordances. Pivotal to Dokumaci's ecological approach to disability then is the reciprocity that exists between the subject and their

environment and how this relationship can be reformulated into new combinations that maintain their own unique potentials. Through this more nuanced ecological understanding of disability, one can begin to understand "how lives experiencing a contraction of the environment and its affordances fall into the zone of disability."[22] Through this lens, micro-activist affordances are not exclusive to disability. As Dokumaci proceeds to outline in her latest work on this theory, micro-activist affordances also exist in people's on-going lived experiences of war and its subsequent fallout,[23] racism and colonialism,[24] and the production of inequity and political-economic disparity through global capitalism.[25] In proceeding with this analysis, some examples of what Dokumaci identifies as micro-activist affordances will be useful here.

In her most recent work on micro-activist affordances, Dokumaci's ethnographic study involves a number of examples drawn from everyday lived experience. These experiences range from her interlocutor's affordance improvisations with buttons, shirts, and their fabrics, their ability to twist and remove caps from bottles, and lastly, the production of more comfortable and safer shoe soles in relation to the surface of a bathtub.[26] This last example is of particular interest as a micro-activist affordance that was more effective for its performer than their medical prescription counterpart. Whereas this person's experience with using the recommended orthotic insoles failed to provide them with comfort and a limitation of pain while walking, their self-engineered insoles made from two-dollar flip flops were noticeably more effective. In light of these examples, Dokumaci is aware that potential critics may attempt to undermine their conceptualization as a form of activism. To this potential critique, she responds:

> If we limit our understanding of activism to the hyper-visible, intentionally engaged political actions pursued by self-identified minority groups, we cannot understand what is activist about buttoning a shirt differently. But if we define activism not by who engages in it, where and how, but by *what activism does and what it affords*, then disorienting buttons, twisting bottles, and transforming shirts into pullovers can also count as activism.[27]

Micro-activist affordances are a form of activism in that they enable one to repurpose the materials of the world in which one inhabits. This perception becomes even more striking when considering that these materials are oftentimes the product of the very same institutions that actively work to marginalize people living with disability—that is, under the guise of inclusion where ableist assumptions of disability conflates 'compensation' with 'accommodation.'[28] To this effect, recognizing the political power of micro-activist affordances involves an expansion of both what 'disability' and 'activism' mean. This entails an ecological understanding of the contemporary moment. One that acknowledges the complex interconnectedness of all our mediated and physical environments (and their relation to disability in particular) that hybridizes peoples' ritual performativity of everyday life with instances of "anarchic spontaneity" and "dances of labor."[29]

## From Pêcheux to Muñoz on Disidentification

Similar to Dokumaci's theory of micro-activist affordances, one of the key pillars to Muñoz's theory of disidentification is its examination of activism through the lens of performance. Muñoz's theory builds on Michel Pêcheux's work through an understanding of subject formations that assess the minoritarian subject's negotiation of identity within a dominant ideology that attempts to systematically erase their existence in favor of a normative subject. From this perspective, Muñoz extrapolates heavily from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's subject formation and interpellation found in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."[30] In reference to Martinez Guillem's summary of Pêcheux's work, disidentification operates as a third modality between the subject and discourse.[31] Crucial to this third modality is the ability to see new possibilities as necessarily stemming from selective processes that are "experienced and built into our living," thus acknowledging both the promise and the difficulty of undoing hegemonic forces.[32] To this effect, disidentification is different from 'counter-identification,' which still inadvertently confirms dominant ideology by reifying the very categories it works to negate. In contrast, disidentification is concerned with rethinking encoded meaning[33] in a way that constitutes a reworking of the subject form and not just its abolition.[34]

### *Enter Muñoz and the application of queer theory*

The language Muñoz uses to describe his theory of disidentification necessarily outlines the ways in which it extends from Pêcheux's concept. Within the context of the present analysis, this conceptual extension more accurately speaks to the contemporary moment. For Muñoz, disidentification is "descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere."[35] This recognition of such theory as a 'survival' strategy is a consistent theme that Muñoz returns to in his writing, and one that helps relate his work to that of critical disability studies. Disidentification is a survival strategy capable of working both within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously.[36] As an extension of Pêcheux's concept, disidentification means one neither opts to assimilate to ideology nor directly opposes it. One that disidentifies neither collapses under the pressures of ideology's assimilation nor attempts to break free of its seemingly in-escapable sphere in favor of some form of utopia. As a form of hermeneutics, it is both a process of production and a modality for performativity.[37] Disidentification "is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance."[38] However, that is not to say that a theory of disidentification is an apolitical ground. As a means for contesting the paradoxes of power, disidentification theory's political agenda is deeply indebted to antiassimilationist thought with discourse that is neither uniform nor stable.[39] Furthermore, while disidentification theory rejects the notion of a 'utopia,' it still inherently values a sense of utopianism in its world-

building project. For Muñoz, and in reference to Osa Hidalgo's Marginal Eyes (1996), this kernel of utopianism entails looking into the past in order to critique the present as a means for imagining a better future; as one that points to the what 'should be' of this world with "elegance, humor, and political ferocity."[40] Essential to disidentification is an ambivalent modality; it is a survival strategy that is engaged by the minority subject in order to resist socially prescriptive modes of identification.[41]

Based on the elements of disidentification that have been outlined thus far, one can observe both the power and the complexity of Muñoz's theory as grounds for a political project in world-making and the imagining of a better future. Yet, it is based on such complexity that this analysis must hand over the task of a final synthesis to Muñoz himself, for no subsequent taking up of his theory can truly describe its potential:

> The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as a raw material for representing a disempowered politic or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.[42]

In light of this passage, we must now turn to the points of intersection that make a dialogue between Dokumaci and Muñoz's work crucial to understanding activist projects such as ACSEXE+ and the intersection of disability and sexuality.

## Critical Disability Theory Meets Queer Theory: Revisiting Crip-Theory

In accordance with Egner's analysis of neuroqueer disidentification, it must first be noted that queer and crip theoretical perspectives are not synonymous.[43] The use of crip-theory specifically here (as opposed to the blanketed notion of disability theory) is important because of its recognition of how these interdisciplinary concepts and their respective fields of research can help inform one another. It would be a disservice to both the identity politic of queer theory and embodied politic of disability theory to conflate the two or suggest that they are wholly interchangeable; they do, however, have intertwined histories and applicability.[44] Both queer theory and disability theory challenge reductionist understandings of human experience and interrogate the utility of binary understandings of normality versus abnormality.[45]

When defining disability and functional diversity outside of critical disability theory, the term generally refers to a "discrepancy between the capabilities of the individual and the functions demanded of him by the environment."[46] Yet, as Moser proceeds to identify, this

relational definition is problematic because it attributes the 'misfitting' of the subject to their strictly individualized loss or lack of function. It identifies disability as "a condition in the individualized body, rather than as a problem with the standards or requirements of the environment."[47] From the perspective of disability and functional diversity, it is with the problems that this misconception manufactures that critical disability studies and its theory are concerned. However, this still does not bring us to the more focused application of crip-theory that is being mobilized in this article.

To a different effect, queer theory provides "other perspectives for understanding different realities and help legitimate different expressions and ways of being."[48] 'Queering' refers to the practices in which one alters mainstream modes of representation in order to reveal latent queer subtexts. As a modality for contesting normative structures of knowledge, queer theory interrogates hegemonic circulations of power and affords potential for sites of resistance based on new and alternative ways of "knowing, being, and acting."[49]As Sandhal articulates, it is a process of appropriating representation for one's own motivations, thus compelling it to afford new meaning in an ongoing act of deconstructing heteronormativity.[50]

While only brief in their description, Sandhal's analysis utilizes these aforementioned understandings of critical disability theory and queer theory as the logical steppingstones for conceptualizing ways in which Dokumaci's micro-activist affordances and Muñoz's disidentification can intersect; ways in which theorizing their combined power can help one envision a deconstructive-hegemonic project. Accordingly, one may conceptualize this proposal as a form of crip-theory if this merger of Dokumaci and Muñoz's work is accepted. Understanding this merger is important because of the inherent rejection of disability hierarchies that crip-theory maintains. This rejection of hierarchy is a crucial component of advancing this article as contributing towards a universal politic, namely because crip-theory formulates its resistance with an active concern for futurity in mind. As such, crip-theory can speak to aspects of activism and intersectionality that critical disability theory (broadly speaking) cannot.

As previously stated, both critical disability theory and queer theory have an intertwined history. Therefore, it is not illogical to put the two into conversation, particularly when the form of activism they conceptualize involves a similar process of negotiating ideology from within. Both disabled people (or, in the context of this given reference, people with 'functional diversity') and queer people have been, and still are, subject to processes of marginalization and stigmatization.[51] Additionally, and as Garcia-Santesmases et al. note, these shared experiences help formulate a sense of intersectionality that:

> understands and denounces the relations between ableism and heteropatriarchy to propose joint alternatives […] what crip-queer alliances have contributed to this intersectional reality is a discursive framework of collective politicization which has named individual experiences that tended previously to be conceptualized as

> independent. What is not named does not exist, and what is named in a certain way, is constructed on that framework of possibility.[52]

Through these processes, both queer identity and disability are continually constructed from the view of normalcy as an 'other,' as exotic or monstrous. As polarities to the accepted status quo, both queerness and disability are cast as "the fruit of sin and meat for diagnosis […] where the rejection of these collectives is generated not by hatred, but by fear."[53] Aside from theoretical unity, this shared history between the two theories speaks to a unique form of oppression. People living with functional diversity usually grow up in isolating socio-cultural settings where few people, if any, share their lived experience.[54] Both queerness and functional diversity have been "pathologized by medicine; demonized by religion; discriminated against in housing, employment, and education; stereo-typed in representation; victimized by hate groups; and isolated socially, often in their families of origin."[55]

This synthesis between critical disability theory and queer theory, the ways in which Doukmaci's and Muñoz's work connect becomes evident. One of the key benefits in 'cripping' queer theory, or vice versa, is how their fluidity provides new forms of insight into negotiated identity politics. In the context of this article, the performance as of micro-affordances can serve as a site for world-building and a means of altering ideology from within.

**One Present Issue**

Based on their condition, living with disability can impact multiple aspects of people's lives. When confronted with the subject of disability, the non-disabled community has a tendency to automatically think of extreme cases, namely the 'tragedy' (used speculatively here) of someone 'stuck' in a wheelchair. And yet, disability exists across a range of different physical and cognitive spectrums. This is why the term 'functional diversity' has been used increasingly in this article. Functional diversity includes everything from conditions made apparent by the presence of assistive technology to invisible disabilities such as chronic illness or pain that, while not immediately clear to the observer, can still significantly influence the way in which someone lives their everyday life. In returning to Dokumaci's ethnographic examples, this applies to everyday and seemingly mundane tasks such as putting on a shirt or undoing a bottle cap. However, despite this diversity, a consistent issue that pertains to virtually all people living with disability are the systematic processes in which the disabled body is frequently degendered and desexualized. These processes exist in media representation, the popular imagination, and even academic research,[56] particularly in relation to the medical model of disability.[57] In reference to Cheng's sociological theorizations,[58] Egner goes on to suggest: "scholars taking up disability and gender together have pointed to social assumptions that contribute to the construction of gender and the consequences disabled people experience when they are unable to meet typical performative expectations."[59] As a product of ideology then, the harmful process of

desexualizing the disabled body is rife with potential for both practical and theoretical critique. As such, recognizing the sexuality of disability is a powerful discursive tool. From one perspective, this analysis can identify the ways in which people with a disability have sex, masturbate, and participate in kinks, which can be recognized as a series of micro-activist affordances in and of themselves. From another, more theoretical level, this recognition holds a political power in its forcing of ableism's ideology to witness the very things in which it deems alien. Yes, disabled people have sex. Perhaps it is about time that everyone recognizes that. With this, the article will now turn to its analysis of ACSEXE+ as a site of combatting systems of marginalization that degender and desexualize the disabled body.

**ACSEXE+ Case Study: Sex, Masturbation and Disability**

Founded in 1972, the Fédération du Québec pour le planning des naissances (FQPN) is a feminist network of popular education and advocacy projects that specializes in issues related to sexual and reproductive health. Its primary objective is to: "raise awareness, inform, and foster critical thoughts on sexual and reproductive health as well as to promote freedom of choice with a social justice perspective."[60] By extension, ACSEXE+ is a bilingual multimedia project created by the FPQN in 2015. More specifically, this project's objective is to develop spaces in which people can discuss sex positivity within the context of disability. To quote their page directly: "Whether it's discussing assistance in physical sexual settings, or stereotypes and confidence, or getting down to practical things like sex positions and where to meet potential romantic partners, nothing is taboo for our collaborators."[61] A majority of the content on their website consists of blog posts and articles written by members of the community and the project's collaborators. Unfortunately, this project's activity went silent in November of 2017, but this does not deter from the political power that their initial dialogue possesses. To provide an idea of the conversations in which this project is engaged, a list of some of their most recent posts is listed as follows: "Dealing with Rude Non-disabled," "Wheelchair, Bound? Kink and Disability," "Sick People Have Sex, Too," "Taking Your Body for a Ride: Masturbation and Disability," "Playing the Online Dating Game, in a Wheelchair," "Disability Sex Yes!" and "Mixed Messages: Ableism in Dating."[62] ACSEXE+ speaks to a wide range of topics pertaining to physical disability and sexuality. What is of particular relevance here are the multiple ways in which these articles identify a series of micro-activist affordances that are deeply embedded in processes of queering the environment, technology, and media around the disabled subject. Underlying the thought processes behind each of these articles are notions of surviving ableism, sexual performance, and acts of world-shaping. The article "Taking Your Body for a Ride: Masturbation and Disability" is an excellent example of these very processes.

As the title suggests, this article addresses the challenges functionally diverse people face in relation to masturbation. From its outset, the author, S.E. Smith,[63] acknowledges that "because

disabled sexuality is a source of so much pointed silence, it can be hard to think of yourself as a sexual being […] you have a right to be sexually autonomous, no matter what messages you might be getting from media, pop culture, and society."[64] After coaching the reader through any potential feelings of embarrassment for wanting to explore themselves sexually, the author then encourages them to 'think big;' to consider masturbation as not just genital stimulation, but also as a form of 'sensation play' that, for example, takes advantage of one's skin as an erogenous zone for pleasure. For ACSEXE+, this ability to 'think big' is made possible because "we're [the disability community] so used to adapting things to make the world work for us, that we tend to be pretty creative when it comes to sexuality […] while some sex stores sell fantastic props and tools for solo and partnered sex, you can also easily improvise, and in the case of some specialty items, you might actually be better off with improvisational work."[65] Already one can begin to recognize the similarities between this discourse and the examples Dokumaci uses in her own work. Given this introduction, Smith then launches into the various props one might require to engage in a do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) culture form of sexual embrace. These D.I.Y. innovations are addressed in the order in which they appear in the article.

The first item Smith suggests is a wedge. A wedge can be used to find a more comfortable position and support one's body. Considering that the cost of wedges from a sex store can be quite high, Smith recommends using folded blankets, towels, and sturdy cushions as a substitute. Importance is placed on wedges in this context because they provide a more immediate way of coping with one's limited mobility or lack of dexterity. In proceeding with their outline, Smith references Sam Wall and Isabella Rotman's article: "D.I.Y. Sex Toys: Self-Love Edition"[66] in order to highlight common household appliances that can be involved in sexual gratification. These objects include an electric toothbrush or razor, back massager, removable shower head, and essentially any phallic object that can be covered by a condom and used as a dildo. In returning to their own work, Smith then outlines a number of safety precautions for the reader, some more obvious than others.

While Smith continues to explain the various ways in which existing sex toys can be used differently by someone with a disability, their most striking advice is tailored to people who use an electric wheelchair: "If you're a wheelchair user, one of our sexy crip experts tells me you're in luck: Your wheelchair can be a tool for sexual expression too."[67] Smith then proceeds with this description:

> Explore the tilt function to get your body in a comfortable position for self-exploration. Depending on your mobility, explore the sensation of shifting or rubbing your weight on the seat. Go for a jiggly, bumpy ride on a rough surface. Play around with the position of your belt and/or straps if you want to see what light bondage feels like. But remember to wash your seat cushion on a regular schedule![68]

Based on this description, one can begin to recognize the ways in which such discourse and its application to people's lives embody the politic of micro-activist affordances and identity politic of disidentification. Readers are encouraged to repurpose the raw materials of the worlds in which they inhabit. In doing so, they not only deconstruct the meaning and application of a number of mundane household objects, but they are afforded an outlet through which they can engage their sexuality while retaining their sense of disability pride. To this effect, they are imaginatively engaged in ongoing processes of queering and cripping everyday objects. The presence of this discourse online and its role in a larger activist project only adds to its political power. There is an anarchic spontaneity to these performances[69] that reconstructs the encoded message of these objects in a way that empowers the disabled subject's minority identity.[70]

ACSEXE+ is encouraging readers not to 'fit in' to normative ideas of sexuality, but to retrofit their environments in a way that carves out a niche for the disabled subject to fully embrace their own sense of sexuality. Additionally, ACSEXE+ serves as a platform for dialogue on topics from which people living with disability are often simply excluded. At first glance, the allure of their website stems from a humorous approach to sexual exploration, but ACSEXE+ also houses an abundance of material that helps readers navigate basic anatomy and sexual education regardless of their functional diversity. In returning to Muñoz's work, disability activism helps readers realize new possibilities in their negotiation of identity under circumstances that attempt to systematically erase their sexuality in favor of a normative subject and more 'accepted' notion of disability-sexuality. As "Taking Your Body for a Ride" concludes:

> Your aide (or family member) may decide that they should be in control of your sexuality — and that specifically, you shouldn't have any. That's not actually their call to make, but you may have limited options when it comes to things like firing them, especially if you're a minor. Or you may feel too uncomfortable to have a discussion about it right now, in which case safe workarounds may be your best option […] If your aide isn't supportive of your needs, it's time to get crafty, and think about requests that would give you a little private time to explore paired with the tools you need without being explicit about what you're doing.[71]

Whether by encouraging the reader to explore their own sexuality through the use of everyday household items (the 'raw material' of the majority) or by encouraging productive dialogue between the reader and their family, friends, or care-workers, ACSEXE+ affirms the positive representation of a positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.

## A Part of a Universal Politic

As stated in this analysis' outset, the motivation for putting Dokumaci's theory of micro-activist affordances in conversation with Muñoz's theory of disidentification is to conceptualize a more

effective and sustainable form of long-term activism that strives to reach a more universal scale in the dialogue it can initiate. Everyday instances of living with disability engage in a world-making process that subtly alters dominant cultural logics from within. Particularly powerful are cases such as ACSEXE+ that not only incite change in people's lives at the micro-level, but actively contest dominant ideologies such as ableism through the lens of sexuality. Notably, these processes are deconstructive in their specifically anti-hegemonic logic. By adhering to any political theory of a counter-hegemony,[72] this activism would run the risk of reifying the unequal power binaries of which it contests in the first place.

Therefore, the vision of a universal activism that this analysis provides is not the ascription of various qualities across 'all' subjectivities in the name of equality. Rather, it is a bottom-up approach in which *all* instances of micro-activism—all performances of everyday life—are invited onto a global stage that invites more progressive conversations of equity and its subsequent projects. The accumulation of individual cases of activism in everyday lived experience at a universal level is a more productive form of universal politic than what previous theorists have conceptualized as a 'politic of universalism,'[73] in which individuality and unique subjectivity is jeopardized. Through instances of micro-activism in the home to the workplace, experimental practices of knowledge production and world-making can challenge hegemony and power relations within issues of not just accessibility and design in terms of disability, but in terms of representation and recognition at the level of identity politics as well. In doing so, expertise is shifted to those people with lived experiences of disability in a way that can potentially promote a more productive dialogue, that is, a form of access intimacy, on a larger scale.[74] Access intimacy here refers to what Mia Mingus describes as an elusive feeling one experiences when someone else 'gets' their unique accessibility needs. Or, by extension, the feeling of intimacy one experiences with other disabled people who share in an understanding of access needs out of their shared living experiences and encounters with ableism.[75] Access intimacy is not necessarily a form of charity. Rather, it is a feeling of genuine solace in having established a connection with someone that lives a different experience than you. By extending such alternative ways of thinking onto the everyday lived experience of disability, we can begin to envision a more productive form of universal politic; one that includes all subjectivities in its contestation of existing knowledge-paradigms and construction of a more equitable future.

At the very least, it is the intention of this article to have contributed to a form of progressive dialogue that combats systems of marginalization that degender and desexualize the disabled body. Notably, placing Dokumaci's theory of micro-activist affordances in conversation with Muñoz's theory of disidentification is one instance of crip-theory at work. Although the project concluded in 2017, ACSEXE+ and its progressive agenda are rife with potential for both theoretical unpacking and practical application. For these reasons, I am confident further research in crip-theory will benefit from additional exploration of ACSEXE+'s (or similar projects) teachings in practice.

## *Notes*

[1] Arseli Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches: An Ecological Approach to Disability and Performance," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 22, no. 3 (2017): 393-412; Arseli Dokumaci, "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances: Disability, Disorientations, and Improvisations," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2019).
[2] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[3] Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches," 394.
[4] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1979).
[5] Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches," 395.
[6] Gibson, "The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception," 127.
[7] Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches," 397.
[8] Ibid, 397.
[9] Gibson, "The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception," 138.
[10] Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches," 397.
[11] Arseli Dokumaci, "On Falling III," *Performance Research* 18, no. 4 (2013): 108.
[12] Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches," 398.
[13] Ibid.
[14] To illustrate her point, Dokumaci quotes Gibson directly in stating:
"There are all kinds of nutrients in the world and all sorts of ways of getting food... All kinds of locomotion that the environment makes possible... These offerings have been taken advantage of; the niches have been occupied. But, for all that we know, there may be many offerings of the environment that have not been taken advantage of, that is niches not yet occupied." Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches," 398.
[15] Dokumaci, "Vital Affordances, Occupying Niches," 404.
[16] Dokumaci, "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances," 492.
[17] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)*,*141.
[18] Dokumaci, "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances," 491.
[19] Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and The Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[20] Sara Hendren, "Notes on an Inclined Plane–Slope: Intercept," in *Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader*, ed. J. Boys (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2017), 278-286.
[21] Dokumaci, "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances," 151.
[22] Ibid, 498.
[23] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of The World* (New York City: Oxford University Press, USA, 1987).
[24] Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[25] Helen Meekosha, "Decolonising Disability: Thinking and Acting Globally," *Disability & Society* 26, no. 6 (2011): 667-682.
[26] Dokumaci, "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances."
[27] Ibid, 516.
[28] Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability," *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 197-204.
[29] Dokumaci, "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances.", 509; 511.
[30] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*," trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
[31] Susana Martínez Guillem, "Precarious Privilege: Indignad@S, Daily Disidentifications, and Cultural (Re) Production," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2017): 243.
[32] Ibid, 250.
[33] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in, *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 129.

[34] Martínez Guillem, "Precarious Privilege: Indignad@S, Daily Disidentifications, and Cultural (Re) Production," 245.
[35] Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics*, 4.
[36] Ibid, 5.
[37] Ibid, 25.
[38] Ibid, 11-12.
[39] Ibid, 17-18; and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*,trans Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage 1990), 33.
[40] Muñoz, 25.
[41] Ibid, 28.
[42] Ibid, 31.
[43] Justine Egner, "'The Disability Rights Community Was Never Mine': Neuroqueer Disidentification," *Gender & Society* 33, no. 1 (2019): 128.
[44] Ibid, 128.
[45] Justine Egner, "A Messy Trajectory: From Medical Sociology to Crip Theory," in *Sociology Looking at Disability: What Did We Know and When Did We Know It*, eds. Sara E. Green and Sharon N. Barnartt (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016), 161.
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[47] Ibid.
[48] Ryu P. Cheng, "Sociological Theories of Disability, Gender, and Sexuality: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Human Behavior in The Social Environment* 19, no. 1 (2009): 116.
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[50] Carrie Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 1 (2003): 38.
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[52] Ibid, 274-275.
[53] Ibid, 270.
[54] Ibid, 274.
[55] Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer?," 26.
[56] Egner, "'The Disability Rights Community Was Never Mine,'" 125.
[57] Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability," 197.
[58] Cheng, "Sociological Theories of Disability, Gender, And Sexuality."
[59] Egner, "'The Disability Rights Community Was Never Mine,'" 125.
[60] FQPN, "About ACSEXE+," last updated in 2017, http://www.fqpn.qc.ca/acsexe/en/about/.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] No further information on the author's identity is given.
[64] FQPN, "About ACSEXE+."
[65] Ibid.
[66] Sam Wall, & Isabella Rotman, "D.I.Y Sex Toys: Self-Love Edition," June 17, 2014, http://www.scarleteen.com/article/sexuality/diy_sex_toys_selflove_edition.
[67] FQPN, "About ACSEXE+."
[68] Ibid.
[69] Dokumaci, "A Theory of Microactivist Affordances."
[70] Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics*, 31.
[71] FQPN, "About ACSEXE+."
[72] Karen Mogendorff, "Constructive Counter-Hegemony," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017).
[73] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).
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# ‘Playing’ With Race: BDSM, Race Play, and Whiteness in Kink

*Morgan Oddie*

**Abstract**

BDSM (Bondage/Domination/submission/Sadism/Masochism) is often assumed to be automatically subversive of gender and sexual norms through its non-normative sexual practices. By deliberately or unintentionally ignoring race, there is considerable risk of the perpetuation of tacitly racist, neoliberal and hegemonic ideologies about sexuality and intimacy. In this article, I take up race play as an entry point to the implications of the practices existing at the nexus of sexuality, gender, race, and class. Specifically, how race play is raced to only include non-white bodies, as one aspect that reflects the oppressive impact of white supremacy in BDSM. With its practices of playing with hyperbolic racism, race play confronts notions of disguised racial superiority, and is, therefore, often a source of discomfort among BDSM practitioners. To highlight these themes, I examine how some of the markers of BDSM that have drawn from historical chattel slavery have been de-racialized in the process of neoliberal private desires and politically correct colourblindness.

**Keywords:** BDSM, Race, Kink, Bodies, Sex Studies

## Introduction

“I do ‘race play’ whether or not I want to.” – Mollena Williams[1]

BDSM (Bondage/Domination/submission/Sadism/Masochism) practices are often perceived to be subversive to gender and sexual norms.[2] Although this subversion is not always the case, there is a perception among many BDSM practitioners, that gendered power dynamics are something that can be manipulated in play. Despite the fluid treatment of other categorical identity distinctions, race is often not considered as something that can be *played* with. By deliberately or unintentionally ignoring race, there is considerable risk of the perpetuation of tacitly racist, neoliberal and hegemonic ideologies about sexuality and intimacy. I take up race play as an entry point to the implications of the practices existing at the nexus of sexuality, gender, race, and class. However, as the epigraph by Mollena Williams—Black BDSM activist, educator, and writer—suggests, race play is something that is unavoidable for racialized bodies. There is privilege in not having to constantly negotiate racial identities or to even address race,

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which is particularly unique to white bodies. The line between fantasy and reality is blurred when the referent of the historical suffering of people of colour—in particular, Black people—is used for an other's pleasure. That is, there are significant symbols of historical chattel slavery that are drawn on in many BDSM scenarios. I do not intend to simplistically align BDSM and slavery, as Christina Sharpe warned against,[3] but instead I examine the intersection of abjected Blackness and contemporary BDSM through its shared markers with chattel slavery.

As a specific set of play practices, 'race play' involves the intentional use of racial epithets or racist scenarios to help construct or maintain the exchange of power dynamics between participants. It is considered an edgier and even controversial practice by most BDSM practitioners because of the emotional labour and risk involved. Race play disallows the concealment of the presence of unequal racialized relations in BDSM practices precisely because it draws on real historical and contemporary relations of racism as a tool for constructing power dynamics. There is a possibility in the space of race play to cause the subtended and constantly deferred awareness of racial privilege to arise. When white BDSM practitioners participate as if whiteness is not proactively there, it is exemplary of how whiteness functions by masking, deferring, and to a certain extent, naturalizing a specific type of racial entitlement to sexuality and humanity.

This article will examine how race play is raced to only include non-white bodies, as one aspect that reflects the oppressive impact of white supremacy in BDSM. The characterization of these practices as limited to certain racial embodiments reinforces the notion of possessive whiteness as an inherent, but nonracial quality. The privilege of whiteness allows for a choice in playing with race, whereas the racialized body is unable to escape the 'reality' of race. The constitution of whiteness is predicated on the inescapability of race by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), but these processes function with a simultaneous invisibility and presumed universality. With its practices of playing with hyperbolic racism, race play confronts notions of disguised racial superiority, and is, therefore, often a source of discomfort among BDSM practitioners. To highlight these themes, I examine how some of the markers of BDSM that have drawn from historical chattel slavery have been de-racialized in the process of neoliberal private desires and politically correct colourblindness.

## Racing Race Play & White Invisibility

As Daisy Hernandez stated in one of the earlier mainstream discussions of race play for *Colorlines*, race play is "far from just black and white. It also includes 'playing out' Nazi interrogations of Jews or Latino-on-black racism, and the players can be of any racial background paired up in a number of ways."[4] Yet, most of the examinations of race play in the North American context—of which, there are notably few—focus on white and Black practitioners drawing on histories of slavery.[5] Mollena Williams has drawn particular attention to

race play through her activism and writing under the former moniker, "The Perverted Negress." In an interview with Andrea Plaid for *Racialacious,* Williams named several examples of race play that she explained as embracing real or assumed racial identities of participants to underscore and investigate differences. "You can have the white Master black slave thing. You can have a tables turned scenario, with a slave seducing the master, blackmailing them. The "Mandingo" black stud thing. And let us not forget we owned one another."[6] Williams went on to include examples involving Native Americans, Japanese internment, Iraqi prisoner torture, Sinn Féin interrogation, Indian caste discrimination, North and South Korean division, and Hutu and Tutsi violence. However, she maintained that at least in the United States, chattel slavery scenarios are the obvious source of history to draw on for race play scenarios. What is important to note with these seemingly dissimilar examples is that all the variations are predicated on a specific racial hierarchy.

When speaking to Black Fuhrer—a Black Dominatrix who has been publicly vocal about race play[7]—Ariane Cruz noted that, especially with the predominantly white clientele, the term "honky" wasn't seen as racially charged, but as a convenient manner of humiliation that was only coincidentally rooted in the submissive's race.[8] This demonstrates the grounding of race play in foundations of racism that relies on particular understandings of racial hierarchy. It is also echoed by Danielle Lindemann's study on professional dominatrices, who tended not to receive requests for race play from white clients, while such requests were "relatively common amongst clients of color."[9] Cruz concluded, if "calling a white man a honky lacks the same 'charge' as calling a Black woman a nigger, race play's potentiality for racial subversion is limited, circumscribed by race and gender, and disciplined by white heteropatriarchy, seemingly a powerful and stable force both inside and outside the world of fetish."[10] Some BDSM practitioners insist on the fantastical element of kink and play that articulates a separation of desire from real-world consequence or political referents. Although Williams has discussed the potential benefits of race play because of consent and scenario control, she also stated about her own play, "My vagina isn't really interested in uplifting the race. What pussy wants is fucked up stuff, really dark scenarios to test the boundaries and cut with an exnihilating level of danger."[11]

In *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Patricia Holland underscored the pervasive attempts to expunge erotic spaces from larger systems of racist violence, and "the erotic, therefore, touches upon that aspect of racist practice that cannot be accounted for *as* racist practice."[12] One source of critical blindness in regard to matters of race is what Toni Morrison argued about the act of "noticing race," where "the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even liberal gesture," and in the climate of critical discourse, "silence and evasion have historically ruled."[13] However, the ability to not address race and the proclamation of colourblindness are reliant on and emblematic of racial privilege. Post-racial rhetoric eliminates the acknowledgement of racial difference as something that contributes to the structure of rights and privileges. Assumptions of universal whiteness and non-racial possessive categorization write

the racialized bodies out in favour of the white body. Amber Jamilla Musser argued that in this process, particularly Black bodies are rendered superfluous, "made irrelevant on the present discomfort of the white body."[14] In their study of queer and trans BDSM communities, Robin Bauer commented that in the mixed-race spaces of BDSM dominated by members of the privileged race, the invisibility of whiteness seems to be a prerequisite for transgressions in other realms and categories of difference, including gender, sexuality, age, and class. In this regard, there is a "Tendency among BDSM queers to deemphasize and thus depoliticize race by deracing historically raced institutions such as slavery, colonialism, or even contemporary racialized stereotypes."[15]

In what she noted as a disproportionately white community for her fieldwork, Staci Newmahr described edge play and the processes of consent negotiation with 'riskier' practices. In mentioning race play, Newmahr ultimately names it with incest play, rape scenes, extreme pain scenes, and "symbolically unethical transgressions, such as hitting in the face (particularly when man-to-woman)."[16] When discussing consent, riskiness, policing, and edge development, Newmahr failed to differentiate these types of play, tie them to larger structural inequalities, or note the ways in which certain racialized bodies at the intersection of gender and sexuality may need to negotiate these scenes differently. While not entirely unsurprising given the racial demographics of Newmahr's fieldwork community, her claims to larger applicability in theorizing kink make the lack of critical insight on racial differentiation notable. In her study of BDSM community in the San Francisco Bay Area, Margot Weiss also noted that her interviewees slipped seamlessly between speaking about "black/white race play, Nazi play, rape play, and incest play" as if they are all related as "forms of play [which] re-encode particularly loaded, culturally meaningful power inequalities" and address structurally-related traumas.[17] The conflation of the various types of edgy practices works to obfuscate the particular histories and hierarchies that are being eroticized.

As Vivian Killjoy, BDSM practitioner and blogger argued, the assumptions of similarities between all types of edge play is inaccessible to Black women (particularly submissives). The inability to remove her Blackness or the history that accompanies it, characterizes "every facet of [her] personal play" and there are safety precautions that Black women must take that white women will likely not have even considered.[18] Killjoy went on to question whether white Dominants automatically empathize with Black submissives in a way that allows for respect of safe words and hard limits because of the assumptions about Black bodies being able to endure more pain. She poignantly asked what any of the precautions "mean when your pain is categorized in a partner's mind as not the same as theirs?"[19] The unfeeling Black body is a pervasive myth that continues to be perpetuated by white supremacy and its cultural representations. In historicizing this harmful assertion, Saidiya Hartman argued that Blackness became entrenched within the biological index that is saturated with pain. Within the context of chattel slavery, the picture of suffering presented by abolitionists called for empathy

based on lengthy and vivid descriptions of the suffering of the Black slave body. As such, pain provided the "common language of humanity" but also "required that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make that suffering visible and intelligible."[20] Similarly, in her analysis of abolitionist paintings, Christina Sharpe argued that the advancement of abolitionism was to occur by viewers placing themselves into the scene through identification with the depicted Black slave, in order to play the Master and "play the slave a little bit."[21] This replacement of the white body for the Black obliterated the suffering of the black body and risked "naturalizing the condition of pained embodiment."[22]

In his study of Black abjection, Darieck Scott asserted that when members of oppressed groups take up race play as an enactment of their erotic fantasies, their play includes identification with the victim and the perpetrator.[23] If white practitioners, as the (often unacknowledged) privileged group, can only identify with/as the perpetrator, this may partially explain the discomfort of doing or encountering race play.[24] This is echoed by Bauer's account of the public performance by Black Mistress Mz Dre, entitled "The Black Confederacy," where Mz Dre dominated her white submissive, using historical techniques that had been done non-consensually to Black people in the United States. Bauer noted that the predominantly white audience of Mz Dre's performance was uncomfortable with the confrontation of racist history precisely because they were unable to "experience the reversal Mz Dre offered as a form of critique, reconciliation or catharsis … This experience shows that there are still limits to the parodying potential of BDSM when it comes to race."[25]

White guilt that reinforces systemic racism also pervades erotic encounters. Writing in 1991 in one of the first collections of BDSM practitioner accounts, Tina Portillo, a self-identified SM dyke of colour, indicated, "it surprised [her] that some white leatherdykes didn't want to play with [her] unless they were bottoming."[26] As a Black woman, Portillo found herself desired by the predominantly white leather dyke scene in only a particular way that helped alleviate the racial discomfort. This alleviation may come from the perception of a power dynamic that reinforces existing social anti-Black racism. However, these inclinations were more about the feelings of white practitioners than Portillo's own desires or agency. She went on to say that race play can be done "as long as it is mutual and in loving spirit."[27] In this regard, Cruz asserted that race play goes beyond typical notions of 'play' because of the "unique physical and psychic labor on behalf of its participants" that exposes the extent to which sexual desire and pleasure are constructed through social exchanges as products of the mind and body.[28] As Williams emphasized, "Doing race play is HARD [sic]. It isn't some walk in the fucking park. And finding people I trust enough to do it with is almost impossible because it is hard, and they are at risk … The one thing – the only thing – that separates BDSM from abuse is consent."[29] A refusal of white practitioners to engage in play, while simultaneously denying the racial referents of BDSM that will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section of this article, creates a scenario where

liberal white subjects are able to exercise the privilege to side-step discussions of race through operationalizing their racial invisibility.

### BDSM & Shared Markers with Chattel Slavery

As Anne McClintock noted, the transformation of the industrial economy from slavery to the wage market coincided with the emergence of European BDSM subculture at the end of the eighteenth century.[30] As such, the transformation of objects that were specifically emblematic of slavery, like slave-bands and collars, were taken as kinky paraphernalia for erotic relations with inscribed meanings through understandings of race and gender. By borrowing these, "S/M plays social power backward, visibly and outrageously staging hierarchy, difference and power, the irrational, ecstasy, or alienation of the body, placing these ideas at the center of Western reason."[31] Ada Demaj offered an interesting interpretation of this analysis, indicating that, at face value, the markers of BDSM are a displacement of imperialist slavery onto the erotic realm. But, she indicated that they may also be interpreted as "a refusal to allow the history of slave labour to fade into the past – a refusal to forget!"[32] In this way, the symbols highlight the unnaturalness of unequal social power relations because of the necessity of "props and labels to acquire their force."[33] While this may be true of intentional race play, there is risk of holding history at a distance with willful ignorance and the silencing of race, despite drawing from that history for erotic sustenance. However, overt race play is often not supported by BDSM communities.

There have been past issues with the play practices of dungeon owners that sparked debate in BDSM communities about the ethics of hosting events in those spaces. For example, in 2019, the Women of Drummer event in Montreal was moved after a community member publicly reported that the intended dungeon, The Triskelion, was managed by a Dominant who had been identified by some community members as a nazi fetishist.[34] Although the space was being offered for free, the organizer of the event, who was queer, trans, and a person of colour, opted to move to another space. There have been similar reactions by queer BDSM communities to dungeons that have hosted 'slave auction' events.

In addition to the language of 'property,' 'ownership,' 'Master/slave,' and physical markers of slavery in terms of bondage, BDSM events sometimes also draw on the space of the slave auction block. Likely because of the salience of the image, Weiss began her ethnography on the San Francisco BDSM community with an account of her attendance at a charity slave auction.[35] Weiss recalled an "uncomfortable" scene in which a young, Black woman was auctioned by her "severe-looking white" Master.[36] She noted similarities of the scene to a historical slave auction, where the woman's genitals were displayed, her collar and leash still attached, and as her Master proudly espoused her submissive qualities. When discussing the BDSM slave auction, Katherine McKittrick's analysis is useful with regards to the meanings and marketable qualities associated with the slave auction block, as a site of public racial-sexual

domination and measurable documentation. There is a specific spatial positioning of the objects of Black bodies for the gaze and assessment of the buyer that allowed for visual demarcation and attachment of discourses of dispossession and captivity to the flesh.[37] This objectification contributes to the processes of subjection. As Hartman stated, the “black performative is inextricably linked with the specter of subjection, the torturous display of the captive body, and the ravishing of the body that is the condition of the other’s pleasure.”[38] The moment of sale reifies the Master’s whiteness as embodied universality and subjectivity, and acts a profitable and pleasurable economic exchange.

Slave auctions do not entail the *actual* sale of submissives, but typically give the successful bidder the opportunity to negotiate mutually consensual play with their ‘purchase.’ However, denying that a slave auction has nothing to do with historical slavery reinforces the invisibility of whiteness that is seemingly pervasive with many BDSM practices.[39] The Black slave/white Master combination described by Weiss likely made the audience uncomfortable for this reason, as the racialized reminder of chattel slavery enacted by the performance prohibited the possibility of historical disavowal that was enabled by white participants.[40] Even though these participants were not necessarily consciously race playing, their racialized bodies depicted the salient and crucial connection between the racialization of sex and the sexualization of race that is often ignored.

The ability to perceive the white body as properties capable of owning itself emerged through these racially contingent forms of property and property rights.[41] As racialized bodies were and continue to be signified through race, whiteness was privileged as unadulterated, exclusive, and rare. As Ummi Khan argued, whiteness simultaneously functions as an “unmarked signifier of sexual purity.”[42] By extension, BIPOC bodies automatically possess non-normative sexuality that writes them into states of abjection through the colonial, white supremacist gaze, a process that Cruz refers to particularly for Black women as “racial-sexual alterity.”[43] Formally BIPOC-only spaces in the forms of caucuses and play parties mark an increasing awareness and grappling with the racism in white-dominated spaces. Historically, BDSM communities have often claimed to be insulated from racism because of the emphasis on fantasy and erotic pleasure, but some dynamics, like the rejection of a space because of rumors of nazi fetishism described above, seem to signal a shift away from unproductive colourblindness.

## Conclusions

Race play can be a space of forceful encounter with unnoticed racial privilege that brings these racialized histories and the contemporary impact of white supremacy and colonialism to the foreground of BDSM. There are dense circuits of meaning that are generated in spaces of collision between sexual pleasure and racist histories. The invisibility of whiteness and silencing

of race is confronted with race play, which by extension makes both the performative pleasures and injuries of race, visible. The choreographies of violence and desire that characterize the complexities of interracial encounters and their accompanying history are revealed through the simultaneous processes of racialization and the presumed invisibility of race in erotic spaces. Moreover, BDSM race play exposes situatedness and implications in racial hierarchies that are most often silenced through rhetoric of private and individualized pleasure and fantastical detachment of BDSM from everyday life. Through this analysis, I am not advocating that every person take up race play as a radical racial political stance, but have treated it as a phenomenon that is apt to begin an examination of the implications of practices, which exist at the junction of sexuality, gender, race, and class.

The privileges afforded by whiteness allow choice in entering an arena of playing with race. Colourblindness allows the fantasy of escape from racism without giving up the material benefits of whiteness, but race play disallows historical disavowal and calls race/racial difference to the forefront of the erotic realm.

***Notes***

[1] Mollena Williams, "BDSM and Playing with Race," in Best Sex Writing 2010, ed. Rachel Kramer Bussel (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 2010), 70.
[2] BDSM is the compound acronym that encompasses a wide range of mutually consensual practices that involve playing with power and/or pain.
[3] Christina Sharpe, Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 123.
[4] Daisy Hernandez, "Playing with Race; On the Edge of Edgy Sex, Racial BDSM Excites Some and Reviles Others," *Colorlines* 7, no. 14 (2005): 14.
[5] In a recent article, Ariane Cruz, one of the early scholars to engage in analysis of BDSM and race indicates that there is a shift in BDSM studies that are now becoming more attentive to race and the racialized erotics of sexuality. While I agree that there is certainly more consideration than when I first started working on this topic in 2015, there is still a large gap in existing literature and the need to continue to push against the erasure of racialized BDSM practitioners in academic accounts. See, Ariane Cruz, "Not a Moment Too Soon: A Juncture of BDSM and Race," *Sexualities* 24, no. 5–6 (2021): 819–24.
[6] Mollena Williams and Andrea Plaid, "Race Play Interview – Part I," *Mollena*, April 6, 2009, http://www.mollena.com/2009/04/race-play-interview-part-1/.
[7] Black Fuhrer, "White on Black Race Play – My Views," YouTube, October 26, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4W8f-xmCEE.
[8] Ariane Cruz, "Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography and Black Female Sexuality," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 433.
[9] Danielle Lindemann, *Dominatrix: Gender Eroticism, and Control in the Dungeon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 160. Lindemann's study goes on to discuss the therapeutic potential of professional Dominance, but positions race play as *either* the reproduction *or* the subversion of racial hierarchies.
[10] Cruz, "Beyond Black," 433.
[11] Williams and Plaid, "Race Play Interview – Part I."
[12] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 27. Emphasis in original.

[13] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9. Morrison is concerned with canonical works of American fiction by white writers in the 1980s and 1990s, but her observations continue to be widely applicable, particularly within erotic spaces.
[14] Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 101.
[15] Robin Bauer, "Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of Dyke/Trans BDSM Communities," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3/4: 246.
[16] Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 148.
[17] Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 23.
[18] Vivian Killjoy, "Vivian Killjoy: On Race & BDSM," *DoomCookie* [blog], August 13 2015, http://doomcookiephoto.tumblr.com/post/126591810417/vivian-killjoy-on-race-bdsm.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18.
[21] Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies,* 126.
[22] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
[23] Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination,* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 222.
[24] In discussing transgressive potentials, this is suggested in Ada Demaj, "Touching Race Through Play: Sadomasochism, Phenomenology, and the Intertwining of Race and Sexuality," *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 11 (2014): 105; Bauer, "Transgressive", 247; and, Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2014), 190.
[25] Bauer, *Queer BDSM,* 190.
[26] Tina Portillo, "I Get Real: Celebrating my Sadomasochistic Soul," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice,* ed. Mark Thompson, (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1991), 50.
[27] Ibid., 51.
[28] Cruz, "Beyond Black," 426.
[29] Mollena Williams and Andrea Plaid, "Race Play Interview – Part II," *Mollena,* April 7, 2009, http://www.mollena.com/2009/04/race-play-interview-part-ii/.
[30] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 142. A similar argument is made by Karen Haltteunen in her article, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995): 304.
[31] McClintock, *Imperial Leather,* 143.
[32] Demaj, "Touching Race," 103.
[33] Ibid., 104.
[34] For further discussion of the eroticization of Nazi themes, see for examples: Daniel H. Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges and Kristin T. Vander Lugt, eds., *Naziploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012); Susan Leigh Star, "Swastikas: The Street and the University," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, eds. Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E.H. Russell and Susan Leigh Star, (San Francisco: Frog in the Well, 1982), 131–36; Arnie Kantrowitz, "Swastika Toys," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice,* ed. Mark Thompson (Los Angeles: Daedalus, 1991), 193–209; and, Irene Reti, "Remember the Fire: Lesbian Sadomasochism in a Post Nazi Holocaust World," in *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, ed. Irene Reti (Santa Cruz: HerBooks, 1993), 79–99.
[35] Weiss indicated that these auctions were common occurrences during her fieldwork and were popularly coupled with play parties afterwards.
[36] Margot Weiss, *Techniques,* 3–4. She later stated that it was the "single most disturbing picture I have from that day,"which upon further reflection, was indicative of her "well-meaning whiteness disturbed by the scene." This ethnographic encounter allowed her to frame her examination of the universality of whiteness providing the background for the scene, which produced privilege and transgressive performances at the same time.
[37] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), Kindle Edition, 1156, 1192.
[38] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.

[39] There are scenarios that specifically racialize the slave auction or 'Plantation Retreats' that intentionally draw on historical notions of chattel slavery, but these are far less common than the de-racialized 'slave auction' described in Weiss's work. See, for example, Chauncey DeVega, "Playing with Sex, Power, and Race: Did You Know That There are 'Plantation Retreats' Where Black People Go to Serve Their White 'Masters'?" *Indomitable Blog,* August 12, 2012, http://www.chaunceydevega.com/2012/08/playing-with-sex-power-and-race-did-you.html.
[40] Although Weiss also described other nonwhite submissives in the auction, she notes the specific reaction by the audience in with the Black submissive as one of unenthusiastic discomfort.
[41] See Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1719–20; and, George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1995): 369–87.
[42] Ummi Khan, "A Woman's Right to Be Spanked: Testing the Limits of Tolerance of SM in the Socio-Legal Imaginary," *Law & Sexuality: A Review of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Legal Issues* 18: 95.
[43] Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 33.

# *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*. A Review

*Antonija Cavcic*

**Keywords**: Gothicism, Queer Culture, Trauma

## Introduction

Academic discourse on gothic fiction's exploration of transgressive sexualities is by no means a recent trend in Queer, Literary, and Cultural Studies circles. For instance, Fred Botting's *The Gothic* (2001), George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* (2006), Andrew Smith and William Hughes' *Queering the Gothic* (2011), and Ardel Haefele-Thomas *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity* (2012) are just several of many scholarly works dedicated to queer representation or transgressive sexualities in literature and popular culture. A recent addition is Laura Westengard's *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma* (2019). While Westengard covers similar theoretical ground as the aforementioned works, she demonstrates how insidious trauma is expressed through queer theory, lesbian pulp fiction, poetry and performance art. This review examines the text's attempt to analyze "gothic queer culture" in popular culture and academic discourse.

By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, Westengard examines how cultural texts that address "transgressive" sexualities and genders in the context of insidious trauma are manifested in gothic queer culture, and how these texts, in turn, narrativize trauma in four unique chapters. Chapter One begins as a reading of gothicism in queer theory, which she argues is a "form of cultural production responding to the insidious trauma of queer marginalization."[1] Reading much like an overview of 19th century gothic fiction and a literature review of texts from a broad field of disciplines related to gothic and/or queer theory, Chapter One begins by introducing oft cited theorists in Cultural Studies and psychoanalytic literary criticism such as Freud, Derrida, and Foucault. The focus then shifts to works from queer theorists such as Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Jasib Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010), and Karen Tongson's *Relocations* (2011). The core concepts discussed in this chapter are (queer) monstrosity, queer necropolitics, hauntology, and gothic negativity. Although the point of this chapter is to illustrate how her notion of "gothicism" and insidious trauma manifests itself within theoretical texts, sometimes Westengard's arguments appear unconvincing in the sense that she attempts to gothicize theory for the sake of maintaining her argument. While this chapter might be insightful for readers unfamiliar with gothic literature, expanding the discussions on the


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aforementioned concepts with some additional theorists who have published on the subject would make her arguments more convincing. For instance, briefly discussing Michelle Massé's *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (1992) or even Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) would contribute to some of the arguments in this chapter.

Chapter Two proceeds with a discussion on lesbian pulp fiction from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s and the "Containment Crypt." Among other texts, through close readings of *Beebo Brinker* (1962) and *I am a Woman* (1959), Westengard attempts to illustrate how the deployment of gothic tropes in lesbian pulp fiction functioned to control and contain queerness. Additionally, she notes that some writers reappropriated gothicism to "express the very trauma created by it."[2] By examining pulp fiction covers, titles and content, and providing visuals and excerpts, this chapter persuasively demonstrates that in spite of pulp fiction's emphasis on the threatening aspects of homosexuality or "monstrous" sexual urges, such texts functioned as "survival literature." The basis of this argument is Westengard's suggestion that they became means of visibility for lesbians who may have felt isolated in a context of heightened conservatism during the early stages of the Cold War.[3] Both intriguing and insightful, if this book had been refocused to expand solely on this chapter, it would positively contribute to the body of literature on queer pulp.

To follow, Chapter Three focuses on precisely what it is titled: monstrosity, melancholia, cannibalism and AIDS. In spite of the sheer amount of cultural productions concerned with such themes, Westengard's discussion mainly features Gil Cuadros' *City of God* (1994) and productions by performance artist Ron Athey. Because the chapter tries to cover a lot of thematic and theoretical ground, as a result, at times it seems rushed and simplified. A single chapter on theory concerning monstrosity and AIDS, which focuses on a single medium might allow for closer and more thorough readings of the texts.

While Chapter Three featured performance artist Ron Athey, Chapter Four is entirely dedicated to performance artists M. Lamar, Cassils, and Zackary Drucker. The crux of the argument in this chapter is that the aforementioned artists deploy gothic sadomasochism to "create shared sensation in the performance space that forces the recognition of […] insidious trauma."[4] Having observed and participated in the performances herself, Westengard's insight is beyond theoretical—it is observational and arguably a form of ethnographic research. Her observations and arguments reinforce the ideas that sadomasochism can be political, create awareness, and can be empowering and cathartic for the artists and audience members alike. While immensely interesting and insightful, this chapter could be improved if the arguments were expanded or if more examples of different artists' performances or works were briefly mentioned to justify the claims being made.

The final chapter considers the future of gothicism and queer representation in popular culture with the discussion mainly centred on neoliberal assimilationist vampires in *True Blood* and *Twilight*. The conclusion thereafter seems rather abrupt as Westengard briefly summarizes what the book has covered and does not seem to suggest possible research avenues in the future.

*Gothic Queer Culture* offers fresh insight into manifestations of insidious trauma in a diverse range of queer gothic cultural texts. However, whether the intention of the analyzed and exemplar texts were to reflect or express insidious trauma is certainly debatable. Since the book attempts to cover a lot of ground, the arguments made about insidious trauma in some of the chapters seem speculative, rushed and incomplete. That said, there is still a sense of flow between chapters with monstrosity being the central theme. The chapters themselves are well researched and written but could have been improved with the extension of certain arguments. Ideally, readers would gain a lot more from a series of edited books based on some of the chapters. In any case, for scholars in Queer or Gothic Studies, *Gothic Queer Culture* is certainly worth adding to the catalogue.

## ***Notes***

[1] Laura Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 35.
[2] Ibid, 93.
[3] Ibid, 91.
[4] Ibid,198.

# Mary Robertson, *Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LBGTQ Identity*. A Review

*Lynnette Coto*

**Keywords**: Gender, Sexuality, Queer Youth, Gender Identity

Mary Robertson's *Growing up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LBGTQ Identity*[1] is an analysis of how youth at Spectrum, a drop-in center for queer youths in an urban city in the United States, make meaning of their queer identity. Robertson emphasizes how youth reshape the label of 'queer,' by defining what it means to them, and rejecting specific identity politics. For instance, youth at the drop-in center refuse to identify with what they see as antiquated gender and sexuality binaries. A monumental contribution in Robertson's work is the amount of information on the various ways that youth make meaning in the past and present of their gender and come to terms with their sexuality. Specifically, Robertson's research plays close attention to the role socialization plays in youth's social construction of their gender and sexual identities.

Organized into six chapters, *Growing Up Queer* introduces Spectrum and situates the youth in a frame of resilience in order to argue how the current perception of queer youth is in a "state of crisis." Robertson advocates for queer youth and sheds light on the ways they are a part of social movements. Throughout the text, Robertson discusses different ways the youth at Spectrum experience societal policing of their gender and sexual identities. She identifies the forces of societal policing as whiteness, heteronormativity, and the norms of middle-class ideals. Also, Robertson's study illuminates how the youth from Spectrum disrupt these notions. Another significant discussion in the text is on transgender youth. Robertson's argument situates increased transgender awareness within LGBTQ youth's non-binary and gender fluidity. In order to shed light on this topic, Robertson discusses the different ways the youth at Spectrum resist gender binaries through anti-identification and the remaking of queer identity.

When discussing the present climate, Robertson argues that we are in an extraordinary moment in history because there is an increase of visibility and normalization of queerness. Rather than homing in on where queer desires come from, Robertson focuses explicitly on the way youth develop and associate their desires with queerness. Brilliantly conducted, Robertson uses ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with youth who identify as queer and who are members of a queer youth drop-in center. Through her research, Robertson—an assistant professor of sociology at California State University who specializes in gender, sexuality, and LBGTQ research topics—secures her status as an expert scholar of Queer Studies.

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Her work with the youth at Spectrum depicts a new generation where queer children have more agency to negotiate their gender and sexuality than previous generations.

One of Robertson's significant findings is that the youth at Spectrum distinguish the difference between gender and sexuality in their queer identities. Through fieldwork at Spectrum, Robertson observes that the youth identify as queer through a gendered lens, rather than a same-sex desire label. However, Robertson's argument lacks an emphasis on intersectionality. While Robertson found the youth to be generally well acquainted with mainstream LBGTQ identity politics, they view these politics as limited to the gay rights movement. In turn, the youth at Spectrum make meaning of the term queer as opposing societal norms within mainstream LBGTQ politics. A noteworthy strength of this text is its definitive guide to comprehending the difference between sexuality, sex, and gender through the eyes of a new generation of queer youth. Robertson distinguishes the differences between these three categories while simultaneously showing how they are interwoven. Her concise, clear distinctions are very timely in today's political climate.

Robertson's observations highlight the social construction of gender and sexuality. Another fundamental strength in this research was her argument that the youth become gendered and explore their sexuality, as opposed to assuming that they already are queer. The youth oppose the assumption by challenging gender norms and ideals surrounding their sexuality. With this lens, Robertson depicts how the youth take control of their agency, and how the center serves as a platform for the youth to socialize and make meaning of their gender and sexual orientations. In addition, she also includes social media in her analysis as a central tool for agency. Robertson's observations highlight the social construction of gender and sexuality.

This book is not without limitations. The sample of participants was racially diverse and had a range of sexual orientations; however, there was a lack of representation of asexuality. Visibility of asexuality is important because it is a valid sexual identity that is often overlooked in Queer Studies. Spreading awareness of asexuality is crucial to the dismantling of the patriarchal society we live in that centers around reproduction—a goal aligned with the overall value of the text. Another limitation consists of geographical influences. While the findings of Robertson's study is monumental to Queer Studies, the findings do not necessarily reflect the experiences of rural queer youth. Future research of queer youth in rural areas is needed to expand on Robertson's work. *Growing Up Queer* is a book that would appeal as an introduction for those interested in Gender, Sexuality, and Queer Studies. It would also be useful for graduate seminars on special topics of gender and sexuality. This is an exemplary book of how to conduct an ethnography and would be instrumental in advanced graduate Qualitative Methodology courses. Lastly, specific chapters of this book can be adopted into undergraduate courses in Sociology of Gender, Introduction to Women and Gender Studies, and Introduction to Queer Studies.

## *Notes*

[1] Mary Robertson, *Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LBGTQ Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).