

# QUEERING BLACKNESS



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Yannick M. Blec • Anne Cremieux

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# Editorial Introduction: Beyond Sociodemographics

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

“In the history of anthropology, what we find is that more and more traits that are thought to be innate – traits that are thought to be natural differences, because they've always been there – are more and more shown to be ephemeral, the results of social history.” (Marks “Interview”)

Coming from a cultural studies background, popular culture scholars likely all understand the constructed nature of sociodemographics as categories used for identification into particular identities and group memberships. Race and gender, for example, only appear to have a basis in human biology because of longstanding – and, paradoxically, always changing – sociocultural norms linking behavior and personality to visual and auditory characteristics that are influenced, to a degree, by genetics. In Eurocentric Western civilizations, to be a “woman” is to be “feminine” is to be more graceful, smaller physically, with more anatomical curves. Connecting a person’s visual and auditory nature to specific traits allows others to manage their expectations about how someone may act, thereby allowing that person to manage their anxiety about interacting with a complete stranger. See uncertainty reduction theory for more explanation of this aspect of interpersonal and, necessarily, intercultural communication. More insidiously, such categorization based on assumed characterizations furthers the maintenance of power imbalances through hierarchies that dictate who people are not based on the nature of their lives but the presumptions of their appearance.

Research from physical anthropology provides evidence to challenge the use of sociodemographics to categorize, understand, explain, predict, and, ultimately, control people. In a landmark study, Noah A. Rosenberg et al discuss how 93-95% of global genetic differences are found in within-population differences, with only 3-5% due to between-population differences. From this genetics analysis, it appears that more variability exists between individuals of a single population than individuals across different populations. Humans share 99.9% genetic material, so categorizations and hierarchies built on sociodemographics

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focus on miniscule variations (Rivera). Thus, much of our economic and political structures exaggerate that 0.1% to control what is appropriate/inappropriate and thus exert influence over people's identities and their lives. "So: we make sense of our place in the universe by classifying; our classifications are not necessarily derived from nature; and even when they are derived from nature, they encode cultural information." (Marks "Scientific and Folk") And, of course, the utility of sociodemographics is not a new argument: this tension can be seen in the 1962 debate between anthropologists Frank B. Livingstone and Theodosius Dobzhansky.

Sociodemographics, then, are increasingly challenged for their utility in understanding how our societies, cultures, and world are structured. Where they remain important, for the time being, is in empowering individuals who have been ascribed to specific categories to challenge the assumptions associated with their assigned sociodemographics. Especially for individuals of marginalized categories within an overall power hierarchy, speaking from a sociodemographic standpoint allows people to raise questions and oppositions to assumed behavior and personality characteristics. In recognizing the presence and impact of sociodemographics, individuals and the communities they form can challenge the stereotypical heuristics associated with the categories, thereby challenging the overall power hierarchies that further their marginalization.

At the same time, individuals can speak from their sociodemographic standpoint to downplay the importance of those categories to their lives while highlighting the importance of other categories or dimensions for how those aspects help them identify themselves, make sense of their worlds and others, and connect with others through a multiplicity of common grounds. Per anthropologist Jonathan Marks:

What is important? Whether you're an American or an Iraqi. Whether you're a Nazi, a Communist, a Democrat, or a Republican. An Oriole fan or a Yankee fan. Rich or poor. Us or them. These categories of history and of society, the categories of human invention, are far more important to our daily lives than the categories of natural variation in our species." ("Scientific and Folk")

This perspective echoes work by popular culture studies, especially fan scholars, who argue for the importance of people's fandoms to their everyday lives and identities. Newer ways of understanding people's identities, from their own perspectives, could result in different forms of categorization, but the hope would

be that such taxonomies would resist the power imbalances inherent in and perpetuated by sociodemographics.

All of this is to say that the special issue presented herein examines popular culture texts – both persons and creations – from an intersectionality perspective of racial/ethnicity and sexuality identities. Specifically, the popular culture scholars examine the experiences of queer Blacks largely existing within contemporary American society. Other identities are also explored, from the very material experiences of rappers to the fictional lives of vampires. In exploring these representations of intersectional identities, and the institutions in which these representations exist/resist, the articles provide readers with more insights into the continuing application of sociodemographics to structure our selves, our lives, our communities, and our world.

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# Introduction: Queering Blackness: Non-Binary Black Representations in Post-Obama Popular Cultures

YANNICK M. BLEC AND ANNE CRÉMIEUX

The 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama unleashed an extraordinary surge of hope across the United States: that a Black man could attain the highest office of the land seemed to signal the beginning of a new, progressive era – not only in terms of racial equality but also for the rights of the LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> community. Alluding to his support for same-sex marriage, Obama referenced the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in his second Inaugural Address: “Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law” (Obama 2013). For many, the words “brothers” and “sisters” had a special ring coming out of a Black man’s mouth. Is it a coincidence that unprecedented legal progress<sup>2</sup> at the Federal level for gays and lesbians came about during the first and only U.S. Black presidency?

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym “LGBTQ+” stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Queer, and Others.” It is used as an umbrella term to designate people who identify outside heteronormativity.

<sup>2</sup> *Obergefell v. Hodges*, on June 26, 2015, ruled that the 14th Amendment adopted in 1868 to ensure Black citizenship and equal protection under the law required all states to license marriages between same-sex couples.

YANNICK M. BLEC, Ph.D., teaches at Université Paris 8. His research focuses on African American identities, and more specifically on the intersections inherent in Black LGBTQ+ masculinities in American inner cities. Beyond representations, his research examines figures of racial, sexual, and gender emancipation in the arts considered as vehicles of equal rights politics. His latest publication, “‘Cause Not Enough Niggas Rap and Be Gay:’ Redefining Black Queer Masculinities Through Intersectional Dynamics and Performativity in Contemporary Rap,” was published in *Coup de théâtre* no.37 “Performing Gender, Sexual and Racial Dynamics on the US Stage,” 4<sup>th</sup> trimester 2023, pp. 95-122.

ANNE CRÉMIEUX, is professor of American studies at the English department of the University of Montpellier Paul Valéry. Her writings focus on the representation of minorities in American popular culture. She authored *Les cinéastes noirs américains et le rêve hollywoodien* (African American Filmmakers and the Hollywood Dream, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004), *Now You See Her: How Lesbian Culture Won Over America* (McFarland, 2023), and edited various books and reviews including *CinémAction #143: Les minorités dans le cinéma américain* (Minorities in American Cinema, Paris: Corlet, 2012), *Understanding Blackness Through Performance* (co-editor, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), *Homosexualités en Afrique* (Homosexualities in Africa, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), and *Exploring Seriality on Screen* (co-editor, Routledge: Serial, 2019).



This message of inclusion of same-sex couples in the U.S. nation, through the symbolism of marriage, must be linked to the very vision of Obama as the beginning of a new, ostensibly post-racial era in the USA (Fox; Tesler). Yet, this post-racial society did not come to be, as the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of a White neighborhood watch volunteer painfully showed, followed by many more Black victims of police brutality in subsequent years. All remaining hope disappeared in 2016 with the election of the overtly racist and anti-trans, anti-queer, highly binary, all-White male Trump/Pence ticket: the political pendulum had clearly swung to the right.

The civil rights obtained during Obama's terms were targeted by the Trump presidency. When, in 2017, White Supremacists held a rally in Charlottesville which resulted in the death of an antiracist protester, Trump referred to those involved as "very fine people on both sides," even as he worked to erode LGBTQ+ rights. Race, gender and sexual orientation were all under attack.

The very idea of "queering Blackness" may well sound like a tautology to some and an oxymoron to others. Is queerness fundamentally defined by White privilege? Is Blackness always already queer? Both questions must be answered in the negative and yet they may ring true under certain circumstances.

In *Gender Norms & Intersectionality*, Riki Wilchins asserts: "gender stereotypes are always raced, just as racial stereotypes are always gendered. So factors like gender and race and class are always intertwined" (32). When, in 2001, E. Patrick Johnson published his seminal article about "quare" studies (quotations in the original text), part of his endeavor was to describe the tension between queerness on the one hand, and race and class on the other, a tension he approached from the inside in an attempt to "suture the gap" between queer studies and categories of race and class ("'Quare' Studies" 13). For Johnson, quoting from Anzaldù (250), queer as an umbrella term erases the specific experience of other races, classes, and ethnicities. In response, quare articulates identities and positively reconciles queer with race and class ("'Quare' Studies" 3).

In the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, queerness and Blackness are visibly connected in American culture, whether through media giants like RuPaul or Lil Naz X, widely influential writers like Roxane Gay or Danez Smith, political figures such as Lori Lighfoot or Ron Oden, or world-famous activists like Angela Davis or #BLM founders Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi – two of whom identify as queer. As the present generation continues the long struggle for

civil rights and equal rights for oppressed peoples in North America and around the world, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has made unprecedented efforts to be inclusive in very diverse ways, opening itself up to grassroots initiatives to avoid the blind spots of the past, and to criticism for never fully achieving that goal.

Despite unparalleled queer Black visibility in terms of sheer numbers, media representations at the intersection of racial and genderqueer identities remain scarce. This becomes obvious when focusing on non-binary<sup>3</sup> representations which, as a sub-category, are certainly scarcer than queer representations in general, and particularly so when it comes to racial minorities.

A recent Gallup survey revealed that 20% of Gen Z Americans (born 1997-2003) identify as LGBTQ+, with rising trends in all categories. African Americans represent between 12 and 14%, which is consistent with overall demographics (Jones; McNabb 27). Non-binary categories have yet to enter these sanctioned surveys and non-binary identity may well be prevalent amongst individuals not yet included in said studies for they have not yet reached surveyable age. Children and teenagers are, however, heavy consumers of popular culture, which may be one factor pushing TV productions to incorporate non-binary characters, including in animated series such as *Steven Universe*, as Melvin L. Williams and Christin M. Smith note in their article about Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* Interview. Because they are still largely foreign to older generations, non-binary gender identities tend to remain an afterthought of queer studies when such questions might well be on the way to taking center stage in the ever-evolving aspirations of the genderqueer revolution.

Just as the concept of gender is socially constructed (Beauvoir; Butler), the concept of race is based on logic that lies in prejudice and oppression, not in biological distinctions that utterly fail to live up to the standards of what defines

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<sup>3</sup> Non-binarism, as an umbrella term, refers to any gender identity that is not exclusively male or female. Compared to "genderqueerness," non-binarism does not refer to sexuality or relationships, and compared to "gender fluidity," it does not emphasize any kind of variation in one's identity over time – but does not exclude it either. Non-binary identity may include the absence of gender (agender), demi or bi-genderism, multiple genders (pangenderism, gender fluidity), transgenderism, two-spiritism and other ancestral forms of gender non-binarism, including metaphorically inspired by species outside the human race (plants, objects) under yet another umbrella term, xenogenderism (McNabb 3-12, 33-53). This special issue does not pretend to address all these notions, far from it, but it attempts to specifically study non-binarism as opposed to, and sometimes combined to, queerness per se.

race in the animal realm (Wright 135). In other words, there is only one human race, and the way in which superficial variations have been posited as valid criteria to separate one race into several is ungrounded yet very real.

Feminist and trans activism have naturally mirrored anti-racist questioning of categories: is gender binarism, a concept so strongly engrained in social practices, family dynamics, and language itself, as flawed as racial categorization? Is it possible to stand outside the rigid female/male fixation that seems to define so much of our lives, from Oscar categories to bathroom signs? (McNabb 19-22) Is there in fact a spectrum, an in-between, an immense diversity similar to how racial categories can never be bound? And do Black non-binary representations therefore have a role to play in the demystification of gender binarism? We believe they do.

This special issue examines non-binary Black representations in popular cultures since 2008 from a transdisciplinary and intersectional perspective. It interrogates how old models may be transcended and reinterpreted and at the same time, reproduce age-old stereotypes in modern disguise. Beyond reappropriating Blackness through performance (Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*), the question of Black queer representation(s) is also linked to the idea of commodification and reception by both Black and queer/non-binary people, and by mainstream audiences. In the introduction to *Are You Entertained? Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, editors Simone C. Drake and Dwan K. Henderson write:

the steroidal commodification of Black popular culture has long raised a different set of concerns about value, consumption, and incorporation into the U.S. body politic for contemporary Black cultural producers, as accompanying mass consumption is a phenomenon of deracination that has sometimes shifted the meaning of “Black” in Black popular culture.

(3)

How, then, have the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and non-binary identities been depicted in recent years, whether in mainstream culture or within LGBTQ+ communities? How are stereotypes countered to “queer” the monolithic depictions of Blackness on the one hand and of non-binary identities on the other, to enable the intersections of identities – and particularly non-binary Black identities? What is the significance of such portrayals on non-binary Black individuals as well as general audiences.

This special issue starts with a 5-article and 3-interview-strong musical section. In “The Queer Spaces of Black Dance Music,” Claude Chastagner contextualizes the queer origins of Black dance music and, in doing so, questions the racial and gender binaries that have overdetermined the reception of both Black and queer dance music, going back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chastagner’s study is supported by two interviews with two music insiders, Detroit music activist legend Damon “Magic” Percy, founder of Club Heaven in the 1980s, and dance scholar, educator, and founder of Black Girl Brilliance, Takiyah Nur Amin. Lauron Kherer continues the conversation with an article entitled “‘You Bitches Wouldn’t Get It’: Queer Ludonarrativity in Lil Nas X’s ‘Late To Da Party (F\*CK BET)’,” which digs more specifically into world-famous gay/bisexual rapper Lil Nas X’s use of non-binary aesthetics to impose queer discourse in hip hop culture. Mathieu Perrot and Glenn Smith expand from non-binary musical representations to the realm of poetry with “From Shadows to Spotlight: Exploring Black Queer Aesthetics and Politics in the Works of Lil Nas X and Danez Smith,” in which poetics feeds politics to deliver a resounding message of existence through artistic voices. The article, already strengthened by direct quotes from the artists in various media, is augmented by an interview with New York singer, songwriter, and performer L’Marco. Emilie Souyri follows up with a pedagogical journey into the dialectic feminism of butch lesbian gangsta rapper Young M.A, and a call for intergenerational dialogue that may be key to grasp the subtleties of non-binary quare representations. This lengthy musical prelude ends on an ironic title by co-authors Melvin L. William and Christin Smith, “‘I Never Hesitated:’ A Quare Analysis of Rap Binarism and Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* Interview.” Through discourse analysis, the article focuses on the July 2023 interview given when the artist was summoned to explain their public switch to “they/them” pronouns on social media, a bold move rooted in long-standing support from friends and family. To declare there was no hesitation is paradoxical for an artist just shy of their 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, active since 2010, and arguably quite famous since 2016. At the same time, taken at face value, it is certainly a mark of the changing times, with non-binary Black identity now fully part of hip hop culture.

Departing from the world of music and lyrics, Frédéric Herbin’s article delves into the world of voguing and ballroom culture as he discusses the hiring of the legendary Leiomy Maldonado for a Black Opal cosmetics marketing campaign in 2021. Cosmetics represent a market strongly divided along gender and racial lines so that hiring a trans, Afro-Puerto Rican activist and dancer, founder of the House

of Amazon, is certainly a stepping stone in terms of breaking binaries. After all, voguing sprang from the impossible dream of AfroLatinx youths to enter the world of high fashion and see their faces in shiny magazines, and the Black Opal campaign did just that, albeit to market a product.

The last two articles converge on non-binary representation in fiction, with Laura Goudet focusing on video games and Elizabeth Mullen on legendary character Lafayette in *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-14). The very title of Laura Goudet's article about video games, "Quare Representations *In Absentia*," underlines the difficulty some authors have had to even find Black non-binary representations to discuss. Goudet makes the rare choice of acknowledging the very limited results of their search for non-binary quare characters in mainstream video games, forcing them to focus on non-human metaphors whose gender ambiguity is intrinsically connected to their racial otherness. More so than video games, mainstream TV-series increasingly introduce non-binary queer and quare characters. Mullen considers the adaptation of a somewhat minor character of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, Lafayette Reynolds, from book to TV-series, and underlines the quare expansion of the self-proclaimed Black sissy in a proud break from stereotypical gender binaries.

As anti-trans, anti-drag, anti-gay-rights bills are being passed, vetoed, and pushed up again in more states than we wish to count, non-binary gender identities sound both overtly radical and soothingly neutral. Is it the ultimate cure to sexism as it strips the issue of its very foundation, or an attempt to destroy the balance of human society? Do non-binary Black representations fundamentally question the need for categories to make sense of the world or are they just one more subdivision with their own codifications and paths of entry? Hopefully, reading this collection of articles will push these questions forward on the pendulum of American culture.

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# The Queer Spaces of Black Dance Music

CLAUDE CHASTAGNER<sup>1</sup>

Despite its hijacking by white artists and corporations and the subsequent risk of cultural erasure,<sup>2</sup> Black popular music remains “a way of resisting racial and sexual oppression, articulating experiences of resistance and struggle, and oppositional identities” (Nelson 7),<sup>3</sup> and a privileged channel for expressing complex black identities.

My purpose in this article is to explore the impact of dance music performed by Black queer artists during Obama’s and Trump’s presidencies in terms of non-binary representations. Under the umbrella term “dance music,” I deal with contemporary artists performing in three related genres: house, techno, and hip-hop,<sup>4</sup> the first two having been pioneered, like disco music, by Black and Latino queer artists, and the latter featuring, with relative invisibility until recently, a substantial number of queer and non-binary artists.

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank very warmly for their time and commitment Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin, dance scholar, educator, and founder of Black Girl Brilliance, and cultural historian, poet, and activist Damon Percy, member of the Detroit Sound Conservancy, founder of the Club Heaven Sound System project.

<sup>2</sup> Of this erasure, Shanté Paradigm Smalls writes that it is “reworked to award [sic] white people [...] for ‘innovating’ or even ‘inventing’ cultural and performative forms that Black people crafted and perfected over years or even decades” (*Hip Hop* 16).

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Simone Drake describes Black popular culture as “a disruptive trope of fiercely resistant blackness” (3), and Stuart Hall as a site of “strategic contestation” (26).

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, hip-hop is not usually considered as a dance genre, however, audiences do dance at hip-hop events. As Miles White states about N.W.A.’s songs (but it is true for most hip-hop music), “as offensive as they might have been, [they] were nonetheless club-banging dance numbers, a fact that may have been overlooked by critics” and their album *Straight Outta Compton* was “a dance floor throw-down that was hard to resist” (60). On the same level, contemporary rapper Le1f recently added: “a lot of my music is made with the intentions of movement and dance” (qtd in Battan).

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Dance music performed by Black queer artists is located at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, all intensely connected with matters of inter/personal and social identities. This has long been expressed through song and music, and many of the spaces where Black and/or queer and non-binary people have found a shelter are also associated with music or singing, from the Church to the “Houses” of the Ballroom scene.

What is “dance music performed by Black non-binary artists”? Does it describe a specific genre that could be identified textually or sonically? Is it just a convenient marketing – and academic – ploy? Should we rather refer to specific subgenres, such as “queer rap” or “queer R&B?” Are we not tying together artists who have little in common beyond questioning gender and sexuality? Do we not run the risk of further marginalizing them? Some queer artists oppose this classification, others appreciate the enhanced visibility.

My goal is to assess whether, over the last ten years, there have been any changes regarding the visibility of non-binary Black artists and what impact it might have had on their acceptance by the African American community, and by the country at large. Has the post-Obama period led to more visibility for Black queer artists, or have they been silenced, once again? If they have become more visible, has it led to a mainstreaming of their artistry? Can we observe subsequent changes in the conception of gender within the community? We shall also ask ourselves if by focusing on artists through the “queer/non-binary” lens, we are not putting too much emphasis on questioning gender and sexuality at the expense of other factors, such as race, or talent. A related question regards the appropriation of Black music and dance forms by the white establishment (club owners, promoters, producers, journalists, academics, etc.): is the Black community getting more control and economic windfall at this level? What role are Black political and religious institutions currently playing in terms of empowering the community?

In the *Call for Paper* for the conference they organized in 2020 on *Queering the City*, Anne Crémieux et al. asked whether territorial identification and spatial belonging are possible strategies for invisibilized groups to “create space” and whether these strategies are “overdetermined by intersectionality of gender, race, class and ableness?” (Crémieux “Call”) This paper similarly focuses on space from an intersectional perspective. Its initial inspiration was the number of publications, from the general and the specialized press to academic journals, referring to “space” in relation to LGBTQ issues, particularly regarding Black and Latino queers. The term is also extensively used by the artists, activists, and participants of the queer music scene themselves. So, admittedly, considering Black dance music as a

queer space is not a groundbreaking assertion. However, the term is often used as a given, and insufficiently problematized, and I wish to explore its implications more precisely. My claim is that in the Obama and post-Obama years, Black queer musicians have not only carved an increasingly visible physical and symbolic space for themselves, but that by challenging the silence and the rejection of different communities, including Black, musical ones, they have shaped more inclusive representations of gender.

Despite the growing body of publications related to Black queer studies,<sup>5</sup> and Black popular culture,<sup>6</sup> until very recently, most books and articles on queer music explored above all classical music or “white” rock (punk, queercore, homocore), and mentioned Black or Latinx artists only in passing.<sup>7</sup> The seminal *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2006) edited by Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga did include a few articles dealing with queer and racial identities. It was supplemented in 2018 by *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, which devotes whole sections to the music of the African American community. Worth noting as well are a few recent books, articles, and special issues of scholarly journals<sup>8</sup>, among which Xinling Li’s *Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop Music: Black Gay Men Who Rap* (2018), Shanté Paradigm Smalls’ *Hip Hop Heresies. Queer Aesthetics in New York City* (2022), and Lauron Kehrer’s *Queer Voices in Hip Hop: Cultures, Communities, and Contemporary Performance* (2022). Yet, there remains a dearth of academic publications on the topic, and none focus on non-binarism.

As a white, straight, cisgender man, I will approach the subject as an “ally.” However, if for singer GodIsMikey, “being an ally means using whatever privilege you have to further the equality of those who don’t have it,” (qtd in Glendon) dance scholar Takiyah Nur Amin expresses serious doubts and reservations on the issue:

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Delroy Constantine-Simms, Stefanie Dunning, Roderick Ferguson, bell hooks, Kara Keeling, J.L. King, José Esteban Muñoz, Siobhan Somerville.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Todd Boyd, Tamara Brown, Ellis Cashmore, Anne Crémieux, Simone Drake, Harry Elam, Stuart Hall, Tricia Rose, Harry Shaw.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Philip Brett, David Ciminelli, Robert DeChaine, Susan Driver, Mark Fenster, Cynthia Fuchs, John Gill, Judith Halberstam, Nadine Hubbs, Haro Ibars, Freya Jarman-Ivens, Doris Leibetseder, Judith Peraino, Kevin Schwandt, Deanna Shoemaker, Stevens Simels, Richard Smith, Jodie Taylor, Sheila Whiteley, Katarina Wiedlack.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Eric Shorey’s “Queer Rap is Not Queer Rap,” Adam Kruse’s “‘Therapy Was Writing Rhymes’: Hip-Hop as Resilient Space for a Queer Rapper of Color,” Brian Currid’s “‘We are Family’: House Music and Queer Performativity,” and Mark Wilson’s “Post-Pomo Hip-Hop Homos: Hip-hop Art, Gay Rappers, and Social Change.”

Often I have had the experience with people saying they want to be an ally, [...] but the minute that folks in the community do something or make a decision that makes them feel negatively implicated, they withdraw their support, because they disagree with that tactic, or don't like the way it makes them feel. [...] This is why I say you can't name yourself as an ally, it is the community that you claim to be supporting that can identify you in that way.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, I do not use “queer” as a catch-all term to describe any non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender person. I only apply it to artists who explicitly claim the term to signify their refusal of identity assignment, binarity, and essentialism in all its forms, often (but not always) as part of a process of “disidentification” (Muñoz). It includes the disruptions and dissonances, the “*coitus interruptus*,” as Shanté Smalls puts it (“Queer” 125 emphasis in original), whose modalities move away from the usual strategies of social protest in favor of what Arlene Stein and Kenneth Pummer describe as “a politics of carnival, transgression and parody” (182). Embodied in performance, “queer” often borrows from camp or kitsch and gender is bent out of its inadequate binaries.

I will first deal with the development of Black queer Anglo-American music before exploring Black non-binary musical spaces. The case of New Orleans’ bounce will ultimately allow to study the impact of such spaces on gender representation, through its most visible and vocal representative, Big Freedia.

## The Musical Context

Popular music is a fertile ground for the exploration and contestation of gender and sexual norms,<sup>10</sup> and not only for white artists. Already in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, singers such as Gladys Bentley, or Bessie Smith alluded to their homosexuality. Ma Rainey made her attraction for women clear in “Prove It on Me Blues” (1928), as did Lucille Bogan in “Women Won’t Need No Man” (1927) and “B.D. [for bull dyke] Women Blues” (1935). Such newly gained freedom was made possible by Harlem’s many jazz cabarets and clubs, some of them openly gay, like the Ubangi Club. However, underlines Emma Chen,

<sup>9</sup> Takiyah Nur Amin, personal interview conducted on March 30, 2023, cut and rearranged for clarity and brevity, with respect to the original conversation. All further quotes by Takiyah Nur Amin are from this interview. The whole interview can be found in the present volume.

<sup>10</sup> As Jodie Taylor stresses, “music’s ability to locate the individual in the social has the potential to provide marginalized people such as queers with a means of transgressing the public/private dichotomy that has long operated as a means of sexual repression” (*Playing* 45).

“there were still limitations as to how much even these women could express themselves. Homosexuality was still criminalized and police raids on the various emerging gay enclaves occurred regularly” (25). After the war, Gwen Avery, who passed away in 2014, was one of the few open lesbian artists in the African American community. She was best known for her song “Sugar Mama” on the famous *Lesbian Concentrate* compilation released in 1977 by the all-female Olivia Records label. And if most male blues or Rhythm & Blues singers boast about their (hetero)sexual prowess with deep, low voices, such as Muddy Waters in “Mannish Boy” (1955), the countertenor voices of Smokey Robinson, Al Green, Curtis Mayfield, Clyde McPhatter, Marvin Gaye, Little Richard, or later Prince and Michael Jackson questioned such binary heterocentrist notions.

However, openly challenging gender or sexuality remains difficult in certain traditional Black music genres. The case of gospel is particularly revealing. Though the homosexuality of many singers or choir conductors is well-known, the ban regarding sexuality in the Church implies that for major figures like Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Clara Ward, Willmer Broadnax, or Reverend James Cleveland, “the basis of their categorization as queer” remains “speculation, hearsay” (Johnson, “The Gospel” 82). Many gospel singers, now middle-aged, stress that performing in a choir surrounded by a substantial number of fellow homosexuals while being simultaneously submitted to preaches vilifying homosexuality was a traumatic experience. Reverend Irene Monroe confirms that “The Black church applauds its LGBTQ congregants in the choir pews, yet excoriates [them] from the pulpits.”<sup>11</sup> She quotes Donell Patterson, chair of the Gospel Music department in New England Conservatory’s School of Preparatory and Continuing Education, for whom “A day without gay people in the choir, there would be no church and in some cases pastors, too. Gays are integral to the black church, and it can’t deny it.” The situation is slowly changing. For example, Patrick E. Johnson, dean of the School of Communication at Northwestern University, gave a special lecture on “Gays and Gospel” for National Coming Out Day in

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<sup>11</sup> Cultural historian Damon Percy, who comes from the voguing community and used to sing in a Church choir, confirms: “The Black Church will pimp you out for your musical ability, your talents, all that stuff, and toss you away. You see so many musicians who passed on, they don’t honor they legacies. These people have created sounds and all these things that you’ve stolen, as the Black Church, but you won’t give them the credit at all.” (Damon Percy, personal interview conducted on April 21, 2023, cut and rearranged for clarity and brevity, with respect to the original conversation. All further quotes by Damon Percy are from this interview. The whole interview can be found in the present volume).

October 2022. But in the Black Church, that has been described as both “the most homophobic and most homotolerant of any institution in the black community” (Boykin 17), tolerance remains for a large part, as in most Churches, based on a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding trans, non-binary, and sexual issues.

However, the situation differs sensibly for the different genres of Black dance music developed from the 1970s onwards by gays, lesbians, or transgender people of color for audiences that looked like them, first with disco music, and then house and techno. With artists like Gloria Gaynor, Patti Labelle, The Pointer Sisters, Sister Sledge, Donna Summer, Sylvester, or The Village People, disco started in the early 1970s an unprecedented movement of sexual liberation, allowing gay men and lesbians to express themselves openly in the clubs of New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Chicago, or Detroit. The mainstreaming and commodification of the genre led its main performers, mostly DJs, to move to something else. In fact, despite the “disco bashing” events of the late 1970s, which were as much a rejection of queers of color as of the music as such, disco did not die. It just returned underground and became what was later dubbed “electronic dance music.” The experimentations conducted by the four historic DJs, Larry Levan in New York’ Paradise Garage club, Frankie Knuckles in Chicago at The Warehouse, and Ken Collier and Stacey Hale in Detroit, gave birth to house and techno music, whose hypnotic, trance-like sounds were adopted by a growing crowd initially mostly composed of gay African American, Latinx, Caribbean, and Asian American youth.

If the clubs that accommodated techno and house gradually attracted a mainstream audience, increasingly composed of straight and white people, the drag balls of the ballroom community occupy a remarkable, though more underground, position. Developed mostly by the transgender community, drag balls offer a combination of beauty pageant, fashion show, and dance competition. The first drag balls took place in Harlem as far back as the 1860s, and particularly during the Harlem Renaissance. Announced as “costume balls,” they allowed to safely bypass New York’s regulations against cross-dressing and same-sex dancing. Drag balls have historically been attended by queers of color, although there has always been a minority of white, straight and/or cisgender participants. In the early 2000s, the ballroom scene branched out into a lighter variant called Kiki,<sup>12</sup> more youth-oriented,

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<sup>12</sup> According to the *Urban Dictionary*, “kiki” is “a slang term in gay culture referring to friends gathering to ‘spill the tea,’ or simply just engage in casual conversation. A party including good music and good friends” (“Kiki”).

and less focused on competition, that included house music and techno, as Damon Percy (who was born in the early 1970s) remembers: “My generation, [...] it was house music, and a lot of gospel house [...] with Crystal Waters, and CeCe Peniston, and Ten City.”

Hip-hop tells a different story. Although there is a long history of queer presence in hip-hop<sup>13</sup>, it is routinely considered as a heteronormative, homophobic, and misogynistic genre. Xinling Li thus writes that “hip-hop culture has not been a place where gay rappers are welcomed” (2), Mark Wilson adds that hip-hop culture is “violent, sexist, homophobic, anti-gay, heteronormative, and male-centered” (117), and Kruse notes that the music is saturated with “misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric” (101). Hip-hop’s hypermasculine rhetoric is sometimes explained to leave behind the genre’s quintessentially queer roots: disco, house, and ballroom culture (Kehrer, Li, White). However, the interrelation that existed between queerness and hip-hop from the genre’s inception is increasingly brought to the fore. Thus, for Jeffrey McCune, “hip-hop is as much a part of queer world-making, as queer world-making is a part of the history of hip-hop” (*Sexual* 127). Smalls claims that “LGBT and queer, intersex, genderqueer, and gender-nonconforming (QIGGNC) bodies have been both integral to US hip hop cultural production and denied as integral to said production” (“Queer” 125), and it is the central argument of Lauron Kehrer’s recent opus, in which she demonstrates that “hip hop is not *inherently* homophobic” (32).

A common explanation to the strongly homophobic content of both the lyrics and the public utterances (tweets, interviews, etc.) of hip-hop’s main performers (particularly within the gangsta rap subgenre), is that rappers do not necessarily express personal opinions, but merely reflect the prevalent attitude within the Black community. Damon Percy upholds this perspective: “I was used to Black men talking like that, that’s what it was in the neighborhood. My brother’s friends, that’s how they were, that’s how they spoke. I didn’t take it personally [...]. At that time, it was about how the community at large felt”.

Another explanation of gay and lesbian bashing in hip-hop is that it would bear the trace of the prominent historical role played by religion in the development of African American musical idioms, down to hip-hop. A third explanation is that slavery emasculated the Black male and turned the Black community into a feminized race, which hip-hop challenges by adopting the

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<sup>13</sup> *The Source*, the most respected hip-hop magazine, published in 1997 three articles on gays and hip-hop.

aggressive male posture promoted by Afrocentrism and Black Nationalism.<sup>14</sup> As a result, so-called “nationalist hip-hop”<sup>15</sup> developed, presenting a form of resistance through the threatening voice and bulging muscles of the Black urban male, construed as the opposite of homosexuals. The presumably sweet, melodious voices of “queer hip-hop performers” became inaudible. Together with R&B singers, they were ostracized precisely because they “sang,” “singing” and “being musical” being two sexual slurs (or at least derogatory innuendos) directed at homosexuals. “Rapping” (as opposed to singing) was the only possible sound of Black manhood, the only possible voice against white domination. “As a result,” concludes Li, “homophobia was no longer a matter of personal belief but an attitude one had to adopt to be accepted as pro-black and be recognized by the male-centered hip-hop community” (36).

*Hip-Hop and Non-binary Communities.* During hip-hop’s formative years, several female artists were instrumental in fighting the heteronormative, misogynistic, and homophobic dimension of the genre, most notably Queen Latifah, who celebrated women empowerment with British-born Monie Love on “Ladies First” in 1989 and addressed domestic violence and harassment on “U.N.I.T.Y.” in 1993. In recent years, and particularly during the period under scrutiny, many openly queer hip-hop artists have become extremely successful, and the genre has evolved toward a more fluid and inclusive aesthetic. The first stirrings date back to the late 1990s when “Homo Hop,” a loose, multiethnic, multiracial movement of LGBTQ rappers and MCs was organized by the San Francisco-based band Rainbow Flava around a record label and production company called Phat Family. Its website defines Homo Hop with great care, underlining that non-binary performers are not threatening the fabric of hip-hop, but “building a home for [them]selves within it” (Phat Family).

Prominent within the Homo Hop movement is Deep Dickollective (D/DC), a California-based rap crew of African American gay men, founded in 2000, which built a new form of “political consciousness from a diversity of identities, particularly based on race, sexuality, and class” (Wilson 119), rather

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<sup>14</sup> Katrina Thompson Moore, for instance, claims that there is “a long history of the term ‘emasculat[i]on’ being associated with Black male identity due to Black men being denied full participation in White male patriarchal privilege” (86). Megan Morris sees the hyper-masculinity of hip-hop as “an extension of the metaphors of phallic power defined by the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, and championed by [...] Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Amiri Baraka” (30).

<sup>15</sup> See for example Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, Temple U P, 2006.

than on purely racial criteria. Taken as a whole, the various forms of Homo Hop challenge “dominant accounts of hip-hop as a culture frequently characterized by violence, homophobia and misogyny” (Taylor, “Claiming” 5).

Though not systematically, and often less visibly, non-binary, Trap Queens have also contributed to the development of more inclusive forms of hip-hop. Originally associated to drug dealing, and to the female partners of dealers, the phrase has come to describe powerful, independent Black women, and is now commonly applied to several female rappers in the trap subgenre of hip-hop, which combines heavy, repetitive beats with R&B and pop influences. Among the genre’s leading artists, we can mention Megan Thee Stallion, Angel Haze, whose lyrics occasionally deal with homophobia, Princess Nokia, and Lizzo.

2012 marks a watershed in the development of non-binary forms of hip-hop. In July, a few months before Barack Obama’s re-election, singer/rapper Frank Ocean<sup>16</sup> released an open letter on his blog<sup>17</sup> revealing his love for another man (nothing about gender, though), which earned him the support of fans and other artists, something hard to imagine a few years earlier. A few weeks before, in March 2012, an article written by Carrie Batten for *Pitchfork* profiling Mykki Blanco, Zebra Katz, Lelf, and House of Ladosha and titled “We Invented Swag: NYC Queer Rap” launched the term “Queer Rap” which gradually came to describe a second wave of rap artists claiming openly their non-binary status. Often influenced by ball culture and drag aesthetics (which was not as much the case with homo pop), they gained more mainstream coverage. They were aided by several straight and cis allies from the mainstream hip-hop community, from Jay-Z to Macklemore, Murs, Kendrick Lamar, and Kanye West. The overarching label was immediately questioned. Pop culture writer Eric Shorey asks: “How are we supposed to talk about ‘queer rap’? Is it a scene? A genre? Is this just a case of a handful of incredibly disparate artists unwittingly (some unhappily) being grouped together for the sake of the convenience of labeling?” Indeed, the label “queer rap” is often applied to any subgenre of hip-hop provided it is performed by an artist identifying as LGBTQ. The interraciality of queer rap is rarely mentioned (Smalls, *Hip Hop Heresies* 24) and journalists tend to focus on gay men, framing lesbians within a masculine angle of power (“girl power”).

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<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, Franck Ocean is more a singer than a rapper in the conventional sense, which may have made his coming out more acceptable for the hip-hop community, since it did not question directly its hypermasculine posture.

<sup>17</sup> <https://frankocean.tumblr.com/image/26473798723>



Nevertheless, as Annika Brandes claims in a recent issue of *Dig*, “the versatility and evolution of contemporary hip-hop and R&B has given a voice to those who are deconstructing both the genre and the idea of black sexuality.” Juan Velasquez asserts in *Them* that “2022 was a landmark year for music by LGBTQ+ artists. The sheer number of iconic tracks that came out this year is astonishing [...] Innovative queer and trans musicians pushed the boundaries of the sonic landscape. [Their] songs dismantle and reconstruct entire genres into different forms.” At the time of writing, about a hundred Black queer male, female, and transgender artists are listed on the Wikipedia page devoted to “LGBT representations in hip hop music.”<sup>18</sup> Some remain fairly obscure, while others like Lil Nas X total millions of views/downloads.

Most started their careers in the early 2010s and have become increasingly successful during the last years of Barack Obama’s presidency.<sup>19</sup> Since Donald Trump’s election, the trend has not abated. While a growing number of LGBT rappers has come out and remained successful, others, straight and/or cisgender, have apologized for their past insulting behavior towards gays (Eminem, in 2018), or now speak up against discrimination and in support of gay or transgender persons.<sup>20</sup> On “Auntie Diaries” (2022) Kendrick Lamar problematically raps “my auntie is a man now;” on “Smile” (2017), Jay-Z pays tribute to his lesbian mother; at the 2023 Grammy Awards ceremony, Beyoncé expressed her gratitude to her late gay uncle and the queer community.<sup>21</sup> Refuting allegations of cultural appropriation sometimes thrown at Beyoncé, Damon Percy explains how, on the contrary, her use of house music is having a major impact on Black queer youth and their approach to gender and sexuality: “What she said is very impactful. [...] in terms of

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<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT\\_representations\\_in\\_hip\\_hop\\_music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_representations_in_hip_hop_music)

<sup>19</sup> During his eight years in office, President Obama displayed ties with Black musicians, some openly queer, others notoriously queer friendly.

<sup>20</sup> Insulting LGBT people has also become more perilous: “Now the artists see the power of our [gay] community taking them down. Lil Baby, after what he said on stage, hasn’t been able to get any good press. You know, you have to be careful, it is a business” (Damon Percy).

<sup>21</sup> Beyoncé declared: “I want to dedicate this award to my uncle Johnny—the most fabulous gay man I’ve ever met who helped raise me and my sister. He lived his truth. He was brave and unapologetic during a time when this country wasn’t as accepting. Witnessing his battle with HIV was one of the most painful experiences I’ve ever lived. I’m hopeful that his struggle served to open pathways for other young people to live more freely. LGBTQIA rights are human rights. To choose who you love is your human right. How you identify and see yourself is your human right. Who you make love to and take that ass to Red Lobster is your human right.”

visibility. [She brought] awareness to the community that she's speaking of". The impact of Beyoncé's album *Renaissance* (2022) regarding the visibility, and recognition of Black dance music, and Black queers' role in its development, cannot be underestimated, and she was hailed as a remarkable ally of the community, as noted in mainstream press articles and academic papers.<sup>22</sup> However, since my main focus is on non-binary artists, I will not specifically examine her contribution.

Another striking feature of the last decade is the increasing involvement of out rappers in the anti-racist struggle. Conversely, the current social movements against police brutality have sparked an equal interest in the long-overlooked central role working-class queers of color played in the development of dance music. In her introduction to her interviews of "18 Creatives on the Black Queer Future of Dance Music," Michelle Kim claims that "since George Floyd's death sparked a national uprising for racial justice, the push to reclaim the narrative around dance music has taken an unprecedented urgency." The increasing number of LGBT people of color coming out suggests that there is an increasing number of "safe places" where they can express themselves, the music scene being one. The next section elaborates on the notion of space within Black dance music.

## The Queer Spaces of Black Dance Music

*Safe Spaces.* One way to assess the impact of Black dance music is to observe the expanding physical and symbolic spaces it has generated, a process that has accelerated during the last decade. "Safe space" is the term most often used by journalists, activists, artists (dancers, DJs, musicians), and participants to describe physical environments (clubs, bars, ballrooms, etc.) where they feel comfortable. One of the obvious reasons behind the need for safe spaces are the "spatial restrictions that most black people feel at an early age—having rocks thrown at you for being on the wrong side of the tracks, for instance," reminds Ta-Nehisi Coates ("My President"). He put it even more bluntly in a 2015 essay: "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – *it is heritage*" (*Between* 103 emphasis added). Takiyah Nur Amin makes a similar connection: "Violence [is] pointed at our very bodies, at our fleshiness, at our materiality".

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance: Battan; Motah; Williams. In the latter, Williams delves on the connection the album's title establishes between the Renaissance Era, and the "rebirth of house music culture." The post is particularly interesting as it considers Renaissance as a "history lesson on the roots of Black music" and examines it from a religious, or at least spiritual, perspective.

For Martez Smith, the organizer of Dick Appointment queer parties in New York, “[Our society has] really criminalized and punished the Black body, and told us like, ‘Yo, you are not allowed to celebrate your sexuality. You are not allowed to be queer’” (qtd in Kim). Black women or non-binary people often must deal with unwanted behavior on the dance floor. Many recount how straight men feel entitled to touch them, or expect them to perform, and entertain them in a sassy way. They also complain about the physical rejection they experience: “[White people] are literally blocking you from moving and won’t make space for you and your marginalized body” (qtd in Wheeler).

“Marginalized body” is not a metaphor. Marlon Bailey defines the spatial marginalization of Black LGBT people as “The ways in which Black LGBT people are structurally prohibited from, denied access to, and oppressed within public and private spaces due to the race, gender, and sexual identities they claim” (6). Often economically vulnerable, Black LGBT youth are made physically invisible, with little access to safe neighborhoods, to the education and health systems, or to the job market. Reliable data is hard to find, but according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, Black LGBT youth represent about a third of all homeless LGBT youth (Ray). The Human Rights Campaign claims that more than forty percent have attempted suicide (Matthes). 2021 saw the highest number of anti-trans murders ever recorded, at 57 (Sosin). The situation is particularly serious in the Kiki community, whose members are sometimes as young as 13. Activists estimate that fifty percent are HIV-positive (Jordenö). The protection of these communities was the main reason behind the development of ballroom houses, stresses J. M. Nimocks: “the organizers of the ballroom scene have always been clear about the primary purpose of ballroom from its conception as providing a safe and celebratory space for mostly black and brown LGBTQ+ communities.”

More than just physical places where to live, dance, and socialize, queer spaces are transformative and performative utterances and actions that trouble the mainstream world. Queer spaces are material (dance clubs, houses), mental (successful black queer artists), and social (human interaction). Nightlife spaces are about more than just dancing, they offer a network of resources and support, love and friendship, creative inspiration and professional opportunity, and provide opportunities to establish business connections (producers, video directors, technicians, dressmakers, make-up artists, graphic designers...) and to express freely non-binary forms of sexuality and gender.

*Electronic Spaces.* The most visible Black queer space today is the Internet where, over the last five years, the presence of Black queer dance music has sharply intensified. Streaming sites like Deezer, Apple Music, or Spotify offer a choice of recent songs<sup>23</sup> grouped according to the ethnicity and sexuality/gender of their performers, such as “Queer Hip-Hop,” “Black and Queer AF,” or “Black, Queer, and Proud” (note the “political nod” of the latter, with its allusion to Nina Simone’s 1970 song “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” and James Brown’s 1968 anthem “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud”).

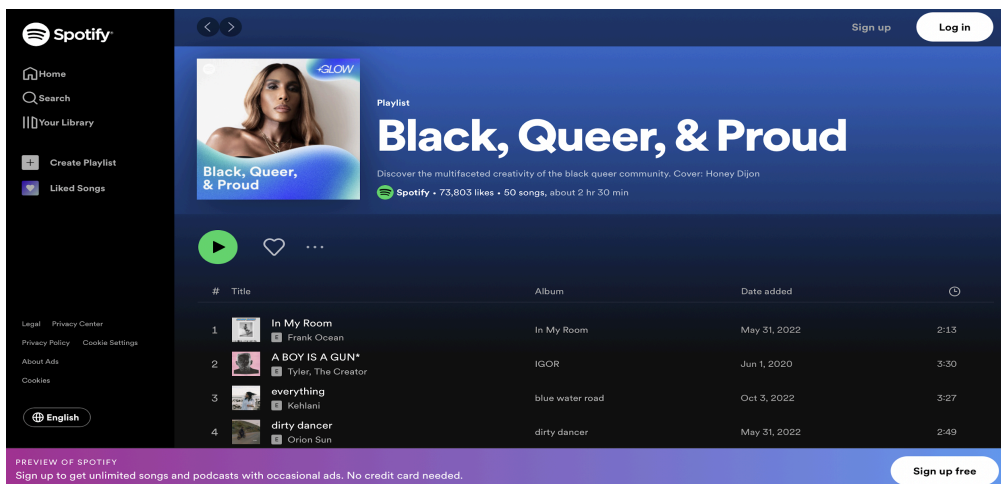


Figure 1. Playlist, *Spotify*, April 2023

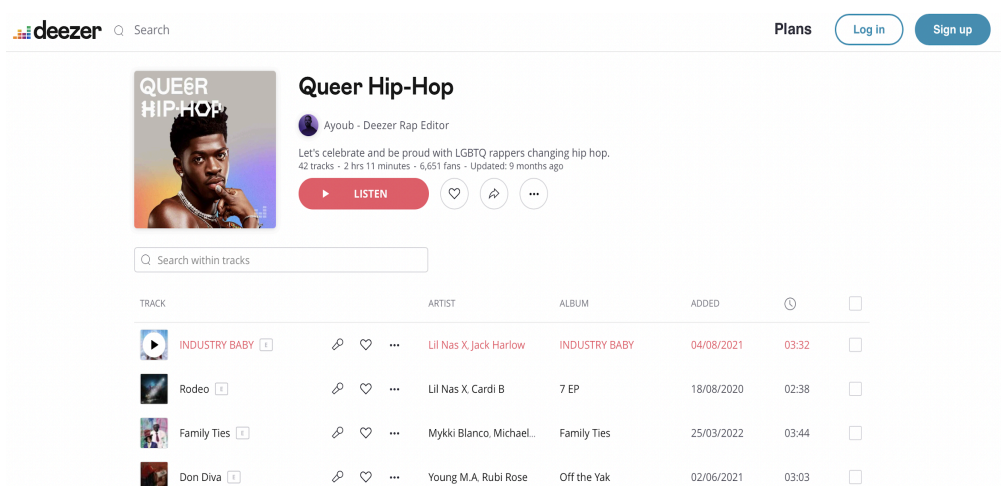


Figure 2. Playlist, *Deezer*, April 2023

<sup>23</sup> The oldest songs date from 2020.

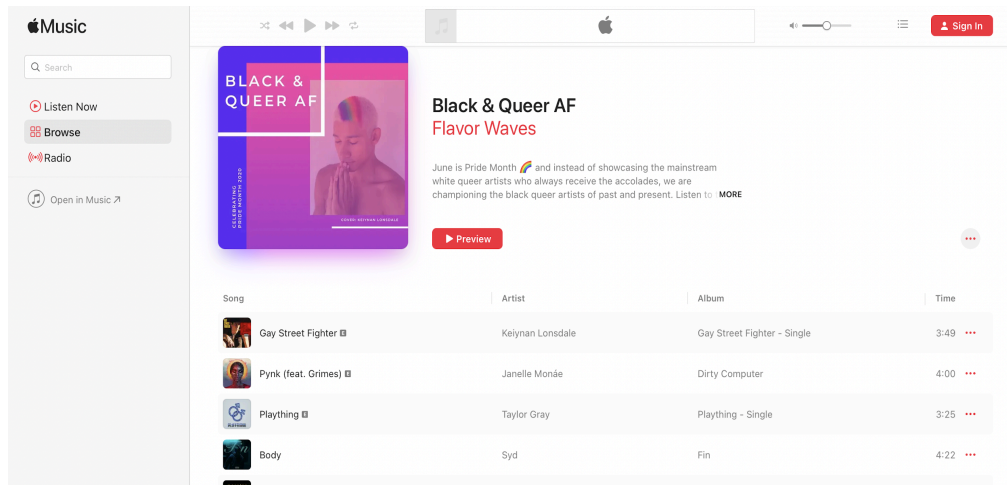


Figure 3. Playlist, *Apple Music*, April 2023

The electronic press is also increasingly covering the topic. The online magazine *Them* has started a thread on Twitter and a weekly column on its website to enable its readers to follow the latest trends, under the header: “Openly LGBTQ+ artists are releasing tons of great music, now more than ever. To help you with this extremely good problem to have, *them* is selecting the best songs released by queer musicians on every New Music Friday.”<sup>24</sup> The list below is a random selection of recent online articles from trade, and general interest publications. It gives an indication of the variety and intensity of this new, timidly intersectional, focus, though they rarely problematize the issue and merely provide lists of names, rather than in-depth analyses:

- “15 Queer Black Music Artists Who Are Proudly Living Their Truth,” *HuffPost*, June 15, 2017
- “8 Queer Black Artists Taking Music by Storm,” Devin Randall, *Instinct*, July 30, 2019
- “Queer Black Artists and Their Quests for Visibility,” Annika Brandes, *Dig*, February 7, 2020
- “5 Black, Queer Musicians to Listen to During Pride Month,” Patrick Ryan, *USA Today*, June 2020
- “A Soundtrack to The Queer Black Revolution: 15 Trans & Queer Black Musicians You Should Add to Your Playlists,” Attou Mamat, *Sayaspura*, June 24, 2020
- “10 Black Queer Artists Get Real About the Intersectionality of Resistance During Pride,” Francis Glendon, *Billboard*, June 24, 2020

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/them/status/1395844424412893184>

- “The Sound of a Movement: 18 Creatives on The Black Queer Future of Dance Music,” Michelle Kim, *Them*, June 29, 2020
- “38 Black Queer Musicians,” *Out Magazine*, January 2021
- “The Summer Black Queer Music Took Over,” Ernest Owens, *Rolling Stone*, September 5, 2022
- “Black Queer Musicians Are Pushing the Music Industry Forward — and Proving They Can Exist Outside of It,” Clarissa Brooks, *Teen Vogue*, March 30, 2023

One reason for this expanding visibility is obviously the growing interest in issues related to gender and sexuality in society at large, and the increased possibility for artists, including African Americans, to come out without fearing negative repercussions for their careers. Donald Trump’s election and increasingly repressive State legislations have made these spaces even more essential.<sup>25</sup> Asked whether he thinks safe places are still necessary today, Damon Percy answers: “We always need safe places [...] where you can go and be uplifted for who you are. [They] are an escape from the world, which is right now a horrible place to be. [...] You want to go to where you have your own people, where you are affirmed, and celebrated, not just tolerated.”

Hence the various initiatives providing Black queer people with an enhanced level of protection. For Kadar Small, photographer of the Dick Appointment parties launched in 2019 by Kenny Jovan in various New York nightclubs, Black queer people need “a space where they know they’re going to be fully comfortable, where they’re going to be fully accepted, and you don’t have to worry about anything” (Gillani). Such is also the rationale behind the “Rave Reparations” parties founded in 2020 in Los Angeles by Alima Lee and Mandy Harris Williams. The politically weighted appellation shows to what extent “making amends” has become an important form of advocacy for Black people. To the extent that “becoming visible is transformative” (Crémieux, *Now* 5), Black queer spaces have also become spaces of empowerment. Takiyah Amin draws an interesting parallel between Black and LGBT issues. For her, like the Civil Rights movement gave the race question a visible, human reality, “the LGBTQ+ communities have always been an expressive, active part of our society. It is just that our lens hopefully is getting broader and deeper”.

*Bodies in Motion.* The sounds, lyrics, and especially dances of Black queer

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<sup>25</sup> See for instance Wyatt Ronan, “2021 Officially Becomes Worst Year in Recent History for LGBTQ State Legislative Attacks as Unprecedented Number of States Enact Record-Shattering Number of Anti-LGBTQ Measures into Law,” *Press Release of the Human Rights Campaign*, May 7, 2021.

music bestow a symbolic agency to its participants, a degree of social prominence and cultural authority. In his study of class relations in a Malay village, James C. Scott coined the term “hidden transcript” to describe practices “likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced” (xi). Dance is one of these hidden transcripts, a powerful form of infrapolitics that sends an intra-community message and contributes to organizing support and resistance.

Dance, as performed by non-binary, working-class, Black and Brown individuals on the dance floors of American cities, on a background of house, techno, or queer hip-hop music, defines and occupies a major queer space, both physically and symbolically. Resorting to an aesthetic of parody, humor, and above all, excess (of vocal expressions, make up, gestures, hairdos, clothes, movements...), abstract notions such as “dissidence” or “resistance” become a daily reality. Takiyah Nur Amin insists on the intimate connection between the dancing body and resistance: “Protest exists at the level of our fleshy materiality. I think whatever liberation looks like, it is going to include a reckoning with our bodies, and dance is one of the tools. [...] Dance is a part of the resistive technology that talks back to oppressive structures”.

Indeed, dance floors allow LGBT individuals to celebrate “family” in safe environments that “talk back to oppressive structures.” After the flamboyant and life-affirming phase of disco music in the 1970s, quintessentially dance genres such as Chicago house and Detroit techno were engineered by and for working-class queers of color.<sup>26</sup> Dance is central to the ballroom scene that emerged in the late 1980s. Its participants, mostly African American and Latino LGBT youth, started to vogue on house music, resorting to complex, highly codified movements (hand performance, floor performance, duck walk, catwalk, spins and dips, etc.). The participants of the vogue scene frequently describe how the genre allowed them to find a way out of abusive families, neighborhoods, church leaders... Amin suggests that the way the Black body has been mistreated throughout history turns dance into a site for “bodily enactments of pleasure, agency, and resistance” (“The Booty” 240). This speaks to why Black queer dance video clips materialize queerness through excess, to compensate the violent discipline and control Black people are subject to. The steps and gestures performed on sonic backdrops create both physical and symbolic spaces of protection and empowerment.

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<sup>26</sup> However, disco, house, and techno’s origins were erased when white American and European DJs adopted the genres and started to cater for an increasingly white, middle-class audience.

The last part of this article focuses on the recent, spectacular development of a queer subgenre of hip-hop, whose specific dance practices have become its trademark. It will further position Black dance music as a generator of empowering queer spaces, relying on the resistive impetus of sexuality despite mainstreaming and appropriation.

### The Case of Bounce

Bounce was born in New Orleans in the late 80s at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and geography. From a second-rate form of heterosexual hip-hop, non-binary Black artists have developed a spectacular subgenre, based on the combination of humorous, sexual, and energetic repetitive lyrics and dance steps, including, among many others, twerking. My claim is that bounce opens a Black queer space, as defined above, creating a strong sense of belonging by mixing the performance of sexuality and gender with references to Africa and slavery.

When bounce's early success began to fade in the late 1990s, it was taken over by non-binary artists. In fact, Hettie Williams credits Trap Queens and Drag Divas (some of whom are explicit about their non-binary identity) with the invention of bounce (*Black Perspectives*). However, New Orleans journalist Alison Fensterstock's label, "sissy bounce," though catchy, was deemed offensive and eventually abandoned. Bounce found an unexpected audience of mostly Black, working class, heterosexual women, but it does not only "oppose antiBlackness and misogyny, but also homophobia and transphobia" (Schoux Casey and Eberhardt 321). Big Freedia is currently bounce's biggest name. Not a cross-dresser, nor a drag queen, she wears make-up, nails, flamboyant clothes, wigs, but not necessarily from the "traditional" women's wardrobe. She says she is above all an artist who happens to be gay and accepts both pronouns. Her career has recently taken a national, and even international dimension, with the publication of her memoir, a six-season (2013-2017) reality series, and collaborations with stars like Drake and Beyoncé (though her name is not always mentioned).

*Local Spaces.* New Orleans' bounce artists stage names, as well as the titles and subject matter of many of their songs and video clips refer to New Orleans' wards and projects. While citing local spaces is obviously intended to foster a sense of community and commonality among listeners, it is also for bounce artists a way to chronicle the displacements the Black community has had to endure. In his dissertation, referring to the consequences of hurricane



Katrina or policies of urban renewal,<sup>27</sup> Andrew Chapman draws attention to the fact that “Neighborhoods, the actual physical spaces that many Black New Orleanians once called home, are literally gone, either from being razed, washed away, or crumbling from disinvestment” (21). By narrating physical and social spaces, bounce becomes a rallying cry providing cohesion and comfort to disoriented communities. Many comments on streaming sites insist on the comforting sense of “home” experienced when listening to such songs by former New Orleanians now living in Baton Rouge, Dallas, Atlanta, or Houston because of Katrina. But local spaces are in turn radically queered by bounce’s strong African presence.

*The African presence.* The central element in the queering process initiated by bounce artists is the introduction at unprecedented levels of African, more precisely West African, elements in their performance, in ways that trouble the genre’s American, Southern, working class, hypermasculine background. This is of particular significance in a place like New Orleans, “the most Africanized slave culture in the US,” according to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (1049), where African, indigenous, and Caribbean cultures blend.

The most visible African presence can be found in the different dances connected to the genre, among which the infamous “twerk,” popularized nationwide by Big Freedia. Infamous, because many (educators, journalists, leaders, etc.) consider it lewd and obscene, even particularly shocking and inappropriate when performed by teenagers in the streets, in cars, on front porches, in school yards, even in classes sometimes, and most of all, on the Internet. Twerking has pushed the limits of acceptable behaviors for mainstream audiences. For Takiyah Amin and Christin Marie Taylor, these dances have obvious African roots. However, such claims are always difficult to prove. Franco-Cameroonian choreographer James Carlès claims that indeed, twerking came after *mapouka*, but that “the influence of this style is much more visible in *coupé-décalé*” (qtd by Sauphie). For Carlès, there is a continuum in all Afro-descendant dances, from Africa to Europe and the United States, rather than a direct link.

Twerking was already one of several similar dances performed in association with bounce music when Miley Cyrus released a Facebook video that went viral, followed by on-stage twerking at the MTV Video Awards

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<sup>27</sup> This is particularly the case with the construction of the elevated Interstate 10 over North Claiborne, which destroyed what used to be a thriving Black district. However, as Tejai Beula Howard underlines, “Bounce music’s history reveals how African Americans, particularly Black New Orleanians, created a sound and culture that allowed them to thrive in spaces that the government designed to destroy them.”

ceremony on August 26, 2013. This was soon followed by Rihanna's "Pour it Up" video on October 2, 2013. Interestingly, despite Rihanna's fame, six days after its release, the video had garnered only 34 million views compared to Miley's 310 million. These statistics are telling evidence of the limits of media penetration of African American artists, compared to what white artists can achieve. Thus today, even if "Pour It Up" has reached 500 million views on YouTube, Miley Cyrus "We Can't Stop" is at one billion, and if Pharrell William's, Childish Gambino's or Beyoncé's most watched videos reach the billion mark, they are topped by Mark Ronson, Ed Sheeran, Katy Perry, Maroon 5, or Justin Bieber, and by Latino artists Luis Fonsi, El Chombo, or Shakira, some of whom are over eight billion views.

Kyra Gaunt points out that "omitted from Miley's performance and from reports about it were any musical linkages like the call-and-response party chants that most Bounce songs inherited from both Mardi Gras Indian masking traditions and brass bands in New Orleans" (268). She claims that Miley "de-racialized" the dance (256). For Big Freedia, cultural appropriation is "offensive to Black culture and Black women who've been twerking for years" (Ross 205), which Amin explains by the fact that "Black communities are creative in general. So, people always want to steal our stuff."

Takiyah Amin and Christin Marie Taylor establish twerking's African roots based on several elements. The dance combines two New Orleans traditions, bounce being born "when these traditions collided with the hip-hop movement" (C. Taylor 66). The first of these traditions are the "baby dolls," masked Black prostitutes who, starting in the early 1900s, paraded in the streets doing what, according to eyewitnesses, already looked like twerking. They were often joined by men disguised as women (while some baby dolls cross-dressed as men). The second origin of twerking is a daring women's dance from the Congo, the *mapouka* (called "danse fustier" in the Ivory Coast) which was already danced at the time of slavery in Congo Square in New Orleans, and in Alabama, as early as the eighteenth century. Accusations of vulgar hypersexuality and African traces have been used to expel high school girls who posted twerking videos. "Black bodies are always already wrong—troubled, tainted, unworthy, dispossessed," claims Amin ("The Booty" 239).

"The groin area has extraordinary power," writes Freddie Ross, alias Big Freedia, "it is more than sexual; it's also deeply intimate and transformative. For us sissies, who lived under such constant oppression – the violence, poverty, and homophobia – Bounce is our way to transmute that pain into joy" (220). The groin and the "booty" are bounce's main targets, as celebrated by

Big Freedia in “Azz Everywhere” (2010). Hips are often isolated in various dances throughout the African continent. These dances partake in the socialization of young working-class Black girls by helping them transfer their identity, via electronic media, from the private (their bedroom) to the public sphere at a critical moment of their lives. This socializing role is yet another space created by Black queer artists. The transformative role Big Freedia mentions is connected to the freedom of movement twerking allows, together with its implied sexual autonomy, whether the claim is actualized or not.

Specific verbal elements also contribute to connect bounce to its African heritage and as such to complexify and enrich its image. The numerous exchanges between the MCs and their audience<sup>28</sup> inscribe the dance within the call-and-response tradition. This is often the case with Big Freedia who uses her voice for repetitive, percussive beats, such as with the word “yaka,” which could at first hearing be taken for a mere onomatopoeia, and which serves as a propulsive background for dancing. In “Explode,” for instance, the song sampled by Beyoncé, it is repeated 16 times before Freedia exhorts her audience to “release yo’ wiggle.”

Of the word “yaka,” Big Freedia says that it “is basically like glocka – when we’re shaking, we’re like, ‘Ooh, she’s glocka, she’s going hard.’ Yaka is kind of the same. We use it for glocka. It’s a feeling of, ‘She’s getting some, she’s going hard, she’s going in.’ I usually come up with my own words to relate to some of the words we already use, but to change the concept of it. Yaka and glocka are kind of the same thing” (Qtd in Feeney). However, researchers have also discovered that “Yakah” is a Congolese surname referring to “people near a river,” and that it echoes the Bantu phrase “yaka awa,” or “come here,” connecting bounce even more directly, albeit unconsciously, to its African origins (C. Taylor).

Admittedly, the most prominently featured lyrics in bounce music are of a crude, (homo)sexual nature. However, they should be replaced within the African American tradition of humorous and hyperbolic verbal jousting, such as “the dozens,” often used in blues, and not to be taken at face value.

Bounce thus results from the intersection of three elements: an emphasis on local spaces; witty, energetic hypersexual lyrics and dances; and politically laden borrowings from African cultures. This combination turns the genre into a joyful “hidden transcript” that uses movement and space to counter the

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<sup>28</sup> “A string of shorter, chant-friendly phrases, hooks, or choruses”, according to Matt Miller in his groundbreaking Ph. D. Dissertation (Miller 169), which he later adapted into a book, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (2013), to my knowledge, the only full-length work on bounce so far.

control of dominant groups. Bounce disrupts not only middle-class, heteronormative expectations, but also homonormative ones, as well as participants in the hip-hop scene, troubling sexual or gender identities. In the process, bounce is not only opening unexpected spaces of freedom to marginalized groups, but also deconstructing entrenched attitudes regarding how gender and race are understood today in the United States.

## Black Gender

What I intend to explore in this last section is the impact queer Black dance music has had on the nature of Black gender representations. Can we provide an analysis that would take the ongoing changes into account?

For the last thirty years or so, African American gender has been increasingly defined by hip-hop's discourse, from New School and Golden Age eras, down to gangsta rap, hardcore, and regional scenes. The record covers, posters, video clips, and live performances featuring mostly male rappers have presented the often-threatening image of an "hypermasculine, Black, cisgender, and heterosexual man" (Kehrer 66) buttressed by an ethos of struggle and material success. Emotions must be withheld, since, according to White, they suggest "vulnerability" (25). He explains further: "For many young males even the act of smiling is seen as registering weakness, feminization, and relative lower social status. The performance of hardcore masculinity rejects the softening of one's facial features in favor of the cold, hard stare intended to project strength and inspire fear if not respect" (25). The feminine being usually devalued in patriarchal societies, displaying what could be interpreted as feminine would automatically entail considerable discredit.

What initially only concerned a handful of artists eventually came to define, in the United States and throughout the world, how people conceived Black masculinity,<sup>29</sup> a cause for either fear and repulsion, or fascination and envy. Those who did not fit the frame, homosexuals, transgenders, or straight, cisgender individuals who just did not identify with this image, had to make do with the margins of social and media life.

However, more complex and nuanced representations are gaining ground. Early stirrings of non-aggressive Black masculinities could already be heard in 1950s gospel and doo-wop harmonies, "an entire strain of black music in

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<sup>29</sup> This is true at least for the generation born in the 1980s, as Damon Percy explains: "The generation under me, they wanted [hip-hop] because they wanted to present an image, this toughness, this whole masculine thing."

contradistinction to white supremacist gender constructions of the black buck” (Pennington 122). Later, artists such as Marvin Gaye, Prince or Michael Jackson offered a suave, sophisticated, sometimes ambiguous image. But in the wake of the evolution initiated by the Homo Hop movement, contemporary Black artists are reshuffling the cards even more explicitly. While straight rappers like Jay-Z or Kendrick Lamar reveal their vulnerability, confusion, or grief, queer performers are flaunting radical forms of gender expression.<sup>30</sup>

Miles White identifies in African American folkloric traditions two counter-hegemonic figures of resistance and subversion. One he calls “the black bad man”, which he describes as “a truly heroic figure in the classic sense of that term, because he seeks the good of those in his community and works toward that even if he is seen by whites as a troublemaker” (65). The second type is “the bad n...”, who “exerts his power by resisting all social and moral control, and tends to be viewed as a threat by other blacks since he acts in his own self-interest even if it hurts his community” (65). If the aggressively virile rapper fits the second category, at least in the eyes of the white and Black middle-class, queer artists rather fit the first one. Of course, for some, they are just vulgar, crude, hypersexual louts, as threatening and repulsive as any other rapper, but the response they get on social networks, in the clubs, or even in the streets, tells a different story. By deploying, like Big Freedia, a tongue-in-cheek “masculinity of assertiveness and strength” (Morris 38) that at the same time embraces make-up, stylish hairdos, warm smiles, and humor, they appeal not only to queers of color, but also to the Black community, from schoolgirls to housewives, and to straight, white people. By referencing ballroom culture and the hardships they have been through, Lauron Kehrer suggests that Black non-binary hip-hop artists “signify that their hardness comes not from heteronormative masculinity but from their experiences of queer community and survival within a homophobic world” (50). For these artists, being masculine means being resilient rather than violent, tolerant rather than mean, welcoming rather than vicious.

Others, like Todrick Hall, opt for a traditional feminine look that they carry with an empowering swagger, disregarding the stigma that comes with it. Such open feminization of the Black man represents a major change. For centuries, the only acceptable social space for effeminate Black men was in the margins, as entertainers, hairdressers, or decorators. The issue of Black crossdressers,

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<sup>30</sup> However, Li suggests a cautious perspective since most Black queer artists promoted by the media and music industry are mostly of the flamboyant and effeminate type, probably for marketing and economic reasons (152).

for instance, whether they were gay or not, used to be extremely sensitive. Asked in 2006 by NPR's Ed Gordon what he thought of the Black male comedians that don a dress to entertain, Todd Boyd, a professor in Critical Studies at the University of California, a Black man himself, stresses the cost for the community in terms, once again, of emasculation:

Perhaps by feminizing the image of black masculinity, some people are made to feel less threatened and more comfortable. Perhaps the cross-dressing black man is a way to neutralize the image of empowered black men that hip-hop culture provides on a regular basis. Perhaps some entertainers will do anything for a laugh and a dollar. I'm sorry. I don't want to see any more black men in dresses. That is dead. There are already too many forces at work in society attempting to emasculate black men as it is. (Boyd)

However, Black men dressed in women's clothes, from RuPaul to Todrick Hall or Lil Nas X, and the occasional straight rapper, no longer get a laugh. Rather, they attract media attention, get imitated and complimented for their flair and panache.

Perhaps the most formidable achievement of contemporary queer dance music is the reconfiguration of "cool" it has achieved. "Cool," another example of "hidden transcript," had for long been the epitome of "true" Black masculinity. Being cool meant dressing, talking, behaving in a way that oozed aggressive hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, pride, and self-esteem. In other words, "cool" was part of the infrapolitics of African American communities, a means to survive, a coping mechanism. Megan Morris insists on the political connotations of the cool pose, "an impenetrable, expressive ideal of black masculinity that is able to unhinge the dominant society rather than contend with the same pursuit of authentic masculinity" (32). She adds that by being cool, "like their jazz predecessors, gangsta rap artists embody and express a masculinity that explicitly rejects reigning constructions of both race and gender," (33) which tend to place the Black man in a subservient, servile position. Todd Thomas concludes that "anything that wasn't masculine, tough, or gangsta became not cool. And it's this chasm that allowed for homophobia to inject itself into the genre." Consequently, if hip-hop was cool, house and techno were not. If rappers were cool, queer artists were not. "Fabulous" maybe, but not cool. In fact, underlines McCune, in African American culture, "the combination of queerness and coolness is incongruous" ("Out in the Club" 302).

However, contemporary queer artists are redefining what it is to be cool. They are reconfiguring the basis for pride, and self-esteem, in terms of gender,

by breaking binaries. In this respect, the prison setting chosen by Lil Nas X for the official music video of the track “INDUSTRY BABY” (2021) is emblematic, since jails have been construed as the realm of the tough, hypermasculine cool gangsta. Duetting with introspective white rapper Jack Harlow, Lil Nas X, in his signature, female-assigned pink-color pants, blends gender-nonconforming sartorial choices with assertive displays of physical strength and Black emancipation. The impact of artists like Lil Nas X, is considerable, explains Damon Percy: “His tour was just like a big gay party [...] I never thought I would see in my lifetime somebody on that level, that successful. I’ve seen so much of this ceiling that we can’t get past because of the phobias, and societal norms...” Not only is Lil Nas X unabashedly gay, he also breaks gender norms in ways that are all the more potent as he embraces some normative aspects of Black masculinity such as body-built muscles. Looking nothing like a woman, he redefines Black masculinity beyond binaries. Takiyah Amin examines these current shifts from a historical perspective: “Black masculinity [...] is always shifting and changing. What we have now is more Black men in the public eye who are willing to question notions of masculinity, and how these have been harmful”.

Queer and butch women are also being given more space in the music scene. Much like the women blues singers of the early twentieth century, rappers like Young M.A. or Syd challenge the heteronormative, misogynistic gender roles of the previous decades by being “hard but also effeminate [...], masculine but not male” claims Lauron Kehrer (65). Explicit lyrics by Young M.A. (“Ooouuu” 2017, with more than 400 million views on YouTube) or Syd (“Fast Car” 2022) bring lesbian sexuality into the mainstream on their own terms, not the male “girl-on-girl” gaze, but the exploration of sexual pleasures from a female perspective.

## Last Words

I have mentioned Barack Obama’s appreciation of Black musicians, including queer ones. In the fast-changing world of Black gender representation, Obama himself has played an important role, embodying a “compelling alternative model of black masculinity” (White 132). “Cool,” confident, and successful, neither aggressively virile, nor effeminate, he unites formerly opposite representations of the gender spectrum, with humor, flair, and determination. The increasing visibility of non-binary Black musicians in the American space is both a sign of, and a catalyst for, the evolution Obama signposted and that Donald Trump’s policies have not been able to halt.

The stunning, unexpected success of the songs, shows, and videos by artists like Lil Nas X, Young M.A., and many others, reveals a growing openness and acceptance among their audience regarding issues of sexuality and gender. Gender binaries are no longer taken for granted. The Black queer spaces these artists are creating may only raise questions, and provide tentative answers, but this alone is an extraordinary achievement.

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# Everybody Needs a Safe Place: An Interview with Damon Percy

CLAUDE CHASTAGNER

*About Damon Percy.* This interview with Damon “Magic” Percy was conducted online on April 21, 2023. Cultural historian, poet, and activist Damon “Magic” Percy is a member of LGBT Detroit and the founder of the Club Heaven Sound System project, an organization partnering with the Detroit Sound Conservancy to restore the club’s sound system. Club Heaven was a legendary Black LGBT after-hours club in Detroit active from 1984 through 1994.

CHASTAGNER. Damon, can you tell us about your involvement in Detroit’s music scene, and in the Detroit Sound Conservancy project? You are a journalist, a writer, and a poet, so what is the connection between writing and preserving the history of Detroit’s music?

PERCY. I went to Wayne State University here in Detroit, Michigan and got my B.A. in journalism. I was an entertainment journalist for a number of years. Then I started working for the legendary gospel group the Clark Sisters and with a buddy, we created the first gospel website and fan club back in 2000. We traveled with them for a decade, I think I stopped in 2012. At the time we were with them, people didn’t understand their impact, but every single group since mimics their runs and patterns. But there is resurgence, it is starting to happen.

I’ve always worked in the community. I was a member of the first House here, the House of Charles, before ballrooms started. Our first balls were in

DAMON “MAGIC” PERCY, cultural historian, poet, and activist is a member of LGBT Detroit, and the founder of Club Heaven Sound System project, an organization partnering with the Detroit Sound Conservancy to restore the club’s sound system.

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1997. It was kind of a fashion house, based on a New York aesthetic, Malcom McLaren woolen knitwear 1992-93 type of presentations. I was around 20, and I always had in mind that people needed to see us and not just go by what stereotypes were presented.

During that time, we didn't have any true safe spaces, centers, or organizations that helped people get along in the black queer community. We were always in survival mode. Consequently, people were not really thinking about preservation, it was just, "OK, something has opened, let's go there." It would get popular, then the owners, who were usually white men, would double the rent. I worked for club 1X in the early 2000s, we were the biggest hip-hop/house club in the Midwest. We would have around 1,000 people every Saturday. But the owners only saw money, they weren't concerned about us. Then, clubs closed, and people didn't open more spaces, and the scene moved into something else... A lot of it has to do with the music. My generation was old-school hip-hop, but we went to dance to house music. As they started playing more hip-hop, nobody came to mentor the younger generation and tell them to create house music spaces so when they get to a certain age, they have somewhere to go. Right now, we only have a couple of places. Our bar, the Woodward, burned down last year. It was the oldest [gay] bar in the State of Michigan. We had been going there for the last two decades, it was a staple of the community. People panicked of course, but the owner was able to purchase another bar, it opened a few weeks ago. But the communal aspect, the place where everybody goes, is gone... When I started going out back in the 1990s, there were places to go every night. The lesbians had their own bars, with their own DJs. Club Heaven was an after-hours place, and I was only 18, so I couldn't go there. They would check your ID, and I was still trying to be a good kid. When I turned 21, I could really go everywhere. We had clubs like Time Square, the Continental, the Famous Door, Club Zipper's on Broadway East, Club Splash... There was somewhere to go every night, that's how everybody stayed in shape! I would be on the dance floor for maybe two or three hours.

CHASTAGNER. What kind of music did they play?

PERCY. It was house music, and a lot of gospel house, with vocals, and then the remixes came out, in the early 1990s, when house music became more mainstream, and on the charts, with Crystal Waters, and CeCe Peniston, and Ten City. House and techno. Mostly house. The rave parties used to have more techno music. Our clubs had more of the black house, the gospel artists, the

tribal beats. Techno had more of a thin sound; house was more “boom boom,” and somebody wailing over the track.

The artists would come to Club Heaven, and play the music there first, the DJ would play a new song by so and so, and the record company would be there, trying to see the response. They would always start a lot of this music here first. Chicago had their own stuff, with Frankie Knuckles, who created the way things sounded in the club. Just imagine, you’re in a room, and in each corner, the speakers are pointing towards you, like a kind of surrounding sound, your eyelashes would be vibrating, your whole body would be pulsing. The sound was loud, but it wouldn’t hurt your ears, it was rather like a huge wall of sound because of all those speakers. Everybody wanted to dance and be in the spotlight. That sound brought people. Madonna used to come here, and Dennis Robin. One weekend, Madonna was on tour, but then she went missing. She was at the club, it was on the news! I told my parents I saw her and a couple of dancers, they were just there, dancing...

CHASTAGNER. Would you say it was easier to dance on house than on techno?

PERCY. Yes, because it’s a different feeling, I can dance to techno as well, but sometimes techno gets very repetitive, it starts to sound like one giant track, and after a while... Whereas with house music, you are always on the 1, on the 3, and all these different layers. You get a drum layer, then you might have some strings, some extra background vocals, and the DJ is mixing something else. With house, you can have a whole *a cappella*, an instrumental track, and mix them. With techno, you can’t really do that, it’s just one thing. But with house, you can take an *a cappella* song and put your own heavy beat on it and make a track. So yes, it is easier.

CHASTAGNER. How did you reconcile your love for house music, gospel, and techno, with hip-hop? Did you get into hip-hop at all?

PERCY. Oh yes, I was always into it. They started playing it in the clubs, more than house music. The generation under me wanted to present an image, this toughness, this whole masculine thing. It shifted around 1996, I remember that because I went to one of the first black Prides, in Washington DC, with my House. We dressed really avant-garde, and at that time, the men had started wearing the hip-hop wear, Timberland boots, baggy clothes and all the



stuff. So, they're looking at us, almost like "oh you're letting people know that we are gay..." and I'm like, "honey, we're two thousand people."

CHASTAGNER. What kind of relationship did you have with the hip-hop community?

PERCY. It was not antagonistic, but in the 90s, it was illegal to be gay, so if you decided to be authentic in those spaces, you were presenting something that others couldn't be or were afraid to be. You're angry because you can't do that, or you haven't gotten to the space where you can do it... I was in my early 20s, in college, I was like "forget it, I'm not gonna be unhappy." But some guys wouldn't deal with you if you didn't look like them or dress like them, if you looked obvious to people, because they thought they would be found out. And in the clubs a lot of them weren't dancing. The hip-hop videos were all on dance, but people would just sit around, and pose.

Today, the equivalent artists are very visible, they are really in-your-face, and I love it! I have a friend who passed away two years ago. He was a tall, slim guy, six feet tall, very androgynous, and did music with some of the soul singers, doing their clothes. The first time I met him, he was wearing boots and a cat suit...! Because he was so himself, you didn't think about it, you just saw him, and it was "oh, that's Mitchy." When people who are not themselves try to do that, you can tell that they're not comfortable. You have to be very comfortable, and very secure, to be in-your-face the way these artists are now.

CHASTAGNER. But at the time you're talking about, were there many black gay people who dared be themselves and in-your-face in that way?

PERCY. No, and it was part of the thing with our House. They brought me out of my shell. Because I was raised in a middle-class home, I went to church and I was a bookworm, so I never thought to wear a crop top, for example. But at the House, they were just saying, "try this on and see how you feel, here's a satin shirt, here are some boots, some shorts." Every Tuesday, it was show night at the Grand Quarters with female impersonators, dancers, and I got to dance behind my gay mother wearing these clothes! But people who see me now, an older professional, they can't put that in their heads! People who knew me at the time, they know I used to be naked a lot!

Had my friend worked on his career more, he would definitely be one of the artists that we see, because he made all his clothes, and he was a singer, and he was like that at the time, he helped me be myself. But don't try to be

us, if you're not there yet. We're here to support you when you're ready to be a little freer, to wear a little sheer shirt or something. This is what creates the division in our community. Some black people, when they see others who are in-your-face, and living out loud like that, want the world to see black people as masculine but when they find out someone who, like them, is gay, then it's a whole issue: "you can't be gay, you don't act gay!", but what is that?

CHASTAGNER. This is precisely what is being debated right now -- Can you be masculine and gay? -- don't you think?

PERCY. Yes, these questions are being debated, and they're being asked because people are starting to see the entire spectrum of the community. You know, for the longest time, we were presented in the media and sometimes even in literature, as either the comic relief, or the hideous and violent transsexuals, the loud gay boys. But if you see someone who looks like Michael B. Jordan, and you find out that he likes men, then you are threatened, because that is someone that you desire. You see, as long as you don't desire me, you don't care what I do. As long as I'm not threatening your sensibility, or what you want, it doesn't matter. And it's not that everybody has to go out and say I'm this, I'm that... Nothing anybody does is anybody's business, how they live, how they exist. There is an entire spectrum, more than just gays, or lesbians... Now, you have polyamorous relationships, you have the leather community, you have all these types of things, TV shows like *Sister Wives* [about a polygamist family], but it's OK if you are straight.

CHASTAGNER. When did things start to change, when did we start seeing different types of TV shows, and artists coming out?

PERCY. The turning point was the early 2000s when a lot of Black filmmakers created great movies, and there was *Paris is Burning*, that really exploded and showed that whole scene. That was the first things I saw. I was 18 or 19, and I went "oh, this is us!" In the 1990s, it was all about acting normal on TV. But in the early 2000s, people started wondering if certain black and hip-hop artists were gay... But as a journalist, for instance, I could not let them know that I was gay...

CHASTAGNER. Why not, what would have happened?

PERCY. I could not have interviewed people, they would have cut me out, because there was the possibility I would run and tell what I saw. When I was at college, I would go to do interviews, I would go to big events, music conferences, and I thought “oh this is it, they are themselves there!” With everybody now recording you every 10 seconds, you can’t pretend anymore. Before, you could. The Internet was just growing so it wasn’t as bad, but now, if they are seeing you with somebody who they might think is... that’s a whole story for a week! Even if you are affectionate with a family member, or somebody who works with you! It is exhausting!

CHASTAGNER. How did you cope with the homophobic lyrics in hip-hop music at the time?

PERCY. You know, when I would hear them, I would just go “oh wow.” I was used to black men talking like that, that’s what it was in the neighborhood. My brother’s friends, that’s how they were, that’s how they spoke. I didn’t take it personally at that time. Now it’s more aggressive, they talk about their personal beliefs, they write songs about how they feel, what they think. But at that time, it was about how the community at large felt. They were not attacking me, they were just saying what other people said. They were not threatening death to me, just saying “I don’t want you sissies around me” or whatever. If you’re threatening death or harm on me, that’s different. It was still wrong, but I did not take that personally. Besides, it wasn’t as often as people make it out to be. I never ever heard LL Cool J or Slick Rick, Big Daddy Kane, De La Soul say a thing... And when N.W.A., or Ice Cube started to allude to it, at that point, it was all about fags, and bitches, and hoes, so it was like everybody was saying it. Now the artists see the power of our community taking them down. Lil Baby, after what he said on stage, hasn’t been able to get any good press. They have to be careful, it is a business.

CHASTAGNER. And what about the Church? Did they give you any support?

PERCY. No... I grew up in the Baptist Church, that’s a staple of the black community, I was never approached, or touched, or groomed by anybody there. I went to Church with my family, was singing in the choir, did all the stuff... It wasn’t until I was actually an adult that I saw that culture. The whole rhetoric, the damnation, always. I’ve been in churches where the entire sermon was about homosexuality, and I thought “why are we spending the hour talking about this?” I’ve had issues with my mother because she’s rooted in

that. She's better now because we've had long talks. My relationship is with the Lord.

CHASTAGNER. Did you ever feel you wanted to reject the Church, and leave it behind you?

PERCY. Oh, I stopped going. I was going regularly and then once I started working for the Clark Sisters, I got burned out, with all the traveling. I didn't feel that I needed to go, and I still really don't. I don't get up on Sundays to listen to these men, you know, because the people who speak aloud are doing the most. You point your finger at me, but I can guarantee you somebody in this community has been approached by you or involved with you a certain way. That was always my fear, that if I did something with someone in the Church, then they would get in the pulpit and blame me... I've seen that happen, I've seen them get up and blame people.

CHASTAGNER. Did they actually tell names?

PERCY. Yeah, sometimes they do that because it takes it off from them. They say, "the devil got a hold on me and put this spirit on me and brought this person to our church to make me do blah blah blah, and he is sitting right there..." and you don't know if somebody is going to kill themselves after that. They think that homosexuality is the only sin, I just don't understand that. You look at the Scriptures, and if you look closely, there are 40 or 50 other things listed that should not be done. And I believe that the black Church, and not just the Catholic Church, is covering up their sins quicker than anybody, and better than anybody. Because it is always about sexuality. When a pastor gets a congregant pregnant, they blame her, "she seduced him," "she is fast," you know... The black Church will pimp you out for your musical ability, your talents, all of that stuff, and toss you away. You see so many musicians who passed on, who have created sounds for the Church, and they don't honor they legacies.

CHASTAGNER. Did you have different sets of friends, some from Church, and others to go out with, to clubs, etc., or was it overlapping to some extent?

PERCY. It started to overlap when I was 24. I had a friend who was a musician, and I introduced him to all of this music, because I love all types of music. And he was just finding himself. I would take him out, and we are still

like family, after 28 years now... And the others were aware of who we were, but there wasn't ever a conversation, because it did not have to be. It was like "OK, this is Damon," and I think this is what people miss, when they find out about your sexuality, they make it all about sex. You know what I mean? My best friend and I, we used to go to church together and then we stopped. I didn't tell my mother, she's like "you go to church?" and I go "hm hm..."

CHASTAGNER. What about the other communities in Detroit? Is there, for instance, a large Latinx community? Did they play a role in the development of house music?

PERCY. Yes, Southwest Detroit is the Latinx community, one of the biggest in the nation.

CHASTAGNER. Do you mix with them?

PERCY. Yes, I go to their part of town, and one of the white gay bars would have a Latin night, for them to come. We have the largest Caribbean population in the United States, and Dearborn, Michigan has the largest Muslim population... when the 9/11 towers were blown up, two of the gentlemen came here to hide with their families. We also have a large Polish population, in Hamtramck, Michigan, which is connected to the city. It is actually where the new gay bar is. We have everybody, in different parts, but the way Detroit is, you can get to any part of the city in less in 30 minutes. In Detroit, everybody works together.

CHASTAGNER. What kind of music is being played today in these clubs. Is it still house and techno?

PERCY. Detroit being one of the leaders, we have clubs that play house music all week, every night if you want to go dancing. We have so many DJs here, like Stacey Hale. All these legendary people are getting these spots ... There are places where they have days when they play house music only, for my age group, the house music we played in the 1990s up to 2000. The younger generation, they hate it! They like house now because of *Renaissance* [Beyoncé's 2022 album]; before, they would say "uncle (they call me uncle), how can you dance on that?," but as soon as that album came out... and that's why I say that album is a love letter to the black gay community. When I first heard the beat, I thought "this shows me love." What she said [about her gay

uncle and the queer community at the 2023 Grammy Award ceremony] is very impactful, she said it on the biggest stage in the known world, in the whole world, not just during an interview that we share. And I went “wow!” because in terms of visibility, the black artists, and black queer people, always are forgotten. And it’s up to the people who are left to keep their legacies alive. [Many] artists who are still around ... got stolen. Kevin Aviance, a legend in the community, says that he’s back touring because of her, they got contacted, and given this check...

CHASTAGNER. How does it work? Beyoncé makes a statement, she acknowledges and thanks the queer community, but then, concretely, how are all these people impacted?

PERCY. It brings awareness to the community that she’s speaking of. When people write about the artists that she’s worked with, they go research them, they go listen to the music that she used, and generally it takes you down a rabbit hole... If you go to listen to two or three songs, if you go to YouTube, Spotify, or Pandora, you get a list of 20 or 30 songs ... She’s the biggest star on the planet, practically, so anything she says... If she takes the time to honor her uncle whom she watched fight, during my generation, and if kids see that, it sets examples. She’s always had those elements in her videos and music. The “Get Me Bodied” video shows two trans girls dancing with her dancers, and it’s little things like that that the community sees, and they think “wait a minute, that’s one of the girls! They’re doing the voguing like you!” So much stuff is secret in the community, that when it’s out, you wonder “OK, is it being stolen, or appropriated, or is it being respected and honored?” She’s honoring these people by paying them. Ts Madison said she would never work again with Beyoncé if she did not want to, but she got that check, and she thought “wait a minute... this is Beyoncé’s check,” you know what I mean?

It impacts the people because they have to acknowledge that what she is saying is true. It opens doors, because people say, “if these people were doing this back then, let’s see what these people are doing now.”

Somebody like Lil Nas X, when he switched and came out, people went “wow!” because he just did it, he just put a post out... At first, I just thought “oh, good for him” then I thought “damn, he didn’t care.” And his tour was just like a big gay party. He opened here in Detroit first, and it was spectacular because I never thought that I would see in my lifetime somebody on that level, that successful. I’ve seen this ceiling that we can’t get past because of the phobias, and societal norms, and the industry saying you have to be this

way or that to be successful. The best example of that is Billy Porter. I heard his first album in 1997, that's how I was introduced to him. And I followed his career, and the series *Pose* [in which Billy Porter plays] really shifted everything. I tell everybody, if you ever want to know how I grew up in this community, watch *Pose*. Damon – it was me. I cried every week, because like I said, I grew up in a House and Blanca, my gay mother, is a Florida diva. She's one of the top impersonators in this country, and she works for the M.A.C. Cosmetics complex, they moved her from here to there to do that. We've had a relationship for 31 years, since I was 20 or 19. Even the part that hurts in *Pose*, like when Pray Tell's family turns on him, is the kind of things that happened all the time, and that's why it was so real. And that opened up how people saw us. It's authentic. If you don't want to like it, you don't have to like it, but you need to respect it.

And then a white artist may be trying to create the same moment, but you can't because it's not authentic. You can create the same beat, the same costume, the same type of video, but it doesn't work, because it doesn't come from the same place. You are just trying to capitalize on something. You may take the language, you may take all the dancers and all the moves, but you don't honor them. You may have a stage full of gay dancers, but if they don't matter to you...

CHASTAGNER. I was wondering, if you are in touch with younger people, what do they tell you? Are they more confident, more secure, less frightened than 30 years ago?

PERCY. Absolutely, absolutely. I work here with an agency, LGBT Detroit, and I've been with them since the beginning. It used to be a magazine, and I was the youngest then, they were 9 or 10 years older than me, so these people are my mentors. My gay dad helped me along, but now, I'm the elder. I tell people who are in their 20s and early 30s – these artists, the stuff that you are seeing, it just wasn't possible before. Now you can go to any format in the world and see someone who looks like you... None of that existed 30 years ago, nothing! They are fighting for our rights.

During the Trump era, we had to fight more. I was frightened when he got into office, because I didn't know what was going to happen. I didn't know if it was going to be like a race war, or if they were going to come out and just try to kill us because he told them to. They tried to kidnap my governor and kill her because she's been the biggest supporters for our rights here, she signed so many bills for us to be safe. For instance, I can't be fired at work

anymore if they found out that I'm gay. In fact, I'm out here. But the Trump people don't believe in that. Some younger people understand that they have to keep fighting in the trenches, because now people are back where if you don't fit a masculine standard, then you are gay. I am affectionate with my heterosexual male friends, all the time. Most of us have been friends since we were 13, we went to high school together. They don't care!

CHASTAGNER. Do you think we still need safe places?

PERCY. Yes, we always need safe places. People carry around so much trauma, and they project that on the people who are living authentically, living out. They are angry, they call out all the gay boys, to make us react to them. So, everybody needs safe spaces, because if I'm going to a space, I do not want to think about what could happen. With the Internet, death threats, the most heinous, horrible things... so much of that can actually affect you. It is dangerous. So, you want to go to where you have your own people, you want to go where you are affirmed, and celebrated, not tolerated. You want a space where you can go and be uplifted for who you are.

People are finding themselves younger. I was not out at 14, but these kids, they are out at 13 or 14. When I was their age, I was wondering, "am I really gay, what's going on?" I had my first boyfriend at 15, and we are still friends and we still talk about that. How did we even find each other? My first love. When we went to college, we agreed to pretend. But it did not work for me, it did not last long, I could not. He's a professor now. We met again a couple of years ago, we had not seen each other since high school. We talked about how people all need a safe space, somewhere to go and be with the people that understand them, and recognize them, and see them, and love them. The kids who are coming out now need to see themselves. I was listening to this French artist you mentioned, Kiddy Smile. He is in the House of Mizrahi in Europe. The story is the same all over the world, be seen! To stand authentically, be yourself, is what is going to inspire other people to do it. That's why I do it, that's why I am out, that's why I make sure that the young people who follow me, or are with me as family, see that they don't have to be anybody but themselves.

People need a haven, they need an escape from the world, which is right now a horrible place to be. Here in the States, every day, there is a threat against trans rights, or grooming children. Our biggest fear now is that President Biden is too old to run again. Republicans want to overturn so much stuff... Someone like De Santis, saying "don't come to Florida." They say,



“we are not going to kill you, we won’t harm you,” but if I’m not welcome somewhere, you’re threatening me, you’re telling me not to come. So safe places are needed.

Going back to how I became involved with Detroit Sound Conservancy: Carleton Gholz [the founder of Detroit Sound Conservancy] contacted LGBT Detroit, and the executive director at the time, Curtis Lipscomb, said “you need to contact Magic [Damon Percy].” They needed a face, so basically, I am the face of it, because all the people on the board are straight! And everybody is either much older or younger, so they did not have a reason to be in Club Heaven, they don’t know anything about it. And so, I started speaking about my experiences there: Club Heaven was a safe place. It was a place of liberation, you went there, and you let everything go, the whole week or the whole world go. Throughout the day, when you went to work, you had to pretend, because if you did not present in a certain way, you could be fired, and you also had to deal with the Church, if you went to Church. We have done panels at different house music events, spoken about our experiences, what Heaven meant to us, the DJs, the music. I have been involved with the project for 7 years now.

CHASTAGNER. It must have been a very exciting period, reconnecting with all these people...

PERCY. Indeed, it is, because I never thought that people would want to hear what I had to say, that my story would be that important. I believe that many people want the history of the black gay community to be erased. They want to say that we never existed, that we were never viable, or important, or productive. They want to wipe us out, wipe out our history. People come up to me, and they reconnect, like with the video I made about the project. It is on [YouTube](#), people are sharing it, the younger people, too. And they say to me “oh my God, uncle, this was you back then? You are an icon!” And I say, OK, I guess so... I lived through it, and it is important...

# Whatever Liberation Looks Like, Dance Is One of the Tools: An Interview with Takiyah Nur Amin

CLAUDE CHASTAGNER

*About Takiyah Nur Amin.* This interview was conducted online on Thursday, March 16, 2023. Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin is a dance scholar, an educator, and the founder of Black Girl Brilliance, an organization providing individuals or institutions with strategic assistance and counsel.

CHASTAGNER. Can you tell us more about your organization, Black Girl Brilliance?

AMIN. I started BGB in 2014 to formalize work that I was already doing informally. When I would go to conferences, or other professional development opportunities, or any gathering where I was with graduate students or faculty, people were always asking for help. I love helping people, so whenever I could give any professional advice or support, I did. But I was doing it in bathrooms, and hallways, and parking lots. I started thinking I needed to formalize this in some way, so that people will be able to find me, and get the kind of assistance that they need. Sometimes people need confidential strategy, there are conversations that people don't want to have with their department chair, or their mentor, or someone in their institution. Professionally, the higher you go, the smaller the networks are. People might need help to craft a career, or an exit plan, in a way that's confidential. So I started in 2014 working one-on-one with individual clients. Around 2018, I

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started working with institutions who came to me needing assistance around curriculum development, policy review and professional development for their faculty, consulting on searches, or how to design an effective and appropriate search to fill a new position. I've worked with public universities, small private liberal arts colleges, and a couple of seminaries and divinity schools. I work with individuals and institutions that are looking for confidential strategic solutions around how to make a positive impact in higher education, in addition to my day job.

CHASTAGNER. Does the name of your organization imply that you are working specifically with African American women?

AMIN. What it means is that I bring the full weight of my personal and professional experience to the table to help my clients' problems. I work with clients across race and gender. When I have clients whose needs are beyond the scope of what I do, I will refer them to someone else whom I think might be a better fit, but I do have male clients, white clients, clients of all sorts of background. I like strategy, and I like solving complex problems, and I don't have the kind of personality where everybody needs to know that I did it. Sometimes I will see things my clients have accomplished, or institutions I helped, where I was the invisible hand, and I'm very satisfied with that.

CHASTAGNER. And how does your interest in dance play into this?

AMIN. I started studying dance when I was 3 years old, and it's the thing that I love the most, all of my degrees are in the arts, my undergraduate degree is in dance, my master is in arts administration, my PhD in dance studies. Dance for me is much bigger than thinking about discreet traditions. My area of expertise is 20<sup>th</sup> century American performance. It's important for me to help my students remember that dance is a fundamental human activity. It does not start on stage. Dance happens in our living-room, with our parents, in our bedrooms, when we were young, and in our communities. When we think about dance as a fundamental way human beings communicate ideas, and make sense of the world, it becomes broader, richer, and deeper. Dance comes into the consulting and strategy work that I do because dancers are problem solvers, they are communicators. There may be a particular movement or piece of choreography you want to teach and the best dance teachers I know have at least fifty different ways to teach that one movement, so I think my

orientation to being a problem solver, a quick thinker and a collaborator certainly comes from the experiences that I've had in dance.

CHASTAGNER. You have very strong words to describe the impact of dance when you write "it is resistance," it is "revolutionary acts," can you elaborate on this?

AMIN. As someone living in the States in a Black, racialized body, the kind of violence that we might think about that are aimed at Black lives are always pointed at our very bodies, at our fleshiness, at our materiality. As a descendant of formally enslaved people in this country, I can't help thinking that Black lives have never really been a problem unless they are working on behalf of themselves. When we worked for other people, when our labor was being exploited, whether that labor was physical or sexual or emotional, that was fine. As long as Black people used their bodies in agency to meet others' needs, whether those needs are material or psychological, everything was OK. But the minute we use our bodies to communicate our own experience, to interpret our own reality, to make sense of the world around us in some ways, usually, there are some problems. And in the context of protest, globally, often what people put on the line is their body. If you think about protest as a container for temporary communities, and about the way that gestures and movements, which are the building blocks for dance, show up in that space, then it is easier to see that dance is a part of the resistive technology that talks back to oppressive structures.

CHASTAGNER. Do you see this at work in the BLM protest movement?

AMIN. Sure, it is certainly a part of the broader movement for Black Lives, but more generally of the long freedom struggle that Black people have enacted, not just in the U.S., but in other parts of the world. I remember as a very young child, having parents who were pan-African in their political consciousness, I saw protest on television in Apartheid South-Africa, or parts of the Caribbean that were just then getting their independence from colonial powers. The way people enacted their bodies in those spaces left a big impression on me.

CHASTAGNER. Is there any connection between these issues and the struggle of LGBT people?

AMIN. Dance is older than the spoken language, than the written word. The impulse to communicate ideas through our bodies is a fundamental human act. If you look at the current structures of oppression, and the violence that are being pointed against communities not just in the States but globally, they are aimed at the bodies of queer folks. The pushback and resistance coming out of our communities are enacted at the level of the body. People are not just writing words, they are speaking back, they are pushing back. Protest exists at the level of our fleshy materiality. I think whatever liberation looks like, it is going to include a reckoning with our bodies, and dance, I think, is one of the tools. We have yet to meet a culture on the planet that does not have dance. It cuts across human experience, but many of us have not been taught or invited to think about it seriously.

CHASTAGNER. Have you been able to observe recent changes on these issues?

AMIN. I think the change that is resonating with me most in this moment is that increasingly young people (but I think this cuts across age) are less willing to collude with and make nice with structures of oppression. There are more sophisticated analyses around about what patriarchy means for all of us across gender, about the negative impact of capitalism regardless of where you sit in your relationship to that system. I am seeing people being less interested in colluding with those systems or making those who do more comfortable. People are sort of giving a big “screw you” to the systems in big and small ways, with dance or with what is closest to the body, the way people are choosing to dress or not dress. In the workplace, workers demand work/life balance and a living wage in ways that they hadn’t before. There is a shift in the socio-political zeitgeist, we have more agency than we think.

CHASTAGNER. What form does this negotiation take?

AMIN. I think people are less accommodationist, they speak in a way that is relevant to their culture and other people have to learn that, pushing back against professional norms whether about hair or clothes, requiring hybrid work agreement so that you can prioritize work/life balance. These things might seem small but they’re not because they’re helping to erode these totalizing systems that tell us our only value is what we give to the State. We’re seeing new business models tied to community and collaboration. We are also seeing an emphasis coming out of activist and artistic communities

around mutual aid which is essentially asking: “how do we get our needs met without everything being about money? If you have a big pot and a frying pan and I need it, can we borrow it, can we share, can we take care of each other’s needs?”. The only way to have mutual aid and sharing is to be in touch with your own community, not be afraid of each other.

CHASTAGNER. And when would you say was the starting point of this shift?

AMIN. It is not just one thing. The Obama presidency, for a lot of people, was a thing they never thought they would see. As a child, the idea of ever having a black president was sort of a punchline, it was a joke. A president with a name like Barack Hussein Obama in the United States, that was anathema to some people. And he had a second term! So certainly, the Obama presidency was impactful. It blew the lid off what was possible, and not just for people of African descent, but for lots of people. If this can happen, what else is possible?

I also think that the Black Lives Matter movement and challenges against State violence is a part of the push for freedom that goes back decades in this country. This kind of renewed interest is not just about freedom struggle and organizing but leveraging technologies. The Civil Rights movement knew how to leverage television, which was a new technology at that time, to get folks interested in and aware of the issues that were being faced in the Jim Crow South for example. So much organizing happens today through social media channels. The Obama presidency leveraged Twitter. Now of course it would be weird to try to organize without using Twitter, or TikTok, or WhatsApp, and Signal, and all these other platforms. Social media is borderless, and information can travel quite quickly, which has had a really strong impact on the way people think about organizing, about community, beyond the local.

All those things matter, and I don’t want to suggest that the election of 45 [Donald Trump] didn’t have an impact, it certainly did as a political backlash. But one of the things that gives me hope is the general analysis of that election as backlash. We were moving in a particular direction as a Nation with this black president, the way we were thinking, and dealing, and talking about race; everything wasn’t better, but our socio-political context was certainly different, the discourse was different from what it was under 45, and so holding that hopefulness as well as the backlash allows for a different kind of political analysis around what’s possible. Even with the disruption of Covid, we see people rethinking the nature and structure of their interpersonal relationships, of community and work, thinking differently about co-housing,

sharing resources. So even with all of the loss of life globally, there was still a seed of opportunity there to say, “OK whatever our life was before, it ain’t one we’re going back to,” so how do we begin to envision something else, something new, something deeper and richer that all of us can benefit from?

CHASTAGNER. Is it something that you see not just in the political and social fields, but also in popular culture, movies, dance, or music?

AMIN. Popular culture is interesting right now because there’s just so many more outlets. Now you don’t have to wait to get a contract with whatever major label, you can just put your music on SoundCloud, and produce it yourself. Some very successful HBO series started with a YouTube series. Think about these TikTok movements and trends. TikTok dances have proliferated with other people picking them up, extending them, interpolating them. When I was growing up, they were three major TV networks. Now I can’t keep up with all the streaming services, social media, podcasts... I can go record a podcast on my phone right now in my bedroom and have it up on Apple and Spotify by tomorrow if that’s what I want to do. It is allowing people to think differently about the notion of media. Most people think of themselves as content creators in some ways. I don’t know if the impact of that is entirely positive and I have some critiques (what does that mean in terms of people thinking of themselves as celebrity, that’s another thing); but I think there’s a greater opportunity. All of us can say something and can find an outlet for what we want to produce, if that’s what we want to do. The lid is off. You can make a movie on your iPhone, you can crowdfund, so what’s the problem!

CHASTAGNER. Do you think the same is happening or has happened in terms of expressing sexual preferences and gender?

AMIN. I think that LGBTQ+ people have always been in our communities and have always been in our world, I think the difference now is that our lens is wider and our acknowledgement of these people is broader. I don’t think that there’s more expression now. I think that expressing our realities and possibilities has always been present. I just think our willingness to deal with it as a society is shifting and changing and not always in good ways. There was just recent legislation passed here this week that would impact transgender teens and the kind of healthcare decisions they can make. There are ongoing debates about the presence of trans athletes in schools. There are

bills banning artists who are drag performers which may or may not align with any particular gender identity or sexual preference... That also raises larger questions, for example does that mean we can't do the school play if it is an all-girl school, and the play has boy parts? It raises all kinds of questions about not just sexual identity and historically marginalized communities, but who we believe is in the community, and what we are going to value as culture. Because the lid is off the box, these people exist, we can't pretend that they don't, and they are not going away, they have always been a part of our culture, so how do we live and work in ways that acknowledge and reckon with that reality, in a manner that is humanitarian and life affirming?

CHASTAGNER. Are these changes just a fad, or do they point to something deeper?

AMIN. It is something deep. It reminds me of the 1980s when there was a push in this country around multicultural education, and recognizing Black History Month across the country, and the various cultures that have helped to shape not just American, but global consciousness. People were asking the same question: is it a fad, is it just the flavor of the week? No, these people had always lived in our world and had always contributed to our society, but we haven't brought them enough into our circle of concern to consider them, their contributions, and their full humanity. And to some degree the same thing is happening with the LGBTQ+ communities that have always been an expressive, active part of our society. It is just that our lens hopefully is getting broader and deeper, and we have the possibility of dealing with each other in more equitable ways.

CHASTAGNER. What is the current mood of the people around you?

AMIN. I would say that you can always find pockets of hope. I work in higher education and so generally we can't afford to be cynical because if we are, we can't do the work we are called to do. It's very hard to teach people that they have capacity, that they can learn and grow if you don't really believe in people's capacity to grow and change. So, we have to push past some of that cynicism in order to do the work that we're doing, especially when it comes to educating students across the lifespan. I have a friend who calls me every week to ask if my job is illegal yet, because I work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space and there are several States that are trying to pass bills to make that kind of work illegal and push it out of colleges and universities. Luckily, I



live in a state [Virginia] where none of that has happened and we seem to have a state government that is friendly, at least to some degree, to the work that I and many others do here, but that could change next week. So you definitely feel that tension in the air, the need to institutionalize, to make good things happen as long as we can, for as many as we can. The State that has proposed the most laws against that kind of work is Florida. I have colleagues who are teaching in Florida. When I see what's happening with their State government on the news, that's very real, in terms of what this means for their daily quality of life. I have a colleague who is interviewing for a job in Mississippi in a few weeks, a State that is trying to reinstate some of the deepest segregation laws we have seen in more than 30 years. Legislation is about ideas but it's also about real people. What does this mean for the lives of people whom we know, and love, and care about? I wish that lawmakers would allow themselves the space to think more intimately in that regard.

CHASTAGNER. What about the role played by black institutions like the Church or by Community leaders?

AMIN. I think that more and more people are not leaving religion as such, but they are leaving formal structures of religion. This has been a trend for 5 to 8 years, especially black folks articulating an interest in traditional African religions or other kind of spiritual practices that don't track along the lines of going to a formal structure on Sunday between 8 and noon. And it requires black institutions, that we might have looked at historically as holding a lot of community power, to reckon with the fact that the scope of their power is shifting, that everybody is not necessarily looking to them to set the agenda, that there are smaller activist communities and other spaces that are also articulating an agenda. It's the same for organizations like the Urban League or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that are active and have been active for some time, and much more informal activist communities, some of which are temporary, that come together and work for a particular cause or purpose. You have small virtually unknown groups that are doing excellent work organizing on the ground, and you have larger, perhaps more traditional, structures that are reckoning with their role in this moment. The organizations that have embraced technology earlier are much better off.

CHASTAGNER. Do you think there is too much emphasis on issues dealing with sexuality and gender?

AMIN. I don't think so because all of us are more than just one thing, and all of the identities that we hold come to bear every time we enter the room. Some people ask: are you black first or are you woman first? I've never been black and a woman 30 minutes later. Everything about who I am comes into the room with me every time I come in the room. A lot of young people now grew up in a world where the presence and comfortability around LGBTQ+ people is more normalized. Obama is the first president they remember, that's not an anomaly to them. Queer people are not strange to them in that way. Young people are always looking at the vanguard, always looking at what is on edge, always looking towards the futurity. We have yet, as a society, to really reckon with people who don't fit in our gender binary, who don't present in ways that we are comfortable with, or a language we fully understand. That's still a part of that vanguard. Young people just grew up in a world where their level of comfort is much deeper than the one we had at the same age.

CHASTAGNER. Does this have an impact on the nature of black masculinity, on the negative stereotypes displayed in hip-hop?

AMIN. I think that notions of black masculinity have always been in flux. It just depends on what you're looking at, and whose identities you choose to center in that discussion. Black masculinity is changing as much as any other identity, it is always shifting and changing. What we have now is more black men in the public eye who are willing to question notions of masculinity, and how these have been harmful and tethered to patriarchal models that have been oppressive, and how they are also wanting to push back on that in ways that we haven't seen before artistically, whether that's in film, or dance, or music, or television. But I think that notions of masculinity are always in flux and have never been set in time in the way that we want to think about. Black life is as complicated and nuanced as any other, but depending on the lens you use, it's easy not to see that nuance and that complexity.

CHASTAGNER. Is it something that you deal with in your job with Black Girl Brilliance?

AMIN. I do sometimes when I am talking to department heads, particularly if they run a dance or theater program, and are working on their curriculum. How do they deal with whatever classical notions of canon they might have, and the interest of their students which are often broader, and deeper than even they, themselves, have considered? So yes, all these kinds of questions come

to the fore when we're thinking about what we teach our students. There is no consensus around what foundational knowledge in dance is, or what foundational knowledge in theater is, we don't have that, and in some ways I'm glad, because it allows us to remain dynamic and flexible. But when you're on a campus, you have to make decisions around curriculum, what is going to ground, what you're teaching and sharing, and training students to do. So, these questions come up when I'm dealing with curriculum design.

CHASTAGNER. Do you observe today a different degree of appropriation of black people's creativity?

AMIN. Black life has always been appropriated, because black communities are creative in general. So, people always want to steal our stuff. That's just because black culture is generative and has always been. So, I don't think there's less appropriation. In terms of empowerment, there is so much violence aimed at black lives, both physically and rhetorically, I don't know that we are more empowered than we have been before, but I do think we have more access to information, and in some ways to each other, than we've ever had before, which certainly has an impact on our ability to think, work, and organize. So, if there's a context for more empowerment it is that: our ability to access more information and resources than we have ever had before and our ability to connect with each other without even leaving our own homes. That allows us to think broadly and differently about community.

CHASTAGNER. Is the black community today supported by a greater number of allies?

AMIN. The issue of allyship is complicated. You have more people who want to be allies perhaps, but you know my thought about allyship is: "the stones that are aimed at me are not hitting you." Often I have had the experience with people saying they want to be an ally, with disabled communities, or black communities, or with whatever marginalized group, but the minute that folks in the community to which they say they want to be allies do something or make a decision that makes them feel negatively, they withdraw their support because they disagree with the tactic or don't like the way it makes them feel: "If you're going to make me feel bad about my whiteness, if you're going to make me feel bad about being straight, if you're going to make me feel bad about whatever identity..." So allyship is a very tricky card because it's so easily withdrawn. This is why I say you can't name yourself as an ally, it is the

community that you claim to be with or supporting that can identify you in that way. They are the ones to say whether you are an ally. I want to believe that people have good impulses, I want to believe that it usually comes from a genuine place, that there are communities and people who care about others being oppressed, that it is a human impulse to want to join in that struggle and that fight. The challenge arises when the work of allyship becomes uncomfortable, like bailing people out of jail, or coordinating childcare, or a security protocol, or taking out his trash, or buying milk to wash out teargas. A lot of times what needs to be done is not glamorous, it's not feeding your ego...

CHASTAGNER. Do you see any regional disparities on these issues?

AMIN. I am originally from western New York, so I grew up about 45 minutes away from the Canadian border. But I've moved away, I've lived in different cities, in different kinds of institutions, with people from all over the country, from all over the world and I do think that there are differences, but they are largely about who you live around, who you are in proximity to. There are people in parts of this country who never lived with black people or other people of color in close proximity, so that the time of experience you might have had in a more urban center like New York City or Philadelphia doesn't necessarily show up in the same way, and the political concerns are not the same. You take a State like California which certainly deals with more migrant workers than Ohio, and the way that they think and talk about labor is going to be different. The size of the U.S. can be really daunting to consider because culturally things are different in different parts of the country, in terms of priorities and notions of indigeneity, and community. I'm from Buffalo, New York, which because of the proximity to Canada historically was a major site of the underground railroad. It was a place that people would get to from the South, you could swim across, and walk across, or get a boat across to freedom. That history is very deeply embedded in the culture of my city, in the culture of my community. That's not necessarily the case everywhere. If you go to a place like Texas which is a very large State, you can be driving for three hours and still be in the State of Texas. Part of it has to do with history and who is present in your community, around you, who you think of as community, there are real distinctions depending on where you live in this country.

One of the things that strikes me because I'm in Virginia now, which is certainly considered as part of the Old South, is the media people access.

When I lived in the North East, it was very common for people to read *The New York Times* or *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*, you certainly wanted to read *The New York Times* by lunchtime because your colleagues were going to be talking about what was on the front page at lunch, or you listened to NPR or BBC News. That's not necessarily my reality living in the South, where the emphasis was much less on that kind of intellectual and topical banter, and more about things that are deeply gendered. For example, I'm trying to get a signature on a form at work, but you want me to talk to you about pie recipes, or how your children are doing. All of that kind of chatter is necessary before getting to the business at hand, otherwise you are considered bold, and direct, and rude. Even notions of what is socially acceptable shift depending on where you might be in the country.

My grandparents were Southerners who came to Western New York after World War II because there were jobs, and that was true for a lot of African American service men. My grandfather fought in World War II and when many black men came back to this country, they were lynching black people in their uniforms in the South, so he moved north for work and for safety, that's why we ended up there.

I've had plenty of situations where a student never had a black teacher or professor before and even their notion of what a professor looks like... a professor is supposed to be an old white man with glasses, and is not supposed to be someone who looks, or talks, or sounds like me. It doesn't matter what degrees I have, or what professional experience I have, they have come from the context where you don't answer to black people, who are not to be in positions of authority. That has caused me challenges throughout my career that had nothing to do with whether I was qualified or not.

CHASTAGNER. What do you think young black people need to know right now?

AMIN. History! One of the things that concerns me, and I know this is probably starting to make me sound to young people like a granny, is that in this moment of social media with everything moving so quickly, the only thing that's exciting is the thing happening right now. If it happened three weeks ago, that's already old. I wish that I knew how to communicate more effectively the deep pleasure that comes from learning something, really learning it and being able to look at a scenario or political reality and make sense of it even if it's a difficult reality. There is something very satisfying about that, that I have experienced as a thinker, as an intellectual, as a person

who is hungry about knowledge in the world, and I wish I could translate that hunger and passion to every single person that I come across, and certainly to young people, that enthusiasm to learn more and not to just learn the things that show up on your timeline. I want you to read a book whose author you don't know about, I want you to go see a movie that you don't know anything about, I want you to take the questions that you had five years ago and spend time really getting to the bottom of them. One of the most satisfying things in my life as someone with a doctoral training is that I know how to research well enough that I don't have to wait for other people to answer my questions. That is deeply satisfying, and I wish I could communicate that joy, that satisfaction and that power. That is the thing that I would want young people to know, that there is more value in understanding the world around you and that it is going to require more of you than just talking to your friends or what you heard in a three-minute TikTok video. Go deeper, read more, explore further, don't be so easily satisfied with information that comes to you, don't steer away from the difficult questions and the complicated ideas that are facing you.

CHASTAGNER. Thank you, that's a wonderful conclusion.

# “You Bitches Wouldn’t Get It”: Queer Ludonarrativity in Lil Nas X’s “Late To Da Party (F\*CK BET)”

LAURON J. KEHRER

Released on June 24, 2022, the music video for “Late To Da Party (F\*CK BET)” (featuring YoungBoy Never Broke Again and directed by Gibson Hazard) was part of Lil Nas X’s public pushback against what he viewed as homophobia from Black Entertainment Television (BET), the cable television network that targets Black audiences and hosts the BET Awards that honors primarily Black entertainers. When award nominees were released on June 1 of that year, the rapper expressed his disappointment at receiving “an outstanding zero nominations,” despite having had several hits during the preceding year including “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” and “INDUSTRY BABY” (“Lil Nas X Takes Direct Aim at BET”). Along with the video’s release, Lil Nas X also took to Twitter to criticize the network, suggesting in now deleted tweets that the lack of nominations was an example of homophobia in the music industry, stating “I just feel like black gay ppl have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top mfs [motherfuckers] try to pretend we are invisible” (“Lil Nas X Takes Direct Aim”). The release of the “Late To Da Party” video was an explicit assertion of the rapper’s Black queer resistance.

“Late To Da Party” demonstrates Lil Nas X’s generational pushback against stalwarts of Black mainstream culture and a rejection of the images of Blackness purveyed by BET since its inception in the 1980s. But, like many of his other videos, this criticism is expressed through modes of narrativity that combine generational influences, particularly as they relate to new digital media, and queer modes of critique. Lil Nas X often engages with an assemblage of sounds, words, LAURON J. KEHRER is an Assistant Professor of Musicology and Ethnomusicology at the Irving S. Gilmore School of Music at Western Michigan University. Their research focuses on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in American popular music, especially hip hop. They have published articles in *American Music*, the *Journal of the Society for American Music*, *Popular Music and Society*, and the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. Their first book, *Queer Voices in Hip Hop: Cultures, Communities, and Contemporary Performance* (University of Michigan Press 2022) examines the work of Black queer and trans artists in hip hop. They can be reached at [lauron.kehrer@gmail.com](mailto:lauron.kehrer@gmail.com).

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and images that rely on cartoon and video game-influenced narratives and aesthetics, resulting in a sometimes playful engagement with Black queer sexuality and trolling of homophobic conservatives. This approach reflects a Gen Z application of Tison Pugh's concept of queer ludonarratology in which "queer identities can emerge from the margins of the textual game or of the ludic text into the open" (5). I argue that, with its video game references and structure, "Late To Da Party" illustrates Lil Nas X's use of queer ludonarratology to combat homophobia and industry gatekeeping.

In what follows I discuss Lil Nas X's engagement with online culture, particularly in his process of publicly coming out and his use of social media to push back against homophobia. I then explore the aesthetics of his visual and online materials, which reflect his queer and generational identities. Finally, I offer a close descriptive reading of the "Late To Da Party" video as a queer ludonarrative that illustrates the influences of internet and gaming cultures on the queer Gen Z hip hop artist. I seek to demonstrate how Lil Nas X's engagement with internet, gaming, and television cultures in hip hop reflects the shifting attitudes and aesthetics of a post-Obama generation.

Hip hop has had a long relationship with video games, which is reflected in many different aspects of both cultures. There are songs that reference video games such as DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's "Human Video Game" (1988); songs that sample video game sounds like Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's "Eternal" (1995), which samples a theme from the Sega Genesis game *Eternal Champions* (1993); hip hop-themed games such as the *Def Jam* series (starting with *Def Jam Vendetta* in 2003) and *50 Cent: Bulletproof* (2005); and games with hip hop soundtracks (including the *Grand Theft Auto* series). Lil Nas X contributes to this history of rap and video game association while introducing narrative elements that emphasize queer identity and thereby challenge real or imagined homophobia in hip hop and popular culture more generally.

Theorists have used the term queer of color critique to refer to the ways queer subjects of color call attention to and refuse to abide by heteronormative expectations within their fields. Queer of color critique is also a theoretical subfield of queer studies that seeks to understand this phenomenon through an intersectional framework that interrogates power structures connected to race, gender, sexuality, class, nationhood, and other social formations. As Roderick A. Ferguson, drawing on José Esteban Muñoz, argues:

queer of color critique decodes cultural fields not from a position outside



those fields, but from within them, as those fields account for the queer of color subject's historicity. If the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class constitute social formations within liberal capitalism, then queer of color analysis obtains its genealogy within a variety of locations (Ferguson 4).

Lil Nas X is part of the cultural field of hip hop, which has a history of engaging with video game cultures, but his methods of critique and his aesthetics reflect several genealogies, including a longer lineage of Black queer music-making, as well as internet, television, and gaming media, all of which coalesce in his work in a way that reflects his own generational position. Furthermore, queer of color critique addresses culture “not as the reflection of the social but as an active participant in the constitution of the social world” (Ferguson 2018). Lil Nas X's queer world-making demonstrates this very type of active engagement. “Late To Da Party,” then, can be read as a queer of color critique that utilizes queer ludonarrativity to decode from within hip hop culture and from a specific generational position.

## Digital Media Landscapes and Gen Z Aesthetics

Social and other internet media have been important sources and tools for Lil Nas X's public self-fashioning prior to “Late To Da Party.” Indeed, his earliest successes resulted from his strategic engagement with platforms such as SoundCloud and TikTok (Yglesias). Ole J. Mjos has traced the significance of online platforms such as MySpace and YouTube (and, later, Facebook and Twitter) for musicians since the late-2000s, noting that even artists without strong corporate backing had access to fans through these platforms which therefore became significant tools for marketing and promotion. In addition to giving access to a wide base of users, the global social media environment also provided ways that media could be integrated across platforms—embedding music videos into social media posts or profile pages, for example, as well as cross-linking profiles across various sites helped musicians share their work as well as construct a public identity.

By the mid-2010s, artists had embraced this new digital media environment to promote their work. A striking example is the surprise release and subsequent viral popularity of Beyoncé's first visual album, the self-titled *BEYONCÉ* (2013). As Paula Harper notes, while Beyoncé and her team relied heavily on social

media as “key sites of circulation, discourse, and meaning-making for the album” (61), the project was supported by an exclusive corporate partnership with iTunes, and therefore was “less of a radical departure from industry norms than its surrounding furor made it seem” (75). Mjos points out that, in the early years of digital internet media, commercially mainstream artists such as Beyoncé had more access to corporate collaborations with “major internet portals AOL, MSN, and Yahoo! to promote their music,” but social media platforms such as MySpace “marked the arrival of a marketing tool for these smaller and unsigned bands and often provided a way for them to link with fans” (61). The accessibility of evolving social media has been quickly adapted by “Digital Natives” – people born after 1980 – but for the newest generation of adults, Generation Z (Gen Z, those born after 1996), the world has not existed without social media (Palfrey and Gasser).<sup>1</sup> For artists in this generation, then, the line between social media platforms as marketing tools and as social sites for connection and self-expression is often blurred, and as such musicians in these groups tend to use the platforms differently.

Like his predecessors, Lil Nas X uses social media to market his latest music. Unlike older artists, though, his online engagement is seemingly less driven by corporate collaborations and more an organic evolution from online user into professional musician. This is not to say that his online content is not carefully thought out or curated, but it pushes against ideas of professionalism and respectability that older artists cultivated in their online profiles. Lil Nas X is adept at social media in the way that only a Gen Z digital native could be, and in addition to marketing music, he also uses platforms as a space for playful engagement and political and social critique.

Most notably, Lil Nas X used social media to publicly come out as queer in June 2019. In tweets that gestured toward his earlier work, especially lyrics for his song “C7osure” and artwork for the EP 7, he suggested that he had already been open about his queer sexuality and that his fans had failed to interpret his codes. He has also used social media, in tandem with music videos and other online content, to engage in “trolling.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* added the following definition of “trolling” in its internet context in June 2006: “To post a deliberately erroneous or antagonistic message on a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response.” Whitney Phillips

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<sup>1</sup> “Digital Natives” is a term used by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser to refer to the generations who have always engaged with technology, especially the internet, since they were young.

writes that “trolling can be nasty, outrageous business... that is, in fact, the entire exercise: to disrupt and upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioral tools available” (2). While Phillips’ study, like much of the discourse around trolling, focuses on what she calls “subcultural trolling,” that is largely white male internet users who often engage in racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism, Lil Nas X uses similar methods to push back against this kind of discrimination, instead poking fun of the folks who would perpetuate it. For example, in 2021 the rapper collaborated with MSCHF, a Brooklyn, New York-based art collective to release “Satan Shoes,” 666 pairs of customized Nike Air Max 97s that featured satanic imagery and, supposedly, a drop of human blood in each sole as part of a tie-in with the music video for “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” (“Lil Nas X Satan Shoes Will Be Recalled”). Nike successfully sued MSCHF for trademark infringement, a case that Lil Nas X then parodied in a teaser trailer video for his “INDUSTRY BABY” video a few months later. This integrated approach to parody and social commentary across his media is indicative of his attempts to troll conservatives. Rather than trolling in the traditional sense by posting inflammatory statements in comment sections of social media posts, Lil Nas X trolls through his online videos and other multimedia. In so doing, he engages in a sort of playful approach to digital media, even if the potential consequences for a young Black queer rapper could be seriously detrimental to him personally and to his career.

Music videos have also been an important medium through which Lil Nas X engages with social commentary and queerness. Since his public coming-out, many of his videos have been explicitly queer, a clear shift from the difficult-to-decipher queerness embedded in his earlier work. “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)” and “INDUSTRY BABY,” for example, feature largely linear narratives that unambiguously highlight queer themes and identities. Lil Nas X approaches this digital media landscape through an embodied bricolage indicative of the aesthetic practices of his generation. He pulls from various influences including internet, film, and television medias, drawing particularly on the queer potential or queer counter-readings of this source material.

Among these influences is the long-running Nickelodeon animated show, *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Unlike typical examples of children’s television (both live-action and animated), *SpongeBob* is noteworthy for its refusal to adhere strictly to traditional binary gender roles and expressions and has been lauded for its positive portrayals of gender and sexual variance (Dennis). For example,

Claire Burdfield writes:

SpongeBob powerfully resists the concepts of both biological and social determinism, and is a flexible canvas that possesses the inherent potentiality to perform different gender roles, and drop them at will. As a biologically asexual being (that is, an organism that reproduces asexually and therefore lacks a biological sex), SpongeBob resists categorization or restriction due to biological determinism, but SpongeBob SquarePants highlights, and ultimately critiques, the role social determinism plays in limiting the amount of agency individuals have in expressing their own gender identity (196).

Indeed, this queer potential has also made the show a target for conservative Christian groups, such as James Dobson's *Focus on the Family*, which weaponized *SpongeBob* under the guise of "protecting children" from its so-called "homosexual agenda" (Zingsheim). Dobson referenced the show using homophobic rhetoric in a newsletter to his followers in 2005, during a time when LGBTQ civil rights were becoming a mainstream cultural and legislative issue, particularly around the legal cases of marriage equality and the repeal of "Don't Ask Don't Tell."<sup>2</sup> Lil Nas X was born less than a month before the first episode of *SpongeBob* aired on television on May 1, 1999, and would have been around six years old when the newsletter was published—the target age demographic of the cartoon. As the Pew Research Center has shown, Gen Zers are driving rapidly changing ideas about gender identity, and are much more open to gender expansive language and identities (Parker and Igielnik).<sup>3</sup> Increasing and increasingly diverse media representation of LGBTQ identities both drive and reflect these shifts. As such, it is not surprising that both the inclusive cartoon and the backlash against it would have influenced Lil Nas X from a young age.

In some cases, the aesthetic influences of *SpongeBob* have been apparent and acknowledged by the artist and are largely visual in nature. For example, Lil Nas X confirmed that the cartoon was an influence for his onstage marching band-inspired outfit for the 2021 MTV Video Music Awards and suggested that

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<sup>2</sup> "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the official United States Department of Defense policy from 1994 until 2011 that banned openly LGBTQ people from serving in the military.

<sup>3</sup> While not all Gen Zers are queer or gender expansive, a recent Gallop poll found that about 21% of adults in this generation identify as LGBT, which is almost twice the number as the preceding generation, millennials (Jones). There are, of course, homo- and transphobic Gen Zers, but proportionally there are much fewer than in preceding generations, which is a marked shift.

the show also inspired the cover art for his first full-length album, *Montero* (Frishberg). *SpongeBob* and other contemporary Nickelodeon shows may also have contributed, along with other influences, to Lil Nas X's sense of camp, particularly as a queer mode of expression. Sarah Banet-Weiser notes that the camp style of some children's television programming, especially *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Ren & Stimpy*, and *The Fairly OddParents*, is "a particular kind of consumer strategy" that "harnesses a political ideology – gay identity politics, queer theory – and commodify it as an aesthetic practice" (36-7). Lil Nas X intuitively identifies this connection between cartoon camp aesthetic and queer practice and uses it to fashion a queer hip hop style.

Lil Nas X's camp influences are not just from children's media, however. We can also situate his aesthetic as part of a lineage of another rapper known for her camp approach: Nicki Minaj. Almost a year after coming out as queer, Lil Nas X came out as a "barb," a fan of the female rapper, stating in a Twitter exchange that he had previously denied running a Nicki Minaj fan account when he was younger because he did not want to be perceived as gay, subtly noting the link between queerness and male fandom of female stars. As Uri McMillan has explained, camp has long been avoided as an analytic from which to examine works by Black artists, whether they are queer, but Nicki Minaj's early work resituates camp as a Black female-centered practice. He coins the term "Nicki-aesthetics" to reflect her style:

A form of black performance art that employs an extravagant theatricality and a vivid, intensely hued style. Nicki-aesthetics shares qualities with the sensibility of camp, as outlined in Susan Sontag's 1964 article "Notes on 'Camp,'" yet challenges camp's assumed association with white gay men as well as its reduction of women to objects (rather than subjects) within the camp universe. Nicki-aesthetics realigns blackness and camp as mutually constitutive (rather than oppositional) forms, while reconfiguring camp as a black female-centered practice. (McMillan 79)

Although perhaps no longer aligned with Black women, Lil Nas X's style is reminiscent of many aspects of Nicki-aesthetics, particularly as Black queer camp practice. While his camp influences may stem from several sources, most of those sources were circulating in popular culture during Lil Nas X's formative years, and therefore his expression of Black queer camp reflects his distinct generational position.

All these influences, as well as many more, manifest throughout Lil Nas X's

oeuvre as a particularly Black queer Gen Z aesthetic that pushes against hip hop's heteronormative assumptions. This is apparent in all the interconnected aspects of Lil Nas X's digital presence but is especially clear in many of his music videos, which often center queer narratives and challenge preconceptions about race, gender, and sexuality. For example, the rapper has offered nonbinary or gender non-conforming characters, especially in the video for "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)." In playing each of these characters in a CGI animated video that reimagines biblical storytelling through a decidedly queer lens, Lil Nas X encourages us to think through new "queer forms, queer beings, queer modes of play" as Jack Halberstam has suggested of queer games (188). The use of CGI is particularly apt, because, as Halberstam writes: "CGI changed the face of animation, not simply because we shifted from 2D to 3D – since apparently most spectators do not register this shift when immersed in the film – but because the shift from analog to digital, from linear to fractal, made other stories, relations, and outcomes possible" (188). While these videos are not games, they are playful reimagining of new worlds that expand queer potentialities.

Lil Nas X uses a plethora of generational influences to protest homophobic gatekeeping in the music industry. His aesthetic approach combines a bricolage of available text and media objects and discourses, filtered through a camp sensibility, manifested as a Black queer practice. In addition to drawing on internet and television cultures, he also draws on aesthetics and narrative practices of video games, another ubiquitous media of the digital age. "Late To Da Party (F\*CK BET)" is an explicitly clear example of this approach and is best understood through the lens of queer ludonarratology.

### "Late To Da Party" as Queer Ludonarrative Text

As Tison Pugh writes, "Many narratives feature games, many games feature narratives, and ludonarratology, a hybrid hermeneutic, asks readers and players alike to ponder their multiple points of intersection and shared structure, as well as the variety of meanings that inevitably arise in the generative space between form and content" (1-2). Ludonarratology, as a frame for analysis, "refers to the theories and structures of gaming narratives and narrative games, those constitutive factors (such as discourses, rules, players, and gamemasters) necessary for their status as such" (Pugh 12). While narratives and games often share some themes and structures, such as plots in which a protagonist encounters

some conflict and undergoes a series of trials to emerge as a victor or resolve the conflict, there are key differences between them, particularly involving the role of audience or player. In a game, a player has agency, even if their agency is bound by a set number of available options and rules. An audience or reader of a narrative text cannot engage with the text in the same way, cannot typically manipulate the medium or change outcomes in real time.

Yet, there can be overlap between narrative and ludology; many games rely on narratives and often narratives incorporate some games.<sup>4</sup> In the new digital media landscape, this is a particularly fruitful space for analysis because it accounts for the ways in which “story lines unfold and are adapted across a wide range of forms (including literature, drama, film, television, video games, board games, graphic novels, among others) and which is characterized by remediation, convergence, intermediality, transmediality, paratextuality, and story worlds (or world making)” (Pugh 40). In this case, the queer potential of the media, through both the overlap of narrative and ludology and the referential use of multiple types of media, is heightened. Pugh writes:

Ludology and narratology, in effect, potentially queer each other, exposing their respective blind spots in overlooking characters and players, desires and identities, neglected by ideological regimes. Similarly, queerness and its subversive effects are better understood through the illuminating disruptions of ludic narrativity, with gaming narratives and narrative games creating fissures of form that call into question long-standing presumption of their cultural meaning. Queer experiences, those untethered to normative codes of desire and gendered identity, flourish when the rules of a game and the structures of a narrative simultaneously shift and merge (2).

In other words, a queer ludonarrative approach that disrupts expectations of normative narrative and gaming practices has the potential to queer both through “disruptions of ideological normativity,” allowing “unexpected, unsanctioned, and otherwise marginalized genders, sexualities, and identities to surface” (Pugh 44). Queer ludonarratology, then, through either gaming narratives or narratives in

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<sup>4</sup> For example, even the most recent *Legend of Zelda* games for the Nintendo Switch platform (*Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom*), which are notable for being open-world games that players can freely explore, incorporate narratives that unfold as the player progresses and unlocks cutscenes, which are unplayable videos that serve to advance the narrative. Similarly, often narrative media such as film or television involves games, such as the 2020 miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*, which centers on a chess champion protagonist.

games, is a framework for understanding how ludonarrative approaches can create new possibilities for queer structures, queer stories, and queer representation.

The video for “Late To Da Party” does this work by augmenting the song with a video game narrative, which is also a queer ludonarrative, to depict a story of the rapper’s journey to and conquest of the BET Award show. In this depiction, Lil Nas X plays both the protagonist of the game and the gamemaster (the person who organizes and moderates the game, controls the narrative, and who often sets the rules of play), as the video alternates between images of the rapper at the computer and compiling materials for his video game, and as he goes through the trials and ultimately performs in the final stage. Throughout, we see him both succeeding in the narrative and reconstructing the narrative to ensure and highlight his own successes. As in his previous work in which he actively constructs new, queer worlds, Lil Nas X uses this video to show both his acumen in the game and to reconfigure the game altogether. In what follows I will examine the video as a queer ludonarrative text.

The video opens with images of the cover artwork for the single, which features a BET Award statue in a toilet being urinated on, actively being photoshopped together while the lines “Fuck BET” repeat over a beat.<sup>5</sup> The camera angle then pulls away from the computer screen where this work is being done to reveal a bespectacled Lil Nas X in a dark studio intensely at work at the computer piecing together these images and video. His hands move with blurred quickness, and he is absorbed in the project, finally lifting a foot ensconced in a platform boot to aid in hitting the keyboard, right on beat.

We are again immersed in the video game taking shape on the computer, where background images flash by to remind us of Lil Nas X’s previous work, including stills from previous videos such as “INDUSTRY BABY.” Many of these images display the Shutterstock watermark, suggesting that this project is not only do-it-yourself (DIY) but also potentially low budget. The process of constructing the game is as evident here as the game itself. As these images flash by in turn, Lil Nas X raps in the first verse both sexually suggestive and braggadocio lines, such as “look at how I top shit” (a queer double-entendre), and “I just put like three in the top ten” (referencing the three top ten hit singles he had in the previous year). At the height of this success he traces in verse, the

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<sup>5</sup> This imagery, which is also the cover art for the single, is a reference to rapper Ye (formerly known as Kanye West) posting a video of himself urinating on a Grammy statuette on Twitter in 2020.



rapper is shown getting into a photoshopped private jet, where he greets two pilots (played by Denzel Baptiste and David Biral, also known collectively as the duo Take a Daytrip, who produced the track) and revels in affluence as he raps about making a profit and wearing luxury (Chanel) brands, status items and evidence of his previous conquests.

In the next section the perspective alternates between that of Lil Nas X the protagonist on his private jet and Lil Nas X the gamemaster constructing the video(game) from his studio. With an effete gesture to remind us of his queer inclinations, protagonist Lil Nas X jumps out of the plane and falls in the direction of an inserted house emoji crudely labeled “YB’s House,” the location of the collaborator on the track, YoungBoy Never Broke Again, or NBA YoungBoy. With the click of gamemaster Lil Nas X’s keyboard, he lands first in a blue sports car, as he races past intentionally fake scenery and raps the hook, “Don’t try me / You better save that shit for somebody else / Don’t try me / ‘Cause bitch I can’t be late to the party.” These lines are a direct address to BET and any other detractors warning them not to stand in his way to success, which he is rapidly approaching (as illustrated by his position behind the wheel of a powerfully fast sports car). As the blue sports car arrives at the house, protagonist Lil Nas X pulls up and runs up the steps to knock on the front door.

The knock is echoed in the gamemaster Lil Nas X’s reality, as the video pulls away again to the studio and Lil Nas X looks away from the computer screen in the direction of a doorbell ringing. The instrumental shifts, as “Late To Da Party” stops and instead we hear diegetic music in the form of “Down Souf Hoes,” an unreleased track Lil Nas X recorded with another queer rapper, Saucy Santana. Gamemaster Lil Nas X gets up from his workstation and the scene cuts to him opening the front door of his house, where he finds a package on his doorstep. The package is a giant USB flash drive that has a blurry label from which we can make out “YB FOOTAGE.” When Lil Nas X picks up the package, it triggers a sound that in a video game would suggest a character has discovered a treasure or a tool that will be useful in their quest. The label on top of the package states “To: Nas From: YB.”

Lil Nas X takes the giant flash drive back to the studio and plugs it into the computer, and an icon appears on the computer’s desktop. When gamemaster Lil Nas X clicks the icon, “Late To Da Party” resumes as the audience is again engrossed in the computer screen, this time in a scene that looks like a video game in which a man wielding a samurai sword is attacking a woman. The camera pulls

away and we see the game on screen is being played by YoungBoy himself, who is rapping his feature while playing this game from a room in his own house. The video game aspects of the video are especially apparent in this sequence, as Lil Nas X uses the item that he found to advance his quest, and we see YoungBoy as both character in a separate game (a game within the game) and as the player within Lil Nas X's game that controls that character. He never has gamemaster status, though, a point to which I will return.

The music video continues to shift between meta layers of game and video, and we see YoungBoy as if he is now in the computer screen — this is the footage that gamemaster Lil Nas X, along with Baptiste and Biral of Take a Daytrip, are going over in the studio and piecing together into the larger work. Lil Nas X hits a button on the keyboard and places the protagonist version of himself into the footage as the pre-chorus returns with him performing it. Interspersed with shifts back to the studio/gamemaster Lil Nas X, we see YoungBoy and Lil Nas X together as the scene behind them shuffles to show stock images of various rooms with their Shutterstock and Getty Images watermarks intact. Protagonist and gamemaster Lil Nas X share the third verse, in which he raps, “Hmm, get, window double tinted/ Face is sitting pretty, you bitches wouldn't get it / I'm at Met Gala in Versace and it's fitted, uh/ farted on these niggas, oops, I think I shitted.” Here the typical rap boasts about materiality (fancy cars, designer clothes) are amended with nods to Lil Nas X's queer expressions and weaponized against his detractors. For example, “face is sitting pretty” combines “sitting pretty,” a reference to the rapper's comfortable financial position, with “giving face” or “serving face,” a reference to Black and Latinx queer subcultures such as Ballroom and drag cultures, that means looking beautiful and relates to the Ballroom competition category of Face, in which participants compete for the best physical facial features. The reference would go unnoticed by listeners not familiar with this queer of color subculture—those “bitches” wouldn't get it. The following line references his three custom-designed looks by the Italian fashion house, who described the outfits as telling a “three-part LGBTQ+ American fairytale”:

[Lil Nas X] arrived on the red carpet in a dramatic cape that exudes regality and represents concealing one's true self. The cape was then shed to reveal gleaming Medusa-adorned armor, a symbol of protection from the prejudices faced as a Black, queer person. Finally, the armor is removed to reveal a skin-tight bodysuit that represents living life as your

true, unguarded self (Versace).

The reference here exudes not only fashion and luxury, but also the intentional queer undertones of the outfits. In the final line of the verse, however, Lil Nas X interrupts this vision of *haute couture* with imagery of desecration and domination: “shitting on,” or dominating, his enemies. These lines encapsulate his assertiveness about identifying as queer, but also his irreverence, particularly toward institutions such as BET.

Gamemaster Lil Nas X manipulates the footage so that protagonist Lil Nas X is again driving his blue sports car with YoungBoy in the passenger seat as they race with alternating desert and city landscapes passing them by. They arrive at nightfall to a city with a hand drawn rendition of the BET Awards logo indicating to viewers that they have reached their destination, the final stage (both in the sense of performance and of video game narrative, in which the final stage often requires a fight to vanquish the final boss, or bad guy) of this odyssey. Gamemaster Lil Nas X puts protagonist Lil Nas X on the stage of the BET awards with a rainbow flag draped over him like a cape as he repeats the opening and closing lines, “Fuck BET.” Television monitors around the stage multiple his image as he holds stacks of cash, throws some of that cash at the audience, and holds the stacks up to his ear like a phone. Lil Nas X thus conquers BET, the final boss, by performing on its biggest stage in his gayest apparel while enjoying the financial rewards of commercial success.

YoungBoy’s presence in this video might seem like an odd choice for a queer narrative. The rapper is known as much for his music as he is for his family life: at just twenty-four years old he is the father to eleven children with multiple women. He has collaborated in the past with Boosie Badazz (formerly known as Lil Boosie), a fellow Baton Rouge native who is known for homophobic comments, including those he made against Lil Nas X in 2021. Even his verses in this song emphasize heterosexual couplings (“He want X’, I’m liking his sister,” he raps). However, YoungBoy’s role on “Late to Da Party” is to act as sidekick to the queer rapper. Indeed, Lil Nas X is always in control. For example, as the end credits of the video play, we see YoungBoy parachuting into his house, nonchalant, placed in just the right spot by an unseen gamemaster Lil Nas X as indicated by the audible clicking of his mouse. Gamemaster Lil Nas X puts the featured artist back where his protagonist found him, safe and sound at the end of the adventure. In this video, it is the queer artist who manipulates and controls the heterosexual one. The seemingly unlikely collaboration further breaks down

divisions in hip hop between heterosexual, hard living rappers and their queer counterparts, another (false) binary that Lil Nas X shatters through this ludonarrative.

Although this is a music video, the reliance on a gaming narrative necessitates an analytical framework that considers “Late To Da Party” as a queer game. In the introduction to their volume *Queer Game Studies*, Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg note that “Games in all of their manifestations are a powerful place to imagine a queer utopia, not simply imagining a better world but by giving players/makers/scholars the tools for enacting new and better worlds” (xi). Edmond Y. Chang further notes that queer gaming specifically is “heterogeneity of play, imagining different, even radical game narratives, interfaces, avatars, mechanics, soundscapes, programming, platforms, playerships, and communities” (15). While “Late To Da Party” might not depict a queer utopia per se, it is an example of queer gaming because it uses the framework of a game to reimagine a series of events in which a queer protagonist not only wins the game but rewrites the game itself.

As he told *Rolling Stone*, Lil Nas X’s criticisms of BET did not begin with the 2022 award nominations (Millman). The rapper and his associates relayed that their tense relationship began during the previous year’s award ceremony, when he performed his hit song “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name).” They noted that before they were approved to do the performance, they had to confirm to the network that the rapper was not a “satanist or devil worshiper” (Millman). To ease concerns, Lil Nas X’s performance took on an ancient Egyptian theme rather than the biblical setting of the music video, but the network was reportedly upset when the gay rapper kissed one of his male backup dancers at the end of the song (Millman). The rapper since has repeatedly critiqued the network for what he perceives as homophobia, which he further claimed resulted in his being shut out of the 2022 award nominations. “Late To Da Party” was an additional and decidedly non-respectable critique of the network’s respectability politics that tend to exclude queerness.

In the video for “Late To Da Party,” Lil Nas X portrays himself as both the game’s protagonist and the gamemaster, situating himself as both victor and the ultimate authority who controls what happens in this game world. As Pugh notes, “It is the gamemaster, the ludonarrative fabricator, who wields supreme authority in creating the ludic event yet who, in most instances, stands removed from its play” (130). Gamemaster Lil Nas X controls the world, recreates the journey up to

the BET Awards as one that can be successfully “won” or conquered by a queer protagonist. Here, however, the gamemaster, or a version of the gamemaster is no longer removed but is the key player, in collaboration with the featured artist. Rather than being shut out of the awards, the game is to get to the awards show stage, where his conquest is his performance. In using BET’s name in the title and throughout the song and video, Lil Nas X takes an antagonistic approach that moves beyond satire and firmly into the realm of online trolling. “Late To Da Party” uses queer ludonarrative logics as a form of resistance against homophobic gatekeeping and respectability politics that police Black queer performers and performances.

### Conclusion: Queer Ludonarrativity as Gen Z Resistance

Queer ludonarratology provides a useful lens for examining ways Lil Nas X, as a Gen Z rapper, combines various aesthetic influences in the digital media landscape to imagine new Black queer possibilities in hip hop. Halberstam notes that queers often “hack” digital worlds to make themselves legible: “Queer subjects constantly recode and, within limits, rebuild the worlds they enter. Since the world as we know it was not designed for queer subjects, then queer subjects have to hack straight narratives and insert their own algorithms for time, space, life, and desire” (187). In “Late To Da Party,” Lil Nas X pulls back the curtain to show, through fictional narrative, how he rebuilds worlds that might resist acknowledging Black queer excellence. By playing both gamemaster and protagonist, Lil Nas X builds his own game world to set himself up for victory within it.

Gen Z has been heavily influenced by internet cultures as well as Black queer cultures, and those influences are evidenced in Lil Nas X’s music videos. Additionally, Gen Z approaches to gender and sexuality, which are in many ways more inclusive of fluidity and expansiveness than previous generations, are also reflected in his work. “Late To Da Party” features much of the rap braggadocio and self-assertion of previous generations of rappers, but it also reflects Lil Nas X’s desire for institutions to break out of outdated, binary modes of thinking. The queer ludonarrative approach of this and his other music videos synthesizes internet and gaming culture aesthetics, hip hop traditions, and Black queer expressions into a form of queer of color critique. While “Late To Da Party” illustrates Lil Nas X’s use of queer ludonarratology to combat homophobia and

industry gatekeeping, the rapper's broader engagements with internet, gaming, and television cultures in hip hop reflects the shifting attitudes and aesthetics of his generation.

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# From Shadows to Spotlight: Exploring Black Queer Aesthetics and Politics in the Works of Lil Nas X and Danez Smith

GLENN SMITH AND MATHIEU PERROT

“I am informed by who I was at 16 and am no longer that bitch—I was a straight football player. Look how far I’ve come! You see these heels?” (Danez Smith, qtd. In Wilbekin)

In a photo shoot that stands in contrast to one conducted for *T Magazine* four years earlier and which featured a group of Black male writers clad in suits, the more recent project, overseen by Shikeith and styled by Ian Bradley, welcomed a varied representation of Black masculinity. It offered a platform for artists “who embodied more effeminate traits or who blurred the lines in [their] depiction of Black masculinities” to wear dresses and unconventional attire—a choice described as “marvelous” by the award-winning poet Danez Smith during a 2022 interview with Emil Wilbekin.

And yet, for a long time, self-loathing cast a shadow over the realization of self-love and acceptance, as captured vividly by the poet in “i didn’t like you when i met you:”

i didn’t know when i thought, i don’t like that hoe, it was just

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my reflection i couldn't stand. i saw it. the way you would break me  
 into a better me. i ran from it. like any child, i saw my medicine  
 & it looked so sharp, so exact, a blade fit to the curve of my name.  
 what a shame. i was slow to you.

The repetition of the word “saw” echoes and reinforces the words “know” and “hoe,” creating a persistent and negative perception of oneself through the association of visual observation with the derogatory term. Moreover, the word “saw” possesses a dual nature, functioning as both a verb (to see) and a noun (a saw), thus amalgamating the action of observation with the reflection itself. This ambiguity suggests that the act of observing oneself is akin to simultaneously “saw-ing” (in) the self, metaphorically cutting the poet’s identity in two. This poem resonates with Marlon Riggs’s 1989 documentary, *Tongues Untied*, where a Black man is filmed walking on the street of Castro, the gay district of San Francisco. He sees another Black man walking in his direction and they both immediately look away. A voiceover explains that there was a fear and discomfort to look at oneself, being Black in this gay Mecca, where Black was invisible or caricatured.

Danez Smith reveals internal conflicts caused by societal constructs in this poem. Meanwhile, Montero Lamar Hill, better known as the performer Lil Nas X, deals with external tensions in tweets that echo similar sentiments:

y'all hate yourselves so much. Y'all live your lives trying your best to appease straight ppl. Y'all are uncomfortable with what I do because y'all are afraid they will be uncomfortable with you. work on yourselves, I love who I am and whatever I decide to do. Get there. (29 June 2021, 12:48 a.m.)

You're right I am insecure about my sexuality. I still have a long way to go. I've never denied that. When you're conditioned by society to hate yourself your entire life it takes a lot of unlearning. Which is exactly why I do what I do. (29 June 2021, 2:23 a.m.)

These revelations show the deeply rooted societal conditioning that has historically marginalized Black and queer individuals. To fully understand the significance of such a confession, one must examine the enduring cultural narratives that shape it. The hip-hop industry has long been a platform where artists address societal issues, challenge stereotypes, and express personal narratives. Yet, the representation of queer identities within this genre often encounters backlash, revealing the deeply entrenched prejudices that persist. Lil

Nas X's rise to prominence not only signifies a new era of openly queer artists in hip-hop but also underscores the double standards that exist in the industry's reception of queer narratives. Lil Nas X's candid tweet highlights this stark dichotomy. After releasing a series of sexually expressive videos and lyrics, he was met with criticism that his straight counterparts seldom face:

y'all be silent as hell when niggas<sup>1</sup> dedicate their entire music catalogue to rapping about sleeping with multiple women. But when I do anything remotely sexual I'm 'being sexually irresponsible' & 'causing more men to die from aids' y'all hate gay ppl and don't hide it. (25 July 2021, 11:10am)

This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the intricate intersections of Black and queer identities, illuminating the challenges posed by societal labels, faith-based criticisms, and solitude. Danez Smith's and Lil Nas X's artistry not only challenges societal norms but also stands as a testament to resilience and self-affirmation in the face of systemic oppression.

### Beyond Labels: Intersectionality and the Quest for Visibility in the Black Queer Community

"I am informed by who I was at 16 and am no longer that bitch—I was a straight football player. Look how far I've come! You see these heels?" (Danez Smith, qtd. In Wilbekin)

The Black gay journalist and writer Emil Wilbekin gathered a group of Black queer artists in 2022 to talk about what it feels like to be a young, queer artist of color today, and what it means to live in "an era when one's own identity can feel so easily marketed, consumed, erased and, much like [Marlon] Riggs's art, legislated against" (Wilbekin). During the interview, conceptual and visual artist Adam Pendleton pointed out the paradox of being adjectivized as Black and queer:

To announce ourselves to the world as Black and queer is also a problem. And I think it's important to acknowledge that and to articulate why it's a problem, because what, of course, will happen is: "Oh, look at them," you

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we will use the iterations of the n-word, b-word, f-word, and other derogatory terms in direct quotes of song lyrics, tweets, and interviews only to preserve the words of quoted persons.

know? And the “them” is the problem, because how can you really see what one person does, what one person contributes, when it’s a collective? Actor Ato Blankson-Wood agrees: “We all get the same headline: ‘This Black [Gay Man] Is Challenging Black Masculinity.’ [...] We’re making so many different kinds of things and we just get boxed in, and it’s so frustrating” (Wilbekin). The labeling of Black and queer artists targets an audience that neither sees nor understands them, contrasting with the artists’ true desire to connect with those who relate with their work on a visceral level.

Building on the conversation, Danez Smith emphasized a “lack of nourishment” in the Black queer community, referring to a lack of connection and visibility. For Smith, the risk of disappearing as an individual does not come from the community in which one strives, but rather from “the stagnant nature of these identity markers,” in other words, in the labeling itself. Indeed, the poet explains: “I don’t want my work to be seen as Black queer objects, unless I’m telling you that’s how to look at it.” Balancing individual identity within larger social constructs requires a careful navigation between not being lost within a universal, color-and-gender-blind ideology, while simultaneously avoiding the erasure of unique identity by overly generalized categorizations of social groups. In the interview, Pendleton asserts, “I don’t want to be Black in abstraction; I want to be abstraction.” The artist envisions a form of equality where labels—whether Black or White, straight or queer—no longer dictate or constrain. To achieve this, championing the distinctiveness of Black queer voices becomes crucial—a form of resistance, where one can embrace ethnic specificities without getting caught up in the idea of a static identity. Stephanie Dunning has also referred to this nuanced stance in the hip-hop world, especially among Black gay artists, as “negotiated nationalism” (Dunning 39).

### Bridging Intersections: HIV and The Quest for Black Queer Visibility

“You are many things within a person. Don’t try to arrange a hierarchy of things that are virtuous in your character and say ‘This is more important than that.’ Realize that both are equally important; they both inform your character” (Marlon Riggs, qtd. by Simmons 190)

Many Black queer artists prioritize their Black identity, both linguistically and symbolically. Danez Smith's reflections on identity, however, provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between various facets of oneself. While recognizing the deep resonance of their Blackness, Smith also emphasizes the significance of their queerness, HIV status, American nationality, and Minnesotan roots. Each dimension, in Smith's perspective, comes with its unique experiences and insights, enriching their overall identity narrative:

Black is the thing that comes to mind that I get the most information from and feel the most possibility inside. But I am also queer, poz, American, Minnesotan, all of these things. When folks think about me in relation to those things, sometimes they have been a wealth, sometimes they have been a target. Sometimes they have been prisons or fields. Sometimes they have been useful. And sometimes I didn't find no use in them. But they were all information that I tried to pull from. (Wilbekin)

Smith's work delves deeply into the effects of HIV on the Black and gay community. They highlight a startling 2016 CDC statistic in their poem "1 in 2," reporting that "1 in 2 black men who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime" (*Don't Call Us* 61). Their writings frequently confront the disease, giving it character through terms like "gay cancer" (*Homie* 60), "queer bacteria" (*Don't Call Us* "strange dowry" 78), "red shadow" ("elegy with pixels & cum (for Javier 'Kid Chocolate' Bravo)" 48) and "the bloodprison" ("recklessly" 41). In "seroconversion," Smith transforms the moment of infection into an allegory, narrating a tale where two young men evolve from humans to mythological beings and, finally, deities – the "god of shovels" and "the god of soil" (*Don't Call Us* 38) – hinting at their inevitable fate. In "all the good dick lives in Brooklyn Park," Danez Smith provides an unapologetic glimpse into the linguistic codes, behaviors, and stereotypes prevalent within the Black queer community. The poem confronts societal stereotypes head-on:

when i roll up on dude house & ain't seen  
no grocery store in miles & there's  
a liquor store next to a liquor store next to  
a little caesars i know the dick gon be bomb  
there's a stereotype there – mandingo myth  
slave quarter bathhouse, animal animal  
experiencing need & so down for whatever. (*Homie* 54)

Danez Smith's poem delves into the impact of the "mandingo" stereotype, purportedly derived from the Mandinka tribe of West Africa, a harmful, yet frequent construct underscoring the hypersexualization of Black men. This is further emphasized by the mention of "slave quarter bathhouses," and the repeated use of "animal," both reducing individuals to mere objects of desire, spotlighting the dehumanizing and objectifying elements of such stereotypes. The allure of these stereotypes may hint at a subconscious internalization of devaluation and societal contempt, reflecting a struggle with self-perception and societal representation. This internalization indicates a painful acceptance, morphing societal contempt into self-contempt. However, Smith offers a nuanced lens, intertwining such stereotypes with a thoughtful understanding of the socio-economic disparities and humanity behind these characters, thereby transforming the narrative from mere objectification to empathetic realization. The abundance of liquor stores and fast-food chains ("Little Caesars") over grocery stores portrays a community riddled with economic hardship and limited access to basic needs. This portrayal, in turn, brings forth a humanizing layer to the seemingly objectified figures, showing a yearning not only for intimacy but also for societal acceptance and connection, as highlighted in "experiencing needs & so down for whatever." In conclusion, Smith juxtaposes passionate intensity with deep empathy, especially evident in: "buddy who rocks me best gets thinner by the day. he can't afford the pills that keep me round & blood quiet." This blend of passion and empathy illustrates a journey from self-contempt to self-acceptance amidst societal adversities, recontextualizing desires in a manner that recognizes and respects the multifaceted humanity of the individuals within these stereotyped communities.

Smith embraces their intersectionality when they write: "queerness and Blackness both speak to an approach to humanity and to art that is best when borderless, best when we use that queer key to question what is outside of the norm. When something feels special, we feel powerful" (Wilbekin). By championing a borderless approach, Smith does not advocate for integration into the mainstream, but for an entire paradigm shift where identities can be expansive and transformative. Scholars such as Robert Reid-Pharr and James Smalls, visualize the Black queer identity as a boundless realm of change and yearning, showcasing its intricate nature (Smalls 284). By framing the Black queer body as an endless space of transition, they highlight the inherent resistance to

categorization of identities, as not merely reactive or shaped in opposition to heteronormative or racial biases, but as possessing their own evolving narrative.

Drawing inspiration from Michel Pêcheux, Pratibha Parmar underscores the potent resilience against marginalization (Gever 5), reminding us that the Black queer identity, while rooted in a history of resistance, is also an active participant in shaping its own future. Rather than solely forming a defensive barrier, the strength derived from resisting marginalization serves as a proactive force that shapes culture, narratives, and art. Black queer identity here is postmodern: it challenges historical narratives, resists simplistic categorization, and posits a dynamic, ever-evolving future. This multifaceted perspective does not merely offer a lens to understand the Black queer experience; it serves as a beacon for all identities navigating the complex interplay of history, society, and self-definition.

### Against the Current: The Black Queer Struggle with Faith, Society, and Solitude

“i need no church but my niggas’ arms / i need no savior but their love” (*Homie “my nig”* 67)

Historically, religion has been intricately woven into the fabric of Black communities in the U.S., acting as a sanctuary and a source of pride and belonging, particularly amidst the racial adversities. It has been the cornerstone of many civil rights movements, providing a platform for the message of equality and a call to action for equal rights. However, the very same religion that empowered movements for racial equality has paradoxically acted as an instrument of oppression, creating realms of exclusion and discrimination against Black queer individuals.

Lil Nas X’s music video “Call Me By Your Name” paints a vivid portrayal of this paradox, illustrating the internal tumult between the artist and societal and religious norms surrounding his sexuality. This artistic piece delves deep into the role of religion in molding self-perceptions and highlights the inherent obstacles faced by queer individuals in communities of color, where religious doctrines are deeply entrenched. In the video, Lil Nas X’s reinterpretation of religious figures like Adam and the devil, characters that he himself portrays, engages in activities that challenge the existing religious dogmas, symbolizing defiance against prescribed norms. His depiction of Adam’s temptation and consequent expulsion

from the Garden of Eden sets the stage for a confrontation with societal norms, culminating in a trial scene that showcases the conflict between religiously influenced societal norms and queer identity. Lil Nas X then descends into hell where he seduces, dethrones, and defeats the devil, claiming the devil's throne while simultaneously reclaiming his identity, lost after his exile from Eden. Despite sparking backlash, the video has often been misinterpreted as merely provocative, rather than recognized as a deeply personal depiction of religious rejection and emotional estrangement.<sup>2</sup>

Smith's representation of Eden differs from Lil Nas X's vision, as they transform paradise into a haunting Jim Crow landscape of fear and oppression as described in the poem "summer, somewhere":

dear dear  
 my most distant love –  
 [...] if you were here, we could play  
 Eden all day, but fruit here  
 grows strange, I know before me  
 here lived something treacherous. (*Don't Call Us* "summer, somewhere"  
 15)

The line "fruit here grows strange" evokes Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," referencing the racial violence during the Jim Crow era. Here, "strange" underscores the transformation of trees from symbols of life to agents of death and oppression. The historical trauma might also be intertwined with the derogatory slang for queer individuals ("fruity"), highlighting the layered oppressions faced by Black queer people.<sup>3</sup> The poet's recurring themes of faith and oppression emerge even stronger in their poem "dear white america," where they challenge conventional religious beliefs against the backdrop of racial injustice:

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<sup>2</sup> On September 18, 2021, at 9:24am, Lil Nas X tweeted: "i love joking but on a serious note making this album was therapy for me. i began healing many unchecked wounds, facing skeltons [*sic*] in my closet i never wanted to, fighting internally every day and crying persistently, MONTERO is truly my baby. thanks for the love."

<sup>3</sup> In the poem "undetectable," the word "fruit" appears at the end and carries a double meaning. It can refer to both the actual fruit and also serve as a slang term for queer or gay: "one dead boy makes the whole forest / a grave. & he's in there, in me, in the middle / of all that green. you probably thought / he was fruit" (*Homie* 53).



i do not trust the God you have given us. [...] take your God back. though his songs are beautiful, his miracles are inconsistent. i want the fate of Lazarus for Renisha, want Chucky, Bo, Meech, Trayvon, Sean & Jonylah risen three days after their entombing, their ghost re-gifted flesh & blood.  
(*Don't Call Us* 25)

The poet references Lazarus to express a desire for divine intervention, hoping for the resurrection of the listed victims. Many of these names are common in the African American community and carry biblical significance. “Trayvon,”<sup>4</sup> the African American teenager who was fatally shot in 2012, evokes racial injustice and systemic violence. By comparing the act of “taking back” their god to returning an unwanted gift, the poet reduces the deity’s spiritual or supernatural authority. This desacralization implies that the god has been stripped of its divine significance and reduced to the level of a weapon used to perpetrate violence against innocent black and brown individuals. As the list of victims grows longer each year, the command “take your god back” carries an almost ritualistic quality, resembling a spell or incantation aimed at dispelling the influence of this weaponized deity and asserting control over one’s own spiritual destiny.

In their pursuit of self-expression, Black artists from the 1970s leaned heavily into pan-Africanist ideals, employing African motifs as tools to reclaim and uplift their identity. During the same era, figures in Black queer theory began a rigorous interrogation of prevailing views, especially the depiction of queer sexuality as a “white disease,” an idea famously rejected by Bobby Seales,<sup>5</sup> but strongly endorsed by Black nationalists like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver. To these nationalists, effeminization was a perceived threat, seen as a White imposition, and thus they cautioned Black men against it while also dissuading them from interracial same-sex relationships. This stance, to an extent, mirrored a broader sentiment: in the face of racial biases that threatened to emasculate Black men in society, some may have found a semblance of regained power by ostracizing and belittling queer individuals.

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<sup>4</sup> The names Trayvon and Sean are also mentioned in the poem “summer, somewhere”: “that boy was Trayvon, now called *RainKing*. / that man Sean named himself *i do, i do*” (*Don't Call Us Dead* 4).

<sup>5</sup> In August 1970, Huey Newton wrote in the Black Panthers’ paper “A letter to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation” (*Gay Flames Pamphlet*, No. 7, 1970).

Addressing a still widespread misconception, Lil Nas X illuminates the reality of homosexuality's existence in African cultures, effectively challenging a commonly accepted historical oversight. Through his tweet (June 27, 2021, 8:17 p.m.) "y'all really like to pretend homosexuality didn't exist in african culture?," Lil Nas X prompts a reevaluation of notions surrounding cultural purity, urging a deeper, more authentic exploration of history.<sup>6</sup> One month later, this theme was once again apparent when a critic commented on Lil Nas X's music video for "Industry Baby." The tweet argued that the video emasculated Black men by portraying them as "extra feminine" in a prison setting, while a white man was shown in a traditional masculine role. Responding to the critique, Lil Nas X tweeted:

the truth is there is no attack. You view femininity as a weakness. You don't like gay black men because you are afraid of black men, as a whole, being viewed as weak. You cling on to your masculinity because without it you have nothing else going for yourself. (24 July 2021, 1 a.m.)

Lil Nas X's response unpacks societal attitudes towards Black gay men, illuminating how an ingrained fear of perceived weakness fosters prejudice against them. In his song "Late to Da Party," released in 2022, Lil Nas X goes on to criticize the Black Entertainment Television network for perpetuating homophobia within the Black community<sup>7</sup>. The track opens with the refrain "Fuck BET," followed by Lil Nas X asserting that he doesn't need awards to validate his talent. Despite winning a Grammy, he expressed frustration at not receiving any nominations from BET that year. Lil Nas X has been vocal on social media about his disappointment with BET's lack of recognition for LGBTQ+ artists, accusing the network of attempting to render them "invisible." In June of that year, the rapper wrote in a now deleted tweet: "i just feel like black gay ppl have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top mfs try to pretend we

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<sup>6</sup> Ancient Egyptian art and literature depict same-sex relationships, while the Zande of Central Africa recognized *azande* relationships and the Mende of Sierra Leone acknowledged lesbian bonds within their *sande* society. Additionally, the Ndebele of South Africa acknowledged *skesana*, effeminate males embodying both genders. To know more about the presence of homosexuality in diverse African cultures throughout history, read *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, Edited by Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, New York: Palgrave, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> For a more thorough analysis, also see Lauron Kehrer's article in the present volume, especially on how he uses ludonarrativity to express his thoughts about the perceived homophobia of the TV network.

are invisible” (qtd. by Pop Crave 2 June 2022, 1:31 a.m.). Lil Nas X’s reactions in his tweets and song demonstrate how being gay as a black man is perceived as a sign of weakness, while revealing the extent to which a network such as BET that caters to black audiences would go to silence gay black men.

Historically, various societal discourses have framed the Black community as more homophobic than its White counterpart. This is not necessarily because Black people are intrinsically more antigay, but rather because they have been imagined as such while equally homophobic White religious subgroups do not impact the perception of white homophobia as a whole (Martin 2). Much of this mischaracterization stems from an overemphasis on the religious beliefs of African Americans, which erroneously lumps the entire community into a monolithic group, failing to acknowledge the diversity of thought and opinion within. This constructed image of heightened Black homophobia presents real challenges for Black queer artists like Lil Nas X, who navigate the dual intersections of race and sexuality.

In June 2022, in response to another critique of his performance on Twitter, the rapper reacted: “Ok cool, I suck, my music is terrible, bad nas. Now answer the question “are queer men more respected when they do less feminine things” yes or no?” (7 June 2022, 6:29 p.m.). Lil Nas X’s question cuts to the heart of the broader issue: the intricate relationship between perceived masculinity, respect, and acceptance within both Black and White communities. By confronting these perceptions head-on, he challenges the prevailing narratives and calls for introspection on how society, irrespective of race, values and judges expressions of queer identity.

*A Lonely World.* The intricate interplay of loneliness within intersectional identities, particularly being Black and queer, resonates deeply within the works of both Danez Smith and Lil Nas X. In their poem “on faggotness,” Smith captures this sentiment, asserting that what defines “a fag” is not just the physical aspect of intimacy but the profound “emptiness; a void you didn’t know existed until someone stopped it up” (*Homie* 27). The phrase “particular lonely” (*Homie* 28) encapsulates a unique solitude stemming from this duality of identity, further highlighted by the lines, “it’s been a while since a body was inside my body...so much depends on sex...only the little ruins follow” (*Homie* 27). This theme of solitude is reverberated in “self-portrait as ’90 R&B video,” where Smith confesses, “my man is all in my head / & it’s a bad head” (*Homie* 31).

In the song “Sun Goes Down,” Lil Nas X tackles the difficulties he experiences as a Black gay individual living in a society marred by racism and homophobia. He confronts these challenges head-on in his lyrics, revealing the often-silent struggle against these dual prejudices:

Since ten, I been feeling lonely  
 Had friends but they was picking on me  
 Always thinking why my lips so big  
 Was I too dark? Can they sense my fears?  
 These gay thoughts would always haunt me  
 I prayed God would take it from me  
 It’s hard for you when you’re fightin’  
 And nobody knows it when you’re silent

He further explores the suicidal thoughts he confronted while struggling with his gay identity and religious background: “I don’t want to deceive, I don’t want to live / Send me a gun and I’ll witness the sunrise.” His song received a mixed reception from audiences and critics. While many praised it for its vulnerability and its contribution to destigmatizing discussions around mental health and LGBTQ+ identity, others expressed backlash and criticism on social media and conservative news outlets. In the song “That’s What I Want,” released the same year, Lil Nas X expresses his yearning for companionship in the chorus: “Need a boy who can cuddle with me all night / Keep me warm, love me long, be my sunlight.”

Danez Smith’s work, too, illuminates a poignant struggle between self-deprecation and self-love, a testament to the enduring spirit amidst internalized racism and discrimination within digital platforms. When, in the poem “a note on the phone app that tells me how far i am from other men’s mouths,” Smith writes “headless horsehung horsemen gallop to my gate / dressed in pictures stolen off Google / men of every tribe mark their doors in blood / *No Fats, No Fems, No Blacks, Sorry, Just A Preference*” (*Don’t Call Us* 32), the lines reveal a stark depiction of how one sexual preference can be used as a device to reinforce ingrained prejudices. This discrimination not only reflects societal biases but also penetrates the psyche of individuals within the Black community, manifesting as internalized racism and resulting in tragic self-deprecation, as echoed in the subsequent poem, titled “& even the black guy’s profile reads sorry, no black guys” (*Don’t Call Us* 33). Yet, in this bleak landscape of self-loathing, Smith juxtaposes a resilient affirmation of self-love and intrinsic worth: “if no one

has told you, you are beautiful & lovable & black & enough & so – you pretty you – am i.” While the three adjectives are shown as equivalent, implying that being Black is inherently beautiful and worthy of love, the last part of the line (“& so – you pretty you – am i”) suggests both self-reflection and mutual recognition. This conclusion does not merely serve as a counter to the pain but transforms it, reshaping internal narratives, and embracing the beauty and value inherent in Black identity.

Having denounced the internalized biases within dating app profiles, Smith also illuminates the insidious nature of learned prejudices in the broader world, stating that

dogs aren’t racist but they can be  
trained to be as can the water as  
can the trees as can gravity as can  
anything marked by a pale hand (*Homie* “dogs!” 20)

Smith conveys the compelling argument that racism is not an inherent characteristic but rather a learned behavior, a product of societal conditioning deeply embedded within the structures and environments that shape our beliefs and actions. Smith’s choice of analogy with dogs – trained by extremists to harbor and exhibit aggression toward Black individuals as was the case, for instance, during the Birmingham campaign – is deliberate, serving as a metaphor for acquired prejudice and animosity. It illustrates the profound impact of conditioning and environmental influences in converting impartiality into antagonism where it naturally would not occur. Furthermore, the references to water, trees, and gravity may seem abstract initially, considering these elements do not have inherent capacities for racial bias. However, Smith probes how control over and access to natural resources and the freedom to traverse are skewed along racial lines when dominated by oppressive entities, symbolized by “pale hands.” While water and trees are universal symbols of life and sustenance, Smith draws attention to the disparities in accessibility to these resources, highlighting broader issues of environmental justice and racial inequalities in resource distribution. Lastly, gravity, typically a representation of an unalterable universal law, could be read as a subtle nod to aviation. It exemplifies the racial imbalances present in the freedom of movement and travel, portraying how seemingly impartial elements can be molded to mirror and perpetuate existing racial biases and restrictions. By addressing these elements, Smith sheds light on the varied ways in which racism infiltrates multiple facets of existence, moving

beyond blatant acts of violence to more subtle, but equally harmful, manifestations of racial disparities and limitations.

### Crafting Resistance: Politics, Language, and Humor Intertwined

Drawing attention to the demarcation between crafting metaphors and actual activism “in the streets,” Danez Smith argues for recognizing art as a potential catalyst for change, not a substitute for direct action:

As [someone] who is often put into the “Danez’s poetry is activism” box, I hate that. I think I can have a political mind. I think I can have a politics to my work. And I don’t think that necessarily makes me an activist, because my activism costs \$16.99. My activism is free from the library. It’s free when it’s published online, but it’s not in the streets. It could be an *inspiration* for activism. One of my active hopes is that my work is a fuel for people who desire to make change. But me making a metaphor is not activism — it’s a craft, it’s work. (qtd. in Wilbekin)

While they may reject the label of activism for their written creations, in “my poems,” Danez Smith turns the word “poem” into a verb, allowing it to fulfill its intended action as suggested by its etymology: “i poem ten police a day / i poem the mayor with my bare hands. [...] / i poem a racist woman into a whistle & feel only a little bad” (*Homie* 64). This alignment with Aimé Césaire’s idea of words as “miraculous weapons,” stemming from the title of his 1946 poetry collection, suggests that, even if Smith resists their work being pigeonholed as activism, they are aware of its potential as an agent of resistance and transformation.

my poems are fed up & getting violent  
 i whisper to them *tender tender bridge bridge* but they say *bitch ain’t no time, make me a weapon!*  
 i hold a poem to a judge’s neck until he’s not a judge anymore.  
 i tuck a poem next to my dick, sneak it on the plane. (*Homie* 64)

The vivid imagery of a poem as a tool of intimidation and rebellion – holding it “to a judge’s neck” or sneaking it onto a plane like a weapon – accentuates the tension between the inherent power of the poem and the societal structures it challenges. Even if not explicitly activist, the poems are charged with a revolutionary spirit, striving to destabilize norms and confront oppressive systems.

In the poem “C.R.E.A.M.,” an acronym for “Cash Rules Everything Around Me” – a title borrowed from a Wu-Tang Clan song – Danez Smith offers a critique of the intersection of economic inequality and race in the United States. The poet accentuates the prevalent correlation between being Black and experiencing economic hardship, illustrating how these socio-economic conditions affect their community:

sometimes i pay the weed man before i pay the light bill  
 sometimes is a synonym for often  
 i just want a rich white sugar daddy & i’ll be straight  
 i feel most colored when i’m looking at my bank account

[...]

what’s a blacker tax than blackness?

[...]

what cost more than being poor?

my aunt can’t hold on to a dollar, a job, her mind

[...]

imma print my own money & be my own god & live forever in a green  
 frame

[...]

the b in debt is a silent black trapped (*Homie 57-8*)

The poem delves deep into the economic and social struggles experienced by Black individuals, offering a glimpse into the difficult decisions they must sometimes make. Prioritizing the weed man over the light bill not only speaks to immediate needs and coping mechanisms but hints at the deeper darkness – perhaps a pervasive hopelessness – that might exist. The recurring theme of economic hardship is evident with the line “sometimes is a synonym for often,” suggesting that these struggles are not occasional but persistent. The desire for a “rich sugar daddy” underscores a yearning for financial stability, yet the phrase “i’ll be straight” cleverly introduces ambiguity. It suggests that achieving this stability might come at a personal cost or compromise, possibly alluding to the complexities of navigating relationships based on financial dependence. The portrayal of the aunt’s struggles offers a reflection on the cyclical nature of poverty and its mental toll, linking financial instability, job insecurity, and mental well-being. The fantasy of printing one’s own money could be seen as a desire to take control of one’s financial destiny. It represents a temptation to resort to counterfeiting as a form of rebellion against an unfair society. The aspiration to

“live forever in a green frame” is a metaphor for the dollar bill. It alludes to ending one’s life, suggesting a desire to gain posthumous recognition or to leave a lasting legacy as a means of coping with current sufferings, possibly feeling it is preferable to the continued endurance of present hardships. It conveys a sense of the ubiquity and timelessness of economic struggle within a symbol that represents wealth and prosperity, yet is so elusive to many. The acknowledgment of this irony heightens the impact of the poet’s message. The poem’s closing line, referring to the silent “b” in debt, serves as a symbol for Black individuals who are rendered invisible and voiceless by systemic oppression – trapped in silence. Here, the “b,” reminiscent of the verb “to be,” represents the stifled existence and unrealized potential of those ensnared in economic adversity, highlighting their struggle against suppression and for visibility in a system marked by inequality. The silent “b” is the symbol of the Black individual who refuses to forge their own path and is complacent with(in) a system that disfranchises them.

### From Insults to Empowerment: The Linguistic Revolution of Black Queer Artists

“I got this problem: i was born / black & faggoty”  
(*Don’t Call Us* “every day is a funeral & a miracle” 66)

Danez Smith explores challenging aspects of language as they recontextualize and reclaim words that have historically been used as slurs, including the b-word, the f-word, and the n-word. This act is more than mere linguistic play; it is a powerful strategy to take back control and transform words into affirmations of identity and community.

Smith frequently incorporates the n-word in their work, including in the poem titled “nigga.”<sup>8</sup> “i know the word is complicated,” Danez Smith wrote in “shout out to my niggas in Mexico,” “but it’s my favorite word! [...] / & yes. yes, it’s intentional. / they were never invited” (39). Danez Smith envisions a dream where they extend an invitation to all the individuals who identify as “niggas” worldwide. The word refers to anyone who identifies as underrepresented and oppressed, including those who are Black, Brown, Arab, Hispanic, Native

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<sup>8</sup> “i love the smell of nigga on the tongue / & how it means that which is me” (*Homie* 4).



American... – “friends their browns a different brown than mine,” who have experienced oppression and racism, as the poet wrote in “what was said at the bus stop” (*Homie* 41). This inclusive gathering would bring together people from the Caribbean, Mexico, Asia, and even Antarctica, uniting them in a grand celebration of their shared identity. As an epigram of their collection of poems, Danez Smith wrote a “note on the title” in which they explain that “this book was titled *homie* because [they] don’t want non-black people to say *my nig* out loud. this book is really titled *my nig*.” The intention behind their poem “...nigga” is precisely to address and prevent the scenario they depict, wherein they imagine a White boy daring to say the word “nigga” repeatedly, as if testing its impact (*Don’t Call Us* 35).

The recurring use of terms such as the n-word and the b-word serves to explore, challenge, and reclaim historically derogatory labels, using them as platforms for deeper commentary on identity, community, and systemic oppression. In the poem “my bitch!,” Smith does not just reclaim the word “bitch” but employs it as a term of affection and unity:

let’s get together & paint our faces the color  
of our mothers if our mothers were sad men  
only soft in bad lights. let’s swirl the deep grape  
& coffee pencils until we look like odd planets  
on our way to looking like the daughters  
we secretly were. caked & cakes hairy  
just short of grace. we look terrible  
when we’re the most beautiful girls in the world.  
bitch my world. bitch my brother. bitch my rich trust.  
i’ll miss you most when they kill us. (*Homie* 32)

The poet explores how identity can be flexible, showing both gentle and tough sides, and how it often sits between what society expects and what one truly feels. The line “we look terrible when we’re the most beautiful girls in the world” underscores the tension between society’s beauty standards and the poet’s own perceptions of beauty and self-worth. Beauty exerts its influence in ways that are both awe-inspiring and unsettling. The reference to looking like “odd planets” emphasizes the uniqueness and queerness of their identities, while suggesting that they experienced alienation, just like extraterrestrial beings who seem unfamiliar or from another world. The poem closes with a sobering reflection on the dangers faced by those who defy normative expectations, yet in the face of potential

tragedy, there remains a fierce loyalty and bond: “i’ll miss you most when they kill us.” Through this, Smith stresses the necessity of community and kinship in the face of external threats, solidifying the poem’s political undertones and its resonance in the broader discourse on Black and queer identities.

As the poet interrogates society’s narrow definitions of beauty, they similarly delve into the transformative potential of another contentious word: “faggot.” The poem “on faggotness” delves into the intricate complexities of the term. In this poem, Danez Smith reflects upon “what makes a fag a fag. [...] a particular strangeness” (*Homie* 27), of which they list the particularities:

particular walk. particular wrist. particular speech. particular clothes.  
 particular piercing. particular knowledge. particular ways of eating  
 particular things. [...] . particular eyes. particular fear. [...] particular  
 shame. particular milk. particular beast. particular cage. particular  
 freedoms. [...] particular gods. particular beliefs. particular hells. particular  
 economies. particular arrangements. particular secrets. particular shade.  
 particular bliss. particular deeds. particular punishments. particular lonely.  
 particular grief.

Through listing specific traits, Smith highlights the diverse experiences and identities captured by a single label, while drawing attention to the ways in which people are often singled out or marginalized due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The repetition of “particular” thus serves as a series of exclusions or exceptions. At the same time, contrasting pairs such as “particular freedoms” and “particular cages,” or “particular bliss” and “particular grief,” reflects the inherent duality and complexity of this “faggotness,” where joy and sorrow, freedom and confinement, coexist within the individual experience. Each detail, from attire to emotions and beliefs, contributes to this complex identity. Rooted in Eve K. Sedgwick’s proposition that “queer” is not just an identity but a continuous practice, José Esteban Muñoz articulates that to embody queerness is to perpetually disidentify, to find oneself flourishing in spaces where “meaning does not properly ‘line up’” (Muñoz 78).

This process of “queering” reflects the essence and experiences of the “particular,” as articulated in Danez Smith’s poem, and resonates with the reflections made by Britteney Kapri in “dboy Black: a poem for Briyae” on the multifaceted concept of “blackness.” This transformative reclamation of language is prominent in Smith’s poem “at the down-low house party,” where the use of coded language narrates the nuanced experiences of Black queer men,

exemplified in the lines “wats gud meaning / could love you until my jaw / is but memory” (*Don’t Call Us* 36). At a glance, it is a colloquial greeting in vernacular English, but upon deeper reflection, it reveals itself as a subtle nod to a sexual proposition. This implicit invitation is further poetically transformed in the line, “love you until my jaw is but memory.” While one interpretation gravitates towards the act of making love until one’s mouth is numb, an alternate, more profound reading emerges: a longing to love so deeply and wholly that individuality fades, resulting in two souls merging into a singular entity. Yet, beneath this exterior interpretation exists a more metaphysical and profound connotation. It suggests an aspiration to experience love so deeply and completely that the ability to communicate verbally becomes obsolete, that words are rendered unnecessary.

While Smith’s previous poems showcase a reclaiming of derogatory terms to form self-affirmation, they further venture into the intricate dynamics of power, vulnerability, and identity in their calligram “jumped!”:

they were around me like  
 nigga 1  
 nigga2      nigga3  
 nigga 4    me      nigga 5  
 nigga 6    nigga 7  
 nigga 8  
 but what could be safer  
 than a circle of boys  
 too afraid of killing you  
 to kill you? (*Homie* 9)

The calligram illustrates the poet encircled by eight symbolic “bullies,” revealing a visual contrast between vulnerability and unanticipated comfort derived from the figures’ reluctance to escalate aggression. The repeated term “nigga” underscores a network of shared experiences and mutual recognition. This interplay between individual and shared identity is heightened when the poet perceives a collective hesitation among the “bullies,” possibly hinting at common experiences or vulnerabilities. This complex relationship reflects the diverse connections within communities, portraying both potential conflict and unifying bonds.

As the story progresses, the poet’s early perceptions alter, unveiling profound emotional layers and eliciting unforeseen desires:

i had always wanted 8 niggas on me, but not like that.  
 after a while I started to like it? [...]  
 you should have heard them laugh  
 a language so delicious i cracked up cracked grin & all  
 i didn't know  
 a thing about love  
 until those boys  
 walked away  
 so happy.

my heart pouring from my nose (*Homie 10*)

This solitary vulnerability is juxtaposed in “saw a video of a gang of bees swarming a hornet,” the subsequent poem in *Homie*, where a calligram features a central rectangle representing a hornet, filled with the words “earth love / murders first / justifies later / so I guess / white folks / do love niggas / to bits” (11). The hornet is surrounded by the phrase “we are in their love,” symbolizing bees banding together in defense against the threat it represents. These bees rally around their “bee-homie”—a play on “be a homie,” hinting at close friendship—signifying marginalized communities’ unity against threats. Together, these poems in *Homie* transition from individual trauma to a unified resistance against oppression, emphasizing the strength and importance of community unity in the face of adversity.

*Not Without a Chuckle: Celebrating Pride and Self-Love.* Navigating the complexities of discrimination, racism, and solitude, both Lil Nas X and Danez Smith chart a course towards empowerment and self-love. Through their art, they adopt varied strategies, including confronting critics directly and using a blend of sharp wit and humor. This is meant to transform the daily discriminatory experiences within the Black and queer community from hurtful encounters into empowering catalysts for self-affirmation. In Lil Nas X’s track “Dolla Sign Slime,” he openly celebrates his body and prowess, standing in contrast to the vulnerability expressed in “Sun Goes Down:”

They can't stop me, say I can't do it, bitch, watch me  
 All you lame hoes turn hatin' to a hobby  
 Damn, watchin' me gotta turn you on  
 I should have my own category in porn  
 Ooh, I'm just such an obsession [...]  
 Everything about me came from genetics [...]

Baby, all these hoes imitate me [...]  
 Toxic, suck his soul out then block him  
 Got more cream than the sundae topping, ah

Mixing the traditions of “signifyin’” and “dissin’” in hip hop, Lil Nas X uses criticism as motivation in his lyrics. He portrays his critics as interested observers, suggesting they are more fascinated than hateful. His proposal of a unique pornographic category for himself underscores his originality, casting critics as unimaginative followers. The metaphor “more cream than the sundae topping” asserts his dominance over critics both metaphorically and sexually. This theme continues in “Industry Baby,” where he details his journey from responding to critics to dictating the story. His line, “I’m done making jokes ’cause they got old like baby boomers / Turn my haters to consumers,” shows an evolution in his approach, his shift from defensive humor to strategic control. He exposes again the irony of haters consuming his work, thereby bolstering his popularity and control, highlighting their contradictory behavior.

Lil Nas X’s ability to redirect prejudice through his lyrics is mirrored in his engagement with social media. Beyond just music, he often uses humor as a powerful tool to disarm and highlight the absurdity of discriminatory comments. In response to a tweet posing the loaded question, “Should all men dress androgynously and sleep with satin [*sic*]?,” Lil Nas X used a succinct “yes” to disarm the homophobic insinuation. His minimalist reply ridicules the question, highlighting his unwillingness to expend energy on such viewpoints. Moreover, the unintentional humor brought about by the tweet’s typographical error – mixing up “satan” with “satin” – underscores Lil Nas X’s dexterity in using wit to deflect criticism and reassert his position. Two months later, the singer ridicules yet another tweet: “we are 4 months in and people are still acting surprised that I am being gay and sexual in performances of a song about gay and sexual sh\*\* like the song is literally about gay sex what y’all want me to do play the piano while baking a cake?” (29 June 2021, 1:06 a.m.). Lil Nas X confidently stands by the content of his songs, emphasizing his right to express his sexuality just as openly and graphically as straight artists. This challenges the music industry’s biases that often embrace explicit straight themes but sideline similar gay expressions. In his 2020 single “Holiday,” Lil Nas X breaks away from usual rap ideas about masculinity. Instead, he openly talks about his sexuality and celebrates his growing popularity: “I might bottom on the low, but I top shit (But I top shit) / Switch the genre on your hoes, do a rock hit (Mmm) / I got the biggest

damn song, fuck the charts, sis, I don't need 'em." Bottoming is no longer something to be ashamed of when one is ruling or topping the charts. Power gets to shift, from sexual to artistic prowess.

While humor often serves as a tool to proudly defy critics and their biases, it also becomes a means to narrate stories of a more haunting and bleak reality, reminiscent of fairy tales with no happy endings. In the opening poem of Danez Smith's debut poetry collection *Black Movie*, titled "Sleeping Beauty in the Hood," the main character, Jamal, becomes Sleeping Beauty. He is admired by various Charming Princes, who might be either brothers or cousins, hinting at the unsettling possibility of them being potential abusers. The poem goes beyond simply parodying the famous story, diving deep into the layered meanings of the word "fairy" and its dual implications of a mythical creature and of a gay man. The words spoken cannot revive those who have passed away, and the tender kisses exchanged by lovers fail to awaken "Jamal's cold mouth" because "there is no magic here / The fairies get killed too" (*Black Movie* 3). Within the poem, a connection is forged between three words, forming a tragic triadic motif: "black," "fag," and "dead."

## Conclusion

Lil Nas X and Danez Smith navigate the multifaceted terrain of being Black and queer, reflecting their journey through their art, which is both an expression of personal experience and a form of protest. Themes of solitude, internalized biases, and societal prejudice reverberate throughout their works. Still, what stands out most prominently is their ability to rise above these challenges, transforming their lived experiences into powerful messages of empowerment, self-love, and change. The honesty, humor, and provocation that both artists employ are transformative in nature. By confronting societal norms and biases, they not only give voice to the unique struggles of the Black and queer community but also redefine what it means to be both. In doing so, they contribute to a broader dialogue about intersectional identities, challenging mainstream narratives and advocating for greater inclusivity.

In the 2022 interview mentioned earlier, Danez Smith spoke about the evolution of Black queer representation in literature. They highlighted how the influential works of predecessors such as Langston Hughes, Bruce Nugent, and James Baldwin were once perceived as unusual exceptions. Smith contrasted this

past scarcity with the present reality, especially post-Obama's presidency. Smith pointed out, "I'm not the only one. If you don't like my Black poetry, there are 80,000 others to go read, and they all write good and different. We're the first truly abundant moment of what's been a long canon, a canon that has all these silences within it" (Wilbekin). Obama's election signified a turning point, particularly for the Black community, ushering in an era that embraces an ever-increasing diversity in the cultural and literary world. In their poem "my president," which starts the collection of poems *Homie*, Danez Smith imagines electing as presidents "the trans girl making songs in her closet, spinning the dark / into a booming dress" (1) and "the boy crying on the train & the sudden abuela who rubs his back [...] & the drag queen who begins to hum" (3). As expressed in Wilbekin's article, the post-Obama era is a unique opportunity for Black queer artists to "creat[e] a lineage" and "the canon moving forward."

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# Harmony of Self: L'Marco's Ode to Awareness

GLENN SMITH

*About L'Marco.* The conversation took place on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023, at the Marlton Hotel, close to Washington Square Park in Manhattan. Performing alongside well-known recording artists such as Brandy, B. Slade, Robin Thicke, and Kim Burrell, L'Marco is an American singer, songwriter and performer from New York City with forays in photography, fashion, modeling, and teaching. Coming from a family who loved music and growing up in the church, L'Marco was surrounded by music from a very young age. He started recording as early as eleven. He studied opera and jazz at the Bob Cole Conservatory of Music at CSU Long Beach.

In 2015, L'Marco released his first album, *Feels Like A Dream*, which includes popular indie songs like "Love Is" from *The Last Letter* soundtrack, and "Come On." He has since released a series of fan-favorite songs such as "This Is Love," written by Wayne'M Lucas, and "If Only Pictures Could Talk," produced by Reinholds Berzins from Latvia. L'Marco has just finished the second part of his international tour, "Feeling Good: A L'Marco Experience," and plans to start touring again in the summer of 2023. He has also released his sixth album, *Word on the Street*, and is currently working on a new EP, expected to be released by the end of 2023.

I had the privilege of interviewing L'Marco at the Marlton Hotel, close to Washington Square Park in Manhattan. We delved into various topics about his personal life, musical journey and performances, the challenges he faces, and his aspirations as a Black and queer artist.

L'MARCO is an international recording artist from New York. L'Marco is most celebrated for his signature performance, charisma and vocal freedom. Performing for notable headliners like Brandy, Robin Thicke and more, he has recently paved his own lane with a slew of independent releases and worldwide performances. "Quiet Time," a collaboration with producer A-GO, is the latest addition to his ever-evolving catalog.

GLENN SMITH, Assistant Director of the Berkley achievement Scholarship program at NYU Stern School of Business and a dedicated advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), holds a Master's degree in Higher Education Administration from NYU, focusing on diversity in higher education. Raised in Brooklyn, he brings a deep commitment to supporting underrepresented students across the USA, leveraging his background in Political Science from Bloomsburg University and East Stroudsburg University. Smith's work at NYU Stern embodies his passion for DEI, driving efforts to foster social awareness and empower students to articulate their values, reflecting his dedication to creating a more inclusive educational environment. He can be reached at [gjs11@stern.nyu.edu](mailto:gjs11@stern.nyu.edu).

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SMITH. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Can you do me a favor and give me your pronouns?

L'MARCO. He, Him, L'Marco... But honestly, I usually don't mind how you refer to me as long as the intent is respectful.

SMITH. I'll do that! So, my first question is: How do you consider the perception of your navigation through the intersections of your Black and queer identities, both in your artistry and in your daily life?

L'MARCO. I stay myself and I just hope that people can let me be. I don't *care* if people let me be, but I hope they do. I still am me regardless, you know? As you've seen in the show, I wear whatever I want. My fashion and song contexts showcase my true identity and what I really feel about myself. My mom used to say "baby, know who you are; whose you are," and I really took that to heart. I'm a child of God, I'm a gifted Black man. I'm daily reminded of the sacrifices that my ancestors endured so I could have a chance, and so I move around with gratefulness, but I also recognize that my Blackness and my art both deserve and have a place in society, home and abroad. Earlier I was wearing a black backwards cap and basketball shorts, but 'round came at 9 o'clock and I was like "oooooh let's hype this up, tighten this up, and crop it a little," you know? And the audience does not matter, I don't know who is there to watch me and I don't have the time to worry about that. Just listen to the music. I hope you clap your hands, see I'm wearing something nice I feel comfortable in it, shut the fuck up and enjoy the show. If not, we can handle that accordingly... That's how I walk through, I treat people with respect and I hope they do the same.

SMITH. Being Black you're faced with challenges for just existing and then being queer is an added layer to that, so when you are thinking about being Black *and* queer, and then being a musician in a city like New York, what are some of the challenges that you face? And what are the kinds of things you do for yourself to deal with it?

L'MARCO. I was told I walk around like a white man, which is very interesting...

SMITH. You walk like a white man?

L'MARCO. Yes, which is very interesting. It's sad, it's kind of funny, too. because I think I just walk around like a human being who deserves to be breathing and to

have what everybody else has. I walk around until I am stopped... until a cop or anybody else tries to impede upon my daily peace, I walk with my head high, my chest out. I take care of myself, I try to appear approachable, but at the same time don't come for me, you know what I'm saying? I wear what I wanna wear, I talk the way I wanna talk, and I'm aware that I don't control things... We are on the planet with other people.

SMITH. This transitions into my next question: how have your upbringing and your environment influenced your understanding of queerness and Blackness, and how you walk around and you present yourself?

L'MARCO. I grew up a very restricted young man, I still experience that with my family in my adult life, but I'm still being myself. I used to conform to straight standards, "put some bass in your voice," and [*using a lower range/deeper voice*] I would. Now I can access both, when I'm on the stage I can just [*singing with high pitch voice*], you know what I'm saying?

SMITH. You have the full range.

L'MARCO. Thank you. All of these restrictions have given me so much freedom. I realize how dumb restrictions are: nobody opens and closes my eyes when I blink, no one has the power to do those things for me. There is a limit to what I can allow people to decide for me.

SMITH. Can you elaborate a little more on these restrictions and your bass voice? Who was putting restrictions on you?

L'MARCO. Being queer is already a problem in a religious upbringing, and in the Black experience, even if it's not religious, queerness is equated with weakness and confusion... Even more than your history, it's important to know yourself. I don't know much about the lineage of my people, unfortunately, but I do know what makes me tick, what makes me smile, what kind of food I like to eat, that I don't like the rain so much, you feel what I am saying? When I go home to visit my family, I try to let them be themselves as much as I can. If they don't let me be myself, then I will speak up now... "Aunty, no you can't speak like that to people."

SMITH. I know what you mean.

L'MARCO. I don't mean any disrespect, but when I learned how to respect myself, I thought, "Oh my god I let people talk to me like that?"

SMITH. When would you say you learned how to respect yourself?

L'MARCO. When I almost killed myself, in November 2009. I realized the voices inside of my head were only speaking to the people outside that would not let me be myself. I think I always knew who I wanted to be, what kind of musician and entertainer I was, and how essential it is to know that. I can sing 'girl', I can sing 'boy', I can sing 'everyone'. I can sing Gospel, RnB. And you will still feel the rawness in all of it if you really are with me. Now, if you come to judge me, then by all means, have a ball. But you'll miss it all, -- the reason why I sing that way, why my hair is long... I have considered removing myself from the equation, and taking over this "control" of life that we don't have... That's why it did not work, because I don't control it. I couldn't even do it correctly, that is how much I don't control shit. When my number is called, I'll accept it. And having a close brush-up with that... being as confident as I've always been... I missed so many opportunities... A label just told me they tried to pitch me to some people who are interested, but they didn't know how to package me. I told them I was a bomb-ass singer, who can perform the house down, darling! If you don't know how to speak on my behalf, I'll do it myself. My Black experience, my queer experience, my musical experience all tie in with that. Just knowing who I am now is greater than any kind of social movement I've ever experienced. I almost died without living out all of my dreams.

SMITH. What do you think the label meant when they say they did not know how to "package you"?

L'MARCO. "Is he gay? Is he bi? Does he like girls? You seem kind of masculine but then you seem kind of fem, you give me kind of Prince vibes, we don't know, etc., etc." And frankly, it sounds like everybody just wants to fuck, you know, when I'm listening to their critiques and stuffs, that's what I'm thinking, "oooo... you and your man are trying to get it." Did you not hear the song I just sang to you? Did you like the song? Did the beat move you? Did the voice get you? All you are worried about is who I might be interested in. If you wanna date, let's talk about that in another moment. Now if you don't know how to tell people "he can sing anything, he knows how to engage the crowd, and it's a genuine moment, I've seen it, I've witnessed him," if you can't vouch for me, even though you really are a fan and you love me, but you just don't know how to package me... after sitting with me telling my heart, we have a problem, right?

SMITH. I think that I've had an understanding of what to say about you when I saw you perform [*laugh*].

L'MARCO. People don't know how to package me: That's not a "gay" performer, that's not a "Black Soul" performer... Because they need to put me in a box. Well, if you don't know what that box is called, put that as a selling point... Just call me an artist and let the music speak for itself, and when people start booking me, if I get all of these pop concerts, then I guess I'm a pop artist. If all of the Latino people are booking me for Telemundo, then *andale*, let's go! You know what I'm saying? My Black experience is that everything that we have, we had to fight for it. Anything that I have now is an accomplishment. The smile on my face is an accomplishment. Recognizing that I am strong-willed and able to have a chance in this fucking country is an accomplishment. When I woke up this morning, I walked out and people were scared of me even in these tight pants! People were crossing the streets. Like Yolanda Adams said, "this may be where I live, but it's not gonna change me." I will always be Black... Who I'm attracted to changes day to day! So how can you put that as a selling point for me anyway, cause I had exes who I can't even stand to look at and one day they were just fine as fuck to me [*laugh*].

SMITH. Thank you for sharing that, on a real level. A lot of record labels packaging Black artists don't necessarily know how to do it. Whitney Houston, with her big voice from Newark, New Jersey, was packaged as "America's princess," and they did not know how to handle her pushing back against it. Have you ever pushed back against narratives constructed about you?

L'MARCO. My last tour started off so rocky – no shade to anybody that I worked with – but the feedback from the audiences was great, but the management that I was working with, was giving me feedback like "you're not conforming, we need you to appeal to this kind of audience..."

SMITH. Were they specific?

L'MARCO. Yes, like "we should be doing more Motown, more soul, people see you and are like... 'ahhh he's giving James Brown', you should definitely add some James Brown to your aesthetics, you should do Prince, 'cause you got the falsetto..." Or I can also sing my song, and you will get what I give you. And so once again, if knowing myself [*ha ha*] is the theme of the night, I'll say after 2009, I won't be moved too much and I move very strategically. I'm not just performing any old song. It means something to me. If I'm singing [*sings*] baby

baby baby baby, I guarantee you it makes sense in my brain, there is a reason why I keep singing that.

SMITH. It's intentional.

L'MARCO. It's not deep all the time, but it's intentional, yes... I watched the ratings go up and I just kept the show the same. Maybe the audience changed a little bit, or maybe my confidence changed. I kept thinking: I'm sticking to my guns, so I'm performing even harder." I have no idea...

SMITH. How do you use your art to challenge these stereotypes? You stick to what you know and you maintain your authenticity, but how do you promote the self-love that you now feel? And can this self-love translate to other marginalized communities? Is that your intention or is it a by-product that you are OK with?

L'MARCO. I travel a lot; I am fortunate in that way. But I also worked hard and pushed past a lot of things to get overseas, to see other cultures. I am very adaptable, like a chameleon. I'm myself always, but if I'm at temple, I'll take off my shoes and submerge myself in your atmosphere, in another culture. I'm trying to do what I want people to do for me, to just come and try to put yourself in my shoes for a moment. When I went to Asia, I did a few shows in China. The people were quiet the whole time, and then at the end they went wild with shouts and applause! They gave me respect the whole time, even though they probably wanted to jump in on the inside, but it was their way of being respectful. Black people are different, and if I can get it, then other people should be able to correlate. I really just try to learn and not be ignorant.

SMITH. And is there a place where you performed and felt extremely welcome outside of the U.S. or does this mostly happen here?

L'MARCO. I would say Thailand. Being considered exotic is a very unique experience, to be somewhere where nobody has seen anybody like me, in real life. Sometimes senior citizens who have gone their whole lifetime without seeing an African American person or a Brown-skin person at all react as if I'm literally an oracle, it is the strangest thing. It's fascinating. How fortunate I am to have this career, to have pushed past police brutality, and pushed past stupid allegations just because I'm Black, past getting pushed to the end of the line because I'm too rough around the edges... or too gospel grit, not masculine enough, not feminine enough, too tall, too short... I think I'm probably more famous outside the U.S.

SMITH. On June 1, 2022, Lil Nas X tweeted: “I just feel like Black gay people have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top, motherfuckers try to pretend we are invisible.” What do you think about that?

L’MARCO. He is correct. I am living proof. He is one of the few who have been given a chance and he must be protected at all costs. I hope he keeps his head on straight and that the fame monster does not attack him... he’s seen enough of it to know. I’m older than him, so I’m looking at him, and I’m like “yes, bitch,” at least somebody is paying attention to somebody like me. He does not even know me, of course. But to know that there are other like-minded unicorns makes me secure in my Blackness and my queerness. Even if they don’t see me, they’re gonna see him. It’s a matter of representation. And unfortunately, in the Black community, just acknowledging that gay exists is important. People try to claim it’s not real. And even if you’re confused, it has nothing to do with my music... I’m pretty androgynous, I’ll “trade it up” and just “queen out” in the next performance so you don’t ever get used to me. I wake up and I feel a different kind of way each day and I’m inviting you on my ride, to do exactly what I’m doing, which is minding my business! And I really hope that more Black, gay and queer artists keep minding their business, keep being themselves, keep being outlandish, loud, defiant, saying, “how dare you?”

SMITH. How do you think that mainstream queer Black artists could support, encourage and empower other Black artists?

L’MARCO. Shout out! Shout out more indie artists! I post everybody, and I’m not even a huge celebrity, but if you’re a kid on the street and you are... [*imitating a silly performance*], I’m posting it. It is free, and most things of this nature disappear after 24 hours anyway, so what did it really do to me? But it can do something for you overnight. If we amplify these voices... I’m trying to amplify friends of mine, and new people. It’s not hard, but in the Black community, we have been fighting for everything for so long that we don’t know how to just share. Even at the top, they are fighting, because it’s so rare, it’s the first Black this, the first queer Black that. It’s the survival of the fittest. But you just keep making art and promoting it for each other, selling out pride and posting in each other’s story, it becomes a trend. Promote your music and it doesn’t matter who you sleep with, tell people to mind their business, thank you.

SMITH. Do you have any role models or inspirations who have influenced your understanding of intersectionality and self-love?



L'MARCO. There's an artist named Tonéx in the gospel community, who now goes by B.Slade. I saw him get ostracized from gospel music, even though he was so anointed, selling out theaters, getting awards...I watched all of these people crying for that song. He moved you, with whatever he was going through, and got you wherever you needed it to be at that time. But suddenly he's wearing those pants too tight and they want to find out who he was sleeping with, and shocker – it's a dude! They don't want him anymore, but they still want that song... He went from gospel to secular and back to the gospel. Why do this? Why make people do this when you could just mind your business.

SMITH. During an interview, the poet Danez Smith said that, even though they have a political mind, they hated having their poetry reduced to a form of activism. Are your songs and performances a form of activism?

L'MARCO. I'd like to think of it more as a movement. Activism stresses me out. I really try to be an example, you know? I do show up to the rallies, because obviously there is strength in numbers, but I also try to implement that in my daily life, and in my songs of liberation and self-exploration. Everything starts at home.

SMITH. S Queer Black people come out and see you perform and you're singing James Brown and Prince in one show... Do you think that that in itself is a form of activism?

L'MARCO. I mean, sure, if me acting like myself is activism, then yes, especially since most people are not themselves. But move carefreely, if you want to wear this kind of clothes and sing in a dive bar... I will go into a redneck bar and sing country music. I will meet you where you're at, and respect the culture, if you will listen to me. So, my activism is me being myself. My freedom and fearlessness on stage is my "activism." I have a Rosa Parks mentality, I have a Harriett Tubman mentality, gun in the face to the slave. If you're not coming with me, you're dying right here. Let's go. I'm moving. So come with me. I'm being free right now. Yes, I'm uncomfortable, yes, I see everybody staring at me, yes, I hear the whispers. I don't want to make me sound all high and mighty like I got my shit together. But I *also* know that I hated myself at one time and I almost took myself out, and you had nothing to do with that. What you thought about me was the least of my worries. The fact that I didn't think that I could trust myself to talk to you was even more heinous in my eyes.

SMITH. And do you think that this person, who almost took their life, still shows up in your performances today?

L'MARCO. Yes, he is a survivor. When those pills did not work, I promised myself, "God... if these pills reverse right now as I feel them shutting me down, I will never take another day for granted." It was a bad day, one of those storms people talk about, one of those lows, I'll acknowledge and call it for what it is. The voice says, "take yourself out, nobody can understand you, you're too this, you're too that...you are kind of famous, but your career should be here by now..." woah woah woah! Time out everybody. I say it on my record, if I'm gonna believe what everyone else says about me, why wouldn't I believe what I say about me? So: I'm dope, I'm a superstar, I'm attractive, even when I don't feel like it, fuck it! My music matters. Somebody in Indonesia is listening to it, even if it's just one person So, the silver lining is that feeling that low taught me that everything is fake, orchestrated. I realized the only person that is setting me apart is me. Now I can go to the hood and be natural, and figure out a way to reach people who can't understand me. We always want to be ourselves so much that we are missing each other, we don't know how to fall back and be "everybody."

SMITH. How do you envision the future of queer Black artists and what role do you believe they can play?

L'MARCO. I see queer Black artists taking over! It's already happening. Vogue is poppin' all of a sudden, everybody cares about the Black queer experience, whether they picked it up on *RuPaul Drag's Race* or like RuPaul, actually know where the phrases are from, it's reaching across the world. "The House of this," "the House of that..." They did not want the slaves to speak, they did not want the slaves to sing, because if anybody heard your song, they would know you were up to something, and now [*beatboxing*] the Afrobeat is everywhere. It's like the BLM movement: it has just been illuminated, but it was always there. The Black queer experience has always been there. Everybody is invited, but who turned the light on at the party? You can come to the cookout, but let's give honor to the runners who put the lights on.

SMITH. What about your role in this future?

L'MARCO. I exist, I've existed. I've already put myself out there. I'm a part of the Black and queer experiences, I'm a part of gay history, and I'm making sure that it stays alive, because somebody will always say [*sings his song*], "I heard that the word on the street is that I'm the word on the street." There will always be someone like me. I was influenced by what I've heard, so how can I do that for people, how can I give them the chance people that influenced me gave to me? I

know there are spaces I can get in that the drag queens can't get into. I can wear a suit and tie and go to a gala and sing for the president [*singing*] and be distinguished, and then I show up as my authentic self and still inspire the people that are watching.

SMITH. If you were one word, what would you be?

L'MARCO. Aware. I am aware that I don't know most things, but I'm taking it one day at a time. What I need to know, I will know. And that alone impacts my Blackness, my queerness, my music, my religion. I'm aware that there are a lot of people who believe different things about me.

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Wrapping up our chat, L'Marco and I headed to the Monster Bar in the Village, where he joined the pianist to give an impromptu rendition of Bill Withers' classic, "A Lovely Day." A few months later, L'Marco communicated to me via Instagram, sharing, "I'm in love with this current era I'm in. It's very revitalizing, even for me, to see the progress I've made. The quality of this new tour is an astonishing event to me, considering I self-produced the whole thing, from having the show transcribed for an orchestra to making audio/lighting cues."

While discussing his catalog of songs, L'Marco singled out "Get There" for the impact it has on people, "that's the whole reason I'm in the music business." The lyrics of "Get There" reflect L'Marco's approach to life: "Don't get stuck in life / you just keep on moving / [...] let yourself feel, that's when you truly become aware / and figure out how to get there, / cause you ain't never gonna get there, until you get there..." A testament to resilience for a broader narrative within the Black and queer communities, his lyrics encourage acceptance of one's feelings and realities, an essential first step towards progress and self-love. The journey itself is the achievement.

# Young M.A: Queering Blackness in the Classroom

EMILIE SOUYRI

In 2021, I started teaching a class entitled “Black, Brown and queer voices in the U.S.” to freshmen, at the university Côte d’Azur in France where I set off to tackle key historical and social issues in the country through hip hop culture in general and rap music in particular. Although I have not grown listening to rap and have never been a b-girl, my research on critical pedagogy led me to hip hop education. I come from a background that greatly differs from that of most of my students. I am a middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, white, French woman who grew up in a family of teachers and scholars. Young M.A whose own trajectory is, in some ways, much closer to theirs than mine appeared as a great means for me to bridge that gap. Nevertheless, the question remains: am I legitimate in teaching about her?

I subscribe with Audre Lorde’s idea voiced in the “Transformation of Silence into Action” (1977 in Lorde 2007), that for queer black women’s work to gain visibility, white women like me cannot use the excuse of not having the same life experience to refuse to learn and then teach about them. Because along with scholars like Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, I question the coloniality of knowledge<sup>1</sup> imposed by colonial European powers (Quijano), it was imperative for me to explore the work of an artist that my own social and geographical background had not groomed me to appreciate. Moreover, at a time when in France 78 % of young people under 24 listen to rap music (Richard and Bernier) and in the U.S. surveys report that half the population

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<sup>1</sup> Quijano developed the concept of “coloniality of knowledge” in a 2007 article where he explained that colonial European powers have defined the systems of knowledge of colonized nations as inherently inferior, and less rational than that of the colonizer. This posture helps delegitimize non-Eurocentric knowledge, culture and art and explains why they are recurrently invisibilized in curricula, methodologies, and scholarship.

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believes that America, as it is today, is best represented by rap (Nguyen), this is clearly a genre that cannot be overlooked in education. Furthermore, in the language department where I teach, a sizable part of the student body openly identifies with the LGBTQ+ community while another, sometime overlapping, large part of the cohort is racialized. Out of 212 students who were free to tackle any rapper and debunk any myth they wanted about hip hop in a written assignment that I gave them last semester, 12.7 % chose to discuss homophobia, homosexuality or queerbaiting in U.S. rap. Along with numerous educators (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell; McLaren; Lamont-Hill, Alim et. al. 2023) I believe that since hip hop culture is part of our students lives, it needs to be engaged with in school settings. The same goes for the LGBTQ+ community. Queer themes and queer of color critics must be part of the material we look at when trying to teach composition, literature, sociology, or history for instance. Finally, to me, Young M.A was particularly interesting because unlike early queer rappers like Joan Grae, or Queen Pen who have been discussed by scholars already, she is commercially successful. The 30-year-old, New York rapper who rejects gender labels has been anointed by Beyoncé, opening on her Formation World Tour in October 2016. She made it to the “30 Under 30” *Forbes* list in 2018 and she is a hardcore rapper who makes no secret of her sexual preference for black women: “Light skin, dark skin, I love me some black women” (“Tip the Surgeon,” single, M.A music, 2022).

In music and popular culture in general, the past 5 to 10 years have seen a riptide of change. Rapper, singer, and songwriter Young Thug (over 30 million listeners on Spotify), who, as I write, is being tried on gang-related charges, has been known for dressing in women's clothes since 2015; Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny (over 74 million monthly listeners) has been a vocal LGBTQ+ ally since 2016. Lil Nas X (over 32 million listeners) boisterously portrayed gay aesthetics in his 2021 hit “Industry Baby” and Beyoncé (over 54 million listeners) proudly honored “black queer culture in Renaissance” (Chery). As *Rolling Stone* magazine underlined too, “Per Gallup, the share of American adults who identify outside of heterosexuality doubled from 3.5 percent to 7.1 percent between 2012 and 2022, with 21 percent of Gen Z adults landing on the LGBTQ spectrum.” Similarly, in France, an increasing share of the population freely identifies as LGBTQ+. While 22% of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQ+, only 12% of Millennials do so (*Le Figaro*).

Despite accusations of queerbaiting for some rappers on the one hand and virulent legislative pushback against the LGBTQ+ community in certain conservative states in the United States on the other (Yang), music,

particularly rap, seems to be more inclusive than ever and lightyears away from the career breaking homophobia Marc Lamont Hill described in his 2009 article or even from Snoop Doggs' 2013 statement that "[Homosexuality is] acceptable in the singing world, but in the rap world I don't know if it will ever be acceptable because rap is so masculine." Even though Katorah Kasanova Marrero's (M.A's birth name) visibility has substantially diminished due to a protracted battle with alcohol addiction, she was still featured on Eminem's 2020 song "Unaccommodating" (*Music to Be Murdered By*, Shady Records, Aftermath Entertainment and Interscope Records). With this featuring, Eminem's long track record of homophobic lyrics was apparently disowned signaling yet again a profound change in the culture. But how profound?

How does Young M.A queer blackness, and how does studying her in class helps us quare<sup>2</sup> pedagogy? While the *New Yorker* rejoiced at the fact that she is "challeng[ing] regressive ideas about sexuality and gender presentation," others like non-binary black cultural critic Hunter Ashleigh Shackelford still consider her as "problematic as fuck". Indeed, misogynistic clichés still pervade her music. This paper is meant to help equip teachers like me who are newcomers to the hip-hop world with arguments to tease out the apparent paradox that M.A represents. First, I explain how toxic masculinity in hardcore rap functions as a shield allowing the artist to establish her credibility in a context where vulnerability can amount to a death sentence. Second, I highlight how through parody and contradictions, M.A reveals the smokescreen of toxic masculinity to be a way of marooning her black queer identity away from the white gaze. Finally, I highlight the challenges of discussing these complex issues in class.

## The Shield of Toxic Masculinity

At first sight, M.A seems to be joyously buying into the general atmosphere of toxic masculinity prevailing on the hardcore rap scene. Women or more specifically "hoes, skeezers, thotianas, thotties or treeshs" (slurs referring to immoral women with an overblown pride for their looks) are routinely dehumanized. They are assimilated to cars in "Thotiana," and the Victorian moral condemnation of their intense sexual activity is reasserted:

Before I buy a bitch I need to know her mileage (Facts)

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<sup>2</sup> Quare is a term that blends queer and black (Johnson) for which you will find a further definition in the introduction to this volume.

50K or more she a thotiana (Yeah, that's a thot)  
 And every nigga drive her (Skrt)  
 No, no, no that's a nada (No-no) (in "Thotiana" remix of Blueface's  
 track, M.A music, 2019)

M.A "disses" and rejects those women that she still consumes. She vilifies their past sexual life when hers is portrayed as sexual prowess all the while reactivating the cliché of the untrustworthy sexual temptress:

When I fuck a thot, I keep my socks on (Ooh, ooh, ooh)  
 Never trust a thot, I keep my eye on her (I see you) (in "Savage  
 mode", *Red Flu* EP, M.A music 2020)

M.A is apparently not above mixing sexism and homophobia:

Y'all niggas got a clitoris  
 Niggas must be on they period  
 Niggas must be bi-curious (in "Body Bag", single, MA music 2015)  
 Fuck your man, he a dick eater (Yeah, hoe) (in "Don Diva" ft Rubi  
 Rose, *Off the Yak*, M.A music, 2021)

Xinling Li, quoting Andrew Read's analysis of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, explains that "men's sense of freedom under capitalism 'involves mastery over subjugated others' which entails that black<sup>3</sup> men ought 'to seek total mastery over the only people they are in position to dominate: black women'" (Li 19; Read 535). Young M.A's sexism fits into this capitalistic framework where one's sense of identity is determined by their capacity to dominate someone else. The category of the "thot" allows the lesbian rapper to present herself as superior, as a "winner." This imagery is undoubtedly pervasive in M.A's work. Other female rappers resort to similar hierarchies in their music but at the bottom of the food chain, we no longer find the "thot" or "hoe," who turns into a "lit thot" in Cardi B's music for instance (see her the eponymous song on the *Gangsta Bitch* album, 2016), but the "broke nigga" who is the object of unadulterated condemnation and contempt.

In a punchline that fuses the two objects of contempt together, Young M.A raps in "Foreign" (2019): "Broke nigga, ho nigga, ho nigga, broke nigga, ho nigga, leave the room." There is reason to believe here that rather than misogyny, what is at stake is a classist vision where financial success is the ultimate goal because it is seen as establishing credibility and respectability. When M.A invites Rubi Rose, a femme presenting female rapper to feature on "Don Diva," Rose displays the very same braggadocio as M.A: "I switch up my niggas like I switch up my flows (Switch)." Rose intertwines the

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<sup>3</sup> Li does not capitalize Black. I do. See Columbia School of Journalism for the rationale. <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php> (last retrieved 02.21.24).

expressions of sexual prowess and vocal ability, suggesting that boasts about sexual performance often serve as metaphors for the ostentatious display of artistic talent. Much more prominent female heterosexual rappers like Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, Nicki Minaj, or The City Girls all participate in the same trend. Admittedly, the highly standardized creative process in rap music (the aesthetics norms and conventions of braggadocio, ego trippin' tropes and others) should predominantly be understood as the product of the paradigm in which these artists evolve rather than as straightforward confessions, despite the repeated authenticity claims to “keep it real” (Edwards; Nielson and Dennis). Nevertheless, identifying the tropes does little to alleviate the pressure of the sexist (or sexually toxic) undertones that the pervasive expression of a cut-throat, transactional vision of sexuality entails. Furthermore, the sexual braggadocio and recurring putting down of the hypersexualized, dehumanized “thot” does not in any way help further the cause of women (nor does the equally reductive, presence of the ride-or-die loyal girlfriend for that matter—in “Hitta,” *Her Story in the Making*, M.A music, 2019). But behind those stereotypes lies the urge to establish one’s street credibility in the game through a masculine of center aura. Even the hyperfeminine Nicki Minaj “lyrically reproduces tropes of Black masculine rap authenticity in order to position herself as an authentic hip hop subject” as ethnomusicologist Lauron Kehrer explained. And while Minaj recurrently reduces men to sexual objects in her songs, is the somewhat paranoid putting down of the other sex simply an expression of how women establish themselves in a ruthless capitalist world, or does it signal a collapse of traditional gender norms?

Leading hip hop feminist Joan Morgan, in her seminal essay “When Chickenheads come Home to Roost” published in 1999, suggested that what goes around comes around and that somehow women consent to that exploitation. She explained that if “women love hip hop—as sexist as it is—is ’cuz all that in-yo-face testosterone makes our nipples hard.” But then she elaborates, explaining that women can both enjoy and reject what is at play here. In other words, women can be “fuck[ing] with the grays” (34). What is interesting with Young M.A is that when it comes to sexually explicit lyrics, it is clearly not the testosterone that turns women on. The heterosexual male gaze is obliterated with a splash of what she calls “carrot juice” in “BIG” (on *Her Story in the Making*, M.A music, 2019). She unambiguously wants to give oral sex as much as she wants to receive it. As Shackelford writes: “This is a black queer woman saying that head is imperative to her sexual pleasure. This is radical as fuck because she also doesn’t pretend or perform around the



desire for cis-het men's dicks." Despite her unashamed vision of queer sexual pleasure, is Young M.A adopting the codes of oppressive masculinity to both be successful and escape her own condition as a woman, just like some people belonging to minorities have embraced codes of white supremacy to avoid being associated with Black people?

This overhanging gaze that we are tempted to adopt as academics here is problematic because it implies that the object of our research is incapable of any self-reflection or contextualization. We would be suggesting that even as a queer rapper, M.A can't see how homophobic and sexist she is, that she can't help but being conditioned by the heteronormative injunctions surrounding her. Concluding the discussion here fails to account for the complexity of the artist and her context. A further dive into Young M.A's discography highlights that she is somehow rather paying her dues, paying, so to speak, an entry fee to the hardcore rap game. She apparently gives in to the commercialization, consumption and ultimate annihilation of Black female bodies while at the same time introducing queer sexuality as a norm but also subscribing to the glorification of independent women in "Bad Bitch Anthem" (*Red Flu* EP, MA music, 2020) and "NNAN" (*Her Story in the Making*, MA music, 2019), and singing about the importance of female sexual pleasure "Angels vs Demons" (*Red Flu* EP, MA music, 2020) (particularly as she raps, "But when I fucked, I always made sure they actually came"), all the while even enrolling 50 Cent to support her dildo business during the pandemic on Twitter in April 2020.

By avoiding the head-on confrontation that a more conscious type of rap would induce, she normalizes girl on girl sexuality, sex positivity and the ideal of the entrepreneurial independent black woman. She also gets heterosexual cis men like no other than 50 Cent to engage in the queering of blackness. His 2003 "P.I.M.P" anthem had been widely attacked by black feminists but it took M.A's deft intervention to move him (on *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, Shady, Aftermath, Interscope). Thanks to her, men like him are screaming at the top of their lungs how they want to "please" women or how they want "carrot juice." When you know that as recently as 2018, 26 million monthly listeners strong DJ Khaled declared he would never give oral sex to a woman, there is clearly progress in the multiplication of voices like M.A's. In other words, Marrero is subversive to hardcore rap but is she subversive enough to challenge the imperative of domination of the other of the capitalistic paradigm?

## Marooning Queer Blackness

The pervasiveness of sexist themes and slurs works as a decoy, sending away the casual listener while true fans know better than to call her homophobic when they listen to her rap: “Fuck your man, he a dick eater (Yeah, hoe) / You be cheatin’, I be cheatin’ but I’m the big cheater (I’m a hoe)” (in “Don Diva” *Off the Yak*, M.A music). The anti-gay slur is out but if she calls herself a hoe, if she’s “the big cheater” for calling him a “dick eater,” who is really homophobic? “You be cheatin’, I be cheatin’...” in other words, everybody in the rap game partakes in cheatin’ queer people by using the slurs. The rhyme is there for a reason. This pattern of reversals, decoys and contradictions is everywhere in her work and her words, and it is in that sense that she is queering blackness. She continuously disrupts the classical sexist and homophobic tropes other rappers use. In “BIG,” she parodies the seminal gangsta rapper through her use of falsetto when she sings:

Ooh, ooh  
 That’s that big drip (That’s that big drip)  
 Big wrist (Ooh)  
 Big body, big whips (Ooh)  
 Big Glockes (Ooh)  
 Big guap, big notch (Ooh)  
 Big goons (Ooh)  
 Small problems, big moves

The braggadocio of rappers who turn small problems into big moves is here made to sound ridiculous, just like rappers who overexpose the female body: the two black women twerking and frolicking in a kid’s pool in the “BIG” video being quite obviously a spoof of the recurring stereotype of the black Jezebel (Hill Collins). To top it up, she also engages in a nursery-rhyme like performing of the actions (flexing her muscles), while all characters in her video joyfully smoke marijuana.

Furthermore, while Young M.A certainly does not belong to the tradition of “conscious rappers” who urged black people to “fight the power” like Public Enemy in 1989, she still challenges the notion that rappers’ lyrics should be taken at face value. Culture critic Chris Vognar wrote “it’s a lot easier to sell a smoking gat or a model’s jiggling anatomy than to celebrate humor [in hip hop].” Looking at rap lyrics literally and failing to see the parody, satire, double-entendre, and other literary devices in it reflects a racist trend that has been documented repeatedly in recent years in the U.S., UK, France and elsewhere (Nielson and Dennis; Fatsis; Owusu-Bempah; Carinos Vasquez 2022).

For instance, in “Kold World” (*Her Story in the Making*, M.A music, 2019) Young M.A raps: “It’s a cold world, brr-brr, buy fur.” In pure Marie-Antoinette style, she enjoins listeners to buy the most ostentatious and priciest possible winter clothing. Obviously, since she grew up poor herself, she knows at least part of her audience is made up of people who are struggling to afford heating their homes. In a classic form of satire, she is ventriloquizing the heartless message that the elite passes on to the poor and the transactional nature of all relationships developing under this paradigm:

You give me some coochie, I might pay your rent (Ooh)  
 Uh, throw you out the condo if you throw a fit (Get out there) (In  
 “Kold World”)

The satire here works to appropriate the prejudice and exorcize it. Miles White underlined a similar phenomenon of reappropriation and subversion of the hardcore thug cliché by Ice Cube who “wields the black male body as a weapon of retribution and transgression, turning centuries of ambivalence, fear, and derision back on his tormentors.” Distinguishing between satire and glamorization of either the hardcore thug or the heartless capitalist may appear hard to do at times, but, in both Ice Cube’s and Young M.A’s cases, reading keys are dropped elsewhere in the music. Ice Cube, as White underlines, unveils where he really stands when he raps:

You wanna sweep a nigga like me up under the rug  
 Kicking shit called street knowledge.  
 Why more niggas in the pen than in college?

Likewise certain punchlines, or songs even, in Young M.A’s music function as shibboleths. “Open Scars” confirms her position on material wealth: “I don’t need material shit, my aura could shine too” (“Open Scars” single, M.A music 2023).

In another recent release “Tip the Surgeon” (single, M.A music, 2022), at first sight, she appears to be adhering to a particularly sexist worldview. She is a sugar daddy bragging about how she pays for her lover’s plastic surgery while condescendingly patting a black twerking woman’s derriere on screen but then she raps: “Invest in her business, don’t buy her a Birkin”. And if that was not clear enough, the video ends with this white on black statement: “Being natural isn’t a statement; it’s the closest thing you can get to being yourself.” With that, she clearly undermines the previous sugar daddy persona she was embodying. But as a savvy businesswoman, M.A knows that the superficial visual and musical representation of misogyny sells. In “OOOUU” (*Herstory*, M.A music, 2017), the lyrics that turned the song into an anthem were: “You call her Stephanie (You call her huh?) I call her Headphanie.”

These words reduced the woman named Stephanie here to the ill-famed status of chickenhead (the bobbing motion of the chicken calling attention to the similar movement performed in oral sex) while delighting the crowds. The pun sounds cheap to a tired feminist audience but a careful dive into the rest of her discography reveals a real aptitude in subverting the codes of toxic masculinity. While her message never goes so far as to pleading for an ascetic or anticapitalistic re-envisioning of the world, she nevertheless proves she is not duped by the hyper consumeristic and hyper masculinist messages surrounding her. The parody and satire in Young M.A.'s work prove Joan Morgan's point when she highlighted that a lot of rap lyrics were "depression masquerading as machismo" (73). Recently, J. Cole confirmed the idea when in the same song he forcefully rapped "I'm counting my bullets, I'm loading my clips" and undid the statement in the melancholy chorus with "Pistol in your hand don't make you real" ("Middle Child" on his eponymous album, Dreamville Records, 2019).

Once Young M.A. is done with the masquerade, the tone shifts substantially. In "Yak Thoughts" the penultimate song on her 2020 eponymous album, she unbosoms herself. Alcohol works as a disinhibitor (Yak standing for Cognac, rappers' drink of choice since the 1990s). Paranoia, loneliness, depression, and a fear of economic downfall, alcohol addiction: she is amazingly straightforward and raw. The loss of her brother to gang violence and mental health issues are also centered in the song. She unveils the pain and despair behind the masquerade:

Hopin' for hope, but I'm hopeless  
 Too much distractions, I'm losin' my focus  
 Too much pain, could barely notice the beauty in things

Her penultimate song to date, "Open Scars" (December 2023) documents her come back from a mental health breakdown and it is even more explicit:

Smilin' was a disguise, it was tears under that mask  
 Suffocatin' inside for years under that mask  
 No regrets 'cause when I lost love, I found peace  
 When I finally dug deep, nigga, I found a beast

Puerto Rican scholar Pedro Lebrón Ortiz recently contended that "hip hop provides a space in which dehumanized subjects can affirm their humanity but also establish a sense of *self* that is distinct from 'measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'" as W.E.B. Du Bois put it in *The Souls of Black Folk*, almost 120 years ago. "As such", Lebrón Ortiz explains, "hip hop can be interpreted in a broad sense as a *palenque*, or maroon town" (83). But rather than considering hip hop in

general as a maroon town, it might be more accurate to say that artists like M.A are hiding those spaces of freedom of expression within their music.

Interestingly, while M.A questions her ability to have healthy relationships with women, while she even confesses her dismay with the current state of U.S. politics (“The government, ain’t no controllin’ it,” in “Yak Thoughts”), the final litany she voices is one that reasserts the need for economic survival:

I’m never goin’  
 Never go broke again  
 Can never lose (Can never lose)  
 Told ’em, “I can never lose” (Told ’em, “I can never lose”)  
 Told ’em, “I can never lose” (Told ’em, “I can never lose”)  
 Told ’em, “I can never lose” (Told ’em, “I can never lose”)  
 Can never lose (Can never lose)

The ultimate fear for M.A is that of going “broke again.” “Yak Thoughts” is M.A’s maroon town where she can completely bare her soul and admit the most primal fear of poverty. But the reason why she can strip her music and video of the glamorizing and posturing demanded by the codes of a toxic masculinity in a capitalistic world, the very codes that gave her credibility in the game, is precisely because the rest of her music is never as explicitly raw, vulnerable and honest. She either hides her truth behind conflicting statements as is the case in “Tip the Surgeon” (2022), behind parody just like in “BIG” (2019), or in satire in “Kold World” (2019). Those various outlets for a more complex narrative of herself are made possible because on songs like “Off the Yak,” that immediately follows “Yak Thoughts” and concludes her album (2021), she puts her guard back up. When she’s weaned of the disinhibiting effect of alcohol (“off the cognac”), she seems to be telling us that she must go back to the holy trinity of “guns, hoes and bros” as a matter of survival.

Pussy, just know that we got it (Grr)  
 Them niggas was tryin’ to rob me  
 My shooter, he cocked it and popped it (Grr, baow)

Appearing aggressive, and trigger-happy here, is the ultimate camouflage that allowed her to be unfiltered in the previous song. With “Open Scars,” she goes closer to fully shedding the camouflage when she raps the final punchline:

Heal first, find peace, find keys, mind free  
 First step find God, next step find me

And once again puts the guard back up with “Watch (Still Kween)” (single, January 2024, M.A music, released on Spotify under another name: Red Lyfe Kween). Where she calls “Open Scars” an “interlude” and presses the audience to “listen to the music.”

None of you rappers can fuck wit' me  
 I'm her, I'm him, I'm shim, not them  
 She does her own kind of queer.

### Conclusion: Queering Blackness When Studying M.A

Parents do not want their children listening to [rap], and educators do not see the educational value in [rap]. I believe that the value resides in the critique (Pough 92-3)

That comment, written twenty years ago, is no longer valid. First, because there is now a vast literature in the U.S. about how and why hip hop can be leveraged at school. Second, because there is a discreet number of teachers who have leveraged it quite positively in the U.S., the UK, or France (Morrel and Duncan-Andrade; Lamont Hill and Petchauer; Chetty and Turner; Love 2017; Souyri). Finally, the value of hip hop is not solely in the critique and probably never has been. While unpacking the contradictions between the pleasure queer Black youth and others may get from hip hop and the pain hip hop doles out to them does matter; and while we need to build more research to guide teachers through the paradoxes and support them when they help students “fuck with the grays” to use Joan Morgan’s expression again, it is also crucial we, as teachers, keep paying attention to what our students are listening to.

The rap genre has been frequently subjected to an array of generalist reductions that often have been produced by people who seem to have refrained from listening to the emerging artists of the new generation. When renowned race scholar Paul Gilroy argued that “[t]he counter-cultural voice of black Atlantic popular music [and rap in particular] has faded out” (2010: 121, 124; and 2000: 179-182), one is tempted to ask whether he was paying any attention since he missed Dead Prez, Common, Nas, The Roots, Missy Elliott, and countless others. In his defense, he is not the first teacher (or even rapper) who “dissed” younger generations of artists. Ismaël Metis, a French rapper and educator I work with, underlined how much of an epiphany it was for him to realize that rejecting his students’ musical tastes would lead him nowhere pedagogically speaking (Souyri). This said, misgivings about the apolitical stance of gangsta rappers’ exaggerated parodies still apply to certain songs. As Peter McLaren wrote in 1999:

when the gangsta rapper undertakes a “parodic hyperbolization” [...] of the subjugated black man—in the figure of the gangsta with a gun –

but does not connect it to a larger political project of liberation, this may rupture the image of the subjugated black subject but fail to unsettle the exploitative relations connected to white supremacist patriarchal capitalism. By not connecting its subversion to a larger politics of possibility, gangsta rap runs the risk of ironizing its own act of subversion and parodying its own performance of dissent in such an I-don't-give-a-fuck fashion that, rather than erode dominant social relations of exploitation and subjugation, it may actually reinforce them. (54)

McLaren may have a point but then again, if rappers reinforce stereotypes when they resort to parody, is that because they are unaware of what they are doing? A somewhat arrogant academic gaze can lead us to believe that, but it can also then easily prevent us from paying attention to the music in its elusive vastness and complexity. Such complexity should prevent us from trying to placate a Manichean vision distinguishing between sexist and feminist rappers, politically conscious and politically inept artists because at the end of the day they're rarely fully one or the other.

Bettina Love, who is a prominent hip hop education scholar today insisted ten year ago that "as a member of the Hip Hop generation, a Black woman, a lesbian," she was taught by male MCs, about what it means to grow up urban, angry, disenfranchised, and yet resilient, but it was female MCs like Lauryn Hill, Salt-N-Peppa, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte who taught her "to love [her] community and find [her] voice within the male bravado of rap and society at large" (Love 2012, 21). These artists surely have a lot to bring to the classroom but here again we must be wary of projecting our own experience and preferences or reaffirming traditional binaries dividing up female and male MCs, conscious and gangsta rap. An artist like Young M.A is particularly interesting in that respect. Her pervasive use of double entendre and contradictions forces us to steer clear of any hasty judgement and helps students and teachers alike interrogate complexity and challenge the fast paced, mindless consumption of rap music that prevails nowadays.

Finally, as white teachers, we need to be mindful that too often whiteness has been understood as giving us the "right to determine meaning" as Cheryl Harris insisted (1762). In other words, when discussing M.A's tracks with our students we cannot impose our interpretation on them but can only strive to give them interpretation tools, concepts that they can then use, challenge, or dismantle. Finally, while not all LGBTQ+ kids listen to hip hop, if Patricia Hill Collins is still right that "for Black and Latino youth who have been denied high-quality educations, school is no longer the place where they learn

literacy and politics. Rather, for many, mass media has become their classroom” (2006, 191), then we need to learn from Instagram and TikTok pros like Young M.A, Lala&ce, Janelle Monáe, and others. In other words, we need to follow our students’ lead because they are the ones who are queering blackness and changing the game now.

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# “I Never Hesitated”: A Quare Analysis of Rap Non-Binary Identity in Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* Interview

MELVIN L. WILLIAMS AND CHRISTIN M. SMITH

On July 16, 2022, Grammy-nominated, Philadelphia rapper Symere “Lil Uzi Vert” Woods trended online after quietly changing their Instagram bio pronouns from he/him to they/them; the action prompted fans and media outlets to believe the rapper had seemingly come out as non-binary (Draughorne). “Nonbinary” is an umbrella term within a broad spectrum of gender diversity, covers many identities (e.g., a-gender, bi-gender, post-gender, gender-queer, and gender fluid), and indicates an overall nonconformity to gender stereotypes (Vijlbrieff et al.; Green and Maurer; Richards et al.). Occurring two days after International Non-Binary People’s Day (July 14), Lil Uzi Vert’s pronoun update ignited a slew of mixed reactions on social media, with some praising Lil Uzi Vert for presumably coming out as non-binary and other fans threatening them to change their pronouns back to he/him or risk losing their loyalty and musical support (Keith). The rapper’s problematic past also resurged in public discussions, as critics revisited their felony assault of ex-girlfriend Brittany Byrd, prior transphobic lyrics in their 2019 single “That’s a Rack,” and alleged Satan-worshipping musical themes and symbolisms (Johan).

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Despite being referenced as “officially the best non-binary rapper of all time” and a “representative of the LGBTQ+ community” by online fans, Lil Uzi Vert offered no public confirmation of a non-binary identity or statement regarding the pronoun change, rejected comment offers from media publications, and simply responded to a tweet posted by rapper Noah “Yeat” Smith with “Yo Yeat” when Yeat tweeted “Yo they” on July 17, 2022 (Draughorne). As an artist, Lil Uzi Vert combines androgynous fashion, imageries, and alter egos with facial piercings, eccentric hairstyles, and a melodic approach to rap music to cultivate media spectacles and public attention. Their music draws on emo, punk rock, Atlanta, Georgia trap, and Chicago, Illinois drill rap subgenre influences. Though Lil Uzi Vert fuses their visual imagery and musical selections with androgynous, genre-bending themes, lyrically, their music dually upholds rap’s normative ethos of cisgender identities, heteronormativity, misogyny, sexism, and violence towards women and LGBTQ+ communities while exploring darker themes of deception, drug addiction, loneliness, and loss of identity (Williams; Smiley).

Therefore, Lil Uzi Vert’s reticence to confirm a non-binary identity or explain their pronoun change caused many to speculate if the action was simply a public relations tactic to generate media coverage, troll fans, and promote their “surprise” SoundCloud exclusive extended play (EP), *Red & White* (Chudy). The EP was released shortly following media coverage of their Instagram pronoun update. Yet, their silence drew attention to an important fact that pronouns cannot be bijectively mapped to gender, for not all people who use they/them pronouns are non-binary, and not all non-binary people use they/them pronouns (Clarke). Still, the rapper’s pronouns change queered hip-hop’s privileging of cisgender, heteronormative, gender binaries and pronouns while opening discourses on non-binary hip-hop representations in popular culture.

After nearly a year of silence, fans and spectators alike were delighted when German magazine *032c* announced Lil Uzi Vert discussed their adopting of non-binary pronouns in a June 2023-released, Summer 2023, magazine series titled, “Culture Crisis: Therapies for the Confused.” Lil Uzi Vert was certainly not the first nor only popular musician to change their pronouns or come out as non-binary in recent years (e.g., Janelle Monáe, Halsey, Demi Lovato, Kehlani, Sam Smith), yet their *032c* interview served as a watershed moment for non-binary representations in hip-hop. Rarely had a non-binary rapper or one who publicly changed their pronouns from he/him to they/them attained Lil Uzi Vert’s rap commercial success and visibility. To date, Lil Uzi Vert has sold over 43

million records worldwide with two *Billboard 200* number-one albums and remains a profitable commodity in global popular music and rap (“Lil Uzi Vert Chart History”).

Rap remains an impoverished site for cultural exemplars of the racial, gendered, and sexual diversity that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) and non-binary rappers represent (Rabaka). Queerness is not associated with rap’s performative brand of Black heterosexual, misogynistic, violent masculinity. Throughout hip-hop’s fifty-year history, Black LGBTQ+ rappers faced industry discrimination and a presumed glass ceiling in the heteropatriarchal markets of hip-hop and rap music (Coleman and Cobb). Over the past twenty years, digital media increasingly permitted LGBTQ+ artists to circulate their music outside mainstream record labels, build global audiences independently, and attain major record label deals (Smalls, “Queer Hip-Hop”). While there exist noteworthy stories of LGBTQ+ artists earning rap success, most of those rappers have identified as bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or queer, not non-binary or transgender. Although the term “LGBTQ+” represents an oppressed group of people based on sexual or gender identities, grouping these identities often undermines significant differences among them and implies an equity that does not exist for non-binary and transgender people (Meyer; Rodríguez Rust). Such factors are highly significant when considering Lil Uzi Vert’s pronoun change, non-binary identity, and *032c* interview discourses.

There is a dearth of literature on the unique experiences of Black non-binary rap artists. This article redressed that lamentable scholarly shortcoming, for Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview offered insight into the intersectional experiences of a commercially successful, Black non-binary rapper. Recognizing such factors, the current study conducted a critical discourse analysis of Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c Magazine* interview to answer the following research question: How does Lil Uzi Vert use the *032c* interview to discuss their pronoun change decision and identity as a non-binary person and rapper? Framed by E. Patrick Johnson’s quare studies and Shanté Smalls’s hip-hop queer aesthetics theoretical frameworks in *Hip-Hop Heresies*, the authors examined Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview to interrogate their intersectional articulations of being Black, non-binary, and a rapper in a music genre hardcoded with gender binarism, heteropatriarchal misogyny, and queerphobia.

## Quare Studies and Hip-Hop's Queer Aesthetics

E. Patrick Johnson conceptualized quare studies to question the whiteness of mainstream queer theory and investigate LGBTQ+ people of color queer identities. As noted by Gloria Anzaldúa, the term “queer” has homogenized all “queer” people irrespective of class, gender, nation, or racial differences, while erasing multiple differences among queer people of color. Acknowledging intersectional voids, quare studies is concerned with the multiple oppressive systems impacting racialized queer communities and the complex intersections of racialized, gendered, and class knowledge(s) embedded in the material realities of LGBTQ+ people of color (Johnson). It also gives attention to the racialization of the bodies, experiences, and knowledge of non-binary people, transgendered people, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (Johnson).

Queer theory privileges white queerness to group all queer people as one (Anzaldúa). In addition, queer theory does not typically locate Blackness as queer when placed within American white, cisgender, hetero-patriarchal power structural contexts (Keeling). In *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Kara Keeling noted Black people are queer because of the relationship that Blackness and queerness share with American iconography. In this context, Blackness exists outside the parameters of whiteness and is deemed queer based on historic racial categorizations in globalizing capitalism and colonial narratives about the deviance of Black bodies (Keeling; Patil). Thus, Blackness is queer because it shifts and challenges material sociopolitical processes (Keeling).

One source of such shifting and challenging is the convergence of Blackness, sound, film, art, and musical cultures like hip-hop. Hip-hop is equally located outside of queerness and whiteness. As a counter-public sphere, its historical origins are rooted in 1970s postindustrial politics that economically marginalized and diminished social services in New York City for impoverished Black and Brown populations (Pough). From these political, material, and social conditions, hip-hop culture emerged as an alternative identity formation for African American and Afro-Caribbean youth that served to challenge the greater public sphere using body, technology, poetry, art, and oral history (Rose). Hip-hop artists reproduce narratives of heterosexuality, sexism, and homophobia that affirm that hip-hop's authenticity relies on Black cisgender, heterosexual, hypermasculine men (Smalls, “Queer Hip-Hop”).

Queerness is seen as counter to “authentic” hip-hop and the “authentic” rap performer, and its “authentic Blackness” is “linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations” and “the imperialism of heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia” (Yep and Elia 31). From this perspective, Keeling’s theorizing of Blackness and Black artistic cultures as queer is appropriate for an examination of Lil Uzi Vert’s discourses as a Black non-binary rapper because Black artists must operate inside of, outside of, and in opposition to a commodified, predominately white-owned entertainment industry that does not privilege Black non-binary hip-hop artists.

Acknowledging these industry politics, Shanté Smalls advanced queer aesthetics as a theoretical framework to examine the “productive tensions aesthetics introduces when paired with a Black artistic form like hip-hop” (*Hip-Hop Heresies* 4). From their perspective, queer aesthetics indexed “a propagative slippage between racial, sexual, and gender subject positions” that “sometimes cohered to already-in-place categories” and at other times yielded “less stable or less recognizable categories that lacked or evaded value as imposed by the state or the marketplace” (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies* 4). This queer aesthetics, whether conjoined with Black LGBTQ+ and non-binary bodies, “produced visual and sonic Black performing subjects who experimented with staid notions of bodily fungibility” and leveraged queer aesthetics as a normative category to assert their queer identities (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies* 4). Queer aesthetics and the use of quare studies are necessary when Black queer rap artists disrupt gender, racial, and sexual identities that hinge on the existence of whiteness and binary notions of existence (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies*). These theoretical frameworks aided the researchers in analyzing the queer temporality that foregrounded and underscored Black queer people and queer moments like Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview discussions of non-binarism.

## Non-Binary Gender Representations in Popular Culture, Music, and Rap

The history of non-binary gender representations in American popular culture is too vast to discuss comprehensively in this work, for non-binary media visibility includes self-identified non-binary people and content as well as media actors and content that are “read” as non-binary by non-binary fans and communities (McNabb). The visibility of non-binary people in popular culture remains a



contention point. While gender minorities have always called for more representation, in legacy media, the presence of non-binary people remains largely unacknowledged despite a longstanding presence of self-identified, non-binary celebrity figures and non-binary-related themes across all mass media genres and platforms (Erzepski). However, in recent years, non-binary celebrities and public figures achieved heightened popularity and visibility in popular culture (e.g., Asia Kate Dillon, Emma D'Arcy, Demi Lovato, JD Samson, Sam Smith, Janelle Monáe, Timothy LeDuc, Vico Ortiz), assisting in the presentation of gender diversity to global audiences and increasing representation (Willans).

Examining non-binary gender identities in popular culture, Charles McNabb noted three contributing factors to the increased visibility of non-binary gender identities in mass media and popular culture:

First, the Internet and social media in particular have extended the reach and impact of content dissemination. Second, greater numbers of nonbinary people are coming out, and in many cases, they are coming out at younger ages than previous generations. Finally, several celebrities have allied themselves with nonbinary politics or come out as nonbinary themselves. (55)

Non-binary identities are not new phenomena, yet the actual terminology as well as “coming out” as a non-binary person are still relatively new in Western popular culture and society (Yeadon-Lee). Increasingly, non-binary celebrities leverage the power of Internet and social media platforms to publicly express their gender identities to fans and followers before engaging media outlets for formal interviews. When celebrities come out online as non-binary, their narratives spark online trending topic discussions, mass media coverage and public interest, and integral societal discussions beyond the traditional gender system and hegemonic, mediated representations of gender (Willans). Further, they immediately draw attention and education to expansive forms of gender and sexuality that challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the public sphere (Martinez). Such discourses reveal how the celebrity is often a sign that embodies unique meanings for the majoritarian public, which “represent typical ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking in contemporary society that have been socially, culturally, and historically constructed” (Dyer 15-6). Under this prism, non-binary celebrities “articulate what it means to be a human being in contemporary society” (Dyer 7) and serve as “embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation” (Dyer 18).

Non-binary celebrities circulate as core textual fabrics on which non-binary identities become legible as recognizable subject positions within popular culture and society (Villarreal), yet they still face a difficult conundrum from industry peers and publics. On one hand, their online narratives create a zeitgeist within which society begins to not only acknowledge non-binary people's identities, but also to attempt to understand their complexities (Fiani and Han). On the other hand, gender non-binary celebrities (and non-celebrities) experience discrimination, intentional invalidation of their gender identities, misgendering, online harassment, sexuality questioning, stereotyping, and other forms of inequality in their attempts to navigate industry-specific politics and social perils related to a stigmatized gender identity (Davenport; Dev et al.). Emblematic of the challenges facing non-binary celebrities is Demi Lovato, who publicly readopted she/her pronouns in 2023 after announcing she was non-binary on Instagram in 2021 and detailed the social challenges of being a non-binary public figure (Irvin, "Janelle Monáe Explains"). The singer explained the decision in a 2023 *GQ Hype Spain* interview, "I constantly had to educate people and explain why I identified with those pronouns. It was absolutely exhausting" (Irvin, "Janelle Monáe Explains").

Nonetheless, non-binary celebrity coming out narratives still serve "as a biographical device to establish their public personae (or public facing identity) and self-brand, to build solidarity and trust with followers, and to set up a viable narrative canvas" (Abidin 615). Their discourses illustrate the ways in which the Internet operates as a safe space for non-binary celebrity and non-celebrity populations to disrupt and challenge gender binaries, create open spaces for non-binary media discourses and representations, and advance counternarratives about non-binary gender identity experiences and social stigmas (Paradis). Recognizing such factors, it is important to situate Lil Uzi Vert's online declaration of non-binary pronouns, non-binary identity, and *032c* interview discourses within the contexts of prior non-binary musician representations in popular music and rap.

Gender nonconformity is common in music, as musicians employ androgyny, camp sensibilities (e.g., parodic characters, ironic humor, extravagant aestheticism, and theatricality), and in some cases, cosplay and cross-dressing to gain algorithmic visibility on digital media, fans, commercial success, and sustained public interest (Figueroa). In popular music, musicians, like David Bowie, Mick Jagger, and Prince, transgressed gender through androgynous style

choices, adoption of several personas, and the inclusion of gender-fluid and non-binary themes in their music (McNabb). Although these artists did not identify as non-binary, there exists a lineage of popular musicians who self-identified as non-binary and utilized media interviews and social media platforms to share their experiences. For example, British singer Sam Smith came out as “non-binary genderqueer” in a 2019 interview with actress Jameela Jamil (Moore). When asked about the reasoning behind their decision, Smith declared:

When I saw the words “non-binary” and “genderqueer” and I read into it and I heard this people speaking, I was like “Fuck, that’s me.” Non-binary genderqueer is that you do not identify in a gender. You are a mixture of different things, you are your own special creation. That’s how I take it.

(Moore)

Other popular non-binary musicians include Gerald Way of My Chemical Romance, G-Flip, Halsey, Kehlani, King Princess, Miley Cyrus, and Shamir to name a few. Hip-hop has also witnessed its fair share of non-binary artists. Non-binary rappers—such as Angel Haze, M(x) Blouse, Mykki Blanco, and Princess Nokia—advanced musical themes and rap identities outside of privileged gender binary expressions in the genre, yet their visibility rarely crossed over to mass audiences and were confined to underground audiences at best (Amber; McNabb). The relegation of non-binary rap artists to underground markets is reflective of popular music and rap’s longstanding complicated relationship with queerness and the limited spaces for Black queer bodies in their mainstream mediums (Taylor).

Perhaps the most prominent non-binary hip-hop musician is rapper and singer Janelle Monáe. On January 10, 2020, Monáe tweeted the hashtag #IAmNonBinary, and like Lil Uzi Vert’s Instagram pronoun change, sparked non-binary identity allegations and trended across social media platforms (Schild). After a year of subtle interview mentions about the tweet and public speculation, Monáe came out as non-binary on the Facebook series *Red Table Talk*, stating, “I’m non-binary, so I just don’t see myself, solely...I feel like God is so much bigger than the ‘he’ or the ‘she.’ And if I am from God, I am everything” (Street). Since coming out as non-binary, Monáe interviewed with various media platforms (e.g., *The Breakfast Club*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Rolling Stone Magazine*), sharing their experiences as a Black non-binary person, discussing pronoun preferences, and dispelling social stigmas about non-binary populations (Irvin, “Demi Lovato”).

Based on this history of non-binary musician representations, Lil Uzi Vert's use of social media to publicly adopt non-binary pronouns and discuss them in the *032c* interview bear significance for three reasons. First, like other high-profile, non-binary musicians (i.e., Demi Lovato, Janelle Monáe, Sam Smith), Lil Uzi Vert announced their adoption of non-binary pronouns first online before deciding to self-identify (or not self-identify) as non-binary in a highly anticipated media interview. Second, LGBTQ+ celebrities (e.g., Caitlyn Jenner, David Bowie, Ellen DeGeneres, Frank Ocean, Janis Ian) historically utilized media interviews as rhetorical tools to come out, clarify gender and sexual identities to the public, offer humanizing stories of LGBTQ+ lived experiences, and cultivate favorable attitudes towards non-celebrity LGBTQ+ individuals and issues (Miller and Behm-Morawitz). Third, Lil Uzi Vert operates in a music genre hardcoded with gender binarism, heteropatriarchal misogyny, and queerphobia. When a rapper comes out as LGBTQ+ in any identity form, it bears sharp consequences, for queerness undermines the level of authenticity, street credibility, and model of cisgender, heteropatriarchal masculinity needed to attain success in hip-hop and rap (Shimeles; Coleman and Cobb). Thus, their decision to confirm (or deny) a non-binary identity in *032c* signals a turning point in the rapper's career and begets substantial consequences for future musical successes. This trifecta warrants the academic investigation of Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* interview as a case study in non-binary identity formation in hip-hop culture and a climacteric catalyst for future mainstream discussions and representations of non-binary rappers.

## Methodology

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* magazine interview was undertaken to address this research question: How does Lil Uzi Vert use the *032c* interview to discuss their pronoun change decision and identity as a non-binary person and rapper? As a form of discourse analysis, CDA recognizes the power of language and how it can contribute to oppression and be used for liberation (Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse*). Further, it allows for the study of how individuals "present themselves, manage their relationships, assign responsibility and blame, create organizations, enact culture, persuade others, and make sense of social members' ongoing interactional practices" (Tracy 734). Thus, its approach is characterized by a realist social ontology, which regards both

abstract social structures and concrete social events as parts of social reality (Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis”). From this perspective, CDA analysts provide a dialectical view of the relationship between structure and agency, the relationship between discourse and prominent social events (e.g., Lil Uzi Vert’s non-binary pronoun adoption on Instagram and the *032c* interview), and how discourse reconstructs social life in processes of social change (Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis”). This was a key benefit to this research, as it considered the impacts of Lil Uzi Vert’s interview discourses on current and future representations of non-binary rappers in rap music.

*Data Collection and Analytical Procedure.* The researchers obtained Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* interview directly from the magazine’s Summer 2023 issue titled “Culture Crisis: Therapies for the Confused,” which contained the full interview transcription. A data collection sheet was created, and researchers noted specific ideas, stories, and statements that coincided with Lil Uzi Vert’s discussions of their non-binary pronoun adoption decision, potential identity as a Black non-binary person, any music industry or societal challenges facing them as a non-binary rapper, and references to LGBTQ+ and non-binary social issues in rap and society. Once data were collected, the researchers used a qualitative inductive thematic analysis to discover themes in the interview, which enabled researchers to pinpoint dominant themes to describe the phenomenon under study. The researchers employed Fereday and Muir-Cochrane’s (2006) six-step process for conducting thematic analysis, which requires the use of an inductive mode of analyzing data. Per their thematic analysis process, the researcher: 1) developed a data collection sheet; 2) tested the applicability of the data collection sheet to the phenomenon under investigation; 3) summarized the collected data and identified emerging initial themes; 4) collected and organized data into categories; 5) connected the data and identified themes among the categories; and 6) corroborated and legitimized the coded themes to identify findings and draw conclusions. (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane)

## Findings

*“Uzi is a Cartoon of Themselves”*: Lil Uzi Vert’s Pre-Interview Framing by *032c*. Conducted in a Brooklyn, New York photography studio, the twenty-nine-question interview, led by Stephanie Perez, prefaced with an analysis of Lil Uzi Vert’s popular culture and rap legacy, which prompted an investigation

by the researchers. Lil Uzi Vert's 032c interview chronicled the rapper's career and journey to publicly proclaiming a non-binary identity while offering keen insight into their views on addiction struggles, artistic banditry in the entertainment industry, prior rap deaths, and the politics of being Black, non-binary, and a rock-inspired maverick in rap. Authored by Stephanie Perez, the preface advanced numerous descriptors (e.g., "formidable player in mainstream hip-hop," "oracle in youth culture," self-proclaimed rock star) and narratives concerning the rapper's image (e.g., eccentric designer clothing, makeup, scar, and tattoos), speaking voice (e.g., "melodic tone, percussive cadence, and staccato interjections"), connections to SoundCloud rap and deceased SoundCloud rappers (e.g., Lil Peep, Juice WRLD, and XXXTentacion), and "uncanny ability to anticipate what's next in music, dance, and fashion" in popular culture (112).

Specifically, Perez framed Lil Uzi Vert as an "oracle in youth culture" and calculatedly linked them to "Gen Z," a term used to describe Americans born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock). Citing Gen Z's popular signifiers (e.g., *Adult Swim* cartoons, anime, emo-rap, pop-punk, and "hodge-podge, maximalist outfits"), the interviewer painted Lil Uzi Vert as a trailblazer whose rap and rock star persona incorporated elements of animation, gender-fluid aesthetics and expressions, and Gen Z cultural trends in their artistic, popular culture, and visual appeals to youth audiences. The interviewer noted:

Although Uzi's love of anime and Adult Swim has long inspired the artist's visuals, I realized, after spending time in their presence, that they are more than just a fan of animation: Uzi is a cartoon of themselves. (Perez 112)

Perez's framing of Lil Uzi Vert with Gen Z and animation was significant given their artistic interests, age and gender identities, and rap status for two reasons. First, the Pew Research Center named Gen Z (formally Generation Z) as the most diverse generation of Americans to date in terms of LGBTQ+ identity and the shifting of gender norms, with sixteen percent of Gen Zers identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community and increasingly, outside of the man/woman binary (Dimock; Eldridge). Alison Eldridge also declared more than half of Gen Zers believe public forms and profiles should allow for sex or gender options other than "man" and "woman." Second, animation remains a popular media consumption trend among Gen Z, as they are more likely than prior generations to watch anime and cartoons due to the anime genre's comparative willingness to tackle taboo topics and feature LGBT relationships, an influx of global animation

offerings on digital media and streaming platforms, and the generation's fascination with "borderless [media] content from other cultures" ("These Are the Entertainment Genres").

According to Dimock's views, since they were born in 1995, Lil Uzi Vert is a Millennial, yet, because some porosity between the end and the beginning of each generation certainly exists, they also emblemize Gen Z's disruption of hegemonic mores of gender, sexuality, and social taboos. They also position and stylize themselves within a popular Gen Z media genre rife with genderqueer, LGBTQ+, and non-binary fantasy art, characters, sex and sexuality depictions, and visuality. Hence, Perez's description of Lil Uzi Vert as a "cartoon of themselves" acknowledged how the celebrity figure's artistic fascinations, gender disruptions, non-binary identity, and public image underscored Gen Z trends and granted them cross-generational access to this influential, profitable media demographic. Yet, it also raised the following question: "Given their knowledge about the Gen Z demographic, have *Symere Woods* and their record executives intentionally fashioned the artistic persona of *Lil Uzi Vert* as a non-binary, fantasy cartoon-like character to pander to Gen Z's emergent LGBTQ+ identification, disruptions of hegemonic views of gender and sexuality, and media consumption trends?" Ultimately, *032c*'s conception of Lil Uzi Vert as a "cartoon of themselves" underscored insidious authenticity questioning and the attempted invalidation of gender identity and artistic persona faced by non-binary celebrities via media interviewers and the reduction of Black queer and non-binary bodies to stereotypical caricatures in entertainment media.

"*It's Not Okay to Be 'Non' Anything!*" *Lil Uzi Vert Shares Their Non-Binary Experiences*. Lil Uzi Vert transparently recounted their pronoun change, confirmed non-binary gender identity, and directly answered *032c*'s queries related to their lived experiences. Consistent with Afiah Vijlbrief et al.'s research on non-binary adult identity formation themes, Lil Uzi Vert used the interview to outline their process of discovering and defining themselves and credit supportive family members and the non-binary community for offering safe spaces. In their responses, Lil Uzi Vert cited personal desires to "figure who they were" as a key inspiration, briefly referenced their education process on gender non-binary identity ("I did take my time to learn as much as I could about this before I was able to proceed.") and praised the sense of community afforded as a non-binary member (Perez 118-9). For them, being non-binary represented a discovery of themselves that mirrored finding one's life purpose and reason for being alive.

Consequently, the methodical, well-researched decision emancipated and prepared them to come out publicly.

Moreover, they denounced any hesitancy with changing their pronouns to they/them and being non-binary given their celebrity status and its potential ramifications. For example, Perez asked Lil Uzi Vert: “In the summer of 2022, you changed your pronouns to they/them. Given your prominence and visibility, the implications of this are huge – some would say historic. When did you realize those pronouns felt right? And did you ever hesitate going public with this choice because you feared negative reactions?” (118). In response, Lil Uzi Vert declared:

No, I never hesitated. But I did take my time to learn as much as I could about this before I was able to proceed. Taking the time to figure out who you are is a big part of what it means to be alive. Once you figure out whether you’re here with it there with it, or both, you’re not alone anymore. (Perez 118-9)

The rapper humanized the non-binary community as one that offered “access to a certain kind of support that you might not have had [previously during] your entire life because you weren’t raised that way” (Perez 119). Reflecting intersectionally on their upbringing, Lil Uzi Vert made it clear that they came from a household “where it’s not okay to be ‘non’ anything,” and as a result, their Philadelphia inner-city environment framed their gender identity and its role expectations before they could discover or frame them for themselves (Perez 119). However, they equally acknowledged family acceptance from their mother and grandmother and their roles in allowing them to explore eclectic artistic hobbies and taboo fashion choices. The rapper noted:

Nothing that I do is a surprise to my mom or grandma. I’ve been into everything I’ve been into since I was little. I started drawing upside down crosses on my clothes in high school. I’m the same person I always was. I’m just older now, and I have a platform. (Perez 119)

Lil Uzi Vert’s descriptions of the non-binary community, their Philadelphia upbringing, and family acceptance became nuanced when situated within queer studies. On one hand, their Philadelphian account acknowledged the multiple oppressive systems impacting Black non-binary and LGBTQ+ people in urban communities and the complex intersections of racialized, gendered, and class knowledge(s) embedded in their material realities, which pushed them into invisibility, shame, and silence as protective mechanisms (Johnson). By denying the advent of “being ‘non’ anything,” Lil Uzi Vert’s social environment illustrated



the discursive process of communal identification and subjectivity in a political praxis that spoke to the material existence of acceptable ‘Black cisgender bodies’ at the exclusion of Black non-binary bodies (Johnson). On the other hand, Lil Uzi Vert suggested that family acceptance from their mother and grandmother operated as an initial safe space for them to explore, develop, claim, and later disrupt the hegemonic gender rules of their Black Philadelphia community as a musician and non-binary person.

By allowing them to “draw upside down crosses on clothes” and queer Black masculine gender scripts, Lil Uzi Vert’s mother and grandmother liberated them to experience and express motions of gender through art and fashion, which later manifested in their musical aesthetics and non-binary identity. As noted by Corinne Cath et al., safe spaces are essential for young people identifying as queer in their explorations of gender identity and sexuality. They also serve as integral spaces for Black non-binary people, like Lil Uzi Vert, to reclaim identities and produce alternative narratives (Nicolazzo). Furthermore, Lil Uzi Vert’s status as a non-binary celebrity and their commendation of the non-binary community elucidated the power of LGBTQ+ celebrity figures to spark societal discussions beyond hegemonic, mediated representations of gender and to offer education on expansive forms of gender and sexuality that challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the public sphere (Martinez).

In addition to discussing their gender identity, Lil Uzi Vert’s rap persona was interrogated by *032c*, leading to meaningful discussions of LGBTQ+ signifiers and queer aesthetics within popular culture and rap. First, the rapper was questioned about their infamous 2021 decision to implant a pink diamond in their forehead. While Perez hypothesized the rapper’s pink diamond implantation functioned as an “oracle” to harness superhuman powers and a “third-eye chakra,” Lil Uzi Vert attributed the decision to the popular Cartoon Network animation series *Steven Universe*. Its character, Pink Diamond, wears implanted pink diamonds (Perez). Lil Uzi Vert stated, “I used to watch a show called *Steven Universe*, and one of the characters in the show had a pink diamond in his belly button.”

Referring to the series as “[their] favorite cartoon,” Lil Uzi Vert’s embrace of *Steven Universe* was noteworthy given their non-binary identity and Perez’s framing of them as an animation fanatic. *Steven Universe* was created by non-binary animator and screenwriter Rebecca Sugar, and the series was highly praised for its inclusive representations of LGBTQ+ characters, themes, and queer

love (Hubbard). Additionally, Steven Universe was a genderqueer character deemed by the series' creator as a "super-expansive, hammy kid" and an antithesis of traditional male youth media roles, while Pink Diamond was genderless and pansexual (Hubbard). Hence, Lil Uzi Vert's identification with the series and these queer characters granted insight into the media representations that inspired their genderqueer rap aesthetics and prior exposures to LGBTQ+ animated content. More critically, Lil Uzi Vert's affinity for *Steven Universe* showcased how LGBTQ+ media provide greater stages for gender minorities and the visibility of gender diversity for minoritized audiences (Yeadon-Lee).

While Lil Uzi Vert did not explicitly offer any criticisms of LGBTQ+ rap social issues, they reflected on their decision to come forward as a non-binary rapper. Coining the action as an "act of bravery" for a "Black and previously male-identifying artist in the hip-hop space," Perez asked the rapper if they viewed being an out non-binary rapper as courageous. Lil Uzi rejected the notion, and instead compared the identity to a "good product" similar to fashion products curated by LGBTQ+ designers for "gangster-ass guys" to wear. They declared:

No, because bravery has only a ten percent chance of living. I'm not brave at all. I just think good product is good product. Think about fashion: gay and trans designers are some of the biggest talents out there, and gangster-ass guys wear their stuff without a thought. What you make is what matters, not how you identify. (Perez 119)

The rapper's response yielded conflicting interpretations from the researchers. While Lil Uzi Vert conceded some level of privilege (related to class and celebrity status) and protection from potentially life-threatening consequences commonly faced by non-famous and non-wealthy, non-binary and LGBTQ+ members, their comparison of non-binarism to a fashion product problematically likened the gender identity to a commoditized, apparel trend worn or removed at the rapper's convenience. Their discourses risked the reduction of non-binarism to a visual aesthetic or consumable product detached from the lived experiences and systemic oppressions of non-binary people such as acts of violence, discriminatory laws and practices, harassment, and other forms of social inequality. Yet, Lil Uzi Vert's words also debatably suggested if their "product" was "good" and sold within a capitalistic music industry, their gender identity should not matter, especially if the music was not subversive and aligned lyrically with normative rap ethos.

Lil Uzi Vert also linked the “gangster-ass guy” rap persona and gay and trans queer aesthetics as co-producers of hip-hop fashion, supporting Smalls’s theorizing of queer aesthetics and hip-hop as an open, unfixed, and ungendered cultural space in *Hip-Hop Heresies*. On the other hand, Lil Uzi Vert participated in stereotypical rhetoric of queerness in hip-hop as marginal to Black masculinity by inferring that trans and gay designers could not also be Black, gangster, and queer. In this sense, Lil Uzi Vert upheld Smalls’s exploration of the complex ways Blackness and hip-hop hide their historical queer artistic tendencies. There was an overall lack of understanding the queerness of Blackness and hip-hop by the interviewer. Perez’s depiction of Lil Uzi Vert as “brave” illustrated the lack of language and framing available to Black non-binary rap artists—something that may be observable in the more general media discourse. In congruence with Smalls’s queer hip-hop scholarship, when hip-hop aesthetics are disrupted from the typical heteronormativity of Blackness, people do not know how to frame those experiences and how they fit into hip-hop.

Situating Lil Uzi Vert’s comments on gay and trans hip-hop designers within the context of queer aesthetics raised another consideration. Hip-hop has traditionally been in conversation with queer and nonnormative genders and sexualities, including queer people in the shaping of its cultural signifiers through behind-the-scenes employment as choreographers, songwriters, make-up artists, hairstylists, set designers, fashion experts, and other roles stereotypically attributed to queer culture (Hill). Thus, “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and queer, intersex, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming (QIGGNC) bodies have been both integral to U.S. hip-hop cultural production and denied as integral to said production” (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies* 126). Nevertheless, queer and trans people in hip-hop shaped mainstream rap’s aesthetic even if their contributions were appropriated and ignored in the overwhelming noise of the genre’s cultural landscape (Smalls, *Hip-Hop Heresies*). From this perspective, Lil Uzi Vert’s statement foregrounded the silenced centrality of LGBTQ+ people in the evolution of hip-hop’s culture and poetics, which enabled the genre to capture a multicultural and transnational audience. However, though hip-hop incorporates queerness in aesthetics, fashion trends, and ideas, it still does not privilege the prospect of an out-Black non-binary rapper. This topic was unexplored by Lil Uzi Vert or *032c*’s interviewer yet critical to an understanding of their gender identity’s impact on future rap successes and opportunities for non-binary rappers.

## Conclusion

The current research analyzed Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* interview as a cultural cataclysmic moment for Black non-binary discourses and representations in hip-hop, popular culture, and rap. Public Enemy member Chuck D once described hip-hop as the "CNN of Black America" due to its pedagogical ability to bring Black identities and social issues to the Black community's collective consciousness. In a critical discourse analysis of Lil Uzi Vert's interview discourses, this study offered insight into the intersectional experiences of not only a commercially successful, Black non-binary celebrity and rap figure but also unveiled, by means of the artist's lived experience, the complexities of being Black and non-binary in America.

Supporting previous research on non-binary identity formation and quare studies, Lil Uzi Vert unabashedly claimed their non-binary identity and lauded the non-binary community for enabling them to discover a sense of personal identity, purpose, and security, as well as encounter a community safe space. They also shed light on Black cultural pressures and geographical oppressions that pushed many Black non-binary people into invisibility, shame, and silence. Their *032c* responses communicated the perils of being raised in a Black urban environment where non-binarism was denied as a gender identity due to hegemonic, racialized gender mores and simultaneously attributed their mother and grandmother as safe spaces for early explorations of gender identity and sexuality. Such findings illuminated the necessity of safe spaces for Black non-binary people to claim their identities and produce alternative gender and racial narratives while exposing hard realities of Black LGBTQ+ populations in urban communities indoctrinated with prevailing notions of gender normativity (Nicolazzo).

Lil Uzi Vert's rap persona was an investigative focal point by *032c*, a factor that drew paradoxical discourses from the rapper and their interviewer, Stephanie Perez. Beginning with the interview preface narratives, Perez framed Lil Uzi Vert as an "oracle in youth culture" whose animation, gender-fluid aesthetics, expressions, and knowledge of Gen Z cultural trends granted them mainstream popularity, yet the interviewer referred to them as "a cartoon of themselves" and highlighted the problematic authenticity questions and invalidation of gender identity faced by non-binary celebrities via media interviewers. By reducing Lil Uzi Vert to a "cartoon," Perez exposed the historic tendency of media outlets to

diminish Black queer and non-binary bodies to stereotypical, racialized caricatures in entertainment media and demonstrated the lack of language and framing available to Black non-binary celebrities and musicians.

Despite this shortcoming, Lil Uzi Vert debunked Perez's hypotheses concerning their rap aesthetics inspirations (e.g., the pink diamond in their forehead), cited LGBTQ+ cultural signifiers (i.e., Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe* and the characters Steven Universe and Pink Diamond), and demystified the interviewer's claim that coming out as a non-binary rapper was "an act of bravery." However, the rapper's comparison of non-binarism to a fashion product worn by "gangster-ass" rappers yielded varying interpretations worthy of notation. On one hand, it detached non-binary identity from its societal positionality, and risked reducing non-binarism to a commoditized, fashion trend that could be temporarily worn or removed at Lil Uzi Vert's convenience. On the other hand, their inclusion of "gay and trans designers" in the discussion amplified LGBTQ+ people as co-producers of hip-hop fashion and queer aesthetics while (intentionally or unintentionally) upholding historically disparaging rhetoric of queerness in hip-hop being subordinate to Black masculinity.

Our findings bear significance to Black non-binary and hip-hop studies, for they showcase the intersectional complexities of being Black and non-binary in an American society ripe with anti-Black racism, gender normativity, and queer oppression and Lil Uzi Vert's positioning as a non-binary cultural figure in a music genre and larger entertainment industry that does not privilege the advent of a non-binary rap artist. This study also displays the relationship between Blackness, queerness, and the need for interconnectivity when examining queer discourses and moments in hip-hop and rap. On the VH1 television special *Out in Hip-Hop*, rap pioneer and member of the legendary group Run-DMC, DMC addressed hip-hop's reluctance to accept queer rappers, stating, "With hip-hop, it was like you could be gay, but you could not be the rapper. If you were anything except the rapper, you were cool" ("Love and Hip-Hop: Out in Hip-Hop"). While Lil Uzi Vert is non-binary and not gay, DMC's statement supported Marc Lamont Hill's research on hip-hop and queer identity, which accentuates hip-hop's reluctance to accept queer people as mainstream rap artists.

Though queer rappers experienced mainstream successes through LGBTQ+ rappers like Lil Nas X and Young M.A., non-binary rappers were predominately relegated to rap's underground circuit before Lil Uzi Vert. This factor raises

numerous questions beyond the scope of this analysis: How will Lil Uzi Vert's non-binary gender identity impact rap audience's perception and consumption of their music? What impacts will their *032c* interview have on future discourses surrounding non-binary artists in hip-hop? Will Lil Uzi Vert's gender identity derail future successes?

Since the writing of this analysis, Lil Uzi Vert released their third studio album, *The Pink Tape* to commercial success. *The Pink Tape* debuted at number one on the *Billboard 200*, allowed Lil Uzi Vert to cross one-hundred charting singles on the *Hot 100* with its release, and became the highest charting hip-hop album by a Black non-binary rapper. Likewise, it was the first #1 rap album of 2023, hip-hop's fiftieth anniversary. As hip-hop extends beyond fifty years of existence, queer and non-binary rap artists (like Lil Uzi Vert) are breaking into mainstream consciousness at increasing numbers and "queering" status quos of gender normative, heteronormative, and homonormative masculinities within rap. However, to continue this trend, there is still a need for the genre to critically engage and include more Black queer hip-hop artists across gender and sexual identity spectrums.

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# The Marketing of a Voguing Icon: How Leiomy Maldonado Became the Face of Black Opal’s 2021 Campaign

FRÉDÉRIC HERBIN

In the words of Katelyn Burns, trans people “entered the 2010s quietly and are leaving it as magazine cover stars and TV shows protagonists” (Burns). The embodiment of commercial brands by trans people in the media contributed to heightened visibility as corporations reached out to a more diverse clientele. Following in the footsteps of the fashion industry, the cosmetics industry pioneered this practice of trans inclusion in 2015. That one year, Lea T became the new face of Chromatics, the hair coloring line of American hair care brand Redken (Sharkey; Ferrier) owned by the L’Oréal Group, Andreja Pejic modeled for the Louis Vuitton-owned Sephora franchise Make Up For Ever brand (Gregory; Del Russo), and teenager Jazz Jennings was featured in the Johnson & Johnson owned Clean & Clear #SeeTheRealMe campaign (Nichols; Alcindor). By showcasing trans women as ambassadors of lead products, giants of the cosmetics industry gave – via sheer presence – a platform for the recognition of trans lives and the defense of trans rights.

During the 2010s, Barack Obama’s two presidential mandates saw several landmark trans victories. Starting in 2010, the State Department began to loosen Federal laws that required gender-affirming surgery to apply for a legal gender change (Eilperin). This not only simplified the lives of trans people but also started a slow movement towards the abolition of binary gender categories on official identification documents (Blinken). The passing of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) in 2010 included article 1557, which bans any state-funded health care provider from discriminating

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on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or *sex*. In 2016, the Obama administration added a series of regulations to include gender identity (Eilperin). The PPACA was then extended to cover gender-affirming surgery and other medical care connected to gender transition, which made it available to people who could not afford it prior to this law.

It is tempting to argue that the rise in representation is directly linked to the advent of trans rights, and it would be hard to argue there is no connection, yet although the two struggles may meet, they are not moving along the same planes. With the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 and his inauguration in 2017, reactionary forces with access to the highest strata of political power pushed binary paradigms of equating sex and gender in ways that jeopardized newly acquired trans rights and endangered trans bodies (Simmons-Duffin). New regulations of discrimination based on sex now explicitly excluded trans people, and PPACA benefits were revoked. In 2021, Joe Biden's administration changed PPACA regulations back to its 2016 scope (Biden), and how long it is upheld will likely depend on the next administration.

Since 2010, the legal status of non-binary individuals has depended on the political will of Democrats and the well-organized backlash of Republicans. Representations in the media partly follow the political pendulum, yet the production and reception of mainstream media do obey their own logic. Trans visibility has not been affected by any significant backlash since 2010 and new promotional campaigns are launched every day (Dua). Yet the hateful reactions and very real economic backlash following the promotion in April 2023 of Bud Light beer by trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney is disheartening (Holpuch). While high fashion, luxury brands and cosmetics continue to open up to gender diversity as a marketing strategy, it is clearly much more difficult to have trans women successfully promote a general market symbol of working-class American culture such as cheap beer.

The Bud Light marketing fiasco reveals how strong the traditional gender binary still is on a symbolic and capitalistic level. Transgender women may be associated with products that promote physical, transformative beauty and care for one's body, and which are stereotypically feminine, when targeting women and even gay men. Because of strong stereotypes, mannishness is in fact left out and the product's binary characteristics remain intact. But when a trans woman promotes goods perceived as belonging to the realm of male virility, marketing strategies spin out of control.

Trans representation in advertising is just as diverse as in any other media. A liberal president's access to power and will to do away with binary policing

and extend civil rights to the gender non-conforming cannot protect trans people from attack. The symbolic plane of representation's impact on the way trans people are perceived still functions within a binary gender matrix that remains very powerful. Skin color also comes into play and, in spite of the election of a Black president open to LGBTQ+ rights, opportunities for the visibility of Black trans people remained scarce. While the world of cosmetics opened up to trans models in the mid-2010s, the case study that follows shows how extending the same opportunity to Black trans women was another stepping stone.

In the spring of 2021, many North American news sites targeting women and LGBTQ+ demographics celebrated Black Opal's choice to hire a transgender model to promote its products (Nguyen; Maril; Broverman). Already famous model Leiomy Maldonado became the first openly queer incarnation of this widely distributed beauty brand presently carried by nation-wide department stores such as Walmart or CVS. Most articles underlined what this meant in terms of diversity and visibility for transgender people. Stressing the importance of these issues, Leiomy Maldonado was quoted saying,

to be their first trans model, it's groundbreaking, and not only for the trans community but for the whole LGBTQ+ community [...] For them to have asked me, I felt like this was another door opening for our community and it's another way for the world to see how accepted we should be and how our beauty matters as well. (Maril)

To fully understand what is at stake, it is important to consider the brand's target demographics. Black Opal was created in 1994 to offer exclusive dark skin products. Maldonado specifically addresses the identity politics attached to this brand.

I've known about Black Opal since I was younger. Black Opal has created products that have been specifically made for women of color for over 25 years, and today it's also black- and female-owned, which to me is something amazing. (Maril)

The photographs of Leiomy Maldonado, one of the world's most famous vogueers, alongside these phrases, promote the image the brand wants to build as being inclusive of non-binary people. Although serving commercial purposes, Leiomy Maldonado's appearance in a Black Opal ad campaign uniquely contributes to the recent evolution of Black representations in the United States. The various declarations quoted here also participate in this reading.

The identification of the model plays an important role, as Leiomy Maldonado epitomizes the ballroom universe and more specifically, the practice of voguing which she illustrates. Voguing is a dance that grew within Afro-Latinx homosexual and transgender communities. Leiomy Maldonado has become a major icon since the turn of the 2010s, a period of important growth in the visibility of voguing, which she largely contributed to. If we assume that the Black Opal commercials are not only aimed at people familiar with ballroom culture, the campaign is an unmistakable sign that visibility is on the rise. With this increased presence outside the ballroom community via mass media and pop culture, voguing is becoming mainstream and voguers may increasingly make a living from it, following the example of Maldonado. This commodification, most prominent in the United States, raises questions of appropriation of a culture born and bred within a racialized, queer community facing multiple marginalization (Bailey 4; Higgins). Yet, the recent increase in non-binary Black and Latinx visibility may well erase the subversive aspect of voguing in the face of heteronormative domination.

Voguing has been in the media spotlight before, and Leiomy Maldonado seems aware that her career happens to coincide with a period of mediatic amplification that should not erase the history of voguing if it is to avoid the pitfalls of the past. I will therefore try to observe how this moment differs in terms of identity politics. First, I will look back on the 1990s when voguing first left the ballroom community and faced the risk of being cut off entirely from its roots. Voguers who embodied this phenomenon were largely re-marketed for the dominant heterosexual matrix. Secondly, I will look at how the legacy of the 1990s informed the renewal of the 2010s, with Leiomy Maldonado as a major figure. This time, voguing espoused the social issues of the communities it sprang from. I will finally suggest that the recognition of transgender identities is a major new step in the struggle for black civil rights in the United States.

### Mass Media Reframing of Vogue at the Turn of the 1990s

In a previous study, I looked at how the increased visibility of voguing happened in two phases, first at the turn of the 1990s, then in the 2010s and beyond (Herbin). The first is well known and often attributed to the release of Madonna's 1990 "Vogue" video at roughly the same time as Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* in the festival circuit. The previous year, while Marlon Riggs' documentary *Tongues Untied* was broadcast on PBS to a restricted audience (Bequer and Gatti; Halter), Malcolm McLaren's

“Deep in Vogue” video reached a wider audience with the successful entry of the track on the Billboard dance chart (Moore). Livingston’s film was then theatrical released in 1991 and largely available on VHS soon after. Such are the major contours of the first phase and its three channels of amplification via mass media and popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

*Paris is Burning*, “Vogue” and “Deep in Vogue” are all created by outsiders of the ballroom community looking in. The houses and the balls are spaces of refuge against the exclusions both from predominantly White homosexual and transgender spaces and from heteronormative circles. Just as the word “voguing” refers to Vogue magazine, the term “house” refers to the fashion houses and the world of fashion that greatly inspires ballroom culture. “Houses” also directly refer to the notion of home: each house acts as a substitute family structure, in place of the biological families that so many homosexual and transgender people are rejected from.

Houses compete in balls where they try to excel in the various performance categories. As ethnographer Marlon M. Bailey has shown, these competitions are intrinsically linked to the “gender system” established by the community. With its six genders and sexualities—Butch Queens, Butches, Femme Queens, Butch Queens up in Drag, Men, and Women—the ballroom scene regulates how each person may compete according to their self-identified gender variance. If the accepted notions of sex, gender and sexuality are not eradicated *per se*, the participative research that Marlon M. Bailey carried out within the ballroom community of Detroit in the early 2000s leads him to observe that “most things are open, negotiable, alterable” (Bailey 34). According to him, the “gender system” and its six categories transcend dominant heteronormative categories:

The gender system is queer insofar as it allows for, and in many cases celebrates, sex, gender, and sexual fluidity and diversity. Members of the Ballroom community enact and experience sex, gender, and sexual identification as a performative process rather than as an immutable biological fact. (Bailey 30-31)

Voguing has thus developed as a performative, individual and collective form of activism. Performed within the ball’s categories, voguing as a dance is a specific expression of ballroom culture. The increase in visibility – to a wider

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the seminal texts in the field of queer studies were elaborated and published during this same period: Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990; Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*, U California P, 1990; *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, n°2, « Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities », 1991.



and therefore less familiar audience – creates both the possibility of recognition and a potential for severance from its community roots and from expressing the disenfranchisement it originally echoed. From this point of view, and in spite of their differences, the 1990s productions were unable to render the complexity of shifting identities taking place within the ballroom community. All three tended to separate voguing from its roots, going so far as to practically erase the original context in Madonna's "Vogue" video.

Jennie Livingston's documentary<sup>2</sup> probably best manages to connect voguing to the ballroom community, even though it was very much criticized at the time (hooks; "Gender is Burning"). The documentary is akin to a sociological investigation shot over several years, during the second half of the 1980s. It is cut up in chapters, one of which is entitled "Voguing" (00:36:01-00:42:01). This sequence revolves mostly around dancer Willi Ninja, and greatly contributed to making voguing a central element of the affirmation of ballroom culture. Willi Ninja's virtuosity didactically illustrates the meanings of voguing's main choreographic elements.

Ninja's centrality to voguing in *Paris is Burning* is no coincidence.<sup>3</sup> He was already renowned in the voguing community and the ballroom scene as a dance master<sup>4</sup> with successful forays outside the reserved spaces of the community. For example, it is Willi Ninja's silhouette that is seen against the white background of Malcolm McLaren's 1989 video "Deep in Vogue." This cut out technique underlines the signature moves of voguing, making it the central visual element. The aesthetic innovation of voguing is undoubtedly what is most striking, beyond the fact that McLaren conceived his piece as a tribute to ballroom culture with the names of the houses of La Beija, Xtravaganza, Saint Laurent, or Dupree quoted in the lyrics. The black silhouettes against a white background also tend to highlight androgyny with the long hair, shiny gloves, short jackets and tight-fitting stockings and leggings, yet it falls short of the range of identities hosted at any ball. Another exceptional detail is that Willi Ninja and Adrian Alicea are dressed in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston, Miramax films, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> His presence is equally central in the voguing scenes in Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*.

<sup>4</sup> Willi Ninja recalls the beginnings of this fame in Rose, Tricia. "Nobody wants a Part-Time Mother: An interview with Willi Ninja." *Microphone Friends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, edited by Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross, Routledge, 1994, pp. 163-175.

creations of French designer Thierry Mugler, who they vogueed for on the runway the same year.<sup>5</sup>

The capacity of Willi Ninja to move from the ballroom scene into high fashion and pop culture begs analysis. When Judith Butler comments on Jennie Livingston's film, she focuses on the trajectories of two of its key figures – Venus Xtravaganza and of course, Willi Ninja – with regards to the lives they manage to create for themselves outside the ballroom scene.

Consider the different fates of Venus Xtravaganza. She “passes” as a light-skinned woman, but is – by virtue of a certain failure to pass completely – clearly vulnerable to homophobic violence; ultimately, her life is taken presumably by a client who, upon the discovery of what she calls her “little secret,” mutilates her for having seduced him. On the other hand, Willi Ninja can pass as straight; his voguing becomes foregrounded in the video productions with Madonna et al., and he achieves post-legendary status on an international scale. There is passing and then there is passing, and it is – as we used to say – “no accident” that Willi Ninja ascends and Venus Xtravaganza dies. (“Gender is Burning” 129-30)

I believe this uncompromising observation underlines one important aspect of the first phase of increased visibility. In all three productions, voguing within ballroom culture is represented by Butch Queens. As Marlon M. Bailey explains, “although it is claimed almost exclusively by cisgender men [...], the Butch Queen category includes very masculine and very feminine individuals as long as they identify and live as gay men” (44). He also observes that this is the predominant identity within ballroom culture in the United States. It follows that “power and privilege are accorded to gay men and masculinity” (41) as shown, according to him, by the absence of competition categories specifically dedicated to lesbian women. Unsurprisingly, this is also true of voguing represented outside of ballrooms, where the pre-eminence of masculinity is accentuated to the point of almost erasing gender fluidity. If Judith Butler may be going a bit fast when presenting Willi Ninja as off to work with Madonna, she does correctly point out that the “Vogue” video made voguing acceptable to the heterosexual matrix.

The video, directed by David Fincher, transports Butch Queens into a black and white evocation of Hollywood's glamorous golden age. Everyone is

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<sup>5</sup> See “22. VERY RARE Thierry Mugler Fall-Winter 1989/90 (3) with Willi Ninja and Imán.” *YouTube*, uploaded by AngelPlanett, 28 April 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjI9\\_zCOOMs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjI9_zCOOMs)

sporting trousers and dinner jackets that tend to erase gender differences. However, the succession of shots contributes to a subtle partition between the bodies of the voguers and the chorus girls. On one side, men's bodies are dressed in shirts and, on the other, glimpses of cleavages eventually reveal bustiers enhancing the women's breasts. When they regroup and shed most of their clothes at the end of the video, the cross-dressing of the chorus girls' bodies becomes perfectly legible, while that of the Butch Queens is not. In a way, the erotic charge that Madonna and Fincher demand from the silenced male bodies eventually has them follow a binary code of gender division, reducing voguing to a choreography that can be appropriated and emptied of its subversive message for change.

### From the Turn of the 2010s to Now, Building a New Representation for Black Trans People with Voguing Icon Leiomy Maldonado

In light of what happened in the early 1990s, the second phase of increased visibility clearly attempted to include the ballroom community and transgender identity in the representation of voguing. Much like the discussions that accompanied the release of the video for Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)," the spectre of a wave of appropriations of dance movements from ballroom culture by pop stars resurfaced. But the following year, in 2009, MTV audiences discovered *Vogue Evolution*, a group of five voguers from New York (Leiomy Maldonado, Jorel Rios, Devon Webster, Dashaun Williams and Malechi Williams) who were proud of coming from the ballroom scene and used the press to raise awareness about the fight against HIV/AIDS (Anderson). As they competed in the fourth season of *America's Best Dance Crew*, *Vogue Evolution* tried to inscribe the issues their community faced in the very dance practice they were showcasing. The TV show's narrative constantly underlined this opportunity for greater visibility by the first openly gay and transgender group in its history, and presented them with a mission of "breaking down barriers," in the words of host Mario Lopez.<sup>6</sup>

Starting with the presentation preceding its first performance, the group introduced each of its members as being gay first and foremost, before the montage isolated one of the five voguers, Leiomy Maldonado, who revealed

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<sup>6</sup> "Dance Craze Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 1, MTV, 6 September 2009.

her singularity as a transgender woman.<sup>7</sup> From then on, the show's narrative revolved around this fact. Leiomy is first literally celebrated as the "queen" of the group by the jury,<sup>8</sup> and then portrayed as uncertain when it comes to her willingness to continue with the competition.<sup>9</sup> The narrative managed to divide the queer unity of the group to set apart one individual, sometimes presented as an inspiration, sometimes as a disruptive element. In fact, the way the group is constantly summoned to "represent" weighs much more heavily on the shoulders of Leiomy Maldonado, the only transgender member of *Vogue Evolution*.

As the season unfolded, issues of gender performativity became prominent, in the sense that, on several occasions, the evaluation of her performance as a dancer was conflated with the evaluation of the performance of her gender identity. When *Vogue Evolution* was asked to choreograph a piece based on Beyoncé's song "Déjà Vu," the jury moved away from its role of judging the dance performance and discussed instead what is traditionally the crux of ballroom culture – rapper Lil Mama praised Leiomy Maldonado for how she managed to "bring out the feminine side of Beyoncé" ("Beyoncé Challenge"). At times, *Vogue Evolution*'s performances loosened the grip of gender naturalization. Yet, identity rules were violently reinstated when Leiomy Maldonado seemed unwilling to comply with the shows' expectations. The same judge who praised her later summoned her, as a woman, to better "represent" herself, more "correctly," through gender stereotypes, by way of supposedly "representing" transgender people as political subjects:

You were born a man and you are becoming a woman. If you're going to become a woman, act like a lady. Don't be a bird, like "Oh my god, I'm not doing this!" You know what I'm saying? It gets too crazy and it gets confusing. You're doing this for America. Even though you're the face for transgenders, you're the face of America right now with this group and it's not about anybody else. It's about y'all. You know what I'm saying? So do it for the team. (Lil Mama "Bollywood Challenge.")

The LGBTQ+ community immediately reacted to this ("Lil Mama"), and the African American rapper had to offer an apology (Newman). The judge's

<sup>7</sup> "Crew's Choice Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 1, MTV, 9 August 2009.

<sup>8</sup> "Beyoncé Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 2, MTV, 16 August 2009.

<sup>9</sup> "Bollywood Challenge." *America's Best Dance Crew*, season 4, episode 4, MTV, 30 August 2009.

reprimand, however, contributed to establishing Leiomy Maldonano as a public figure for the ballroom scene and more specifically, the transgender community and their demand for recognition and respect. From that moment on, she became associated with all major projects connected to ballroom culture and its representation in the mass media, a bit like what happened with Willi Ninja at the turn of the 1990s. She even ended up symbolically turning the tables on her original TV performance in 2020 when she joined the jury of *Legendary*,<sup>10</sup> a competition entirely dedicated to voguing. Along with the TV series *Pose* created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals in 2018, *Legendary* marks a culminating point in the commodification of ballroom culture that arguably started with *Vogue Evolution* competing on MTV. And every single time, Leiomy Maldonado is there as a dancer, a choreographer, an actress, and an icon of the ballroom scene. She is known as the Wonder Woman of voguing and excels at ubiquitously validating any visibility effort she participates in. Her name and image are conspicuously connected to the ballroom scene, beyond community circles.

Maldonado's ubiquitous presence in the representations of voguing, and the media's attempts to make voguing palatable to mainstream audiences — naturally breeds criticism from the ballroom community (Kleinmann). But it also gives her a platform to promote the queer community and more specifically, trans people. Leiomy Maldonado introduces a new paradigm of visibility for voguing, one that reconciles artistic recognition with community activism. This is shown in the advertising campaign launched by sports equipment manufacturer Nike in 2017, which is the first for this company to feature a trans woman. Its “Be True” campaign in support of LGBTQ+ people featured the voguing legend in a video directed by up-and-coming visual artist Daisy Zhou<sup>11</sup>. Leiomy Maldonado is presented as an accomplished athlete teaching voguing in a dance studio. The clip cuts to ball competitions that place the practice in its original context. The two spaces are connected via slow motion underlining dance moves at the studio, at the ball and back, as if to make sure voguing is not separated from the ballroom culture that created it. Here, Leiomy Maldonado's success as a dancer is fundamentally linked to her recognition on the ballroom scene she belongs to and allows her to serve as a role model for racialized queer people in the ballroom community, and for all non-binary people. This was presented as the reason for the Hetrick-Martin

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<sup>10</sup> Available on VOD with HBO Max since May 27, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *Nike Vogue*. Directed by Daisy Zhou, Dream City, Public Record, 2017, [vimeo.com/222699290](https://vimeo.com/222699290).

Institute to honor Leiomy Maldonado, along with Nike Incorporated, at the Emery Awards Ball on November 16, 2022.

### Conclusion: From Past Black Representations to the Present, Inscribing Trans Recognition in the Legacy of the Struggles for Civil Rights

The Nike ad campaign logically brings me back to the cosmetic brand Black Opal campaign I started with. Hopefully, this analysis of images that are making voguing visible outside its original community informs the reading of the Black Opal images. Leiomy Maldonado's persona as conveyed by mass media informs what the pictures are attempting to channel by using her as a model. Unlike the way Butch Queens may have been appropriated by the heterosexual matrix and emptied of their activist, community roots, I believe that Leiomy Maldonado's images for Black Opal, while also reframed for the heterosexual matrix, are rooted in the history of the struggle for the recognition of civil rights. To show this, let us look at the two portraits produced by the photographer Quil Lemons for this campaign.



Figure 1 BLACK OPAL/QUIL LEMONS



Figure 2 BLACK OPAL/QUIL LEMONS

Both portraits feature the voguer's face on a unified background similar to the cosmetic products tone sold by the company. Only a few elements distinguish one portrait from the other, but they are significant in the way they reveal two versions of Leiomy Maldonado, possibly both required by Black Opal to embrace a panel of black femininities – one with natural hair, one with straightened hair – as if to reach out to a diversity of customers who may identify with the model. Here, Maldonado's poses are static, in stark contrast with the acrobatic spins and dips that have imposed a profoundly renewed conception of femininity inside voguing. Maldonado's signature head spin is dependent on her long straight hair that whip the air to create the Leiomy Lolly, picked up by numerous pop stars.

From my point of view, the second portrait is more surprising as it calls on historical figures to inform our understanding of the Leiomy Maldonado icon. I believe the use of a natural Afro hairstyle affirms black transgender beauty within a black militant legacy. The same year as the Black Opal campaign, Quil Lemons also used this hairstyle in a photo titled *Monument*<sup>12</sup>. This time, the Afro literally hides the model's face so that it works on a symbolic level to represent Black beauty. At the crossroads of art and fashion (Sargent), Quil's work pursues a line drawn by the 1960s Black is Beautiful movement (Ford) and updated for queer inclusivity.

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<sup>12</sup> Lemons, Quil. *Monument*. 2021, private collection, <https://www.abt.org/entry/quil-lemons/#images-0-4>.



Figure 3 Hulton Archive. Angela Davis. 1969. Getty Images, T992504\_01

Leiomy Maldonado's portrait with the Afro recalls this visual memory of the Black activism of the 1960s and 1970s. It is reminiscent of Angela Davis's famous portrait with a similar pose, hand under chin. Maldonado also refers to past Black representations when she dedicates her image on Instagram to Tracey "Africa" Norman,<sup>13</sup> the first African American transgender model whose journey was marked by the discrimination transgender people have historically suffered. The association with these two figures seems to serve a similar purpose as when Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* connected in its montage the Selma marches with the first Black prides. These evocations of past discriminations and political struggles in the United States clearly posit the recognition of non-binary people as full-class citizens. It is one more step in the on-going fight for civil rights.

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# Quare Representations *In Absentia*: Non-Binary Black Characterization(s) In Video Games

LAURA GOUDET

Why this paper? This article aims to evaluate the recent developments in non-binary Black identities in video games, mainly using discourse analysis, borrowing from other disciplines as well. It is also a confession of failure—not through a lack of trying, but through a resounding absence: the absence of quare people in mainstream video games or, rather, their extremely scarce portrayal. This paper cries for the representation in absentia of non-binary Black characters in a way that mixes gender studies and research-creation. It examines how it has, ultimately, been (im-) possible to write. It is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek adaptation of Boutet’s writing of the self (“écriture de soi” 24) about artistic endeavors—with a twist, as it deals with the writing of itself rather than the creators themselves.

The focal point of this essay is quareness, that is the deep interconnection of LGBTQIA+ and racial identity<sup>1</sup> as a counterpoint to White-perceived queerness; in the words of E. Patrick Johnson, I intend on exploring the limits of this “queer-within-the-queer” identity in video game discourse (1). Further studies have anchored the idea of quare portrayals within cultural studies (Crémieux) and how these had been evolutions from queer to quare representations. The simple yet effective consideration “Who can be quare, and who can be queer?” (Boylorn

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas’ definitions of quareness differs in that it encompasses cisgender and heterosexual Black people (Thomas 2017). The importance of Black identity is palpable in this different view of queerness.

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and Adams 85) highlights the subtleties of crossing identities in autoethnographical works. As such, this article is also a cross between several methodologies and frameworks. My linguistics background, and especially, my concentration in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 110-2), take me through several stages, bringing together source materials (games, testimonies, anything pertaining to the questions at hand, from game researchers to actors of the field of games who have dealt with the issue), the interactions of these sources within the bigger context of the video game industry, as well as social context in itself. The games at hand are mostly taken from a pool of commercial games,<sup>2</sup> nor serious games or games developed by students. This analysis will be undertaken following several methodological and theoretical frameworks. Obviously, research-creation is important, even in video games (Sellier 18), and this will lead some of the explorations, which will borrow from cultural studies (Jenkins 1) as well as discourse analysis (Fairclough 1) and queer methodologies (Ahmed 1) along with queer game studies (Ruberg 32, Shaw 211-4), and minorities in video games (Malkowski and Russworm 1-16). The construction of this paper owes much to the concept of a “mixtape of [quare] thought,” to quote Russworm and Blackmon (1) about Black feminism: another close analysis of intersectional questions in video games. The discourse contained in this present article is also very much situated in another type of quareness: as a white-passing scholar with a North-African parent, as a queer person, as a French non-binary, female-presenting scholar, these experiences mold my sensibilities and the points of view developed here.

When submitting the first abstract for this paper, I had several questions: Is there an auto-ethnographic movement in video games? Are quare identities already implemented in video games?

These questions are prudently asked: they are indeed the questions leading this article, divided in several sections. First, I documented the steps taken to write this article, as well as a presentation of representational issues observed in video games for non-binary and Black characters. The second part will be devoted to the analysis of the depiction and perception of the (very few) non-binary Black characters found in mainstream video games.

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<sup>2</sup> Indie or independent games are developed by small teams, with limited budgets—sometimes even nicknamed “one-dollar games” (Werning) and are, as such, not subjected to the same pressure when it comes to narratives, game mechanics, etc.

## Elaborating This Paper: Representation In Video games

So it is important, in future evolutions of video games, to be aware of who is represented, as well as who is not represented, to whoever is speaking and to whoever is silent, that is to say: to focus on practices and identities that are being constructed in the shadow of the most famous productions and which often disagree with their embodiments.<sup>3</sup> (Coville 11)

Marion Coville's warning comes as a founded fear: where are non-binary Black people in video games? What is represented in their absence? How are characters read as being non-white, non-cisgender? Ultimately, is it enough? This initial section tells of the tentative movements towards spotting examples to elaborate a robust enough corpus to offer a "mixtape" of sources and questions about queer identities, mainly taken from mainstream games. Now, a few clarifications about video games. "[A] game conveys what it's like to experience the subject as a system of rules" (Anthropy 3). Part of playing is to follow the rules established; part of being a game is to be a system of rules, an opposition traditionally found in the division between *ludus* and *paidia*.<sup>4</sup> We know, through the study of video game characters, that there is a queer "avant-garde" in video games "because we're willing to do things other people aren't... We take the work of disrupting systems farther than other people can [...] if you're really interested in queering games, you can never rest" (Clark qtd. in Ruberg 1).

Encompassing several identities is uncommon in video games. There may be various reasons for this, such as the rampant tokenization in games, where characters belonging to minorized archetypes (where the dominant character is understood as male, Caucasian and muscular) often only represent one type of minority, be it women, people of color, people with disabilities, etc. This is also what we can see in minority females in popular culture, as Martin shows in movies and TV series where, "for every minority female role on the market, there are countless traditional middle-class US-American white leads" (Martin 8).

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<sup>3</sup> Personal translation of the original—unless stated otherwise, I am responsible for all translations in this work.

<sup>4</sup> For a synthesis and an analysis of the dichotomy, see Jensen, 69-80.

*Non-Binary Characters.* The portrayal of non-binary characters is an ongoing process which seems to be just beginning: “we can observe the appearance of non-binary characters in the media and a societal trend towards inclusivity and breaking down the binary conception of gender” (Rivas Ginel and Theroine 364). Very popular characters may also be invested by players as non-binary, such as fan-made non-binary characters in *Pokemon Reborn* (Kocik 3). This raises several issues, not only regarding the creation of accurate representations, but also how these characterizations are inserted within the media’s binary structure. Non-binary characters demand shifts in phrasings and vocabulary that imply a profound change in how people work in the gaming industry—on all levels. These include character and narrative design, localization and further promotional materials of games after their release, to avoid erasure, or reverting back to the dualistic default.

Personally, I worked on a project a couple of years ago where one of the main characters was a lady that wrote letters to the person she loved, and during six months we were wondering whether it was a man or a woman. So we interpreted it as a man since 99% of the time it is the case. However, two months before the release of the game, during the testing phase, the studio wrote back and told us that it was actually a non-binary character.<sup>5</sup> (Techoueyres in Rivas Ginel and Theroine 364)

This story shows how easily a character’s non-binary nature might be lost in translation because of the frequent “erasure of non-binary gender identities [...] which are consequences of the non-recognition and a lack of understanding of non-binary genders in society” (Dev et al. 1). This erasure of identity is similar to color blindness when it comes to racism, as both simultaneously evade the issue of otherness, and assert the dominance of the standard model of White, binary identities (Gillborn 101), and the preservation of the unspoken consensus of power dynamics favoring predominant identities.

It is also visible in the way the gaming industry has tackled non-binary people: “while it might be the case that there is good non-binary gender representation in some other games, especially games developed by queer indie game developers [...], this does not always appear in AAA<sup>6</sup> games” (Heritage,

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by Rivas Ginel and Theroine.

<sup>6</sup> AAA games are developed by bigger studios and publishers, benefitting from million-dollar budgets and targeted at wide audiences.

227-8). In these games, such as BioWare's *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), questions revolving around the integration of non-binary characters seems to be met with some resistance. The studio is known for being progressive in the way it portrays characters and minorities (Dym 23) and has included homosexual romances in its famous franchises (*Dragon Age, Mass Effect*), but there is more to creating an inclusive game than just including a gay or a lesbian romance. Some five years after the release of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, BioWare's user experience lead explained that "If you add, for instance, a non-binary player character, you also have to add the dialogue for a non-binary player character [...] That's a lot of content, so in some cases I think it's a question – it's crass, but it's true – it's a question of content. However, we're working on that" (Roos in McGlynn 2). Not including non-binary characters (understood as playable non-binary characters, according to what Roos says) amounts to increasing the workload for the studio. It implies "focus on content, on same-gender sex, and queer couple or marriage plots in ways that are, by and large, still window dressing, as the games provide menu-driven identities and represent sexuality as a series of yes-or-no choices" (Chang 228). Ultimately, "the privileged narrative of heteronormativity is, by design, in the very code of BioWare's video games" (Dym 31). AAA games perpetuate the expectations of dominant groups, and non-binary characterizations are scarce. The case of inherent racism within video games is discussed in more details below.

*Black Representations in Video Games.* In AAA games, representations have been increasingly diverse. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the Qunari dating option is Black-coded, as he is a very powerful foreigner from another race – quite literally – with massive horns, a muscular body with much bigger proportions than human or elf characters. His animalistic name, the Iron Bull, leaves little to the imagination about his physical prowess. Although not non-binary, his masculinity is made of several nuanced portrayals. First, he engages with the main character in a non-traditional, BDSM romantic partnership (or, if neither are romanced, he ends up with Dorian, the only gay character). His obvious friendship and respect for his second-in-command, Cremissius "Krem" Aclassi,<sup>7</sup> who comes from enemy land (Tevinter) and who is a trans man, shows non-binary affinities in friendship

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<sup>7</sup> A deeper analysis of the character of Krem is available in a soon-to-be-published paper entitled "My identity by itself causes violence': educative and testimonial moments in queer videogames" (Goudet, n. d.).



if not in love and is in line with his general rejection of norms. The Qunaris are usually represented as stern members of a heavily codified society, which the Iron Bull seems to dismiss. Yet his bisexuality, refusal of monogamous relationship and insistence on consent are as far as this representation of non-normativity will go, in a series of games known for their inclusivity. The Iron Bull is a preliminary example of the way minority characters permit alternative behaviors and non-patriarchal depictions in games coming from studios where Black developers are underrepresented.

*Otherness In Video Games: Representations of Romantic Figures.* When trying to create a corpus for this article, dating games were my first intuition, as they present many various options. It is possible to date quite a vast array of birds in *Hatoful [sic] Boyfriend* (2011), Lovecraftian goddesses in *Sucker for Love* (2020), or (embody) a tentacled alien in the cooperative card game *Consentacle* (2015). The game *Parasite in Love* (2020) features a brain amoeba who is embodied as a beautiful man to the female main character's perception and who, in the bleakest paths of the game, manages to impregnate her and have a child – an embodiment of its propagating, really. This choice in lovers errs in the realms of horror, comedy, and other-worldly experiences. Leaving *Consentacle* aside, where the game mechanics themselves allow for a much more nuanced representation through players, these games only feature heterosexual romances with extraordinary – but quite traditional – non-playable characters. Non-binary, datable characters exist; the same goes for Black characters in many dating games, although the proportion of Black characters remains small. In the gay dating game *Coming Out on Top* (2014), out of the six primary romance option, there is only one Black man to choose from, when *Dream Daddy* (2017) boasts three Black men out of the seven dating alternatives. The latter's cast is more diverse as it contains an Asian American choice and a trans man as well. The problem inherent in the selection of dating games to find once-again elusive Black, non-binary representations is maybe within the contract of the dating simulation, where growing close to another character is the main goal, and where these potential partners must hold a stereotypical (or archetypal) role to be considered:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of

dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (hooks 23)

This quote is precisely the problem in some dating simulation games. The “Other” characters are exotic in their appearance, as is the case in *Boyfriend Dungeon* (2021), in which White non-binary character Rowan is ageless and mystical while Sunder, one of the few non-white characters, is a vampire of Indian descent. The characters are created with special effort to show how different they are through dialogue. The game offers many opportunities to share intimate details and speak with characters having a diversity of life experiences (Valeria is in a polyamorous relationship, Sawyer is a non-binary teenager) on varied media: the player and characters exchange text messages, or go on missions in dungeons together, as well as meet inadvertently on the main map, go on dates. Creator Tanya X. Short declared in 2017: “I think inclusivity is important in every game [...] but especially in games about love and the bonds we forge with other people. [...] True love is always inclusive” (Chan 7). This blanket statement is virtuous indeed, but it also shows the very real work behind creating such characters in the development of games where intersectionality is still largely nonexistent.

When asking gamers I knew about non-binary Black characters in video games, the answer resembled the one given by my friends working in the game industry: “There is Chaos in *Hades*, and the game *Life is Strange: True Colors* maybe. And *Monster Prom* maybe but they’re not humans. We can have pronouns in the Sims now. *Boyfriend Dungeon*, too”.<sup>8</sup> This is the most comprehensive answer I received in the year or so spent working on this paper. Most people forwent the African American aspect, often going for White, queer characters or POC who were not quare in the strictest sense. To be completely honest, the study of *Hades* and Sundance below does not fit the criteria either, because they are not strictly speaking American. However, the impossibility of finding characters is revealing in itself. First, people tend to turn to American-made media. Almost no Japanese games were named in the very informal inquiry I made, apart from *Life is Strange* (2015) and *Life is Strange: True Colors* (2021) where same-sex romances can be pursued, the latter featuring an Asian American main character. The African American identity is erased in favor of the queer identity, as if

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<sup>8</sup> I reproduce here the translation of our dialogue online.

intersectional elements did not matter.<sup>9</sup> Trans and non-binary characterizations were conflated, as well as Black and more broadly non-White characters. A. Waszkiewicz who, at the time of handing this paper to its rightful reviewers, was writing an article about non-binary representations in video games with R. Longobardi Zingarelli, told me one of their points was that characters in game were exclusive: when selecting a pronoun, there was no option to select more than one pronoun, such as she/they, or to forgo pronouns altogether and choose not to decide, letting the machine select pronouns randomly, for instance. This cookie-cutter model of exclusive choices prevailed in my small circle of acquaintances working on inclusive video games, whether concerning in-game representations, the game's mechanics, or self-characterization.

Non-human, Black-coded characters did not carry the same value, as they may be likened to racist stereotypes, which has been the subject of papers and journal issues showing that video games are steeped in colonial (Mukherjee and Hammar 6) and racist ideas, reenacting real-life issues with little insight (Derfoufi 1; Mukherjee 1; Srauy 1).

Non-binary animalistic figures also exist but, as is the case for the Iron Bull, their Otherness is not congruent with an African American identity. The queer big cats in the gay dating simulator *Nekojishi* (2017) have far fewer hesitations about their being gay or attracted to the main character than he has about himself, as his humanness ties him to real-life issues in Taiwan when his potential love interests are much more detached from these questions. This relative genderqueer liberation in non-White characters should not, however, be conflated with quare identity as quareness is fundamentally grounded in African American culture, making even Brown skinned non-binary humanoid characters subject to scrutiny when it comes to discussing non-binary Black identities in video games.

*Searching For Games Outside of Games.* The inauguration, in May 2023, of the *Black Games Archive* website curating resources on Black video games, developers, and analyses was another possible source for games featuring non-binary Black characters. Founders S. Blackmon and T. Russworm describe it

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<sup>9</sup> In a similar fashion, I almost contacted media historian and an Assistant Professor at New York University media historian and Assistant Professor at New York University Whit Pow about their experience as a queer POC—forgetting in the process that they were not Black.

as a database on “Black culture, games, and play.”<sup>10</sup> The site is brand new and focuses for the moment on an inventory of Black questions in game, and a thematic classification of their content, creating a cartography of sorts of what a Black game is. Russworm is used to working on minority representations (Russworm and Malkowski, 1-16) but her main focus remains Black history, when Blackmon works on feminist game studies. A mere 24 games are tagged as containing “intersectionality,” and there is no LGBTQ+ or queer theme available yet.<sup>11</sup>

In lists often published in video game magazines, there are frequent calls to non-binarity or queer representations. “Video Game Characters that are non-binary”<sup>12</sup> in *GameRant*, “10 games with non-binary characters”<sup>13</sup> in *The Gamer*, etc. These lists have little to do with genuine interest, but rather belong to the engagement landscape of streamed media (video games, TV series) which focus on the creation of networks of media content sharing the same characteristics, to break from a model where game stores would only display their goods, instead of linking together several media (Lotz 74). The same type of pages exists to rank Black characters, joining games via a single characteristic. However, the query for “non-binary Black characters in video games,” most likely too precise in its wording, does not return any hits.

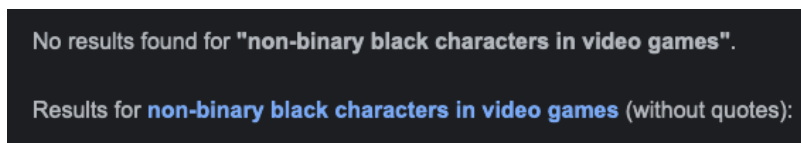


Figure 1. Absence of results for “non-binary Black characters in video games”

<sup>10</sup> As of July, 2023. Both creators have released a video discussing the taxonomy here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkyKp7pk-4A>. Last access: 07/01/2023.

<sup>11</sup> As of July, 2023. Both creators have released a video discussing the taxonomy here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkyKp7pk-4A>. Last access: 07/01/2023.

<sup>12</sup> URL: [https://gamerant.com/video-game-characters-non-binary/?newsletter\\_popup=1#bloodhound-ndash-apex-legends](https://gamerant.com/video-game-characters-non-binary/?newsletter_popup=1#bloodhound-ndash-apex-legends). Last access: 05/20/2023.

<sup>13</sup> URL: <https://www.thegamer.com/non-binary-character-options-in-games/>. Last access: 05/22/2023.

At last! A search returned an interesting sentence: “As a non-binary, Black tall person, there’s no game where I see myself completely in that world.” The blog post had a promising title, *Black Gamers Still Don’t Fully See Themselves in Games*. However, the link pointed to a page so old<sup>14</sup>, which, once again, rerouted to a non-existent article.



Figure 2. Error on Wayback Machine

More research revealed the author was Cheyenne M. Davis, an independent content creator whose AllMyLinks page<sup>15</sup> included a link to the article that also landed on Pop Sugar’s main page – the irony of a non-binary Black person raising the issue of the lack of representativity for them, in but a stub lost to the Internet, is not lost on me.

In articles or books, the same absence of resources is confirmed: non-binary issues are sometimes conflated with trans issues in the gender non-conforming spectrum, and racial and gender issues are treated as separate. The fact that Queer Game Studies is a White-dominated field is a reflection of this very issue.<sup>16</sup> A query for “non-binary Black” or “non-binary African American” on journal and

<sup>14</sup> URL: <https://www.popsugar.com.au/gaming/black-gamers-inclusive-character-customisation>. Last access: 06/04/2023.

<sup>15</sup> URL: <https://allmylinks.com/cheymodee>. Last access: 02/29/2024.

<sup>16</sup> As a piece of evidence, the book *Queer Game Studies* edited by B. Ruberg and A. Shaw contains no articles pertaining to the intersection of race and queerness, even if it features contributions by Black authors.

academic article search engines returns very few results, and none pertaining to the type of article I was set to write.<sup>17</sup>

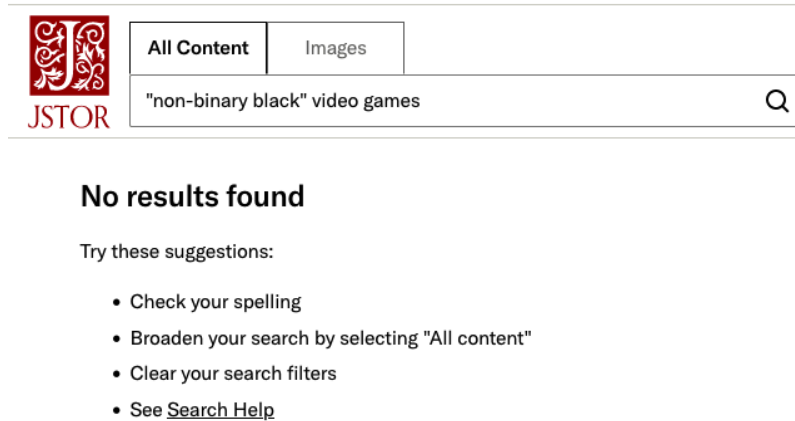


Figure 3. Unsuccessful search, Jstor

Now that the conditions in which this search *in absentia* has been laid out, from the context of games to the broader fields of journals, websites, and personal connections, it is time to turn to the representations found in games, however scarce.

### Non-Binary Black Characters (?)

Out of all the characters evoked in these pages, only two can be said to fit the bill. Both come from American studios, and both are non-binary, non-White characters. The game genres they belong to are quite different. *Battlefield 2024* is a first-person shooter set in the future; *Hades* is a rogue-like<sup>18</sup> game set in the depths of the Greek underworld. The characters do share a common point: their identity is unlike any other characters' in the game and they represent a hybridity that is translated by their ethos.

Sundance is the first non-binary and first LGBTQ+ character to be introduced in the *Battlefield* franchise. They belong to the most offensive character class of

<sup>17</sup> This test was made on *Google Scholar*, *Internet Archive Scholar* and *Jstor*.

<sup>18</sup> Rogue games take the player through various maps, dying in the process but becoming more and more powerful in the process/as they advance (to avoid the repetition of "in the process").

the game, an assault specialist, and they are the only non-male in this category. They are presented in the Electronic Arts promotional material as quite a rough character. In the screensaver provided by the game,<sup>19</sup> there are two armed men – a glass of wine in one hand and a pistol in the other. Compared to other supportive characters in the same game,<sup>20</sup> they are much more menacing: Irish, for example, is shown with his son,<sup>21</sup> and Maria Falck delivers a baby to a smiling woman on a gurney. Sundance’s identity is also twofold in their background, as both a former member of organized crime, and of the army; they are also the only character equipped with a wingsuit which allows them to glide in the air and land where needed, contrary to others who have a parachute. Ambivalence is part of their characterization and their gender expression is stated through the ambiguous situations they experience. The fact that they present as a woman and that their gender has no influence on the game shows the kind of ambiguous gender identity (Thach 34) present in games where gender identity plays no role in the character’s development. They have a feminine first name (Emma), are voiced by Aurélie Konaté (a French actress), and aside from a few sentences they utter on the battlefield, they remain mostly silent so that their gender identity cannot truly become part of the game. They are tokenized in more than one way. For example, their hair is also notably curly<sup>22</sup> which is an uncommon feature in games. They are described in *The Gamer* as “the complete diversity package all in a single character” (Murray 5). Is their race and gender important for the game? Hardly. Is it important representation-wise? Maybe more so.

*Grey Figures: Chaos as a Quare Chorus of Voices.* The color gray is both a reference to the sexual orientation and the blurry nature of the identification of the characters. One character who fits this description is Chaos in *Hades*. In this game

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<sup>19</sup> URL: <https://www.ea.com/games/battlefield/battlefield-2042/game-overview/specialists/emma-rosier>. Last access: 06/04/2023.

<sup>20</sup> : <https://www.ea.com/games/battlefield/battlefield-2042/game-overview/specialists/kimble-irish-graves>. Last access: 06/04/2023.

<sup>21</sup> URL: <https://www.ea.com/games/battlefield/battlefield-2042/game-overview/specialists/maria-falck>. Last access: 06/04/2023.

<sup>22</sup> See Ivanescu for discussions about “the absence of Black hair textures and styles” (7) in video games.

featuring characters from the Greek mythology, mostly gods and semi-gods, the personal qualities of the characters are mostly essentialized, through their godly attributes. Chaos depicts the primordial force behind creation and, as such, is agender, lives in a space of their own, between godly and mortal plans, and does not actually interact much with other characters, noting their presence only in the lines of dialogue shared with Zagreus, the hero embodied by the player. The existence of such a grey character suggests yet another question: quare portrayals are not always androgynous, devoid of identifying traits linked to traditional male or female representations (Lan 10). Such a character is also too far from reality to be a representation of us, humans, but it is telling in the way grayness is portrayed in this American video game. The character is actually made of a multitude of others: the human-looking headstands on top of a skeleton torso seemingly clothed with an indistinct mass of humanoid faces and other unidentified elements wrapped around their neck as a scarf or massive collar—they have no visible lower body besides this girth-like growth. They are quite serene and seem content with merely being. Chaos' voice is made of a chorus of half-whispered, genderless voices and Chaos is addressed using they/them pronouns. They are described in game as being “an ancient presence from which sprang forth every manner of existence.” When they meet the main character, Chaos tells him that they “know everybody, here and there.” They are omnipotent and presented as the “primordial originator” and yet, they do nothing but exist, in their retired realm. They are generally liked by players, who praise their appearance as “an absolute non-binary icon,”<sup>23</sup> regardless of their ethnic background—or absence thereof. However, their presence is also noted by Black players as: “Lacking any real material desire, Chaos, it seemed, only wanted respect. I related to them; in their cool suave and in the outside realms' collective unknowing. What interest's Chaos? What do those who live, at once, within and without the world actually *want*?” (Love 1, emphasis in original). Their being both a chorus of voices (both metaphorically and physically) and an identifiable character whose powers reflect their deeply intersectional nature is the embodiment of the crossed identities of quare characters – and that of players too.

This success amongst players who see themselves in this powerful character is ultimately all that may matter in quare representations in video games. Even if

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<sup>23</sup> In the non-binary section of Reddit. URL: [https://www.reddit.com/r/ennnnnnnnnnnbbbbbby/comments/10b5xu/shoutout\\_to\\_chaos\\_from\\_hades\\_primordeal/?rdt=48908](https://www.reddit.com/r/ennnnnnnnnnnbbbbbby/comments/10b5xu/shoutout_to_chaos_from_hades_primordeal/?rdt=48908)



Chaos is not Black – they are gray with Caucasian features – they are, strictly speaking, not White and the dilution of their identity – or, rather, the fact that they embody any and all identities at once – is enough for players to perceive them as non-binary in the strictest sense of the term (not binary), and a positive representation.

## Conclusion

Video games have long suffered from the dichotomy created by competitions, where matches heighten inherent oppositions within society. The latter is better represented in the conversations that can be heard in the online vocal chat rooms when gamers use various swearwords to playfully castigate each other – something that reminds of certain behaviors in European soccer stadiums. As put by a Black game designer named Saint in an interview about the slow shift in attitude towards Black people within the gaming community, “It’s worth noting that every slur thrown out on voice chat – “nigger,” “faggot,” “pussy,” “dyke” – is really code for “different,” in the same way that “relatable” when spoken by a marketer is shorthand for “straight, white and male.” But I don’t think it’s unique to the game industry at all. The racial issues we deal with are endemic in our society; just so happens the gaming industry is a part of society as well” (Saint qtd. in Condit). Is the saturation of identities embodied by Chaos, the endless potentialities they represent, the way to go to erase and represent any and all intersectional identities? Or is such a grey identity merely a portrayal of every intersectional identity, resonating in quare people?

“Queerness and video games share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play” (Ruberg). The tension between queer and quare game studies is made apparent by their circulating in different circles, producing research about conceptually different alternatives to mainstream games.<sup>24</sup> In the present article, I hoped to encompass all the issues regarding the representation of non-binary Black characters in video games. I believe my repeated failed attempts show the systemic failures in the way certain intersectional identities are presented in popular culture. Non-binary Black characters are depicted with

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<sup>24</sup> The question of representation in games is often that of female representation; adding sexual identification points to gender identity is one of the focuses of queer game studies, where quare game studies add yet another layer, that of racial identity.

special focus on their identities. However, we know that “when representation is reduced to character/avatar aesthetics, it cannot actually encompass the experience of inhabiting the world with a specific identity” (Shaw 213). Subversion of expected identities, of pigeonholed characters, may be found in limited representations – and maybe in the oblique representation offered by characters like Chaos.

A game such as *Spirit Swap*, whose release is expected in 2024, is perhaps a good place to end. Created by an inclusive cast, with a clear queer orientation, this game is a sign of potential shifts in the way queer games may effortlessly include non-binary, African American cast members, simply because their developers resemble the characters. It suggests that future endeavors on this subject should focus on indie games as an alternative to mainstream productions, to represent both queer characters and game mechanics.<sup>25</sup> This is but a potential, as “identity formation – even body-coded ethnic and gender identity – is a chaotic process that can have no end” (Gilroy 238). This article has itself been a chaotic process made of fumbling and intersectional trials striving to show how lacking these incomplete representations are and how much even partial representation may resonate in players.

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<sup>25</sup> Queer game mechanics focus more closely on the affect and on player-centered experiences, resorting to personal testimonies, as opposed to capitalistic game mechanics where winning means colonizing territories and amassing fortunes or killing others.

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# Queering Lafayette: Adapting and Subverting the Black Sissy Trope in *True Blood*

ELIZABETH MULLEN

In the first two novels of her *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, straight White female author Charlaine Harris depicts the character of gay Black short-order cook Lafayette Reynolds as a flamboyant, delicate, effeminate sissy – one who, by the opening pages of the second novel, ends up beaten and strangled to death at the hands of a group of older White men. From the start, the text conflates Lafayette’s race and his queerness to create an overall impression of vulnerability and victimhood.

Nelsan Ellis, the Chicago-born Black actor who portrays Lafayette in *True Blood*, HBO’s television adaptation of the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, takes the character in a different direction, coding Lafayette’s queerness as a source of his resilience and completely abandoning the sissy trope that permeates the novels. This study will examine how Ellis’s portrayal of Lafayette’s queerness in the *True Blood* series subverts binary views of masculinity, queerness, and race.

## Defining the Sissy

Derived from “sister,” a word referencing a female family member, the American slang term “sissy” denotes both the presence of characteristics traditionally coded as feminine and the absence of traits traditionally coded as masculine; as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, a sissy can be defined as “[a] boy or man whose behaviour, demeanour, or appearance is considered in some way to be effeminate or lacking in manliness, esp. one regarded as feeble, cowardly, timid, squeamish, or excessively averse to dirt” (*OED*). Additionally, a boy or man exhibiting interest in stereotypically feminine pursuits such as physical adornment, unathletic activities or needlework may also be called a sissy.

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Two factors stand out in this definition. First, it reinforces the idea of a closed male/female binary that values masculinity and demeans femininity, echoing Aristotelian claims that women are misbegotten or defective men. Second, as a creature “lacking in manliness,” the sissy is, by definition, a failure.

In *Manhood in America*, feminist scholar Michael Kimmel establishes a clear connection between the tenets of hegemonic masculinity and American identity, highlighting the inherent tension between these impossible ideals (dominance, invulnerability, and individualism, among others) and the unspoken fear of failure they inspire among men (Kimmel). What was true of the Founding Fathers remains true in this first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: framed in the language of virility, the cult of winning lies at the heart of American identity.<sup>1</sup> Along similar lines, in his book, *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness*, Marlon B. Ross hints at the undercurrent of violence associated with non-masculine behavior: to be a sissy is to fly in the face of American ideals of manliness and the many myths those ideals embrace – from Manifest Destiny to the myth of the Cowboy and beyond – underscoring how the sissy trope challenges the deeply ingrained masculinity of American identity:

The sissy remains the gremlin of the American national imaginary when it comes to the rites and rights of manliness [...] Sissiness haunts every sphere of vaunted masculine empowerment as a cautionary figure of the failure to win, which is assumed to result from a failure of manly drive. (Ross *ix*)

For African-American men, the dangers of both “manly” and “unmanly” behavior present significant historical challenges on and offscreen. In either

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<sup>1</sup> Masculine-coded language dominates accounts of winning irrespective of gender, as evidenced in coverage of prominent female sports figures such as Serena Williams and Megan Rapinoe. Interestingly, controversial actor Charlie Sheen’s 2011 remarks around “bi-winning” have sparked a deeper discussion on the grotesque extremes to which the compulsion to be seen as a winner (and not to seem like a loser) can drive conversations around what it means to be a man. When, in an interview about the actor’s supposed sobriety, a journalist asks Sheen whether he is bipolar, he responds he is “bi-winning, I win here and I win there,” and continues to describe a life of drug-induced drama. For further discussion, see Nora J. Rifon, Marla Royne, and Les Carlson, Eds., *Advertising and Violence: Concepts and Perspectives*, Routledge, 2014. The interview is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emEM5H9NgTI>.



case racist ideologies appropriate black bodies, demonizing the “Buck/Coon,” infantilizing the “Uncle Tom/Boy,”<sup>2</sup> and brutalizing both.

### Contextualizing the Southern Sissy

As Kimmel argues, [White] southern men experienced the defeat of the Confederacy and its aftermath as a “gendered humiliation” (30). It is worth pointing out that both Harris’s novels and the HBO series adaptation are set in the fictional Louisiana town of Bon Temps, firmly placing the narrative in the Deep South. As Mahoney and Katz have pointed out, regional identities are built on both a sense of commonality within a given region and a feeling of distinction from those outside the community (xi). This sense of commonality finds its roots in shared beliefs, shared history, and shared values; though, in the case of the South, questions of race (and, to a lesser extent, class) complicate the notion of a “shared” regional identity.

Drawing on several scholarly sources, Educational Leadership for Diverse Learning Communities specialist Tricia Kress argues that regionalizing the South as degenerate Other should be read as an expression of hegemonic power by the rest of the country, one that establishes a binary relationship between the two:

The South is thereby constructed as “America’s opposite, the negative image, its evil twin” (Griffin, 2006, p. 7). As the disadvantaged side of the binary, the South is “defined in opposition to the North/nation” (Winders, 2005, p. 392). Consequently, if America is ideologically constructed as a mythical beacon of progress, mobility, individuality, equality, and reason, the South, as its opposite, is the antimodern, backward, degenerate region. With its bruised history of slavery and racism and its unsuccessful (and disloyal) attempt at secession from the nation, the South is geographically bounded as a historical “problem.” (Kress 109)

Much as hegemonic masculinity thrives on excluding the unmasculine Other, so hegemonic national identity preserves itself and its ideals by regionalizing the South. R. Bruce Brasell, a specialist in southern and queer cinema, notes that through a certain national lens, the South can be viewed as inferior to the rest of the United States, marked by its failure to live up to national ideals

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<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Black stereotypes on screen, see Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Continuum, 1990.

(35). If, as Kimmel suggests, the fear of failure – and of the feminization it implies – drives hegemonic masculinity, then we can perhaps interpret the Southern stereotype of the gun-toting tobacco-chewing racist homophobic straight White male redneck as a reactionary response to this Othering of the South as the “sissy” (the defeated, unmanly inferior) of the US.

### The Sissy and the Vulnerable Black Body: Lafayette in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*

In *Dead Until Dark* (2001), Harris describes the diminutive, gay, Black short-order cook, Lafayette Reynolds, as a loner almost exclusively confined to his place of work, Merlotte’s Café, stripping him of a personal life outside his subordinate position as a back-kitchen cook. First-person protagonist Sookie Stackhouse introduces Lafayette thus: “Through the window into the little kitchen I could see Lafayette Reynolds, the cook, flipping burgers and sinking a basket of fries into hot oil. [...] He winked at me with a sweep of his thick, false lashes. Lafayette wears a lot of makeup. I was so used to him I never thought of it any more” (50). From the start, then, Lafayette is at once set apart from the others and ignored by them, marked by his “sissy” appearance as framed through the kitchen window in Merlotte’s Café.

The town’s treatment of Lafayette’s queerness further marks him as othered. Sookie points out that the other female staff members want nothing to do with him: “Dawn had never gotten along with Lafayette, whether because he was black or because he was gay, I didn’t know ... maybe both. Arlene and Charlsie just accepted the cook, but didn’t go out of their ways to be friendly. But I’d always kind of liked Lafayette because he conducted what had to be a tough life with verve and grace” (115). Lafayette serves as a foil to Sookie, showcasing her empathetic superiority to her coworkers: she has “always kind of liked him” and interprets his effeminate appearance and sassy remarks as evidence of his “verve and grace.” And yet, while he has clearly come out of the closet, Lafayette never comes out of the kitchen: Sookie’s assumption that Lafayette’s life must be hard does not stem from any actual knowledge about his past; in a novel ostensibly centered on notions of family, community and tolerance, readers learn next to nothing about Lafayette’s family, his community, or his past.

If the first novel of the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* underscores the solitary, othered nature of the queer Black sissy, the second, *Living Dead in Dallas* (2002) shifts focus to his vulnerability and expendability. When, in the opening pages of the novel, Lafayette’s corpse is discovered in the back of the

Sheriff's police vehicle in the parking lot of Merlotte's, Sookie as narrator treats the body as a problem, initially focusing not on the loss of a human life but rather on the disturbance of her expectations: a day off interrupted, a car where it does not belong, a door that will not shut. Upon finding the car, even supernaturally empathetic Sookie at first experiences only frustration and disgust:

I shoved the [car] door to, but it would only give an inch. So I pressed my body to it, thinking it would latch and I could be on my way. Again, the door would not click shut. Impatiently, I yanked it all the way open to find out what was in the way. A wave of smell gusted out into the parking lot, a dreadful smell. Dismay clutched at my throat, because the smell was not unknown to me. I peered into the backseat of the car, my hand covering my mouth, though that hardly helped with the smell. "Oh, man," I whispered. "Oh, shit." Lafayette, the cook for one shift at Merlotte's, had been shoved into the backseat. He was naked. It was Lafayette's thin brown foot, its toenails painted a deep crimson, that had kept the door from shutting, and it was Lafayette's corpse that smelled to high heaven (8).

Sookie describes the discarded, naked body stuffed in the back seat like so much trash, down to the corpse's foul stench. Tellingly, when the other waitresses arrive on the scene, one expresses astonishment that the sheriff "let a black queer sleep in his car" and audibly wonders "who's gonna cook for us? People come in, they'll want lunch" (6). Aside from the lingering odor of his corpse, Lafayette is forgettable, expendable. In fact, in the description of the scene, what most stands out – textually and metaphorically – is Lafayette's thin, brown foot with its painted toenails: clearly venturing to the "wrong" (read: female) side of the gender binary comes at a terrible cost.

No matter their level of gender conformity, any discussion of mutilated, naked Black bodies resonates particularly strongly in US culture;<sup>3</sup> even more so in stories set in the South, where, as Patricia Yaeger points out in *Dirt and Desire*, "this literature provokes the uncanny presence of disposable [Black] bodies" (Yaeger 67). In the passage describing his murder at the hands of a group of White men, Lafayette's slim brown body becomes the locus of sexual and sadistic violence:

I could taste the flavor of Eggs's thoughts. He was remembering Lafayette, thin brown body, talented fingers, and heavily made up

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<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the racist spectacle of mutilated black bodies, see Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, UNC Press, 2009.

eyes. He was remembering Lafayette's whispered suggestions. Then he was choking those happy memories off with more unpleasant ones, Lafayette protesting violently, shrilly [...] I reached in another direction, wormed into the head of Mike Spencer, found the nasty tangle I'd expected, found that as he rolled Cleo's breasts in his hands he was seeing other brown flesh, limp and lifeless. His own flesh rose as he remembered this. Through his memories I saw Jan asleep on the lumpy couch, Lafayette's protest that if they didn't stop hurting him he would tell everyone what he'd done and with whom, and then Mike's fists descending, Tom Hardaway kneeling on the thin dark chest... (256)

Lafayette's gendered and racialized torment is rendered more pathetic by his longing to belong to the very group that first uses then disposes of him. Throughout his brief presence in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, Lafayette remains firmly entrenched on the sissy side of the binary. His onscreen counterpart resolutely reclaims the term and refuses the binary outright.

#### From Text to Screen: *True Blood* in the Obama Era

By the time HBO aired the first season of *True Blood* in September 2008, the nation was on the brink of a sea change: Barack Obama, a biracial Black man, had just secured the Democratic nomination as presidential candidate; same-sex marriages and civil partnerships were growing in some states, and LGBT representation was on the rise, particularly on HBO.<sup>4</sup> By 2010, LGBT people could serve openly in the military and, following the passage of the Matthew Shepard and George W. Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act, race and sexuality-based acts of violence were recognized as hate crimes.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Alan Ball<sup>5</sup>, creator and showrunner behind *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), would agree to take on the adaptation of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series. As Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris aptly points out, from the opening scene of the first episode to the images accompanying Jace Everett's 2005 country song, "Bad Things,"

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<sup>4</sup> According to a 2008-2009 GLAAD Network Responsibility Index, 42% of HBO's total programming hours featured LGBT representation, as did 24% of ABC's total network hours – a substantial increase over previous years. See <https://glaad.org/publications/nri2009/>. Accessed 11/11/2023.

<sup>5</sup> Known for his outspoken support of screening LGBT characters, openly gay writer, producer and showrunner Alan Ball has made a career of challenging the binary in all its forms.

Ball continually draws on contemporary concerns even as he erases the boundaries between fact, fiction, and the supernatural:

*True Blood's* combination of historical clips, eerie special effects and photos in Digital Kitchen's title credits powerfully evoke other seminal images from either the Civil Rights era archival footage or from celebrated films on southern unrest during the 1950s and 1960s. [...] The contiguity of the color picture of the abandoned car with the black and white archival photo of a young boy in Ku Klux Klan attire already foregrounds a compelling visual grammar, which foreshadows the dark confrontational forces at work in the series' South. (Paquet-Deyris)

The same opening sequence underscores the contradictions inherent in the religious South, juxtaposing shots of charismatic Church revivals with bodies locked in a sexual embrace, or images of lewd pool-playing with full-immersion baptism. A close-up on a sign reading "God Hates Fangs" evokes the intolerant pronouncements of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church<sup>6</sup> and other hate groups concerning the queer community, while the opening scene of the pilot, featuring a confrontation between a White frat boy and a White redneck vampire, subverts audience expectations (Paquet-Deyris). The community of Bon Temps undergoes similar erosion of the binary present in the adapted text, as evidenced in *True Blood's* treatment of Lafayette.

### Lafayette On Screen: Subverting the Sissy Trope

From his first appearance on screen (S01E01, 10:48) Lafayette contradicts the sissy trope without flipping to the other side of the binary. Dressed in a sleeveless red mesh tank top, chef's apron, patterned head scarf and earrings, he swivels his hips and bats his heavily made-up eyes as he shakes spices onto the grill. His femininity is on full display as he sways his slim, muscular body, clearly at ease with himself and with those around him.

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<sup>6</sup> Founded in 1955 in Topeka, Kansas, the Westboro Baptist Church, an unaffiliated Primitive Baptist organization, is widely considered a hate group. It has especially garnered media attention for its slogan, "God Hates Fags," a message so integral to the Church's identity, it figures in their domain name (<https://www.godhatesfags.com/>). Accessed 1/1/2024. For more information on the group's hate-based actions, see the Anti Defamation League's website, <https://www.adl.org/resources/news/westboro-baptist-church-legacy-hate>. Accessed 1/1/2024.



Figure 1: Lafayette Reynolds S01E01, 10:48

In a significant departure from the adapted text, the camera starts next to Lafayette on the kitchen side of the restaurant before panning around him to show Sookie placing an order. Lafayette’s sassy feminine banter includes not only Sookie (“Ooh, Sookie! Chicka chicka bow-wow! You look like a porn star with that tan!”) but Arlene and Dawn as well, prompting teasing responses from both<sup>7</sup>. All four share the bond of mutual labor in the service industry—a bond that extends to Lafayette agreeing to drop a few onion rings on the floor before giving Sookie her order for an obnoxious client. Later, we see Lafayette working on a road crew alongside Sookie’s brother: not only is he out of the closet, but he is also out of the kitchen and at ease among a group of construction workers who are equally at ease with him.

The sissy as other is traditionally characterized by exclusion and failure. Yet, in *True Blood*, while fully embracing his queerness and his blackness, Lafayette remains an integral part of the community. In Ball’s version of Bon Temps, Lafayette has ties to family as well as to the admittedly small local community of color. In the first episode, his cousin Tara, Sookie’s best friend, invites a shirtless, overall-clad overweight White male patron at the bar to appreciate the irony of a Black girl being named after a slave plantation, seconded by Lafayette, who coos that he likes a big man. The cousins clearly watch out for one another even as they spar like siblings. Lafayette can be considered as part of the Merlotte’s family as well, protecting Sookie from supernatural creatures on more than one occasion. Lafayette’s connections to

<sup>7</sup> The full scene is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cz3zi8sweYA&list=PL\\_BveLxvS8SwR3-4lytZdfHUWiz-xOkFF&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cz3zi8sweYA&list=PL_BveLxvS8SwR3-4lytZdfHUWiz-xOkFF&index=3). Accessed 1/30/2024.

the community extend beyond the living: once united with his Hispanic brujo boyfriend, Jesus, Lafayette discovers that he can speak to the dead, allowing him to draw on his ancestors as well.

Interestingly, when Lafayette does encounter homophobia and rejection, the perpetrators are outsiders. In an iconic scene in the episode “Sparks Fly Out” (S1E5), three White male out-of-towners attempt to harass Lafayette by refusing to eat the food he has prepared, claiming the burgers might have AIDS. In the following exchange, Lafayette refuses to be othered by their rejection and claims his legitimacy as a member of the Merlotte’s family.<sup>8</sup> The dynamics of the dialogue demonstrate Lafayette’s refusal to become a victim at the hands of Southern White men coded as traditionally masculine:

Arlene [*talking to Lafayette*]: Oh, come on now. It’s not worth it.

Lafayette: What did they say?

Arlene [*in a low voice*]: He said...the burger....

Lafayette: What did they say, Arlene!?

Arlene [*reluctantly*]: He said the burger might have AIDS.

[*Lafayette removes his earrings, his apron, and grabs a plate of food*]

Arlene: Lafayette! Oh, fudge!

[*Lafayette walks over to the table.*]

Lafayette: ’Scuse me. Who ordered the hamburger, [*puts plate on table*] with AIDS?

Redneck: [*laughs and pokes his friends*] I ordered the hamburger deluxe.

Lafayette: In this restaurant a hamburger deluxe come with French fries, lettuce, tomato, mayo, AND AIDS! DO ANYBODY GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT?!

Redneck: Yeah! I’m an American, and I got a say in who makes my food!

Lafayette: Well baby’s it’s too late for that. Faggots been breeding your cows, raising your chickens, even brewing your beer long before I walked my sexy ass up in this mother fucker. Everything on your goddamn table got AIDS.

Redneck: You still ain’t making me eat no AIDS burger.

Lafayette: [*leans in*] Well all you gotta do is say hold the AIDS. Here. [*licks the hamburger bun*] Eat it! [*jams the bun in the redneck’s face, and punches all three*]. Bitch, you come in my house, you

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<sup>8</sup> *True Blood* Season One, Episode Five (“Sparks Fly Out”) 35:15-36:05

goin' to eat my food the way I FUCKIN MAKE IT! You understand me? [Pause] Tip your waitress. [*sashays away*]. (35:15-36:05)<sup>9</sup>

The beauty of the scene lies partly in the way Lafayette references other subordinated groups in his response. Taking off his earrings, a gesture associated with women (especially women of color) preparing to fight, Lafayette draws a parallel between the historic invisibility of the LGBT population in the service industry and the history of enslaved people of color's servitude to Whites. Additionally, Lafayette defends himself "like a man" without sacrificing any part of his queerness, fluidly passing from explosive violence to shade-throwing composure, further emphasizing the trio's abject failure in their attempts to exclude him.

The shot/countershot structure of the sequence alternates low-angle shots of a fearless Lafayette with high-angle shots of the rednecks, emphasizing Lafayette's superiority while minimizing the impact of the outsiders. Fully claiming his place in the restaurant ("my house," "my food"), Lafayette ends his speech by putting the rednecks back in their place: they are customers, not members of the community. Background shots of the reactions of the other patrons, particularly those of Sookie's brother, straight White male Jason Stackhouse, provide White spectators with an ally with whom they can identify, allowing them to reject the three redneck homophobes and join in Jason's applause.<sup>10</sup>

As cathartic and affirming as this scene may be, it would be a mistake to think that *True Blood's* Lafayette is impervious to the trauma of being a gay Black man who questions gender binaries in the South – even in a South rife with supernatural creatures. Lafayette's reclaims the rednecks' insulting remark about his food and AIDS, turning their fear of contamination against them first by evoking the unseen omnipresence of the gay community across the service industry, then by breaching the physical separation between his mouth and theirs: first, licking mayonnaise off the burger bun, and, then, smashing it into the mouth of one of the rednecks. Yet, this rousing scene belies the underlying trauma of the AIDS epidemic and its effects; Lafayette remains poised between both truths.

Throughout the series, the camera captures Lafayette crossing liminal spaces: doorways, mirrors, computer screens, and even the space between the living and the dead. This liminal fluidity reflects what Brigid Cherry sees as a

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<sup>9</sup> The full scene can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7l-VVxCLo8>. Accessed 1/1/2024.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Anne Cremieux for this observation.



particular admixture of race, history, and identity in Southern Gothic television, linking this idea to Adrian Parr's perspective on national trauma:

The past is not so much a tangible terrain, a demarcated and identifiable space, or a monumental time that acts as a warning or reminder both in the present and for future generations, but an admixture of times that affirm the present and future and in so doing encourage a more nomadic subjectivity that identifies with a variety of subjectivities. (Parr, qtd in Cherry, 467.)

In the vampire/werewolf/faerie-laden world of *True Blood*, this nomadic subjectivity builds on a kind of cumulative liminality where multiple boundaries are simultaneously crossed and binaries of all kinds risk collapse. Within this world, Lafayette's nonconforming fluidity contains multitudes, subverting the sissy trope by placing masculine and feminine characteristics on equal footing, navigating past and present in a region haunted by past and present trauma.

### Vulnerability, Trauma, and Queer Survival

As discussed earlier, in Harris's text, Lafayette's gender nonconformity is negatively coded as lacking in manliness and infected with femininity while his Blackness further marks him as Other. Perceived as disposable prey by the straight White men who beat him, sexually abuse him, kill him and dump his naked body in the back of a car, Harris's Lafayette serves as locus for gendered and racialized trauma, both of which haunt the American imaginary. In *True Blood*, Lafayette's sassy fierceness does not protect him from trauma borne of vulnerability. His responses to that vulnerability set him apart from his textual twin, underscoring his refusal to play either the victim or the superhero. Lafayette continually vies for agency over his own commodification. In a constant state of financial instability, he takes on several risky, illegal ventures in addition to his legitimate jobs, trading sex work for vampire blood to sell and performing sexually suggestive acts over the Internet for money. No matter the situation, Lafayette never loses his drive to survive.

The racial and queer power dynamics at the heart of Lafayette's attempts at agency shed light on the ambiguity surrounding the interplay between dominated and dominant, as Laure Blanchemain Faucon makes clear in her analysis of a scene from Season One, Episode Three. At Lafayette's behest, straight White male Jason Stackhouse dons a rubber mask of Laura Bush and dances in his underwear in front of a webcam in exchange for vampire blood.

Unbeknownst to both, Lafayette's cousin Tara watches the scene from behind a curtain.<sup>11</sup> Faucon draws our attention to the multilayered scopophilic resonances of the scene:

The scene [...] inverts power relations in terms of gender and race at the same time. The presence of Lafayette's shirtless body on screen further confuses the spectator. As a sex-worker, he is usually the one performing in front of the camera and subordinated to a predominantly white male clientele. The *mise en abyme* reminds us that his body, like Jason's, is also on display, even in this scene, for the paying audience of HBO. Although seemingly debunking white male domination, this scene also suggests that the reversal of the forces of subordination is far from complete. (77)

By analyzing certain contradictions in the scene, Faucon points out the pitfalls of applying an unnuanced intersectional lens to interpretations of the queer gaze. At the same time, the scene complexifies its exploration of the gaze by layering homosocial trust and transactional exchange: Jason comes to Lafayette looking for Viagra, tacitly confiding in Lafayette about his sexual performance anxiety. Lafayette's flirty remarks ("hello hotness," etc.) and exotic attire (a silk headscarf, gold lamé pants and nothing else) inspire no homophobic hysteria on Jason's part.

This trust does not extend, however, to business: Lafayette requires payment for the vampire blood he provides, stating "ain't nothing free in my world." It is worth noting here that Lafayette's motives are financial rather than cruel: streaming Jason's toned body in his tight white briefs will make money. Peering through a sequined curtain, Tara secretly observes the scene, mirroring (some) spectators' initial confusion and eventual pleasure in the spectacle, while, hidden behind a mask of a former First Lady known for her conservative values, Jason feels free to perform in front of the camera, undercutting the potentially emasculating subservience implied in being required to dance like a circus animal.

Despite his occasional financial, romantic, or supernatural success, traces of generational trauma persist in Lafayette's experience through various forms of economic and bodily appropriation. As a medium with the ability to speak to the dead, Lafayette serves as conduit between the living and their lost loved ones—for a fee. In later seasons of the show, consensual transmission becomes forcible possession, mirroring racialized narratives of early Zombie films in which a White figure of authority uses magic to control (mostly)

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<sup>11</sup> The full scene is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTF4a63O0wU> Accessed 1/30/2024.

Black bodies. Marnie, a dead middle-aged White woman at the head of a local coven, possesses and instrumentalizes Lafayette, forcing him to release his boyfriend's Mexican demon power then stab him in the heart.

Finally, in a reverse twist on racialized possession, Lafayette's body is appropriated by Mavis, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Creole woman whose married White male lover, fearing the possible repercussions of miscegenation, killed and buried their baby before killing her as well. Mavis steers Lafayette to the bedside of a White baby boy and steals him, relinquishing him only when her own baby's bones are uncovered and both can rest in peace. Through a certain lens, Lafayette reclaims his appropriated body by enabling Mavis and her child to reclaim theirs.

Lafayette's physical vulnerability is most striking when, in an oblique allusion both to sharecropping and to the disproportionate number of Black men incarcerated for drug possession in the 1980s and 90s, blindingly White vampires Pam and Eric imprison and torture Lafayette for dealing vampire blood, then force him to continue selling it while turning the profits over to them. When Sookie discovers him shackled to a wall in the dungeon of Fangtasia, the camera lingers on his chained, bruised half-naked body in a way that explicitly recalls the dehumanizing conditions endured by enslaved Black people before the Civil War (and during the successive waves of racial violence that followed).<sup>12</sup> More faintly, the scene's visual emphasis on Lafayette's battered body may echo Harris's descriptions of his demise. Unlike his textual counterpart, however, Lafayette defies total reification: even in the depths of abjection, he refuses to be defined by others. In an often-quoted scene, Lafayette (still in chains) balks at being characterized as a prostitute: "Oh, don't get it twisted honey cone. I'm a survivor first, capitalist second and a whole bunch of shit after that. But a hooker dead last! So if I've got even a Jew at an Al Qaida pep rally's shot at getting my Black ass up out of this motherfucker, I'm taking it!" (S2E2 "Keep This Party Going," 06:39-06:42).

## Conclusion

By the time *True Blood's* almost universally abhorred final season aired in 2014, the promise of the initial Obama years was fading, far-right Republicans controlled the Senate, and the mirage of a post-racial America seemed more far-fetched than Bon Temps' ever-expanding mix of vampires, shapeshifters,

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<sup>12</sup> A 2020 article from *Smithsonian Magazine* puts the number of Black victims of racial violence between 1865 and 1950 at nearly 6,500 (Fox).

fairies, witches and ifrits. What, then, can we take away from Nelsan Ellis's gender nonconforming performance as Lafayette?

Ellis reclaims the sissy trope not by balancing between masculine and feminine sides of the gender binary, but by de-hierarchizing them and erasing the barrier between the two, opening up space for Parr's "variety of subjectivities" (Qtd in Cherry, 467). Additionally, Lafayette's constant queering of the binary, as evidenced by his continuous interaction with liminal spaces and ever-revolving states of being, can be understood to be both overdetermined and indeterminate: he is firmly anchored in (and haunted by) the painful cultural kudzu of the Deep South while refusing to be reduced to the margins of the Southern Gothic. Short order cook, chef, entrepreneur, sex worker, drug dealer, webmaster: Lafayette's refusal of any categorization but his own underscores both his uniqueness in the American televisual landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and his ties to a larger American queer tradition of self-discovery and possibility. As Whitman writes, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.) / I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> From Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, 51 1892. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>. Accessed 1/30/2024.

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# The Commodification of Bodies in Women's Rap

CHLOE CASSIDY

Imagine this: You walk into an all-you-can-eat buffet. The aromas of food fill your senses with sugary delights and tantalizing goodies. Platters of chocolate and vanilla cake, eggplants, bananas, peaches, and cherries surround you. One cannot help but think of the suggestive images that flood your mind with colorful and delectable objects. Imagine the baby-blue frosting on fluffy cupcakes; the butter dripping down girthy sausages; candies stuffed with fillings that gush with a single flick of the tongue. You gaze at the split melons, their sweet juices trickling down the edges of the rind and pooling around the platter. There are bundles of crimson-rich pomegranates, tangerine-colored papaya, and fuchsia-colored figs. It's impossible to decide what to devour first; all cravings render you speechless. "Make That Cake" plays on the speakers as you fill your plate, which is ten times the size of a human head. The sweets' colors burst to life with LunchMoney Lewis's rendition of baking massive, delectable pastries.

Of course, he is using cake as a sexual metaphor for the voluptuous butts of women and for anal sex. As you pile rolls onto your plate, Doja Cat's verse floods through the restaurant:

Sugar Mama, turn you to a dumb sucker . . .  
More water, needs milk, needs sugar  
More cocoa, half cup, pure vanilla  
Out the oven, mittens on, need a chiller  
Big cake . . . (Genius Lyrics)

Licking frosting off your fingers, you think about the way she combines a recipe for a cake as an innuendo for her butt. The "cocoa," "milk," "sugar," and "pure vanilla" all act as ingredients for her body. You visualize the way bread rises in an oven, slowly constructing itself until it spills over the edge of the pan. You

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remember a song you heard about food and genitalia used interchangeably. Doja Cat's "Tia Tamera" comes flooding your cerebral plane with its bright,

bubbly lyrics:

He wanna eat up the Caesar (ayy)

Bonita, bonita, bonita (ayy)

Baby girl needed the wiener (ayy)

Dug in the guts and I skeet her (ayy) (Genius Lyrics)

You bite into a steaming hot dog while admiring the clever way she incorporates sexual slang into another popular food item. The reference to "the Caesar" is a euphemism for her butt; it is also a reference to "tossing salad," which describes the act of stimulating a person's anus with a tongue. These lyrics are a clear distinction between Doja Cat's desire for sex and to have sexual acts performed on her. Also, the use of "weiner" replaces penis and "dug in the guts" illustrates sex. Just before you eat your dense pudding, Rico Nasty's voice rings, "He just wanna eat me like some candy, but I'm not his buttercup" (Genius Lyrics). You chuckle at the innuendo of yet another sexual organ referencing candy and sweetness. You think about the ways women in rap have used sexual metaphors to describe their sexual desires and body parts.

Through food, euphemisms of sexual acts, and references to body parts, women rappers vibrantly communicate sexual desires in mainstream rap. Women artists illustrate the connections between food and their bodies to emphasize the insinuation of sexual organs and pleasures. Food and sex have a distinct mission to submerge sexual innuendos and euphemisms in media; these two things are connected through primal desires. The use of foods in place of sexual organs or acts is a way to bypass generations who may not understand what the song is hinting at; sexual actions can be insinuated through carnal activities such as licking, biting, tasting, and squeezing (Akande and Ojoawo 10). Sexual metaphors for women's bodies and genitalia have altered drastically in women's rap throughout time. The aphrodisiac emphasis on sexual acts and food in women's rap plays a role to disrupt the traditional sexualization of women in rap.

The rap and hip-hop music genre has gained explosive popularity since the 1950s, 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. Early origins of the hip-hop and rap genre in the 1950s were classified as Blues, Rhythm and Blues (R&B), Swing, Doo-Wop, and Jazz. Black musicians were at the forefront of these genres and combatted segregation in the music industry. However, the music styles in the 1950s and 1960s later developed into rock n' roll; white figures, such as Elvis

Presley, covered songs of R&B from Black composers to market to white audiences (Library of Congress). Hip-hop and rap were generated in the early 1970s with the DJs (disc jockeys) spinning records (Dye). Not only did DJs create visibility for Black MCs (unknown rappers) and the community, but they cultivated “commercial viability” for rap (Dye).

The sexualization of women within the generations of the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s hip/hop developed into a powerful force of persuasion. Sex developed into a source of ambiguous lyrics to emphasize and shield the smutty meaning behind the songs. According to scholars Terri Adams and Douglas Fuller, hip-hop’s connection to misogyny minimizes women as objects and “fortifies men’s ownership” of their bodies (Bernard 84). For instance, Wynonie Harris’s “Wasn't That Good?” (1953) creates an image of him and a partner sexually engaged in a variety of settings: “Here's another game called kissing in the dark/ We can play it in my room or over in the park” (Genius Lyrics). Sex is meant to be playful and seen as a game; the term “play it” refers to sex as the man possesses the authority to select the setting. The reference to “in the dark” is also a subtle metaphor for sexual activity. In Marvin Gaye’s “Let's Get It On” (1973), he discusses sex hidden in this song through the act of her body being a gift to him: “And giving yourself to me can never be wrong / If the love is true, oh baby” (Genius Lyrics). The sexual partner “giving the good feeling” refers to the sexual encounter. He convinces his partner to perform sex with him and emphasizes his pleasure. Even the title conveys the “It” as an illicit sexual act. Another example, in Kool and The Gang’s “Get Down On It” (1981), they connect sex and dancing. Dancing and “getting down on it” insinuates sexual activity (Genius Lyrics). The gang hints that women should “get down on it if you really want it” (Genius Lyrics). Sex is hidden within lyrics like “play” and “do it” to desensitize the sexual act while shielding the actual meaning. A women’s sexualization and sexual representation are heightened throughout the lyrics. The situations are dictated by the men’s perspective as they place their sexual partner through a limited lens. The censorship of sexual activity in rap and hip-hop genres deteriorated into more overtly sexual lyrics in the transition to 1990s rap.

Black rappers in the 1990s used their platform to expose political injustices and uplift people of colors’ experiences. Music, historically, has been a medium to express identities, address hardships, and connect communities. Popular 1990s rappers such as Biggie (The Notorious B.I.G), Tupac, and Ice Cube have formed aggressive hypermasculine personae to reflect their successful and competitive



status in the rap industry. They have also reinforced the image of hegemonic masculinity in the rap space. Hegemony describes the influence of cultural ideologies, and ideas dominating the common sense of society (Nealon and Giroux 157). The hegemonic identities constructed through men rappers may affect young women's identities and "adherence to objectifying labels" (Griffin and Fournet 301). Hegemonic masculinity places men in a dominant role and authority that shadows others' autonomy and freedom. For example, in Biggie's "One More Chance," he describes his masterful techniques in the bedroom and his reputation as a satisfying sexual partner. He mentions a lack of emotional regard towards his partners and mentions his only interest in women is sexual: "She mad because what we had didn't last/ I'm glad because her cousin let me hit the ass" (Genius Lyrics). He claims to have sexual abilities that women cannot resist and that they beg for *his* pleasure. In addition, in Tupac's "Wonda Why They Call U Bitch," he illustrates the story of a woman and the shaming of her promiscuous actions. Tupac personifies the word "bitch" through the perception of the woman subject. The song tries to express the woman character's sexual worth and appeal through men's locker room conversations. For instance,

It was said you were sleazy, even easy  
Sleepin' around for what you need, see  
It's your thing, and you can shake it how you wanna  
Give it up free or make your money on the corner (Genius Lyrics)

Tupac claims he listens to the men talk about the female subject in an objectifying way; he describes the woman's worth only being her genitalia and sexual appeal. Tupac reinforces an overtly hypermasculine, aggressive, and angry persona to characterize performances and illustrate traditional gender roles (Máthé 67). He also states that the men call her "bitch" and "slut" to degrade her identity and restrict her sexual freedom.

In contrast, men rappers such as Kendrick Lamar and Jay-Z have combatted toxic masculine labels and the stereotypical image of drug abuse associated with Black masculinity (Máthé 66). These rappers emerged in the early 2000s and promoted a challenge to traditional masculinity. For instance, in Lamar's "Swimming Pools (Drank)," the rapper demonstrates the normalization and glorification of alcoholism: "Pool full of liquor, then you dive in it/ I wave a few bottles, then I watch 'em all flock/ All the girls wanna play Baywatch" (Máthé 77). The pressure of succumbing to alcohol in social settings, like a party, influences negative effects.

Another example, in Jay-Z's "The Story of O.J.," he communicates his criticism of the conspicuous consumption of men rappers and celebrities: "You wanna know what's more important than throwin' away money at a strip club? Credit...Financial freedom my only hope" (Genius Lyrics). He stresses the ignorance of dismissing the obtainment of financial success and negligence of women as the primary subject.

Despite Lamar and Jay-Z's pursuits, men's rap predominately illustrates the hypersexualization of women in rap through misogynistic terms and gender roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Women in men's music videos, for instance, serve as a commodity to the rapper's status and success (Griffin and Fournet 299). Their bodies are draped around the settings, even on the rapper himself, to convey his materialistic power. According to author bell hooks, music videos also reinforce objectification through the "thin-ideal imagery" (Zhang et al. 263). For example, in Travis Scott's "Butterfly Effect" and "goosebumps," the women surrounding the rapper are thin, white, and young. This portrayal of thin white women appeals to white audiences and society's body idealization; it also reinforces the dichotomy of "ghetto rap music" as an unpopular genre for white listeners or white audiences (Hunter and Cuenca 32). The Black woman embodies sex and represents a character who is present in physical form while "invisible in voice" (Lane 777). Women in videos are referred to as a type of property, reduced to sexual body parts and cater their bodies to the "male gaze" (Onanuga 104).

In addition to thin bodies, music videos portray women with large breasts and massive butts to appeal to the "male gaze." The film theorist Laura Mulvey introduces the concept of the "male gaze" in her 1975 book, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema;" the "male gaze" is a tool utilized to view women through a compulsory heterosexual lens. According to Mulvey, "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 19). Mulvey describes the "male gaze" as a masculine point of view that normalizes the inferiority of women in cinema (Tehrani 348). Mainstream film codes sex and transforms it into language to serve the "dominant patriarchal order" (Tehrani 805). Media leads to blaming Black women's flesh for their sexualization through men's gazes (Ohman 10). Furthermore, anthropologist Laura Nader emphasizes the "hegemonic control" that serves the marketing of women's bodies in media and the imagery for "social propaganda" (Bernard 5). Compulsory heterosexuality refers to heterosexuality forced upon women to fulfill sexual or romantic

relationships with men. Women in this lens possess physical features that make them attractive to cisgender men. The dominance of the “male gaze” fetishizes women’s bodies and depiction of their sexual value.

Sexual and gender roles influence the concept of cisheteropatriarchy that normalizes hegemonic masculinity (Alim et al. 59). It is a term utilized in opposition to femininity and is used to describe weakness. The term also refers to white heterosexual men who marginalize women and all gender non-conforming individuals (Alim et al. 59). In adherence to *cisheteropatriarchy*, rap battles in Cape Town lyrically use feminine attributes to insult their opponent’s physical or emotional characteristics (Alim et al. 67). They utilize feminine imagery like “double-D tit” and “bitch” to describe and offend their opponent (Alim et al. 61). The language of hip-hop is gendered and structured through “heterosexual metaphors of power” (Lane 776). These heterosexual metaphors include men’s usage of objectification and stripping women characters of sexual agency. Traditional sex roles regard femininity as a weak trait and as a form of otherness.

Similarly, historical sexualized visuals and labels function to dehumanize Black women and their sexual freedom. Black women and their bodies are distinguished through marginalized identities; they are either classified as exotic or dehumanized. The colonization of women’s bodies reinforces hypersexualization and objectification of their features. The history of women’s sexualization has presented figures such as the Jezebel stereotype and Saartje (Sarah) Baartman. The Jezebel stereotype is a concept that refers to women as sexual objects. This stereotype draws on racist, sexist, and classist ideologies to classify the sexual value of women (Anderson et al. 463). It is a stereotype meant to treat a woman’s body as a tool that serves to pleasure others. It reinforces the “bad” or “dirty” sexual behavior of women and mediates a relationship between gender roles and negative sexual encounters (Fritz et al. 103). Links between the hypersexuality of women and the Jezebel stereotype are “reinforced in mainstream media” (Anderson et al. 463). For instance, Black women’s bodies in rap and hip-hop music videos are depicted as “decorative objects” rather than active participants (Anderson et al. 463). This stereotype portrays the connection between women as tools of men’s pleasures and the fetishization of racial or ethnic identities. Furthermore, Baartman faced sexualization and objectification of her body’s exoticness. She was detained by white Europeans and forced to showcase her abnormal buttocks and breasts (Anderson et al. 461). Baartman’s body was displayed to white audiences, reinforcing the white notion of deviated

Black sexuality (Bernard 6). The mistreatment of her body and genitalia also reinforces the “animalistic concepts associated with Black women” (Anderson et al. 461). According to the blog *Jezebel* (2014), Baartman’s body is still fetishized through labels like “The Original Booty Queen” and the “Venus Hottentot” (Hobson 106). These labels function as sexualized figures to fortify Black women’s hypersexualization and aestheticization of their bodies. The ethnic identities of Black women are regularly fetishized and act as “idealization” in men’s rap (Zhang et al. 263). Their sole purpose is to appear seductive and desirable to the male gaze while being a physical embodiment of sex. A women’s purpose in men’s rap has functioned as erotic objects for sexual pleasures while emphasizing patriarchal control.

As we near contemporary time, the reinvention of rap and hip-hop has led women to embrace liberation in their sexual desires and exploration of sex. Music is a space where Black communities and people of color can dismantle stereotypes, combat toxic masculinities, and promote social and political justice. Through the commodification of women’s bodies in women’s rap, they can reclaim the authority of their bodies and sexual autonomy. Women rappers exemplify how their sexualization is reclaimed and appropriated through rap. Commercialization has become a major component of cultural popularity and means of profiting from their bodies. Women’s rap achieves a space that has been dominated by men’s presence in the rap industry; they gain support to expose sexual stereotypes and express sexual pleasures and identities. They demonstrate the reclamation of their bodies through the appropriation of degrading lyrics and hypersexualization from men rappers.

As the male music industry continues to convey women as sexual material and feminine stereotypes, women rappers’ self-sexualization transitions into third-wave feminism and Black Feminist Thought to influence the connection of Black women communities (Tyree and Williams 69). Black Feminist Thought examines the connections between the symbolic, structural, and daily aspects of domination, as well as the collective and individual struggles that Black women face in various domains of social life (Khoza 310). There have been three distinct waves of feminism that have served to equalize the ideologies surrounding social and political injustices toward women. Initially, first-wave feminism functioned to open the political sphere to women, for voices to participate in suffrage and human rights. Second-wave feminism focused on struggles for equity, the disruption of gender roles, and sexuality. Third-wave feminism, in musical

culture, functions against racial and class oppression as a space that Black women can explore sexual identities and a spectrum of feminist ideologies (Tyree and Williams 67). Third-wave feminism incorporates intersectional frameworks like class, race, ethnicity, gender, and age; however, Black women are still oppressed in white feminist spaces. They pose as a threat to disrupt the worlds of race and gender that they are bound to (Khoza 308). In the rap sphere, third-wave feminism seeks to reclaim the words, images, and symbolism established by media and norms of Black women, gender, and sexuality.

As rap develops into the bucket hats and gold-chain link necklaces of the 1990s, women rappers challenge the traditional role of women's bodies and identities in men's rap. They play with gender roles while generating sexually positive messages and images. For instance, the rapper MC Lyte uses her low and aggressive voice to oppose binaries of gender, identities, and experiences as a Black woman (Mosley 8). She produces a masculine persona with baggy, androgynous clothing, and a gravelly voice. She combines masculine imagery with blaring messages of her sexual pleasures and her authentic version of femininity.

Missy Elliot creates a similar persona against stereotypical femininity to explore spaces of gender and sex. She creates a queer image that allows her to redefine her gender and threatens men's dominance in the rap industry (Lane 778). Elliot is a prominent rapper who significantly constructed a textual space for Black women's erotic pleasures and freedoms (Sullivan 709). She also plays with masculine and feminine imagery through clothing and rapping style. Furthermore, the rapper Lil' Kim promotes sex-positive femininity as she gains power over men through allure and seductive appearance (Mosley 11). For instance, in her song "How Many Licks?" she emphasizes the desire for oral sex while expressing her hyper-femininity in revealing clothing. As men in rap use women as sexual objects for oral sex, Lil' Kim creates an image of sexual autonomy and prioritizes her pleasure.

Women rap groups like Salt-n-Peppa produce messages about safe sex practices that obliterate the objectification of their bodies in men's rap (Griffin and Fournet 300). The lyrics focus on the social acceptance of sex and sexual activity in their song "Let's Talk About Sex:" "Those who think it's dirty, have a choice/ Pick up the needle, press pause, or turn the radio off" (Genius Lyrics). They want to dispel the social taboo of sex talks and will not shy away from the topic. It is emphasized to those who feign ignorance of sexual activity or themes

and deny that sex exists all together. Sex inhabits social media, film, literature, and let's not forget *music*.

Women rappers perform and dismiss gender roles to create a non-binary or masculine persona in their music. Gender roles in rap, and communities, reveal the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity. Women artists can play with and switch gender or sexual roles to mock and reclaim their form of femininity. The theorist Judith Butler's gender performativity is a concept of performing gender through socially influenced, repeated acts (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 20). Women and men learn and develop behaviors that associate them with the "appropriate" gender. According to Dr. Sandra Zichermann (2013) of the University of Toronto, women in men's hip-hop portray traditional gender roles such as mothers, girlfriends, sexual partners, bitches, and hoes (Onanuga 84). For example, in the song "Who's That Girl," the rapper Eve embodies a clash of masculine and feminine energies through clothing and dance style. She wears a durag on a motorcycle then the panel switches to her in a tight top in pants surrounded by pink. Gendered labels are damaging and restricting to both men and women; they dictate your attitude towards the dichotomy of gender. The roles women perform in men's rap serve as a form of degradation and limitation of femininity. Women rappers' performances of masculine identities illustrate rejection of gender conformity and present forms of their gender identities.

The rap and hip-hop industry utilize pornography as a heavily marketed tool toward men to act as a visual stimulant; strippers, magazines, and television programs create a clear, provocative picture. Pornography becomes a picture created verbally and its imagery has controlled the fetishization of women's bodies. Degrading and bigotry lyrics leave women grappling with their sexual identities and freedoms as women rappers strive to reclaim their body's objectification through ownership of genitalia. For example, Nicki Minaj is an iconic rap model who embodies an image of the "increasingly pornographic culture of popular music" (Tyree and Williams 73). She self-hypersexualizes her body and commodifies her sexual features. As she markets her breasts and butt for consumption, her "Black Barbie" personae combats "the regime of white beauty" standards (Hunter and Cuenca 33). Her body serves as a product not only for consumption but for her empowerment.

Women rappers continue to utilize lyrics to appropriate and reclaim the fetishization of their bodies. For instance, Minaj's infamous "Anaconda" tore through the rap space to demand her sexual identity be on display. In the music



video, she accentuates her curvy figure and plastic personae. She emphasizes her figure and “sex appeal” to arouse and satisfy her sexual partners: “Put his ass to sleep, now he calling me NyQuil/ He keep telling me it's real, that he love my sex appeal” (Genius Lyrics). She, along with other women rappers, emphasizes the fetishization of their bodies to shatter the patriarchal ownership of Black women’s bodies. Minaj exaggerates Black forms of beauty like a curvaceous figure and large posterior to commodify her body (Hunter and Cuenca 33). Black women’s posteriors are popular, aesthetic pleasures of black women’s bodies (Hobson 107). Aesthetic sexual sites of Black women’s bodies are depicted and hypersexualized to emphasize their sex appeal to their audiences. Women rappers, especially Niki Minaj, utilize themes of pornography to construct hypersexualized images in music. As these images are clearly illustrated through her curves and flaming sense of sensuality, Minaj embraces self-objectification to signify *her* dominance of her body and image (Cuenca and Hunter 29).

Development of image and commercialization is more popular and anticipated for current music. Commercial image increases a rapper’s popularity in mainstream music and social media platforms; it reinforces the hypersexualization of women’s bodies. In music videos, women use close-up shots of the body, self-touching of sexual body parts, dancing, and excessive skin exposure (Ojoawo and Akande 5). Furthermore, the visual degradation of Black women is labeled as “sex objects” and “video hoes” (Tyree and Williams 72). Women reclaim their sexualization through sex talks, sexual innuendos, and slangy expressions (Ojoawo and Akande 6). For example, “Pussy Talk” by City Girls refers to the vagina as an entity and a commodity itself, an expression for sexual messages which are visual. The City Girls refer to their vaginas as characters or physical beings. They state that their genitalia can detect and choose a sexual partner that will suit their materialistic and sexual desires. The City Girls personify their “pussy” as characters that possess wealth, luxurious sports cars, extravagant fashion brands, access to travel, and multilingual abilities:

Boy, this pussy talk English, Spanish and French (hello)

Boy, this pussy talk Euros, Dollars and Yens [ . . . ]

Boy, this pussy make movies, wetter than a whale (hahaha)

Their genitalia, breasts, and butts are avenues of sexual pleasure; their “pussies” act as a tool of commodification and empowerment. The rappers display several images of success, sensually dancing in a corporate office. The rappers are sexually stroking papaya, grapefruit, and hibiscus flowers while dressed in

dazzling gold catsuits. They are the embodiment of yonic symbols. The penis in rap represents the tool and source of pleasure while the vagina is simultaneously objectified and humanized by women rappers. The “pussy” holds weight in physical and conversational form; it holds persuasion and praise while encompassing multifaceted labels. The City Girls reclaim their vaginas as symbols of fertility, financial success, and sexual pleasure.

Media utilizes women’s bodies as sexualized products, but women rappers reverse this role. The aesthetics of hip-hop culture influence women’s sexualization and “stylization” of their music (Miles 15). These “aesthetics” refer to Black women’s breasts, butts, and curves. Hypersexualization may act to dehumanize Black women and reinforce “racist, homophobic, and sexist ideology” of Black women’s bodies (Lane 789). However, women rappers utilize their hypersexualization to reclaim their body parts. Rico Nasty’s “Pussy Poppin” threatens phallocentrism by prohibiting her male partner’s genitalia as the subject of the song. She controls the situation, claiming her dominance over her sexual desires and genitalia; the lens of objectification shifts to the rapper’s perspective as she continues to advance:

I tell him that he better eat it like he starving (what?)

Put this pussy in his mouth while he yawning

He put that woo all down my throat until I started coughing (Genius Lyrics)

She states that her “pussy” is a source of food and extreme pleasure. She asserts her authority over her body through the lyrics “I let him stick me” “I might let him crash in” and “I bend it over” (Genius Lyrics). She replaces the male character’s penis with “woo” to signify that the song focuses on *her* pleasure and genitalia. She accentuates the feminine features of her voice to sound high-pitch, cutesy, and coy. Her intonation is utilized to sound feminine to appeal to her sexual partner. As men rappers emphasize their penis as the central tool for their pleasure, Rico Nasty centralizes it as an avenue to achieve an orgasm. Furthermore, in the music video, she utilizes pink costumes and overtones to accentuate femininity while assertively referencing her genitalia.

Women rappers redefine gender roles through performances of mimicking features through redefining masculinity from men performers. The androgynous clothing and aggressive attitude produce a masculine image. Women rappers such as Da Brat and Queen Latifah wear loose-fitting clothing or men’s sportswear to “be one of the boys” (Lane 778). Clothing reinforces the use of masculinity as a form of rebellion against gender norms and disruption of compulsory



heterosexuality. Furthermore, Princess Nokia's "Tomboy" reflects the sexualization of unconventional sexualized body parts, such as "little titties" and "phat belly" (Genius Lyrics). She self-sexualizes her "boyish" features and highlights the limited standards for women's bodies; the rapper refuses to enable feminine body standards to affect her self-worth. She emphasizes the naturalness of women's bodies and the disregard to appear feminine and cater to traditional gender roles. She redefines beauty standards through a lack of attention toward the "male gaze." Furthermore, the rapper highlights her success with her body: "My little titties be bookin' cities all around the world" (Genius Lyrics). She combats the marginalization of Black women's sexuality that subjects them to racialized beauty (Hobson 106). The rapper expands the beauty expectations for Black women, emphasizing that masculinity does not conform to solely the male gender. She can still seduce and appeal to men and people without having a conventionally "perfect" female body. The rapper also initiates self-respect for your body in a society where women's bodies are set at unfeasible standards.

The traditional attributes of women conversing or shouting too loudly are deemed unladylike or inappropriate, but they combat gender stereotypes by communicating their messages through brash and explosive lyricism. In Lil Mariko's and Rico Nasty's "S.I.M.P.," the rappers appropriate the fetishization of their bodies and racial identities to emphasize their sexual desires. A "simp" is an internet slang phrase and refers to a person who expresses too much attention or sympathy toward another person to gain their affection. The person or subject of interest usually does not reciprocate the attention or affection towards the "simp;" the goal of a "simp" is the pursuit of a sexual relationship. In the synthetic beats of "S.I.M.P.," instead of women obsessing and succumbing to men's authority and affections, the roles are reversed. Lil Mariko illustrates her power over the male character through the worship and excessive attention he gives her. Full-Tac, a featured artist on the track, performs as the "simp" character; the rapper Rico Nasty, who is also featured, acts as Lil Mariko's partner. In the music video, Full-Tac wears a black, full-body latex suit with a red dog collar and leash; these items relate closely to bondage and submission accessories. Rico Nasty and Lil Mariko act as dominatrix characters and "owners" of Full-Tac. Lil Mariko and Rico Nasty combat the stereotypes of gendered language through their raspy, destructive voices. Furthermore, American linguist George Lakoff refers to the avoidance of assertive speech as a part of lady-like speech (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 141-2). The rappers emphasize their menacing demeanors by

punishing and degrading the “simp,” they claim he is “wrapped around” their “fingers” and subject him to “on his knees” to illustrate their power (Genius Lyrics). The subordinate position of the “simp” male character acts as a tool for sexual dehumanization. The hegemonic masculine attributes, displayed by the rappers, classify as independence and assertiveness (Tyree and Williams 71). Lil Mariko and Rico Nasty reinforce elements of masculinity to redefine femininity through explosive vocals and the sexual overtones of bondage and submission. The rappers reclaim the degradation of embodying a submissive character, while using Full-Tac to criticize men’s fetishization over their bodies.

Women rappers further dismantle men’s hegemonic labels in rap such as “gold-diggers,” “hoes,” and “freaks” (Tyree and Williams 25). “Freaks” refer to a woman’s sexual fantasies or preferences with a sexual partner; “hoes” reference women’s promiscuity through multiple sexual partners; “gold diggers” refer to women seeking a man’s financial fortune for sexual activities. The sexualized terms utilized to degrade women consist of negative sexual images that separate their experiences from men. Women rappers may intentionally reinforce themselves as materials for the male rapper’s sexual pleasure. For example, the non-binary rapper ppcocaine (Trap Bunny Bubbles) appropriates terms like bitches, thots, and hoes (Tyree and Williams 76). In ppcocaine’s “That Bitch,” the artist self-sexualizes themselves and their image as a “slim thick bitch” and “whore” (Genius Lyrics). They adhere to gender-stereotyped labels to self-sexualize and resignify the terms utilized to degrade them. The rapper’s tone is rough and contains an aggressive edge as they communicate a masculine yet bratty personae. The rapper proclaims themselves as the “main bitch” and subject of sexualization. Ppcocaine’s music tracks contain heavy elements of trap beats, which allows women and rappers to explore more versions of femininity and non-binarism (Miles 18). For instance, ppcocaine raps: “Heard you fucked that girl...” and “Wanted to fuck, I told her ‘Slurp on this nut’” (Genius Lyrics). Their usage of “fuck” and “slurp on this nut” refer to oral sex with women. According to Professor John Erni, at Hong Kong Baptist University, the term queer sexuality refers to “a practice of discursive excess that twists normal notions of gender and sexuality” (Lane 778). Ppcocaine utilizes the term “fuck” to subvert more feminine references for sex.

Women’s rap also portrays masculine or feminine identities within sexual engagements (Holmes and Wilson 344). Women rappers redefine gendered labels such as “bitches” or submissive “girls” to illustrate and expand their sexual

identities. Gender performativity connects to resignification, which reshapes hegemonic norms and social structure (Washington 363). Resignification is presenting a different or changed meaning to phrases. For example, ppcocaine's "DDGL" (Daddy Dom/ Little Girl) depicts themes of masculinity hidden between shades of femininity. A DDGL relationship consists of the duality of sexual partners. The male is the dominant "daddy" figure, and the woman plays the submissive role, imitating a young girl. They experience sexual pleasure through the lens of their partner, which leads to mutual pleasures (Thorpe 12). Women twerking and sexually dancing around ppcocaine simultaneously illustrates her status as a "dom" and a "little girl." Dancing is linked to hypersexuality, exhibiting too much skin or dancing too provocatively in public is deemed "socially wrong" (Lane 790). In the LGBTQ+ community, there are phrases to classify who is sexually dominating (a top) and submissive (a bottom). The Daddy Dom and Little Girl situation accentuate ppcocaine's fluidity between masculine and feminine roles. Furthermore, the term "camp talk" refers to the patronizing language or mixing registers, for instance, referring to a man as "she" or creating clever insults (Holmes and Wilson 345). Ppcocaine refers to her female sex partners as "daddy" which challenges the compulsory heterosexuality surrounding homosexual and heterosexual relationships in rap.

For generations, throughout musical eras, women are told they exist too much. People stress women's existence is beneficial when silent and invisible. When women take up too much space in a patriarchal system, it feels too tumultuous. It feels disruptive because women become offensive if they occupy a male-dominated space. The music of women rappers allows women listeners to place themselves in the narrator's lens, to share the struggles and experiences to connect with women. Men rappers reinforce women's silence through the control they exhibit through objectifying language. Women rappers dispute these sexualized images and encourage their listeners to defend their bodies and praise the power their bodies hold. Since women's bodies are malleable to men's gaze, lyrics try to take their identities and sexual freedoms away.

Silence breeds inequity: The silence of Black women has been constructed through ideologies that suppress their ethnic, racial, cultural, and sexual identities. Silence forced upon Black women, and all women of color, function to muffle and consume their identities and existence. Women are told to adhere to traits of traditional femininity such as silence, complacency, and obedience. Society claims women should behave, dress, and communicate in hyperfeminine forms.

Gender and hegemonic labels pressure that women and men are separated, binary forces. But women's reclamation of their voices transgresses the grain of hegemony, systemic sexism, racism, and patriarchy. The conception is that men and women in music can use their voices in tandem to combat hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality.

Music is made to inspire, connect, and uplift others. Women rappers shift the paradigms of their sexualization through brash and hypersexualized lyrics to redefine their sexual identities. Rap expands Black women's limitations on their perceived societal image; their voices of sexual pleasures and identities are a proclamation of their existence. Women rappers are a force to promote not only respect but acknowledgment for social change and to instigate conversations. Through women's rap, there is a continuity of shattering the sexual stereotypes and stigmas against women's bodies.

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## “I, Baby Raccoon”: Jeff VanderMeer and Performed Identity Networks

AUBREY DICKENS

Character is undeniably important to any text. *The Last Jedi* (2017), a later installment of the Star Wars franchise, received backlash and outcry due to what was perceived as an out of character portrayal of Luke Skywalker. For example, after a very brief search on Twitter, I found a tweet by user @Lord\_Marco\_C that says, “The Last Jedi [sic] did my boii [sic] Mark Hamil/Luke [sic] dirty, finally brought back Luke Skywalker and he doesn't have a single real light saber fight” (Toss). Yet, in that same search, user @MithrandilPlays wrote that the film “does complete justice to Luke Skywalker” (Mithrandil). Across the internet, people are bickering incessantly, six years later, about whether or not Luke Skywalker was in character in *The Last Jedi*. How can something be out of character to one individual, but not to others? In this paper I will argue that in the world of modern media the character is not singular, but a network of variations that are all equally real. Throughout this work, I will argue that the multiplicitous, fractured nature of the modern character analysis can be comprehended through an analysis of the performed identity networks of fictional characters. New, contemporary meanings can be extracted when analyzing characters when no one interpretation is privileged over another; the author is just as crucial as a community of teenagers online as an academic, and all these individuals hold sway on the meaning and reality of a text.

I will begin by outlining a theory of character and identity that I call performed identity networks, utilizing the concepts of nodes and links to visualize varying sized pieces within a whole network whole. This theory will be built on theories by individuals such as Patrick Jagoda, Henry Jenkins, Sue Ellen Case, and Samuel Weber. After this, I will perform an analysis of a performed identity network on the works of Jeff VanderMeer. His body of work easily fits within the concept of the network, with most of his series not being chronological or linear

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stories, but multiple contained stories within the same world. People can read works of VanderMeer in any order they wish, and still understand the story. Additionally, VanderMeer has used online interaction and alternate reality strategies to create engagement with his text, such as including an encrypted story throughout his book *City of Saints and Madmen*. Instead of focusing solely on one of his nonlinear series or his explicit use of network, I will analyze the fictionalized version of Jeff VanderMeer himself used as a character in *City of Saints and Madmen* as “X” and played as a joke on Twitter<sup>1</sup> as “Baby Raccoon.” I will not be referring to the identity of the author Jeff VanderMeer, but of the fictionalized versions of himself that he includes in his works and on his social media. The aforementioned specific fictionalized identities of VanderMeer, X, and Baby Raccoon, will be defined as nodes. Then, I will link these two nodes together to perform a brief reading of “The Strange Case of X,” revealing a dimension to the story that focuses on rewilding as well as the perseverance of the natural world. This paper will propose a theoretical framework with which to comprehend modern, fractured conceptions of character, and to demonstrate how that theoretical framework could be used.

### Performing Identity Within a Network

To understand how performance of identity functions within a network form, we first have to define a network. The word network is notoriously flexible, referring to anything from a network of spies in a fiction novel to phone networks like Verizon, T-Mobile, et cetera. Individuals often come across the word network when told by a doctor that they are not “in network” for their insurance and are suddenly paying incredibly steep prices. While all these networks seem vastly different in meaning, there are some core elements of the idea that can help us narrow down a definition in the context of this study. Patrick Jagoda defined the conception of a network, which he referred to as the network imaginary as “the complex of material infrastructures and metaphorical figures that inform our experience with and our thinking about the contemporary world” which is

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the use of interactions on Twitter present in this work, I would like to include a disclaimer. At the time of writing, Twitter was referred to as X by Elon Musk, but retained the handle twitter.com. Due to the enduring nature of the Twitter brand and the likelihood that others may not recognize X due to its broad and vague nature, I will be referring to Twitter as such throughout the work. In addition, posts on Twitter will be referred to as “tweets,” and cited as the same.

“closely tied to the growing interrelationship... that digital and networked technologies make possible...as well as the increased embeddedness of these forms in everyday life” (3). To imagine and conceptualize a network then, is to conceptualize the interconnected nature of modern existence. Daily, physical communication is connected to social media, to texts, to emails, to the media an individual consumes, to news. The world is no longer solitary, but a web of connections.

Another crucial element of understanding the network comes from Henry Jenkins’ conceptions of convergence culture and participatory networks. Henry Jenkins was the first person to take fan culture and move it into the realm of tangible theory in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Convergence culture is defined as the ways in which different forms of media “interact in unpredictable ways” (2). New media, such as social media websites, interacts with old media, physical grassroots movements and books, to create new meanings that cannot be predicted, but can be examined. Participatory networks take the idea of networks above, in which all individuals are embedded in media of all forms around them, specifically to look at how individuals collectively participate and understand media and create convergence. I shift away from Jenkins by focusing on the performative power of convergence and collective participation; that is, how individual’s online communication and language reconstructs meaning within a participatory network.

To understand performative power in networks, I will first briefly define performance studies and performativity in the context of this work. Performativity refers to the studies of how actions create reality through words, movements, et cetera. The idea of language creating reality came from J.L. Austin’s lectures published as *How to Do Things With Words*, which forwarded a theory of speech acts. Speech acts meant that the words we say were actions in it of themselves—such as saying ‘I Do’ or christening a ship. Austin’s work relates more to the idea of linguistic performativity than the more theatrical performance studies, though—performance studies focuses on how the act of performing creates meaning. This meaning could build from street performances, theater performances, and more. In our case, I want to consider how networks, and people within networks, perform meaning through their online actions and interactions, both in a theatrical way as audience members, and in a linguistic way as creators of meaning.

Crucial to the conceptualization of network performance is the concept of links and nodes. Jagoda refers to networks as “structure[s] composed of links and

nodes” which helps conceptualize the simultaneously solitary and communal elements of networks. Each singular unit in an internet network acts as a node, able to exist on its own without any understanding of the greater concept. To view the links between these nodes is to view the greater net we work as a whole, see the connections between each solitary unit, and see how this changes the overall understanding of the network. One text message would be a node, and that text could easily link that to the greater network of all text messages sent on a phone. Further, that compilation of all text messages is also a node, linked to the greater network of modern communication. The text messages could be linked to nodes such as social media, email, phone calls, or even face-to-face communication to better understand the network of one individual's communication. Networks are expansive and exponential. Nodes and links can explain a small, two- person network, or the greater global network.

Blending network theory with performance theory clarifies how I define nodes and links in the context of this paper. Links and nodes in networks may be better understood through Samuel Weber's concept of pearls and threads. Weber used these words in his work “Theatricality as a Medium,” which unpacked the structure of theater, specifically plays. Weber's theater theory applies here due to the similarities between threads and pearls and links and nodes. Threads are defined as the “general plot of the play” while pearls are “specific scenes of the play” (23). The concept of threads and pearls are important precisely because the scenic “‘pearls’ can be separated from...the ‘thread’,” (23) allowing for moments in theater to exist as separate entities to the scenes surrounding them. Theater can have meaning in its scenes, but it gains greater meaning when it's conceptualized within the context of the greater thread, or the complete plot of the play. The definition of pearls and threads provide the building blocks for links and nodes, which take performed network identity one step further. Theater is linear; networks are nonlinear. Thus, links and nodes are actions of nonlinear performance, with each node and link being interacted without regard for space and time. Anyone can encounter a node at any time and connect those nodes to others in your own order; you will likely never encounter the whole image of a network. Thus, the act of linking nodes, of understanding networks, is a performative one – it constitutes an individual's reality through adjustments in language and action.

One example to explain the performative nature of networks could come from an individual's experience with a film. Two individual consumers, Person A and

Person B, are planning to see a film. Person A has already interacted with outside nodes— they have watched the trailer and read three film reviews. The film itself will be the fourth node to link within the network of the film. They go into the film with preconceived expectations, which alters the way Person A understands and experiences the film. The links alter, and potentially define, Person A's viewing experience. Conversely, Person B has seen nothing about the film and has no knowledge or expectations of the film. The film on its own is the first node and is the whole of the network that Person B is experiencing. Afterwards, though, Person B writes a review on Letterboxd, a popular social media site for reviewing films and sharing with friends. Person B starts by sharing their review, then reads the reviews of their friends. As they link their own Letterboxd review with other individual's reviews, with each review acting as their own self-contained nodes, Person B reconceptualizes their experience with the film. By the time they turn the next day to speak about the film with someone else, their opinions will have become linked to a network of nodes made up of Letterboxd users, meaning that Person B's understanding of their own experience with the film will have been altered by the whole of the network. If Person B was to talk to a friend, Person C, that person would encounter the whole of Person B's network as a node, which links with their own. Maybe Person D will come across Person B's review and link that node to his own perception of the film without perceiving the greater node of Person B's interpretation of the film. And then maybe Person C and Person D talk with Person E, on and on, building out networks and new perceptions infinitely. By encountering other understandings, opinions, themes, and interpretations, consumers alter their perceptions of their lived experience. When or how the network works is entirely up to the choices of the consumer. The choices an individual makes within the larger network performs their reality, even more so when living in a technological age, taking action not only physically, but digitally. The network, then, is a space for nonlinear performance, stretching further outward as individuals link additional nodes into their understanding.

Networks as nonlinear performance lead directly into how *identity* is performed in a network. To turn back to the filmgoer examples, Person B is constituting their identity by posting on Letterboxd. This action creates a node, one that can be linked with other Letterboxd reviews on Person B's profile. They have a network constituting and performing their identity within Letterboxd, but people could also consider their Letterboxd account as one node in a greater

network, one individuals can link with their Twitter profile or Instagram. Maybe, if the individual is a filmmaker themselves, they will connect the films they claim to like with the films they make. When you like a tweet, follow a creator on TikTok, post on Instagram, or so on, these posts and interactions become your online identity. Identity on one social media may differ from the another, creating separate conceptions of personality for each website. When linking the individual nodes of social media identities together, one comes closer to comprehending the whole performance of that individual, at least in the media space. They are not fractured, but multicast, a dozen different iterations of the same person across a network. I am borrowing the term “multicast” from Dhiraj Murthy’s textbook, *Twitter*, emphasizing that individuals “become content producers” (8) themselves, posting heaps of different content which creates different theatrical portrayals of the self, then actively interacting with those versions across the internet. Even though a networked reading of identity brings us closer to a whole person, though, it never becomes the whole of that person. It does, however, become the whole of that person’s performance. Their fictive projection of identity in many ways becomes their real identity because it affects not only their internal perception of themselves, but the external view of their personality by others.

Identity networks, though, are equally dictated by the observer as by the creator. Just as Person A and Person B built their own network of meaning about a film, one could build their own interpretation of an identity, choosing which nodes to interact with. If someone only knows an individual due to taking a college course with them, their networked perception of that person’s identity is limited to the context of that course. If they then turned to the internet and found that individual on Instagram and Facebook, their networked perception would adjust and grow. Identity networks are performed equally by the individual themselves and by their surrounding audience. In fact, you cannot have one without the other. Sue Ellen Case argued that when interacting online, people require an assumption of a live person behind whatever account or post they are interacting with. She refers to the account or post as an “avatar” (174) or “mask” (177) which often comes with a presupposed human being behind it. This mask “depends upon some notion of the ‘real’ or the ‘natural’ for its function” (177), meaning that an individual online can only become real when someone else assumes they are. A person becomes a person through someone else’s belief. To create an identity requires an audience for the performance, someone to see the technologized identity and accept it as reality.

The conception of a performed identity network can apply to how readers view characters in fiction media. Analyzing a character within its own network requires analyzing that character through the context of how individual conceptions of the character, or nodes, link to the greater understanding of the character as a whole. When applying the theory of digital performance of networked identity to text, one must consider the nodes that are performed through technological networks. To explain this application further, I turn to the example of Nick Carroway in *The Great Gatsby*. I could start by considering the node created by a social media interacting with the text specifically around Nick's identity. Maybe I could turn to a Discord server, a Reddit thread, or Tumblr tag. One quick search of "Nick Carroway" on Tumblr came up with two posts of note: one in which a Tumblr user describes themselves "giving [their friend] the Look every time something extremely homosexual happens" (fluff-e-boy) while watching *The Great Gatsby* for class, and another user claiming "Nick Carroway and Jay Gatsby are both queer and [they] will not hear otherwise" (shadowsandstarlight). Nick Carroway, when read using the conception of his character performed by Tumblr users, can be identified as a queer man. I can then take this Tumblr node to and link this to the textual node of the character. Analysis of scenes such as Nick's mysterious trip into a private room with Mr. McKee, or narrative cues such as the romanticization of Gatsby through Nick's point of view, become central to the reading. By using the performed node of the character created within the network of Tumblr and linking it with the textual node performed by the character's actions, readers create a broader, more complex reading of a character. This analysis of Nick's performed identity network reveals something new, specific to the modern age: *The Great Gatsby* can be read as a queer novel by modern readers.

The method with which readers analyze a character through performed identity networks then takes a clear structure. First is to define the character node from the original source (referring to the text of a novel, the dialogue in a video game, the portrayal in a film). Then, define outside nodes of identity performance, whether coming from a community online, a different text, or maybe a different individual. Finally, consider the full network, rereading the text with the full context of the character now defined. Whatever issues arise as central to both characters become central to the text, highlighting things that may have previously been overlooked. New, yet important, meanings can be derived from old sources.

All this considered, the remainder of this project will demonstrate the process of using a theory of performed identity networks to read the character that is the fictional Jeff VanderMeer. I will begin by doing a reading of Jeff VanderMeer’s short story “The Strange Case of X,” and emphasize how the character of X in this story is a fictionalized version of Jeff VanderMeer himself, existing in limbo between the factual and the fictional. Then, to further understand the identity network of the fictional Jeff VanderMeer, I will consider the node created by VanderMeer himself on Twitter, in which he refers to himself jokingly as “Baby Raccoon.” After understanding how X and Baby Raccoon function as versions of the same character, I will perform a second reading of “The Strange Case of X” which focuses exclusively on my understanding of the greater network of fictional VanderMeer. I will link X and Baby Raccoon, creating a hybrid understanding of not only fictional Jeff VanderMeer, but of the story itself. Through defining and applying the network, I hope to argue that because meaning and identity is hybrid and multiplicitous in the modern age, analysis of media should be as well.

### Fictional VanderMeer as “X”

Jeff VanderMeer’s Ambergris trilogy begins with a collection of novellas titled *City of Saints and Madmen* that closely resembles a network form. The Ambergris trilogy takes place in the city of Ambergris, an absurdist location full of mushroom people and brutal violence. Each novella is set within the city of Ambergris, though readers are originally led to believe that one story, “The Strange Case of X,” takes place in the real world. “The Strange Case of X” revolves around two characters, a psychologist (“I”) and an inmate of an asylum within Ambergris (“X”). The story takes place in both first person and third person, becoming first person only when the psychologist converses with the inmate. X is clearly VanderMeer himself, institutionalized for, allegedly, his belief that Ambergris is real. Readers may think they know where the story leads, maybe even thinking the story fits into old clichés, only for the ending to reveal that the story has taken place in Ambergris all along, and VanderMeer, aka X, has become trapped in a world of his own making.

X is defined as a node of a fictionalized Jeff VanderMeer through nods to his factual, real life. X used to live in Tallahassee; VanderMeer is an active citizen of Florida who writes op-eds about the politics of the state. X desperately misses his wife. He obsesses about leaving the asylum because “[his] wife is waiting for

[him]” (330). In the same vein, VanderMeer dedicates all of his books to his wife, Ann. Both the location of X’s home and his fervent love for his wife are references to recognizable elements of VanderMeer’s public personality. Readers are meant to connect the actions of X to the greater context of VanderMeer; to link this fictional node, X, to the factual node, Jeff VanderMeer. He reinforces this link in the “About the Author” section of *City of Saints and Madmen*. A narrator claims, “in late October 2003, on the eve of the publication of this very edition, VanderMeer disappeared from his house” (3), and he has not been seen since. About the Author sections are expected to break the fourth wall of sorts, to step away from the fictional and speak as a real person. Instead of including elements of his real personality, VanderMeer presents an author directly connected to X. By pointing to these connections, the real VanderMeer asks his audience to apply the fictionalized version to himself, to view him as built of both fact and fiction. X gains credibility by being a fictional mask of the real VanderMeer; VanderMeer loses a bit of his reliable reality by making himself the assumed reality behind a fictional identity.

As a node, X builds on an absurdist portrayal of VanderMeer’s success. An example of VanderMeer’s hyperbolic description of his career comes from drawings of sentient mushrooms presented to X by the psychiatrist, I. X claims the images are “sample drawings from Disney...for the animated movie of my novella ‘Dradin, In Love’” (287). “Dradin, In Love” depicts a night of hedonistic anarchy, with depictions of child corpses, murder, rape, and other horrific images dominating the last section of the story. The idea that “Dradin In Love”—in which a key scene occurs while the main character stands next to a nude man in a dog collar—would be optioned for an animated children’s film by Disney is inherently absurd. Readers are meant to acknowledge the fictionality of X’s career, while still recognizing the factual undercurrent. Unlike the About the Author section, however, this absurdity emphasizes the fictionality of X. Absurdity creates distance between X and VanderMeer, establishing X as his own being outside of VanderMeer, despite being built on key characteristics of the real-world VanderMeer. Distinction is drawn between the identity of the fictionalized VanderMeer and the identity of the VanderMeer we would meet at author events. VanderMeer uses humor to give X his own life separate from himself, defining him as a node not only of the real VanderMeer, but of a separate character, that of the fictionalized VanderMeer.



X also becomes a solitary identity, a person who can be seen as a whole network, through the validation of other characters within “The Strange Case of X.” In Ambergris, other individuals consistently define his identity based on their own understanding of his actions. The narrator, I, remarks that X would not like being called a patient, because “patients often did not like being labeled patients” (279). X’s identity becomes tied with mental instability because of the diagnosis from an outside source. Unlike the prior nodes, which focused on resembling the real VanderMeer or distancing from him, X’s perceived instability contains itself within the fictional realm. Other fictional characters call X’s sanity into question, not that of the real author VanderMeer. X’s identity builds upon external action *within* the fictional world of Ambergris, rendering him a sort of tangibility as a fictional VanderMeer. Similarly, when X first enters Ambergris, children mistake him for a “Living Saint” (298), a specific occupation that VanderMeer creates in his city of Ambergris. When the fictionalized VanderMeer enters the fictional world of Ambergris, he is immediately perceived by other fictional beings. He is not limited to the interpretations of the author and the reader but is instead built out through different nodes and interpretations of himself by other characters. Other fictional characters attempt to fit X within their own understanding, perceiving him as a patient or a Living Saint because that fits the context of what they know. Interpretations of X by the citizens of Ambergris flesh out the network of X within the context of Ambergris.

External involvement with X’s performance defines X’s identity, emphasizing the lack of control VanderMeer has on his identity. After writing about Ambergris, X experiences repeated instances when “[he is] continually surrounded by the products of [his] imagination, often given physical form by other people” (288). What was an internal part of X’s mind becomes an external part of his identity. X is stuck within a performed identity that he created but has no control over. In a moment symbolic of this, the narrator says that he “had to help [X] lift the typewriter” (283), signaling the way that others carry X’s creativity. X’s creative identity is dictated by how his performance is perceived. Interpreting X through his creativity reminds the reader once more of the real-life author VanderMeer. VanderMeer adjusts how others perceive his identity through a fictional version of himself, which highlights the way his fictional writing adjusts his external perception. Everything VanderMeer writes changes based on its context, and those writings change the way people understand VanderMeer’s identity.

X combines the factual and fictional VanderMeer. X acts as a node himself, but also as a network split into two nodes—the fictional side, defined by absurdist success and the validation of other fictional characters, and the factual side, based on Jeff VanderMeer’s tangible experiences. X exists successfully because of both sides, which only emphasizes the lack of control that comes from creative endeavors. His stories will outlive him and continue even if X becomes trapped in his mind. X as a node, then, functions as a blurring of what is real and unreal and mimics a relinquishing of control over one’s identity and creativity in the digital age. To focus so heavily on what is true or untrue about a person one can only interact with online, instead of what partially fictional persona the audience perceives, leads to dissonance and discomfort. Relinquishing control and allowing characters, creativity, and personas to have a split existence frees creators from exerting unnecessary effort in trying to limit the boundaries of their creation.

### Fictional VanderMeer as “Baby Raccoon”

Now I turn once more to the online persona of Jeff VanderMeer, specifically his focus on using Twitter as an activist space to teach others about the process of rewilding. Rewilding is the process of cultivating the natural spaces in your home such as your garden, backyard, or front porches, in a way that allows nature to reclaim them. By not having a lawn, or specific landscaping, you can allow local plants, insects, and animals to thrive. Daily, he posts updates from his backyard, which he has rewilded— or, brought back to its natural state. VanderMeer frequently documents the interesting plants and animals that populate his yard. Often, that animal is a baby raccoon, such as when he tweeted a few photos of the raccoons throughout his yard with the caption “Some baby raccoon still shots. #VanderWild” (VanderMeer). Before Baby Raccoon was a piece of VanderMeer’s identity, he was a vehicle for environmental activism.

The fictional identity of “Baby Raccoon” started out as an inside joke for the #VanderWild community. To reference his self-identification as a baby raccoon, on April Fool’s VanderMeer posted the cover of a new book with the caption “So so happy today to reveal the cover for my new book, I, BABY RACCOON” (VanderMeer). The April Fool’s Joke was on the heels of the prior year when he announced children’s editions of his Southern Reach Trilogy. The post was well received, with users such as @loufreshwater replying, “I need this T-Shirt Jeff!” (Freshwater). Baby Raccoon beginning as a joke lends to his position as a node of

fictionalized VanderMeer— inside jokes require a surrounding audience to interact with a performance. The need for audience perception continues the issue raised by X, which is whether an online persona is fictional or factual. Here, VanderMeer utilized the inherent fictionality of online identity to create a fictionalized version of himself that existed through his Twitter audience’s suspension of disbelief. Humor acts as a vehicle with which to emphasize audience perception and interaction. To be part of the joke requires a certain suspension of disbelief, a sort of ironic perception of the joke as something as real. The joke then gains real force, and that real force translates into the solidification of Baby Raccoon as an identity. When others accept the identity as real and actively appear to believe in it by joining in on the joke, Baby Raccoon gains traction and tangibility. Others outside of the circle may not understand the joke, but will comprehend that, for some reason, Jeff VanderMeer is also called Baby Raccoon. Because of an inside joke, others outside of that joke will interpret Baby Raccoon as a persona, a node that exists as whole within VanderMeer.

The outside interpretation of the joke made Baby Raccoon a complete node and a split fictional identity when VanderMeer brought “Baby Raccoon” into the professional world outside of Twitter. VanderMeer was not the first individual to push Baby Raccoon into the spotlight. Early in 2023, due to his profile picture being a raccoon, “a website quoted one of [VanderMeer’s] novels and used [the raccoon picture] as a headshot alongside the quote” (VanderMeer). A professional individual, who was not a part of the in-group on Twitter, viewed the Baby Raccoon persona and assumed it to be a real, key part of VanderMeer’s identity. His fictional persona gained real force, affecting the way his physical identity was believed and performed by others. Later in 2023, VanderMeer continued this joke, writing an author bio for a convention that described himself as “A baby raccoon who lives in a ravine” (VanderMeer). VanderMeer was called out by his wife over email, but only responded with “Should I add more detail about the ravine? Is that the problem?” (VanderMeer). An inside joke only understood by VanderMeer’s Twitter followers now became key to VanderMeer’s self-promotion. The presence of Baby Raccoon to promote the works of factual Jeff VanderMeer blurs the lines between the fictional and the factual, superimposing Baby Raccoon onto the live Jeff VanderMeer, the way that identity is constituted not only by the real, but by the unreal. No node online is completely real— they are more often self-contained fictional identities which can expand the real individual’s identity.

VanderMeer used the fictional identity of “Baby Raccoon” as a running joke to present feelings of social estrangement in his professional life. Recent examples of this came when VanderMeer traveled to promote the reprint of one of his first novels, *Veniss Underground*. When reflecting on his experience traveling, VanderMeer noted that other authors tended to “[take] photos with their book and bookstore owners while traveling,” which he did not do, because he was “still in the ‘baby raccoon felt shy so signed a few books incognito and fled the scene’ phase” (VanderMeer). When he referred to what he felt was his own deficiency as an author, he tied it to his identity as a Baby Raccoon. Baby Raccoon was meant to explain how uncomfortable VanderMeer felt in the social world around him. In many ways, Baby Raccoon is a self-contained fictional entity with which VanderMeer explores his feelings of distance to other human beings. By performing himself as an animal, he explores in a fictional realm his comfort within the natural world, and shares that with his audience. VanderMeer, as Baby Raccoon, is an anxious animal who does not wish to interact with the outside world, though he must for the sake of his own success. When VanderMeer officially returned home from traveling, before the previously mentioned reflection, he posted a photo of his backyard with the caption, “baby raccoon, back where he belongs” (VanderMeer). Baby Raccoon feels at home in the natural world, away from human creation and civilization. His backyard, brought back to its most natural state, is where Baby Raccoon feels the safest. Baby Raccoon, like VanderMeer’s backyard, thrives when subsumed by nature, or rewilded.

Baby Raccoon is not just performed by VanderMeer, but by his audience, solidifying it as a node of the fictional VanderMeer persona. Returning to the example of the ReaderCon event, VanderMeer posted a list of his schedule for the convention and noted he forgot to change his bio for the program. Under this tweet, user Marion Deeds, @mariond\_d, replied, “We think of you as a baby raccoon now” (Deeds). VanderMeer validated this response and continued in conversation with the user. The author bio was validated by outside voices, with an individual proudly buying into the joke and declaring they personally now could only imagine Jeff VanderMeer to be a baby raccoon. These responses call back to the earlier suspension of disbelief but move into a realm of belief. The audiences allow themselves to believe in VanderMeer as Baby Raccoon, to expect the fictional Baby Raccoon to appear at events and sign their books. Further, when VanderMeer later posted a picture of his ID card for the event, he was responded to with comments about his identity as Baby Raccoon, confused why

this would not be a part of his ID. VanderMeer reposted the ID card with “(and baby raccoon)” written in sharpie under his name, citing that he “fixed it due to comments” (VanderMeer). VanderMeer’s identity as a “baby raccoon,” which started as a joke relating to his rewilding efforts and social faux pas, became a persona others could recognize and identify. Not only this, but his audience was able to alter the choices of VanderMeer as Baby Raccoon due to their own interaction and enthusiasm. VanderMeer was expected to include the fictional node of himself within his factual performance of identity, his fractured self incomplete without its Twitter half. Whether or not VanderMeer took on his fictional Baby Raccoon identity was no longer solely in the real VanderMeer’s control; the fictional node took on a tangible force.

Baby Raccoon represents a lack of control over not only VanderMeer’s fictional world, but of the natural world. Baby Raccoon as a node is characterized by his inability to feel comfortable in man-made settings. Unlike X, Baby Raccoon is not his own character, but a fictional, comedic node of the technological hybrid that is VanderMeer’s public identity. Baby Raccoon exists more freely in the real world because he is a node of VanderMeer that VanderMeer uses to interact with other individuals. The concept of rewilding fits well here, precisely because Baby Raccoon is a rewilding of VanderMeer. The human VanderMeer becomes subsumed by the animal Baby Raccoon, who runs his technological persona and does his professional work for him. X fights the wilding of his creation; Baby Raccoon is the wilding of VanderMeer himself.

### The Strange Case of Baby Raccoon

Having now set the parameters of the identity network we’re visualizing we can now turn back to “The Strange Case of X.” The nodes of Baby Raccoon and X link together to create the image of a network of fictionalized VanderMeer. We then can reread “The Strange Case of X” through the lens of the identity network we’ve considered. This analysis reveals the crucial element of VanderMeer’s story: the fictional VanderMeer relinquishes control of himself and his works to achieve a rewilding of his identity. Fictional VanderMeer, understood through X and Baby Raccoon, relinquishes himself to nature.

Before being trapped in Ambergris, Fictional VanderMeer attempts to control his world through his writing, but interactions with animals consistently unmoor his control. As attempts to write about Ambergris, he finds himself plagued by a

creature made of his own inner darkness, which he describes as a “sleek, black manta ray with cat-like amber-red eyes” (342). This fishlike creature plagues Fictional VanderMeer, and Fictional VanderMeer eventually decides he must “destroy the creature or be destroyed by it” (317). But in the end, the creature does destroy him in a way, as it takes him into Ambergris and traps him there. He works to control the world he creates, but an animal keeps him from that control. The natural world intervenes on his creations and keeps him from continuing forward. The node X must release control of his creativity almost through creating space for the node Baby Raccoon. He has an animal inside of him, reflected by the animals around him, and until he surrenders to that animal and allows it to be part of him, he cannot fully reach some sort of sanity.

“The Strange Case of X” exists in first and third person, reflecting the split nature of Fictional VanderMeer. The narrator, who we learn to be X himself, reflects that X “might even tell the story in first and third person, to both personalize and distance the events” (332). This distance and personalization comes from a feeling of being split through reality and insanity, but it also exemplifies his wrestling with control. Attempting to tell the story is an act of control, and one which similarly pushes against the process of rewilding. Arguably, Fictional VanderMeer wishes to write the story to suppress the wild Baby Raccoon persona, but the perspective splits in half, revealing the rewilded node of VanderMeer’s identity nonetheless.

As such, the sterile world X inhabits cannot suppress the natural world of Baby Raccoon, pushing against external control on the Fictional VanderMeer. The asylum where X is kept is described as smelling like “mold and a sickly sweet sterility,” (277) where “mushrooms [sprout] from the most unexpected places” (278). Though enough sterilizing chemicals are used that a “sickly sweet” smell is created by their abundance, the mold and mushrooms cannot be kept out. The wild creeps in, attempting to rewild the space of the asylum from the get-go. Not only this, but in the crack of the building, the narrator finds “a tiny rose” that has “blossomed, defiantly blood-red” (279). Once again, attempts were made by human beings to control Fictional VanderMeer and suppress his rewilded node, but the nature returns, revealing that the lack of control and perceived insanity becomes a sort of stability for Fictional VanderMeer. An external, persistent rewilding reflects the internal rewilding occurring with Fictional VanderMeer.

The moral here, then, is that no matter human intentions, the natural world will survive and grow. To fight nature is a losing battle, where plants and animals

will find space within the cracks. Whether that fight is internal or external, nature will still find its way in. The more an individual pushes against nature, the more split they will become. Nature will always overcome. The mold will grow over the sterility; the rose will become a rosebush. If we consider X and Baby Raccoon as the same person, we can speculate that in the universes of Ambergris and Fictional VanderMeer, X disappeared and genuinely was replaced by a raccoon version of himself to run his Twitter account. It's certainly not the strangest thing to happen in the world of Ambergris. Baby Raccoon would then be a strange rewilding of X's life, where his human-made creations trap him, leaving only the animal behind.

## Conclusion

Analyzing texts through the lens of identity networks allows a narrowing in on meaning that is potentially more potent for a modern audience. “The Strange Case of X” was published in 2001, and Baby Raccoon was created two decades later. None of the meaning found today was explicitly intended by VanderMeer but reveals a consistent theme throughout his fractured persona and networked novels. By taking the new identity node and linking it to the old, we find meaning in VanderMeer's text that more closely resembles his goals in the current day. The seeds of rewilding were sown in VanderMeer's works far before he announced a book on rewilding.

Through performed identity networks, scholars can connect pieces of identity in nonlinear ways, applying modern conceptions to ancient texts and vice versa. We can move not only linearly through identity, but exponentially, expanding our knowledge of texts through the expansion of our conceptions of identity. What is considered a canonized characterization holds just as much sway as the headcanons of young readers on TikTok. With this communistic approach to identity, critics can better understand the tangible performative power of a text, whether that be literature, film, or any form of media. Defining a piece of a performed identity network reveals the way a text performs across time and space. One can see explicitly what elements of a character have stuck with audiences. Analysis can show where elements creators or original audiences did not expect became the core of a character.

Analysis of performed identity networks can be applied a myriad of ways in varying fields, such as pop culture studies or media arts studies. This kind of

analysis could work well in discussions of franchise, specifically in considering how the character exists as its own node from one text to another, and what links exist between those two nodes. Or, potentially, adaptation could use this to find what the full network of a character between the source material and adaptation looks like, and how the affirming reading of all versions of a character being real to that character changes the way the text is read. Or, better yet, one could consider how modern performances of the identity of characters in classic or canonized works create meanings that are central to modern understandings of older texts. The potential foci of this analysis are expansive and exponential. It provides a tangible way to consider characters in the fractured, networked era we are living and creating within.

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# The Repression of Sexuality, the Incitation of Sublimity: Discussion of Sex and Pleasure in the music of The Pretty Reckless

FEI JIA

Upon its debut in 2010, The Pretty Reckless promptly elicited parallels to esteemed female-fronted hard rock ensembles such as The Runaways and Hole due to its overtly explicit sexual imagery and lyrical content. Within the lyrical fabric of their compositions, explicit allusions to sex, drug use, and diabolical elements not only conjure religious trepidation but also evoke inclinations towards morbid gratification. Notably, the front person of The Pretty Reckless, Taylor Momsen, emerges from a Roman Catholic upbringing, a faith tradition imposing abstinence from carnal desires and any form of sexual engagement prior to marriage. Thus, her musical repertoire ostensibly emerges as a channel for articulating her perspectives on sexuality and pleasure. Moreover, her music may encapsulate a divergence from her religious upbringing, serving as a vehicle for the nuanced exploration of her identity as a former adherent of Catholicism juxtaposed against her embodiment of profound sexual desires.

To discuss the music of The Pretty Reckless, one must look into the concept of sexuality. Sexuality is an individual discourse that involves desires and pleasures (Jia 44), and a seismic sensitivity that includes the wide variety of needs and desires: “for love and anger, tenderness and aggression, intimacy and adventure, romance and predatoriness, pleasure and pain, empathy and power” (Weeks 1). Sexuality, in its essence, has the potential to evoke a sense of the sublime. This sentiment is rooted in the shared encounter with pleasure, a quality that is both irresistible and imbued with a perception of boundlessness. The concept of the sublime encompasses not only an emotional state but also a

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visceral experience. It is characterized by a profound sense of limitless expansiveness, derived from the engagement with formlessness and unpredictability. This phenomenon encapsulates an amalgamation of feelings, intertwining the disagreeable with an accompanying sense of pleasure. (Kover 59).

Conversely, popular music, serving as a pervasive medium, consistently embodies a discourse surrounding sexuality. Frith and McRobbie stated that rock music had been the aesthetic form most closely connected with the youths' sexual experiences and difficulties, and music was both a means of sexual expression but also as a mode of sexual control. Rock n roll was a state of empowerment. It rejected "many of the structures of contemporary boredom" and transforms them into "the structures and pleasures of its musical and listening" practices (Grossberg 116), it challenged "hegemonic constraints on sexuality, desire, and even gender construction" (114).

To narrow down, I specifically read into the texts of female rock band to see how sexuality was presented as a sublime experience, for the reason that sexuality was repressed due to patriarchal culture that female desire was structurally excluded so that sexualities were generated as power and pleasure through the discourses in rock music (Shepherd 68).

Thus, the current study undertakes a critical examination of the notion of sublime sexuality within the musical compositions of the contemporary rock band, The Pretty Reckless. In the study, I will analyze three songs from The Pretty Reckless: "Goin' Down", "Follow Me Down", and "Nothing Left to Lose". By analyzing these three songs, the study endeavors to explore the intricate process by which the discourse surrounding sexuality undergoes a transformation into a phenomenon of sublime nature. Recognizing that language and textual constructs have the capacity to both encompass and mold individuals' perceptions of reality (Machin & Mayr 16), this research endeavors to conduct a meticulous analysis of song lyrics in order to decipher the underlying messages encapsulated within the textual content.

### Goin' Down: The Power, the Sublimity, and the Discourse of Sexuality

The compositions featured in The Pretty Reckless's inaugural album, *Light Me Up*, distinctly diverged from a conventional, family-oriented characterization.

Instead, these songs prominently centered around a discourse centering on themes of sexuality and pleasure, forming the principal thematic underpinning of the album. The song “Goin’ Down” displayed a strong message of sexual desire and pleasure. In the song, Momsen turned her sexual desire into confession, as Foucault illustrated, the confession system served as an exercising power to engage sexual pleasure when questioning and searching. The central idea of sexual repression was that it was only a hypothesis that sexuality was only a means for the dominant group to perform manipulation. Therefore, sexuality was not really repressed or been silent but has a visible explosion and deployment of sexualities. In the first verse of their song “Goin’ Down”, “I” was portrayed as “I” went to a priest to confess a sin for killing her boyfriend who has cheated on “me”. The “age of 16” and the “mind of taking off dress” played a significant representation of the “free sex” ideology of rock music and the contemporary culture since the sixties that broke free from the “all of the associated societal values and needs of parental and societal constraints” (Harris 121). The “good parts” and the friendly reminder of “cross up your legs” implied a strong sensory sexual content in the confession. Sex and desires were dangerous. They engaged envy and greed which eventually led “I” to murder.

However, the dialogue concerning sexuality within the song exuded an alluring yet perilous quality. The act of suppressing sexual impulses paradoxically seemed to intensify the allure of such desires. The correlation between interdictions and pleasure made sexuality a vice that would not diminish pleasure but turned it into masturbatory (Klein 182). With the continuance of the confession in the second verse, “I” implied more sexual hints. To trade for impunity, “I” in this song offered sex as debt. Here sex became a noble object that allowed one to get away from sin. The fear was gone, and the pleasure of impunity arose. The use of “Perhaps” here was more than a negotiation. It implied a confirmation that led to the illusion of having options and/or allowing uncertainty. Therefore, sex was unavoidable and non-negotiable.

The confession of sexual desire in the song reflected the concept of sexual repression. In Foucault’s perspective, sexual repression is always associated with power. Power was a process than an object. It was that “knowledge and truth are produced out of power struggles” (Danaher et al. 64). It operated the mechanisms of control through complex and overlapping mechanisms, which domination and oppositions, subordination and resistances were produced (Weeks 35). According to Foucault, sexuality was first carefully confined by the Victorian bourgeoisies,

where “on the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (3). Foucault further stated that “repression operated as sentence to disappear, but also an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (4). The bourgeoisies used the agenda for repressing sexuality to control the labor by not dispelling itself in pleasurable pursuits because while sex was hard to deciphered, their repression was easily analyzed.

In this song “Goin’ Down”, the priest represented the power mechanism that could “give [God] a nod”. The pleasure of listening and watching sexuality was showed as “I noticed your breathing is starting to change”. “I” was small because there was nothing “I” could do except confessing to the priest, but such insignificantly small used sexuality to evoke the sexual instinct of the mighty power. Sawicki argued that the power institutions’ discourses and practices created an authoritative status which enabled them to be utilized as effective means of social control. The sex then became a pleasure feeling of “sublimity accompanied by ‘quiet wonder’, evoked by a great height” (Clewis 35). The “wonder” evoked by great height, in this case, was the power of getting away from control and finding peace for her soul without the quiet element.

As a result, the title of this song, “Goin’ Down” played a pun as both the fearful “going down to hell” and the irresistible “going down on the ground”. It also played as sarcasm to the confession mechanism of the Catholic Church who used discourses of sexuality as the tool to control and gain pleasure but was controlled by the discourses of sexuality. According to Foucault, the central idea of sexual repression was “the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (18). By transforming every detail of sex fully into discourse, there was a proliferated quantity of discourse about sex. On the other hand, sex was the political, economic, and technical subject to be turned into discourses, where people were forced to talk about sex because it was administered (Foucault, 23-24). Therefore, “repression” was the production of dominant power that allowed the agencies of power to verbalize sexuality in order to satisfy their pleasures and desires.

Thus, by turning sex from discourses to the actual corporeal experience, “I” challenged the authority to experience the intangible pleasure of sexuality. As a

result, sexuality became a silent but eloquent expression. Sex, therefore, evokes the absolute greatness of the sublime feeling of taking the power from the exercising power both corporeally and sensuously.

### Follow Me Down: Sexuality and the Dark Pleasure

In the second album *Going to Hell*, released in 2014, The Pretty Reckless took a deeper approach on the discourse of sexuality as pleasure, pains, and chaos. The first song of the album, "Follow Me Down", started with the sounds of orgasm with erotic and libidinous moaning and breathing. The orgasm, representing sexuality, originates from an inherent impulse within human nature and possesses an innate capacity to arouse a sense of sublimity. This arousal was attributed to its ability to evoke a state of chaos and potency, contributing to the heightened emotional and experiential dimensions inherent in the sublime. After the strong rock beats kicked in, Momsen started a story about tasting the forbidden fruit. This song was a metaphor of the relationship between a younger girl and an older man. This "pure girl and mature man" relationship is a signifier of a tradition patriarchal society in which male takes female's virginity without concerning female's sexual desires, where such relationship Momsen highlighted in several other of the band's songs such as "Nothing Left to Lose" and "Sweet Thing". This idea is closely related to Foucault's perspective of sexual depression. According to Foucault, sex was always related to power. It was where the dominant group executes its superiority as a "deliberate transgression" and the act extends "outside the reach of power" (Foucault 6). In this song, the patriarchal society, the mature man, turns sexuality into the social forms and social organization that is governed by the social force.

Such social force created by repression made the seduction of sexuality powerful, while the resistance was powerless. Paradoxically, the act of resisting seemed to exacerbate the relinquishment of pleasures to the captivating influence of sexuality. In the context of comprehending the sublime, an encounter with the negative aspect of sublimity was inevitable, as it encompassed an inescapable confrontation with pain and discomfort as given by repression. In "Follow Me Down", Momsen started the first verse by telling the loss of her sanity as the seduction of sexuality was painful and dangerous. The experience of sexuality here drew a line for dualism between sanity and instability, wholeness and disintegration, clarity and obscurity. As soon as love became a metaphor for an

object, it became something that could be valued and measured. When the cost of love became unbearable, love turned into something painful and negative from something joyful and positive. However, the line “Have I lost my mind?” referred to the confusion of such transformation - the body difference, the sexual impulse and the lust that have never been seen in virginity. Since nature “excites the ideas of the sublime in its chaos or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation” (Kant 84). The impulse of sexuality is thus the sublime chaos and might. Like smoking a cigarette, the experience of sex was a negative pleasure: “a darkly beautiful, inevitably painful pleasure that arises from some intimation of eternity” and “the taste of infinity...resides precisely in the ‘bad’ taste [one] quickly learns to love” (Klein 2).

The second verse of “Follow Me Down” plays like a confession to the listener as an engagement of the “pleasure in the truth of the pleasure” (Foucault 71) as the following to the confusion rose from the first verse. Sex and night are perfect combination for their boundlessness and darkness. The word “unholy” signified the pureness and the virginity of the young girl who has never experienced lustful feelings. The “sin” was another signifier that implied the loss of virginity was unholy and guilty. In the second two lines of this piece of lyrics, sex was portrayed as a gentle but coarse experience and feeling which was infinite with ecstasy and mighty sensory pleasure. On the other hand, it also aroused the feeling of resistance, the feeling of inevitably painful pleasure because sex was a sin. However, with such painful pleasure, it stirred a great pleasant that made “me” beg for not confessing the sins. The seduction to sexuality and the resistance to power turned the sublime experience into silence, where Foucault pronounced that “on the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (3).

In the chorus and the bridges of “Follow Me Down”, Momsen further discussed the experience and feelings of sexuality. The word “river” in the lyrics was a signifier to body and “clean water” referred to something deep in the body as pureness like a virgin. The experience was a massive and raw nature that one must be awed for its power and might. The bridge of this song delineated the feeling of infinite ecstasy with a certain dread of death. Like smoking a cigarette as Klein described, sexuality can also be an “extase infinie” which induces “a feeling of having died and gone to heaven” (60).

The sexual repression was the certain power that one was seduced to sex but had to put it into secret, into discourse. Thus, sexuality was mighty, and the sensuous pleasure of sublimity that bicycles and sprinklers could not compare,

especially when it was long be repressed for a young girl, the breaking free from the pure virginity to the first taste of forbidden fruit brought a greater sense of both confusion and pleasure. Forbidden censorship incited the very practice it wished to inhibit and would therefore make such practice more dangerously compulsive due to the illicit. Danaher et al. demonstrated that sexuality was a human experience that “affects and involves the body, desires, forms of knowledge, fears and social rules” (136). However, people were conscious of defying established power for decades now, while the tone of voice showed that “we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future” (Foucault 6). In this case, what made the repression of sexuality sublime was that one must break free from power to experience the truth of sexuality and resist the fears from the social rules. The fear from the social rules, the cautiousness of defying the power established the sense of terrifying sublime. Therefore, sexual repression was an experience where one must measure themselves as insignificantly small in comparison to the might of power. The sexual instincts and inclinations were those one would resist against the dominant power. This made the feeling of sexuality sublime.

### Nothing Left to Lose: The Splendid, the Noble, and the Terrifying

The Pretty Reckless depicted less a dreadful feeling of the sublime sexuality in their song “Nothing Left to Lose”. According to Kant, the sublime was divided into three types, which were the splendid sublime, the noble sublime, and the terrifying sublime (48). As Clewis concluded, the splendid sublime was the feeling of sublimity with that of beauty; the noble sublime was the feeling of sublimity associated with the ‘quiet wonder’ evoked by a great height; while the terrifying sublime was the basic feeling of sublimity accompanied by dread or horror, such as a far-reaching depth, profound loneliness, the notion of limitless and eternity (35). In this song, love and sex were the splendid sublime and the quiet wonder that was hard to forget. Kant read the sublime as intangibility. He claimed that the sublime, unlike the beautiful in nature that has a tangible form of the object and definite boundaries, was only to be found in formless and boundless shapes. Hence, we emerged the feeling of sublime with speechless emotion, unpredictability and infinity. Again, Momsen took a “young girl older guy” approach to depict the sexual relationship. However, unlike the story from “Goin’ Down”, the narratives of this story were less dreadful and depressing.



“Late night sex, smokin’ cigarettes” were the reconstruction of the sexuality. Although there was no further description, the simple and plain language gave a less ornamented beauty but a more noble sublimity. Cigarettes here, associated with sex, were the signifier to the pleasure of infinity. It was bad, but the pleasure was boundless and raw. “...I can’t forget...I would do it all again” reflected sexual attraction and pleasure of desires. However, whether it was the sex itself or the cigarettes was not known. They could be converged as a whole, as the perfect combination of pleasure.

The depiction of sex and pleasure within this song adopted an aesthetic perspective that endorsed notions of beauty and simplicity. The pursuit of pleasure from desires necessitated an approach characterized by a formless cognitive engagement to fully appreciate its aesthetic appeal. Foucault argued that desire, act and pleasure were in a circle where “the desire that leads to act, the act that is linked to pleasure, and the pleasure that occasions desire” (Foucault 43). This approach endowed the experience with a sense of sublimity, as the very sensation of the sublime demanded such aesthetic judgement. Kant accentuated that since the sublime was formless and boundless, the experience of the sublime was therefore the “cognitive powers in the estimation of magnitude” to which the judgment of reflection and representation was applied (88). Kant concluded that the sublime is “the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense” (89). Therefore, the infinite of the sublime was an idea, a cognitive representation. On the other hand, a sublime presentation required the absence of sensibility and loss of purposiveness. Therefore, as Kant followed, we must make sure the ideas of the sublime was separated from the purposiveness of nature and made them only the appendix to the aesthetical judging of such purposiveness since no particular form was represented in nature but a purposive use which “the imagination makes of its representation” (84-85).

In the chorus, Momsen continued her confession of sexual pleasure, but this time, it was more for the terrifying sublime. According to Brillenburg Wurth, the sublime feeling always involved the negative moment of fright, frustration, or confusion (2). This feeling went beyond pleasure, transporting one close to “ecstasy, touching pain or even disgust” (Kover 61).

Kant argued that because we resist the power and the fear, we therefore experience the sublime: “[the powers of nature] exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might...they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance

of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature” (100-1). The dominion, the mighty, and the aesthetical judgments superiority consisted of how we valued the fear but sublime experience. Doran articulated Kant’s idea that the resistance to the power of nature was also the resistance to people’s own physical instincts and inclinations. Therefore, our resistance and will were absolute because nature was not able to make us do anything against our will (Doran 247). Therefore, death and suicide are merely the power of nature that we cannot resist since we are small compared to the mighty nature. In the song, “Ever since the day we died” was the metaphor of the day of the sex which was the feeling of having died and the feeling of falling into an infinite abyss. Same as the bridge of the song “Follow Me Down”, sex was again a metaphor of feeling died. “Between Elvis and suicide” and “after Jesus and rock n roll” put sex in a between position that was both noble (Elvis and Jesus) and terrifying (suicide and rock and roll). It was terrifying because after the sex, there was nothing left, but it was also noble because there was nothing to lose.

## The Finale

The sublime is “the highest in art and must be employed when the mind is to be attacked with powerful strokes, when admiration, awe, powerful longing, high courage, or also fear or terror are to be aroused” (Brillenbug Wurth 47). One must realize that the sublime is not the beautiful, it was the feelings of awe and esteem, and never too small. Sexuality is the certain object that allows our minds to be invaded by such feelings. Sexuality possesses the potential for beauty, yet it is the inherent peril, uncertainty, and risk that it carries that ignites a range of emotions including fear, apprehension, and even terror. On one hand, people enjoy the impulse and lust that sexuality evokes. On the other hand, people admire and awe the power that sexuality brings: the power of the feeling of having died, and the power of resisting existed rules and institutions.

Foucault's perspective on sexual repression can be viewed as a hypothesis, as it posits that suppressing discussions of sexuality within the public sphere inadvertently facilitates the proliferation of discourses that are generated from within the confines of the prevailing power system. As a result, it became a social force that only allowed sexuality to exist in its social forms and social organization (Weeks 18), and not a natural impulse that was driven by pleasures

and desires. The reason to choose The Pretty Reckless as the case to investigate falls into this circumstance. When Momsen, who was raised in a Roman Catholic family, uses rock music as the format to talk about sex, it becomes a sublime experience. The songs reveal that sexuality is a danger zone. It triggers the feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing what it is. The formlessness in such feeling evokes the dreadful of having died. Because it was long repressed, therefore by tasting it and talking about it, it turns into an overwhelming yet noble first-time experience. When sex was expressed in their songs, they explicitly express such feelings into discourses without concealing any parts of the details.

Thus, The Pretty Reckless was a proper representation of such dreadful but pleasant desire to imply sexuality in their songs while being repressed by a faithful religious background. All three songs analyzed in this study showed strong and explicit sexual implications with a taste of forbiddance. They showed that sexual implications and sublimity could be presented in popular music. The first two songs showed the dark side of sexuality which led to death and hell. The constant uses of “down” after verbs in both songs further reflected such idea through the concept of orientational metaphors, as “down” was culturally and physically considered as low status, bad, and/or sick as Lakoff and Johnson stated. Sexuality, therefore, was not a beautiful garden, but an infinite and boundless abyss down there. However, as Kover stated that the sublime feeling was a feeling through the experience of unpleasant yet accompanied by a certain pleasure (59), the songs showed how the dreadful and terrified but pleasant corporeal and sensuous experience of sexuality could trigger the feeling of sublimity. Furthermore, both songs had strong religious hints. The explicit sexual portrayal in the songs was also the defiance to the dominant system. The sublime pleasure, therefore, drew not only on sexuality itself, but also on the experience of enjoying sex while defying and challenging the existed rules that repress the discourses of sexuality.

The third song, on the other hand, gave a noble feeling of sexuality. Although the sublime feeling was inevitably engaged with the unpleasant, it could be in a “quiet wonder” that involved less terrifying moment. It was undeniable that sex was nowhere near beautiful because of its coarse and raw nature. However, when sex became irresistible and unforgettable, it transformed itself from the terrifying present to the noble past. The memory became noble even though the experience of sexuality was painful. In all, the truth of sexuality and the knowledge of sexuality as Foucault reiterated were generated from either *ars erotica*, where

truth was drawn from pleasure, or *scientia sexualis*, where truth was based on scientific principles (Danaher, 2000, p.142). All songs showed that the knowledge of sexuality was drawn from the coarse and raw or subtle and noble pleasure that generated from the sexual experience. The truth was not beautiful. Instead, it was dark, dreadful, and painful regardless of the feelings of being noble or terrifying. Such knowledge learned from direct pleasure was what Kant described as the aesthetical judgment upon the sublime which has no judgment of understanding or reason mixed up.

In this case, when The Pretty Reckless actively seek to unveil the truth underlying sexuality, they enable an immersive integration of the experience into their beings, causing it to manifest as discourses. It is the feeling that one has never been allowed to talk or even to have. Therefore, it becomes an overwhelmingly sublime feeling, especially for The Pretty Reckless and Taylor Momsen, whose religious faith that represses the discourses of sexuality collides with the sexual desire in the songs. It is the sublimity of breaking free in sexuality, the sublimity of enjoying sexual discourses. When there is the repression of sexuality, there is the incitation of sublimity.

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# Cryptids and Historical Memory: The Asserted Antecedents of the Michigan Dogman

DANIEL MCMAHON

Attention to cryptids has in recent decades become prominent in the popular culture of the United States, and indeed the world. “Cryptid” refers to species whose existence is suspected but yet remains unconfirmed, as “cryptozoology” is the study of such species. The link to popular culture lies in a sharper sense that such animals possess, in the words of the pioneering cryptozoologist Behard Heuvelman, traits that are “truly singular, unexpected, paradoxical, striking, emotionally upsetting, and thus capable of mythification.” Creatures, that is, that tend toward the monstrous, such as Bigfoot or Chupacabra (Loxton and Prothero xi; Dendle 192).

There has been extensive contemporary discussion of cryptids, in the form of books, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and guidebooks, as well as commentary on television and radio programs, newspapers, websites, and podcasts (Dendle 190). The bulk of this has been of a grassroots, layman, or commercial variety, with relatively little (and little welcomed) input from institutional scholars or trained experts. In a situation where there is much speculation but little evidence there can be both fascination and freedom, but also challenges to academically rigorous examination. This discussion seeks ways to confront that challenge.

How are we to study this subject? Consideration of cryptids has generally focused on identified elements such as physical characteristics, behavior, and location. Our focus will be upon a less prominent aspect: asserted origin and history. Descriptions of cryptid provenance are often insubstantial, as befits a topic likely both mythic and unreal. But recognition of background does exist, and is to an extent necessary in any presentation of the species as authentic. Examining such information offers one avenue to better understanding how knowledge of cryptids has arisen and been embraced in American popular culture.

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This discussion starts with the premise that cryptids are not actual animals, but rather a kind of idea. This was a notion that at some point coalesced or was created, then was subsequently developed, as a local and informal kind of folklore, an aspect of popular culture communicated widely, or even a “folkloresque” fashioning that flexibly mimicked older folklore. Cryptids, that is, have a discursive existence, one that can be traced from the point that discussion of them began. In their study, one might ask (as a cultural historian would) where or why that discourse started, how it formed, and to what it has connected.

The specific cryptid addressed here is the Michigan Dogman. According to accounts, this being appears much like a werewolf, tall and hairy, with a man’s body and a dog’s head, often (but not exclusively) seen near northern Michigan’s vast Huron-Manistee National Forest. Its asserted antecedents extend back to pre-colonial times, with reports of sightings since the late nineteenth century. Stories of the Michigan Dogman in history, however, are belayed by indication that the cryptid was created almost whole cloth in 1987. That is, this is not traditional folklore, but rather a new invention with the form and feel of older tales. The “legend,” once introduced, was nonetheless embraced, elaborated, and transmitted, taking on a life of its own. In this way, Dogman became not just another popularly-discussed modern cryptid, but also a new expression of genuine local folklore.

This essay specifically explores how Michigan Dogman discussion developed, and even fabricated, components of the cryptid’s history and provenance. As will be seen, there is virtually no physical or documentary evidence of the Michigan Dogman prior to 1987. An imputed past has, rather, been fashioned from Native American legend, a story of first contact, and later eyewitness accounts. This has been perhaps superficially compelling, inserting the cryptid into a vision of the state’s bygone days, linked to Michigan’s larger historical memory and identity. There are, however, substantial problems with how the sources utilized have been made to serve as both a historical record and validation of the dogman as an entity.

### “The Legend”

Before reviewing the manner that the history of the Michigan Dogman has been posed in popular discussions, attention must be paid to what, it seems, are the actual origins of this cryptid legend. Notable is the song “The Legend,” aired for

the first time by the radio station WTCM-FM in Traverse City, Michigan on April 1, 1987. This song begins:

A cool summer morning in early June, is when the legend began, at a nameless logging camp in Wexford County, where the Manistee River ran. Eleven lumberjacks near the Garland swamp found an animal they thought was a dog. In a playful mood they chased it around till it ran inside a hollow log. A logger named Johnson grabbed him a stick and poked around inside. Then the thing let out an unearthly scream and came out and stood upright (“Dauthrt”).

The lyrics go on to discuss a series of encounters with the “Dogman,” a creature later elaborated as being about seven feet tall, with a furry human body, dog’s head, and blue or yellow eyes of a malevolent cast, possessing a high screeching human-like voice. According to stories, it appears on the seventh year of each decade to harass hapless rural Michigan residents.

As the creator of this song, Steve Cook, states, it was all intended as an April Fool’s Day joke. “I had never heard of anything called the Dogman before I wrote the song...So I decided it was time to create a creature that was unique to Northern Michigan” (Sands; “Q and A”). While perhaps inspired by local stories, the Michigan Dogman tale was a wholesale fabrication to boost station ratings, presented in the nature of a Halloween story.

By Cook’s admission, this was not folklore, but rather akin to what Micheal Foster and Jeffery Tolbert term the “folkloresque” (4-5). As a cultural creation, it posed forms, figures, and images that resembled Michigan’s old stories and legends, but without actually being bound to any particular tradition. Intended to be locally resonant, it was also explicitly designed, as a recorded and repeatedly-played song, for commodification and mass appeal. This was an arrangement that established a cultural space for Dogman, as well as blurred the line between the local legends and popular cryptid discussion that subsequently emerged. Both, it seems, could grow from Cook’s foundation, as well as be mutually nourishing.

The song had an immediate impact. People began calling the radio station to hear it again. Some of them claimed to have seen or had prior contact with the Dogman, or knew others that had. In time, Cook claims, over five hundred people reached out to him with their stories, some of which he found credible. “It is amazing,” he observes, “how quickly one song was able to create the creature and how seriously it has been considered in the years since” (Hudson).



The “legend” of Dogman has gained attention, if in a marginal, largely non-mainstream fashion, and more on a regional than national level. Tales of the creature were elaborated as local legend, arguably developing into genuine folklore. In a manner commensurate with expanding interest in cryptids more broadly in American and global culture over the past few decades, Dogman has also grown as a popular culture phenomenon. This is evidenced by, among other results, newspaper reports (among which, fairly recently, of a trucker shooting Dogman in the face), television program reporting (such as *Monster Quest*), radio reports, podcasts, websites, books, and web chatter, as well as fictionalized accounts in movies and novels (Mulka; Sands; Holes). Attention has broadened over time with, for instance, new Dogman stories, word of mouth accounts, or new traditions of listening to “The Legend” before Michigan hunting trips (Fallon). Cryptid stories have likewise become more complex, and even politicized, as seen in recent podcasts that claim the U.S. government started a dogman breeding program in 1952 and has used dogmen as elite soldiers, notably in Vietnam (“Cryptid Super Soldiers”; “Remote Viewing”). The Michigan Dogman has become conspicuous, comparable to cryptids associated with other U.S. regions, such as the West Virginia Mothman, South Carolina Lizardman, or Alaska Bigfoot.

### The Documentary Record

As suggested in “The Legend,” the Michigan Dogman has long been known, with a presence extending back decades or even centuries. The ways that entity’s past has been asserted, and the problems with such assertion, will be discussed. But first, attention might be given to “harder” evidence that would better corroborate both Dogman’s existence and historical presence.

In fact, stories of dogmen are prevalent in world history. In probably the finest book written about this cryptid, *Myths of the Dog-Man*, David Gordon White traces ancient accounts of “Cynocephali,” dogmen or dog-like creatures. References appear in Europe, India, China, and Central Asia, among other regions, noted in Herodotus’ *Historica*, Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, as well as China’s *Houhan shu* and *Shanghai jing*. This includes note of dogman monsters, dogman gods (such as Anubis), distant dogmen races and nations (such as the “Dog Jung”), and even a Christian dogman saint (Christopher) (26-71, 114-92). Viewing all this as part of the global history of ideas, White posits dogmen as “a

deeply embedded and powerful metaphor” in which the cryptids are “constructed as marginal groups that haunt the boundaries of human, civilized space” (xii, 1). Half human, half beast, the Dogman represents the reach of that “other world,” from beyond the map or within the forests, possessed of a supernatural, criminal, chaotic, or polluting influence. This cryptid, however, is not just a dark threat, or representation of a prejudiced and simplified “Other,” but also an “alter ego” that has allowed humanity to better define itself (1-15).

White’s insights are intriguing but, to an extent, limited for our purposes. We are not considering all dogmen stories, but rather looking at the specific legend of the *Michigan Dogman*, a purported beast of America’s Great Lakes region. If this animal existed, or was believed to have existed, then people would have taken note. And there almost certainly would have been some documentary record of it – particularly before 1987.

But little record seems to exist. In terms of physical or forensic evidence, almost nothing has come forth. The footprints offered are unconvincing. The “Gable Film,” which purports to show a video of Dogman in the 1970s was shown to be a hoax (Godfrey, *Michigan Dogman*, ii, 1,5). There has been no body, no hair, no bones, no spoor. Further, there is little sign of habitation, ecological impact due to diet or migration, or much of anything that should reasonably be present if this is a species existing within a natural ecosystem. To suggest that this absence may be due to a government cover-up, or that dogmen are supernatural or trans-dimensional entities, is also problematic as, similarly, there is scant evidence to support such possibilities.

Even as a legend or “idea,” there is little reference before 1987. To be sure, there have been historical reports of strange phenomena in Michigan, such as “ghost lights” or lake serpents (Bartholomew). But a review of Clarke Historical Library’s Digital Michigan Newspaper Database, as well as the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America Historic American Newspaper Database, extending back to 1770, reveal only limited awareness of “Dogman,” “Dog-Man,” or similar variants. The most frequent references are to characters in O. Henry’s 1881 short story “Ulysses and the Dogman” and H.G. Well’s 1914 *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, as well as to men who looked like dogs, handled dogs, or were unusually vicious or cruel. Concerning our cryptid, there is nothing. Similarly, a review of collections of Michigan folklore published prior to 1987, including Richard Dorson’s seminal *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers*, have no mention (Littlejohn; Andrews and Steinman). Questioning of people who grew up in

Michigan, done over three months in the summer of 2023, was also inconclusive. There simply is no memory. As Rachel Clark of the Michigan History Center states, growing up in Lansing “I had never heard of Dogman,” although she had since learned the stories and suggests there might be recollection among residents further north (The Michigan).

This lack of documentary proof prior to 1987 is distinctive even for cryptids. In the cases of Sasquatch or Yeti, for example, legends draw from older stories of wild men, tribes, or animals recorded in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (Loxton and Prothero 34-3, 74-9). Such a gap presents a problem for establishing the authenticity of Dogman as a historical phenomenon, and has even caused complications for building fictional narratives. But it is instructive for our purposes, permitting us to more clearly discern the way that the Michigan Dogman has, as a construct at the turn of the twenty-first century, been positioned in the state’s historical memory.

## Native American Legends

So how then has the Michigan Dogman been asserted as a part of Michigan’s regional past? That is to say, how has the idea of this cryptid been developed since 1987 and introduced into the state’s popular recollection of earlier times? Notably, three approaches have been utilized, being perhaps superficially convincing but problematic in establishing a genuine historical presence.

The first, similar to assertions about the history of Bigfoot and Yeti, has been an association, or outright conflation, of the Dogman with the legends of indigenous peoples (Loxton and Prothero). It is suggested that native American groups such as the Ottawa or Ojibwa – themselves popular symbols of the antiquity of the Great Lakes region – have long known of Dogman and have their own tales that extend back into the distant past. In essence, long-standing American tropes of hoary or secret Indian wisdom are manipulated to pose connections and infer historicity.

There are complications. One is difficulty finding any such local native story that refers explicitly to the Michigan Dogman. Intimation that they exist, or that this is hidden knowledge, is not evidence. The recorded myths reviewed – say of the Thunderbird or Winabijou the Trickster – also seem quite different in character and function from modern day Dogman stories. Like traditional myths generally, they exist not just to entertain, but to teach lessons particular to that

culture, intended to help people understand the world and how to live properly within it (Dorson, *Bloodstoppers* 41-55).

Even when there are Native American tales of horrific beings that seem similar to the Dogman, and might be taken as reference to it, there are still concerns. The Great Lakes region has an array of old monster legends, such as of the Windago, Skinwalkers, Bearwalkers, and the Loup Garou. As Richard Dorson and others tell us, these were most often understood as witches and evil sorcerers with the ability to transform into wolves, bears, dogs, or floating lights. They have been portrayed as vicious, murderous, and sometimes cannibalistic, using their powers to curse, sicken, slay, or frighten. The Windago was in some instances also presented as a gluttonous disembodied spirit whose possession brought lust and madness, although at least one source speaks of it as being like a man, but taller, with a dog's tail, fangs, and howl. The Loup Garou, drawn from the beliefs of Finnish and French immigrants, was likewise seen as an evil shapeshifting warlock, although the term has sometimes indicated a kind of werewolf (Dorson, *Bloodstoppers*; Godfrey, *Real Wolfmen*, 220-32; Wood 56-7).

These are, however, distinct beings, drawn from distinct legends and stories, in their particulars arguably often quite different from the identified Dogman. The Windago, for instance, generally neither looked nor acted like the Dogman we know. The Bearwalkers and Skinwalkers could take dog form, but not *dogman* form (at least until some suggestion of this possibility was made after 1987). The Loup Garou might have been a man who became a werewolf, but there is little in the legends to suggest that the Michigan Dogman is a werewolf.

Legends are amorphous and malleable, to be sure. But to facilely conflate creatures of historical folklore, suggesting that they actually were Dogman and, because the stories exist, we can understand that Dogman existed and was known more distantly in the past, is questionable (Leon). Such use of historical information also exhibits a clear confirmation bias. Elements of those accounts able to support a possible presence of the Dogman cryptid are embraced, while other conflicting details are altered or simply ignored. Historical sources are thereby stripped of context and original meaning, serving as fodder with which to sustain a preconceived narrative, as well as impose a faulty sense of historic existence (Loxton and Prothero 32-3). Historians are assiduously taught to avoid such methods, largely because they work to support social memory or contemporary goals rather than establish the actual conditions present in past times. The approach seems, rather, akin to Richard Dorson's conception of

“fakelore,” as “a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but actually tailored for mass edification” (Dorson, *Folklore*, 5).

### The 1887 Wexford Encounter

Another approach in the asserted origins of the Michigan Dogman is reference to an imputed 1887 encounter between the Dogman and lumberjacks in what is today part of the Manistee National Forest in West Michigan’s Wexford County. This story is noted at the beginning of the song “The Legend,” as in virtually every subsequent discussion of Dogman that mentions the cryptid’s history. In essence, the tale is that, at a time when Michigan was being settled in earnest, at the height of the timbering of that state’s vast old growth pine forests, a group of shanty boys found a strange dog. Chasing it into the hollow of a tree, the canine emerged, rose to its feet, screamed horrifically and fled into the wilderness (Smith; Boudreau).

The tale is intriguing. Corroborating David Gordon White’s analysis, this narrative poses the Michigan Dogman as liminal, positioned at the point of contact between ancient wilderness and the expansion of civilization. Here is a being unknown, perhaps unknowable, resonate of the darkness and dangers a savage “other world.” Contact with such mystery leaves the lumberjacks shaken and the beast itself still loose along the borderland.

But there are more specific elements in the story. The Dogman is here introduced in the context of Michigan’s late nineteenth century, during decades in which the forests were being systematically cut to the ground, with that lumber shipped out to fuel America’s urban growth and westward expansion. In the region’s historical memory, this is Michigan as the frontier, a romanticized era of “wild west” style pioneers, lumberjacks, timbering camps, and lumber barons, marked by coarseness but also a prosperity and newly-infused culture that would transform the state (Neithercut). By the late twentieth century, such selective remembrance had been directly linked to, and developed in, Michigan’s public education and tourist industry (Rypma; Wiles). It is a source from which Michiganians have drawn selectively to galvanize a common identity. The introduction of the Michigan Dogman into this discursive context effectively inserts it into a larger mythologized world already well-established, associating that cryptid not just with an ancient past, but a place then being tamed by a rowdy American civilization. Dogman amongst the lumberjacks makes a mythic sense,

and this account has become one more addition to the many other legends and tales of that time.

One might consider, moreover, how the story fits in the cultural context of America in 1987 and after, particularly in connection to the embrace of conservationism (Keiter; Nash). Recent understanding of cryptids, Peter Dendle argues, often frame these entities as having resisted human devastation. Study of them “serves to channel guilt over the decimation of species and destruction of the natural habitat,” as well as to “recapture a sense of mysticism and danger in a world now perceived as fully charged and over-explored” (190-200). In this respect, the resonance of the tale goes beyond Dogman as a symbol of the timeless forest, a mysterious being threatening “to encroach on the center’s limits,” or a part of Michigan’s fabled settlement days (White 9). The dogman in this story is a pitiful and bullied creature, taking refuge in the hollow of a timbered log, howling his resentment as Michigan’s primeval woodlands are obliterated. Such depiction suggests indeed an “alter ego” against which humanity might measure itself. But one less like a savage monster and more akin to, say, the Lorax of Dr. Seuss’s 1971 children’s story *The Lorax*. The Dogman’s presence speaks to the selfishness of ecological annihilation, the tragedy of its consequences, but also the resilience of the old world.

Once again, however, there is seemingly no record of this event having taken place or even being noted in early times. The many accounts of it do not provide citations or reference to an original source, or else simply make reference to other sources published after 1987. There is no *locus classicus*. Or, more precisely, the apparent *locus classicus* is the 1987 song “The Legend.” The result in the Dogman literature is essentially the creation of an echo chamber, with the discussions repeating one another, then posing that repetition as corroboration of the story and its proposed veracity. In this respect, the presentation of the Wexford encounter mirrors that of several other unsubstantiated historical encounters, such as a 1938 dog attack, also frequently referenced in discussions of the Dogman in Michigan history (Smith; Boudreau; Godfrey, *Michigan Dogman*, 14-18).

The story of the Wexford encounter is, however, intriguing in its relationship to folklore and popular culture. If in fact originating from “The Legend,” the tale provides a specific example of how the folkloresque can be shaped from a context of local tales, mythology, and contemporary concerns. Even more striking, it suggests an example of how folkloresque creation that is truly resonate, as clearly this was, can ground not just new popular culture discussion, but seemingly new

Michigan lore rooted in physical space. This is not a circumstance of local informal culture being antithetical to mass communication. In this instance, the two have clearly worked together, symbiotically, to flesh out a stronger vision of the Dogman.

### Anecdotes and Eyewitness Accounts

A third element of the asserted history of the Michigan Dogman is the use of personal anecdotes and eyewitness accounts. Many people have claimed to have seen the Dogman, or know of someone who has, or have heard tales that they consider credible. These sources, however, are also problematic as an acceptable record, although, in the means of their presentation, they often reinforce historical myths or associations.

Referenced in such testimony is a wide range of encounters. Dogman has been observed wandering the woods, eating animals, crossing roads, running with ordinary dogs or other dogmen, jumping from tree to tree, lazing by roadsides or waterways, stalking hunters or cars, eyeing rural residents, scratching doors, howling in the distance. The books about this cryptid offer long lists of anecdotes; at least one is made up entirely of them (Godfrey, *Michigan Dogman, Realwolfmen*; Leon; Lyon; Haggard). Such claimed sighting is often presented *ipso facto* as proof, generally offered with a “believe it if you want,” “come to your own conclusion,” or “where there is smoke there is fire” rhetoric (Haggard 3). The distinction made between the eye witness stories being true in the sense that sometime happened, and that *something* being, in fact, a genuine cryptid encounter is often ambiguously rendered.

A number of these anecdotes and personal stories extend their accounts into the past. This includes, among others, the story of a dog attack – or at least threat – during an ice fishing trip in 1938 (mentioned above), and of an unnamed security guard that, on night duty in the 1950s, saw a strange canine against a distant fence suddenly stand erect (Boudreau). Or, more strangely, of a traveling salesman meeting an upright, talking wolfman in a farmhouse in rural Detroit in the 1920s (Godfrey, *Monsters*, 53). That these encounters purportedly happened in the past, prior to 1987, corroborates the existence of the Dogman in history. The credibility of such assertion, however, is muddied by the fact that virtually all of these accounts came to light, or were released to the public eye, after 1987. Although a common response in this connection is that people were afraid to

come forward, as well as that, as some suggest, the United States government has suppressed knowledge, perhaps to better develop secret “dark state” military programs (Mulka; “Cryptid Super Soldiers”).

The nature of personal sightings of the Michigan Dogman, as presented directly or recounted by a third party, tend to follow a common narrative form. There is an unexpected encounter, an episode of menace by the cryptid, then withdrawal of the beast without definitive resolution. Most often, Dogman is associated with the forest or its ancient beasts, but always with a twist of mystery and the unknown. In the claimed 1938 story, for example, the fisherman Robert Fortney fired his gun to repel a pack of wild dogs, but “fear escalated to cold terror as the only dog that didn’t run off reared up on its hind legs and stared at Fortney with slanted, evil eyes and the hint of a grin” (*Real Wolfmen* 79). Or, in another story set in Iosco County, within the Huron National Forest, in the 1970s a hunter found himself being followed. When this stalker emerged, as the hunter stated, “it was like the forest opened up...it looked like a hole in the woods. It kind of absorbed all color and light, yet at the same time was not a shadow” (174).

A number of accounts are also explained in terms of native beliefs, practices or landmarks: the so-called “Native American Connection” (*I Know What I Saw*). As a narrative presentation, this is the inverse of the exploitation of legends discussed above, but draws a similar association with a mythic past. It includes contextualizing stories within an asserted indigenous understanding that beasts such as Dogman are shamanic shapeshifters (*Monsters* 117). One story, for instance, recounts a farm woman from Iosco County who was pursued by Dogman, but saved when she crosses the drawn line “from a Native American cleansing ceremony they had performed on their property” (*Real Wolfmen* 100). She “wondered whether the creature could have been a supernatural manifestation such as a skin walker, an animal-like creature that is said to be conjured by the ritual practices of some types of Native American medicine men” (101). Other encounter stories are framed in light of places purportedly lost to the past. After recounting three meetings with dogmen in 2016, near the Manistee National Forest, a man named “Brad” observed that “I was told by a family member that a lot of the wood acreage is Indian burial grounds.” The author then links that referenced region, and Dogman upon it, with “the tragic historic massacre of the area’s Potawatomi” (*I Know What I Saw* 87-8).

As Micheal Shermer points out in his article “Show Me the Body,” the core problem with such anecdotal accounts is that they are not reliable evidence, even



when there may be some truth to them. “Anecdotes do not make science. Ten anecdotes are no better than one, and a hundred anecdotes are no better than ten” (37). Or, as Daniel Loxton and Donald Prothero concur, eyewitness testimony is simply “insufficient” (13-6). People often remember incorrectly, incompletely, or disingenuously. Moreover, a prevalent confirmation bias, as is clearly evident among many who discuss cryptids, can shape accounts into certain predetermined, often invalid, shapes. Even when there is sincere belief in what one has personally experienced, or heard, it cannot necessarily be accepted as full confirmation. Further evidence is required to establish authenticity, if not belief. This difficulty was illustrated in recent U.S. politics, when challengers presented an array of personal depositions as evidence of interference in the 2020 presidential election. Although persuasive to many in the public sphere, a lack of corroboration made it unconvincing in legal court review. The result, in the case of the Dogman stories, seems little more than grist for what Richard Dorson termed “urban legends.”

### Concluding Remarks

The Michigan Dogman is a popular culture idea that has gained in scale and complexity over the past four decades. As a “metaphor,” the cryptid is consistent with David Gordon White’s analysis of dogmen more broadly, in the manner that it is portrayed as residing along liminal or civilizational boundaries, represents the threat of the mysterious unknown, and offers a contrast that allows society to evaluate itself. Since 1987, and the song “The Legend,” however, Dogman has been posited as a genuine entity with a distinct past. Given an absence of supporting physical or documentary evidence, a historical presence has been asserted through the use of Native American legends, a foundational story of encounter, and personal anecdotes and testimony. Although problematic as corroboration, the presentation has yet had an impact on historical memory, in effect injecting Dogman into a popular vision of Michigan’s past days. In contrast, the actual *history* of the Michigan Dogman, particularly as an idea present in discourse, emerged only from 1987, as the story of the cryptid was introduced, developed, and transmitted.

A few points might be made about that history. First, the Michigan Dogman legend, as it has evolved, is not just a scary story. The discursive positioning of the cryptid in relation to ancient wilderness, Native American lifeways or beliefs, the height of Great Lakes timbering, and well as subsequent forest contact, works

within a popular culture visualization of Michigan's past. The Dogman is a folk image not just of darkness and peril, but also of a mysterious world that once existed but now is largely gone forever. In a sense, it really is the *Michigan Dogman*, as the cryptid symbolizes that region, its secrets or potentialities, and by extension stands as a source of regional pride. That is to say, it has served, and continues to be made to serve, the purpose that Steve Cook originally intended. Indeed, it seems to have transcended Cook's ambitions in the way his "folkloresque" story created new, interwoven folklore and mass culture. That this legend may not jibe with actually historical conditions, of which many Michiganians are not fully aware, does little to discount its contemporary meaning or the manner that it links to, and even buttresses, romanticized historical memory.

Second, as seen in this case, attention to the past in framing Dogman has been integral to the form and interconnections of this modern discourse. Engaged is a common technique, selecting from former events to enliven a mythic narrative, as well as recasting old folk tales to provide corroborative detail. This shaping, or even fabrication, of historical information and stories has allowed discussion to be variously folkloresque, part of a new Michigan folklore, a subset of cryptid-centered popular culture, or even pseudoscience. In this service, distorted historicity compensates for a lack of corroboration or evidence, offering validation while being flexibly molded to accommodate different configurations. Indeed, it has enabled the interlocking, communication, and mutual reinforcement of related expressions. Urban legends can, for instance, be inserted into historical memory; historical memory can give substance to urban legends. In this commonality, new folklore has a largely fluid, and even symbiotic, relationship with popular culture.

Third, if the logic and evidence of the Michigan Dogman antecedents are not impressive to professional historians, the way in which those stories have been developed and transmitted should be. We see here an example of how knowledge, of and for ordinary people, was effectively invented, gathered from mutually-affirming sources, processed uncritically in support of specific preferred notions, then disseminated using evolving new technology – all done with a freedom, and on a scale, unprecedented in human history. It may be presented as secret lore of a mysterious hidden world, accessible most to those who can see it and really want to know it. But the process is in fact indicative of how

contemporary ideas, no matter how strange, have been shaped into forms seemingly real, as well as shared virtually anywhere, with anyone.

Finally, the perspectives and techniques discussed here are far from unique in contemporary America. In the embrace of Dogman, as other cryptids, we see not just an acceptance of fabricated or scientifically-unsupported notions, but also a rejection of elite knowledge and experts that monopolize “the pool of culturally acceptable beliefs” (Dendle 190, 200). This approach to knowledge has similarly incorporated distrust of government, acceptance of unvetted sources, bias in consideration of evidence, openness to conspiracy theories, and even embrace of the supernatural -- in all, a kind of iconoclastic magical thinking (200-1). Such a way of knowing has also been found, among many other places, in recent extremes of American political discourse. When for example Kristina Karamo, the former chair of Michigan’s Republican Party, noted for election denialism and opposition to vaccination, opined that “demonic possession is real,” that statement was based in a similar approach to, and transmission of, public knowledge (Danner). It may even have worked within a common, mutually reinforcing, milieu. This study of cryptids as an artifact of contemporary history – a recently-fashioned mythic idea, supported with distortions of history and folklore, enlivened through repetition and self-reference, aided by commodification, transmitted electronically -- is thus not just about cryptids. It also offers insight into the mechanism of a larger, and discernibly potent, perceptual shift in American culture.

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# Popular Culture and Liberatory Transformation: Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the Biopolitics of Fascism, and Argentinian Socioeconomics

CARLOS TKACZ

The postwar history of Argentina is central to what Manuel Puig accomplishes in his novel, *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, a “a popular, if not canonical, novel in the history of Latin American narrative” that “holds an incontestable place in most canons of gay literature” (Allan 71). Despite its fundamental relation to the period and place in which the novel takes place, the novel “remains remarkably fresh,” as it “considers themes and questions that continue to resonate with readers: intimacy, love, psychoanalysis, identity, politics, and sexuality” (Alan 71). This makes the novel a relevant text for the study of popular culture – an important element and theme in the novel – in relation to both the local cultures in which mass media is consumed and the global socioeconomic matrix in which it is produced. The novel follows the conversations of two Argentinian prisoners of the state in the 1970s during their internment; the topics of conversation vary from, and both of these elements are important, political theory to popular culture, in particular film. To pass time while imprisoned, Molina relates to Valentin various films he has seen, six in total. These conversations become the basis of their relationship, which evolves throughout the narrative, and become essential to their survival while oppressed by the Argentinian state of this period. As observed by Patricia and William Marchak in *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s* (1999), the period before the military coup of 1976 was defined by “political anarchy and economic decline,” especially in the years immediately before the novel's release in Spain<sup>1</sup> (3). During Juan Domingo Peron's third stint

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<sup>1</sup> Puig was living in Mexico when he started writing and published *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, having already run afoul of the authorities in Argentina for previous works. In particular, he was CARLOS TKACZ has an M.A. from California State University, Bakersfield, and is currently a doctoral researcher at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he studies speculative fiction and pop-culture through an ecocritical lens and in the Global Anglophone context.

in office from late 1973 until his death in 1974, after which his wife took over, “up to two thousand people were murdered by paramilitary groups known as the Triple A, organized by a ministry of the government” (3). Both before and after the military coup, which brought in the government generally referred to as the junta,<sup>2</sup> “the stated objective of state agencies engaged in killing people was to destroy subversives, communists, atheists, and dissidents” (3). This was a period of Argentinian history in which all governments, elected or otherwise, engaged variously in the oppression of their political threats, perceived and otherwise.

At the same time, the novel hinges on the characters’ engagements with popular culture; in this, Puig seems to anticipate the increasing importance popular culture will have in the contemporary world. According to Brad Adgate at *Forbes*, the United States entertainment market – the money consumers spent – reached \$37 billion in 2021. This does not include the social media market, which, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, accounted for “10.2 percent of U.S. gross domestic product” (1). Furthermore, the total market value for entertainment and media worldwide has been steadily on the rise and is expected to continue, reaching 2.51 trillion US dollars in 2022 (Guttman “Value of the Entertainment and Media Market Worldwide from 2017 to 2026”). Douglas Kellner, writing in 2020, observes that there has been little work in exploring how mass media “could be transformed and used as instruments of social enlightenment and progress” (296); yet, we see that Puig, over forty years before, had already anticipated this possibility. Using Argentina as a case study, Puig traces the ways in fascist biopolitics function through categorizations dependent on misrepresentations of ideas of the “natural,” which in turn allow for the utter exploitation of people through forms of violence and through the movement of resources outside of a country. In this context, he uses the novel’s formal structure and the insertion of popular culture from international sources to make visible the paradoxical avenues for liberatory transformation stories of mass media can offer

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threatened for his novel *The Buenos Aires Affair*, which contained anti-Peron sentiments (Cruz 307-8).

<sup>2</sup> The *junta* ruled the country from 1976 until 1983 (“Argentina’s Dirty War” 63). In 1985, the “Trials of the Junta” began prosecuting the crimes committed during this period, the “Dirty Wars,” but these were brought to an end in 1986 when the military threatened another coup. Since 2005, however, the trials have continued (66). For more, see *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (2011) by Marguerite Feitlowitz and *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina* (2014) by Federico Finchelstein.

as the material for identity engagements that burst through the categories the state forces onto its populations.

### Argentinian History: Politics and Popular Culture Assemblages

The novel is situated in the political history in postwar Argentina. The politics of Argentina in the period from after World War II until the military coup of 1976, regardless of the political leanings of whomever was in power, was engaged in cementing a stronger and stronger sense of nationalism. The parameters of this nationalism are important: “the conservative church and military, that of the bureaucratic unions, and that of guerrilla fighters and dissident unions” all “engaged in social engineering, or ethnic cleansing,” in order to “reconstitute the society according to its version of ‘pure,’ ‘good,’ and ‘perfect’” with “the tacit consent of a fair part of the population” (Marchak and Marchak 7). These efforts were informed by “conservative nationalism” and “the scientific construction of biological races” (Carter 144) and sought “an ideal Argentine race” (Carter 148) through “a carefully planned, very well organized, even bureaucratic, response to a perceived threat” (Marchak and Marchak 319) in which the “killing of subversives was an exercise in logistics, so much so that excellent minds were put to the task of finding improved means of disposing of bodies” (Marchak and Marchak 319).<sup>3</sup> We see here several threads that connect to the idea of “nature” and the need of oppressive governments to categorize their subjects: ideologies of “purity” trend towards biological framings that paint forms of dissent as aberrations in “nature,” which in turn allow for the state to utilize these same, spurious definitions as justifications for the removal of dissent in ways that almost always target the bodies of peoples who do not fit the desirable categories

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<sup>3</sup> This issue is complicated, for the biological constructions mentioned do not quite correspond only to racial categories. Argentina’s history is one of much immigration, with European people’s coming to the country well into the post-45 era. My own family’s story testifies to this – my grandfather moved from a disputed territory between Ukraine and Poland to Argentina sometime between the World Wars. My father, born in Argentina, grew up and lived through Peron’s rise and through the early parts of the Dirty Wars. Both of them, and myself, are Caucasian, Slavic. Argentinian culture, from the particular dialect of Spanish they speak to the traditional foods, bears the stamp of Europe. I have always been made to understand that this is point of pride in Argentina, and Argentine’s are known for the pride they have in their culture as different from the rest of Latin America. As such, the categories mentioned in this section are racial but are also heavily influenced by cultural and ideological elements.



established by the state as being friendly towards its power.<sup>4</sup> The two prisoners, but in particular Molina, suffer from these abuses of state power.

Another important part of the novel that relates to Argentinian history – both the history of the politics and the history of the economics of the country – is the treatment of films Puig includes in the novel. The films vary in their content from romantic to political to purely genre-based; we will return to the importance of these soon. For the moment, it is necessary to recognize the role popular culture like film played in the development of the country in the period from the end of World War I until the publication of the novel. Michael B. Karush, in his book *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina* (2012),

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<sup>4</sup> The categories of existence framed as desirable by the state, insofar as they extend the state's power, are built in part on forms of subjectivity that determined, through oppressive tactics, by the state itself. For Foucault, one of the principal features of modern human relations is a new form of power that "is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being" and, furthermore, to "man-as-species" (1442). He specifies that state discipline, in this newer form, "tries to rule a multiplicity of men" through their "individual bodies" with surveillance, training, and punishment" (1442). This leads to Foucault's conception of "biopolitics," which "deals with... the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as a power's problem" (245). More specifically, according to Vandana Shiva, emphasis on the "natural" and the ways in which those categorizations create biopower and biopolitics "[transform] diversity into a disease and deficiency because it cannot be brought under centralized control" (101). For the state, this justifies "the use of coercion, control, and centralization" and "introduce[s] violence at many levels" (101). Shiva, here, is theorizing on the effects of globalization and the prevalence of monocultures in that system. This is relevant to the history of Argentina: as we shall see, Argentina's history can be seen through the tension between extra-national influences and a strong sense of nationalism. In the end, both the global influence of other countries in Argentina – through popular culture and through business – and the nationalist rhetoric utilized by many of the governments active during the period in question – also, interestingly, through the same avenues of popular culture and industry – both depended on the kinds of categorizations made available through biopolitical machinations. The next important theoretical context necessary for situating *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* is the relationship between fascist and oppressive structures and conception of "nature" or of what constitutes the "natural." Recent scholarship in ecocriticism, some of which engages with the term "nature" and calls into question its usefulness for environmental forms of thinking and writing, is cogent here. This scholarship connects the term and attendant concept to homogenizing efforts that are, ultimately, tied to oppressive categorizations utilized by totalitarian states to project specific, acceptable identities and social relationships, which in turn are mobilized for the protection and continuation of the state itself and usually at the expense of significant portions of the citizenry. As observed by Timothy Morton, the concept of nature can act as "a way of establishing racial or sexual identity" in which the "normal [is] set up as different from the pathological along the coordinates of the *natural* and the *unnatural*" (16). What this means is that "nature" can be used "to point out what is intrinsically human, and to exclude the human," as well as to "justify competition and cruelty" among the oppositional categories the term enables (19). Nature is, then, "a norm against which deviation is measured" (14).

observes the fact that “workers made up a substantial proportion of the audience for mass culture in Argentina” and that “the mass culture they consumed must have had a significant impact on their consciousness” (1-2). Popular culture in Argentina “trafficked in conformism, escapism, and the fantasy of upward mobility,” but there was a kind of paradox at work from the very beginning (3). Because Argentine producers of mass culture like film had to compete with entertainment imports from the United States, they focused their energies on “delivering what foreign mass culture could not: Argentine authenticity” (Karush 3). A tension was born here. In the back and forth between Argentinian and US produced mass culture, a sense of Argentinian identity based on “consumerism and middle-class aspirations” developed, thereby reinforcing the trend away from working-class militancy” (Karush 2). At the same time, “[c]orporations in the United States, penetrating Latin American markets to an unprecedented extent, launched an ambitious effort to disseminate North American ‘corporate culture’ abroad” (Karush 7). As such, popular media in Argentina operated through two, seemingly paradoxical strands. Mass culture in Argentina was a part of the development of a new sense of national identity,<sup>5</sup> and with it “came a fascination with newness, an ethos of individualism, and the ideal of the self-made man” (Karush 7). This was developing at the same time as the groundwork for Peron’s style of populism, the *peronismo*, a political movement built on leftist politics guided by labor concerns in the industrializing country.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, foreign involvement in Latin America, Argentina included, had deep effects in the modernization push the continent was going through in an attempt to improve the lives and fortunes of, depending on who you ask, the common people and/or the elite. By the time the military juntas took control of Argentina in the 70s and the violence that had already been happening exploded

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<sup>5</sup> Claudia Contente writes that the “period starting in 1862 is referred to in Argentine national historiography as the period of “national organization,” during which the state gave substance to its sovereignty and institutions,” and is the beginning of the nation as an independent state; that said, “both popular culture and the official history generally agree that Argentina’s origins lay in the break with Spain in 1810 or even earlier, during the colonial period.”

<sup>6</sup> *Peronismo*, or Peronism, “envisioned a government in which business, the labor unions, and the military would collaborate on behalf of national development, social peace, and political sovereignty” (Brennan and Rougier 17) through “a transition from an agrarian to an industrial society” (19). Peron’s sincerity, in his commitment to the working class, has been long debated, but it is hard to ignore the “role industrial capitalists” (17) played in his political action, in which “capitalist groups retained preponderant economic power” and in which “political power... rested in the hands of the businessmen” (40).

into something still larger, the common perception among those who were being oppressed was “that terrorism in Argentina... was a consequence of an economic restructuring plan that had its origins outside the country” (Marchak and Marchak 8). This is often attributed to “monetarism or neoliberalism,” ideologies that we might accurately say were supported by the paradoxes implicit in the popular engagement with mass culture, Argentinian and foreign, that was growing during the same period. One of the first steps in this direction began under the rule of Isabel Peron, who took over after her husband died in 1974; Juan Peron had come to power for the first time in the 40s by close involvement with and support from labor unions. It was, then, the “destruction of unions” that “began under the Isabel Peron regime and continued through the next several years” so that “foreign investment could operate in the domestic market on the same conditions as national companies,” a process supported by the military, that allowed that same military to take over the country in 1976 (Marchak and Marchak 326). This, in turn, “destroyed small national companies but provided entry into the global marketplace for Argentine capital” (Marchak and Marchak 326); we see here again the same paradox described above in the tensions between foreign involvement and national production. In order to achieve these ends, which began with Peron’s return and continued both through Isabel’s rule and into the military junta that came next, all three governments used similar tactics: the “kill[ing] off [of] all actual and potential opponents, and... destroy[ing] the strong union movement” (Marchak and Marchak 8). The military government especially was engaged in brutal tactics, “kidnapping and killing workers, students, and others who might have mounted an offensive campaign,” and this process is best seen as an “economic restructuring” that was “part of the more general social engineering” underway in Argentina in the 70s (Marchak and Marchak 8). Foreign influence in Argentina, then, had “profound but complex consequences” which led to “hybrid discourses, rather than straightforward cultural domination” (Karush 7).

### Narrative Forms and Political Oppression

The plot of *The Kiss of the Spiderwoman* speaks to these realities:<sup>7</sup> the story involves two imprisoned men – one for being a political dissenter and the other, presumably, for being a homosexual. In this, already, we see both angles of oppression laid out above represented. Valentin, the communist, represents political dissent, and Molina, who is gay, represents biological dissent. Their punishment, imprisonment, speaks to the forms of biopower oppressive states engage in; they are being held captive. That is, the abilities of their bodies to move in space are being restricted. We see the same in the treatment of Valentin, who is poisoned so as to try and force him into giving up information: through the introduction of a foreign substance, the processes of his own body are turned against him.

These modes of oppression are indicated in the form of the novel: it is written wholly in dialogue without any descriptions from a narrator about the settings, characters, or actions. Another way to put it is that the characters in the novel, through the form, are denied their own embodied lives, becoming instead only words on the page. Combined with the fact of their imprisonment, the state's biopower over them is complete – they are stripped of any sense of material reality, presumably so they can be rebuilt, if possible, as the state sees fit. This creative choice by Puig mobilizes the cell as a “[symbol] of the roles that the culture's oppression has enforced on them and the seemingly inescapable fact of their ultimate powerlessness” in the “unalterable reality of the cell” (Tuss 327). Puig here attends to the connection between emphases on the “natural” and the biopolitical enforcement of specific ways of being, as if those ways of being are the only “correct” ones available to subjects of the nation. Puig's choice also captures the reader in this structure of oppression: the reader, as well as the characters, is “trapped inside the highly structured world of the narrative, a parallel of the oppressive regime of the Argentina of the novel” (Tuss 327-8). In this way, the prison is one of the country's “holes of oblivion in which the destruction not only of human dignity, but also of human spontaneity, are chief

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<sup>7</sup> As do, it must be said, the “intrusive footnotes” spread throughout the novel. These insertions present “textual authorities,” often taking an academic tone and usually dedicated to the scientific and medical discussion of homosexuality, and are intimately concerned with the “causes” and “effects” of homosexuality and look at the people who identify this way from and lens that further objectifies them, collapsing their identities with the categories described above by tracing an “unknown authority” that is “a part of the text, yet.. distinct” (Boling 79). The “omniscient narrator” these footnotes point towards “has complete control and exists simultaneously outside and inside the narrative” (Boling 79, 80).

aims” (Amin 189). That is to say, Puig’s decision to leave out the bodies of the characters, relying only on their voices, indexes the biopower the state exercises. This biopower is reinforced by biopolitical conceptions of nation and subject, through an absence that lays bare the structures of oppression at work in Argentina during this period.

The characters themselves seem to, perhaps unconsciously, acknowledge these facts. The novel begins with Molina describing a film to Valentin – something that happens often in the narrative and a plot point we will return to soon. After a description detailing the appearance of a female character in the film, Valentin says, “Look, remember what I told you, no erotic descriptions. This isn’t the place for it” (Puig 4). It is the latter part of the quote that matters here: eroticism, which requires embodiment both for its phenomenology and its action, is for the moment left out of the realm of possibility within the confines of the cell, which represents the state as a whole. The original Spanish deepens this analysis:<sup>8</sup> in the original, the last part of the quote is written as: “Sabés que no conviene.” This can be translated other ways: “You know it’s not appropriate” or “You know it’s not suitable” or “You know it’s not advisable.” The tension between the English translation and the original Spanish is productive, in particular between the “This is not the place” of the English and the “You know” of the Spanish. The English version emphasizes the cell – a place and not a body. The Spanish version emphasizes the person being spoken to, who in this form is folded into the conjugation of the verb. What is more, the Spanish version speaks to the ways in which these conceptions are agreed upon formulations rather than facts of reality. Indeed, the root word for “conviene” is “convener,” which can also mean “agree on.” In their own ways, both erase the bodies of the speaker and spoken to. Cogent here are the concepts of “natural” and “unnatural” the state enforces. For Valentin, the erotic, that is the body, is left out of the realm of possibility because he still ascribes to the heterosexual definitions of sexuality endorsed by the government (a fact made clear through the imprisonment of Molina). Also important here is the way the words of the characters are delivered. The novel retains only the long dash as the markers of the words spoken by the characters –

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<sup>8</sup> For this portion of the analysis, I will be looking at the differences between the original Spanish text and the translation; I will not do this for the rest of the textual analyses in the novel; my emphasis is generally on elements in the novel that do not hinge on the subtleties of the writing itself—my focus is on elements of plot and action, as well as the format of the novel. These are textual elements that, in my opinion, work in either language. That said, I will provide the Spanish version, in footnotes, for each section of the text I utilize in my reading.

the technique most often used in Spanish language novels. What this means is that, in addition to not including any narration or descriptions of the characters, the novel also lacks any of the verbs most associated with speaking: says, asks, yells, etc. Verbs, of course, are words that indicate action, and the verbs used to denote speaking in narratives are indelibly tied to the body as they tie the words of dialogue to the physical actions that precipitate them. Through these techniques, Puig utterly separates the body from the narrative, thereby using the form of his novel to speak to the biopolitical machinations of the Argentinian state.

### Burst Categories and Liberatory Transformation

Through the conceit of the plot and the inclusion of film narratives in his own narrative, Puig begins to resolve the problems the citizens of oppressive states who do not conform to the dominant forms of subjectivity face: he was the “first novelist, writing in Spanish, who consistently utilized popular culture and the products of the show business industry in order to articulate his fictions” (Echaverren 581). For Puig’s characters, as can be seen in the novel, popular culture played an important role in their ability to survive their imprisonment. The films allow Molina and Valentin to “escape from reality once and a while” so that they “don’t go nuts” (Puig 78).<sup>9</sup> Valentin puts perhaps too fine a point on it when he says, while Molina is having stomach pains, “Tell me about the film so you don’t think about the pain, it hurts less if you try not to pay so much attention” (Puig 88).<sup>10</sup> The use of popular culture in this novel, however, goes beyond mere escapist tactics. Rather, as observed by Kimberly Chabot Davis, Puig’s use of popular culture as a form through which the characters interact – as the form of their dialogism, as it were – “moves audiences to weigh the merits and limitations of various dichotomous polls such as emotion versus reason, fantasy versus realism, and escapist kitsch versus Marxist critical thought” (1). That is to say, Puig’s engagement with mass-produced culture, through his characters, indexes the complex role popular culture plays in societies generally and in Argentina during this time more specifically. The inclusion of these films “betray[s] a lower

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<sup>9</sup> “Que me dejes un poco que me escape de la realidad, ¿para qué me voy a desesperar más todavía?, ¿quierés que me vuelva loco? Porque loca ya soy.”

<sup>10</sup> “Contame así no pensás en el dolor, te duele menos si te distraés...”

middle class, ravenous appetite for commercially packaged products” (Echaverran 581) and, at the same time, argues that “popular texts, and not only the avant-garde, can foster progressive change” (Davis 9). This move both “mounts a defense of popular culture” (Davis 9) and situates that culture, the culture of the masses, as the zone of revolution and change – this is further evidenced simply through the proximity of the characters in the novel and their dependence on each other. Valentin, the educated revolutionary, relies heavily for his physical and mental survival on Molina, the consumer of popular culture. This undercuts the idea that “only formally experimental, non-realist aesthetics can have transgressive politics, that popular culture never fosters critical thought” (Davis 9).

What is more, the novel “suggest[s] that such films can work to open up the identities of viewers” (Davis 9), an idea that connects popular culture to the idea common at the time that a new world will require a new kind of person.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted, here, that Molina’s use of popular culture in some ways mirrors Valentin’s communist ideology, which places the zone of power in the masses rather than in the few elite. By using the narrative techniques described above, Puig includes popular culture, a form of art geared towards the masses, in the broader ideological assemblage of revolutionary politics Valentin represents. There is, of course, a strange kind of paradox here – the Hollywood films Molina describes are, as is all mass-produced pop culture, the products of capitalism; indeed, they are only possible, in that form and due to the costs associated with their production, in a capitalist society that creates a surplus of wealth available to certain parts of its population. The loop here then becomes clear: the economic policies Argentina was increasingly engaged in during the years leading up to the publication of the novel, an early version of neoliberalism, moved wealth and resources outside of the country and increasingly to the United States. This at once degraded the living conditions of the working class in Argentina and

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<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps best seen in the many communist movements from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their goal to “remold the mind, psychology, and even character of individuals by various party and state policies designed” to do just that (Cheng 1). This “aspiration for changing human nature” (2) reflected “a calculated and systematic cultivation of ideas and perceptions, consciousness and subconsciousness, personal character, psychology, and even physical constitution” that constituted the concept of the “new man” (3), who then would become “an alternative human model” and a “a new stage in human evolution” (3). This idea is not unique to communism, however, and connects “with a more profound and enduring tradition of human society throughout history” that points to “a much deeper and more anxious concern about human development amid...changing circumstances” (7).

increased the wealth of the elites both there and in the United States, in turn allowing for the production of the very films that became tools for the survival of both prisoners.

Altogether, Puig's emphasis on popular culture engages in a kind of liberatory transformation that bursts open the authoritarian, biopolitical categorizations the fascist governments of Argentina in the postwar period used to, as explained above, control the population and enrich the elite. It is this transformation that resolves the paradoxes implicit in the use of popular culture for the liberation of the political subjects of authoritarian regimes: popular culture, "like culture more broadly, both enables and constrains" but ultimately provides "a set of discursive raw materials from which consumers can build their own meanings" that become "important sites for the elaboration of identities, values, and aspirations which can and do become the basis for political action" (Karush 5-6). This is not to say that the films Molina narrates in the text were made with these possibilities in mind. They were, of course, commercial products made for profit. Rather, the films become sources, almost found materials, that Molina and Valentin repurpose for their own needs.

Valentin, who here is speaking more generally but within the context of one of the films Molina is retelling, speaks to these possibilities when he says, "[R]eality...isn't restricted by this cell we live in. If you read something, if you study something, you transcend any cell you're inside of" (Puig 78).<sup>12</sup> Valentin is talking here about his own political studies; however, the fact of his very proximity to Molina, whose interests are more directly engaged with popular culture and with whom he shares the cell, and the fact that quickly he asks Molina to continue telling the film shows that this statement applies more broadly to the use of popular culture as well. Indeed, this transcendence of their reality goes deeper than the physical and cascades through their own mental processes as well. Later, when Molina is telling the story of the zombie film, he begins to have what might be called intrusive thoughts, presented by Puig as stream of consciousness and indicated in italics: "*police patrol, hideout, tear gas, door opens, submachine gun muzzles, black blood of asphyxiation gushing up in the mouth*: (Puig 158).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Porque escuchame, tu realidad, tu realidad no es solamente esta celda. Si estás leyendo algo, estudiando algo, ya trascendés la celda, ¿me entendés?"

<sup>13</sup> "patrulla policial, escondite, gases lacrimógenos, la puerta se abre, puntas de metrallitas, sangre negra de asfixia sube a las bocas."



Note the content of these thoughts: images of state power that end with an image of death and silence. Those thoughts continue seamlessly, without punctuation, into Valentin's next spoken words: "Go on, why did you stop?"<sup>14</sup> There are two things of note here: Valentin, beset upon by what appear to be memories of his capture by state authorities, memories that increasingly threaten to take over his mind and destroy his resolve to survive the cell so as to continue his political fight, immediately turns to the story Molina is telling in order not only to escape the thoughts but to move past them, to find space on the other side of them that allows him to live another moment. Second, the final thought-image in the stream quoted above emphasizes death and the mouth and becomes a metaphor for biopower and biopolitics in which the subject's inability to speak is a part of the oppressive categorization fascist regimes use to control their populations – only certain groups, certain types, are allowed a voice. It is significant then that Valentin's next statement is about the film Molina is describing. It is the very engagement with popular culture, which by this point of the novel has begun to act as a kind of a bridge between the two men, that allows Valentin both the chance to speak and the chance to connect with another equally oppressed subject.

The novel also includes popular culture elements beyond film; later in the novel, after their first sexual encounter, Valentin asks Molina to describe "a toy [he] really liked" when he was young, "the one [he] like[s] most of all" (222).<sup>15</sup> Molina describes "a dolly with very blonde hair, all braided up" who "could blink her eyes, and wore a Bavarian costume" (223).<sup>16</sup> While this "bought" toy is interesting in and of itself – the fact that it represents a different culture than the one the two men, who don't fit within the dominant culture of their own country, is itself yet another testament to the ways in which mass produced culture can bring subjects into contact with other modes of being that then opens up their own senses of the possibilities of being – what is perhaps most cogent here is what happens next in the plot: Valentin laughs at Molina's memory. Molina's response is telling: "I think this is the first time you've laughed since I had the great

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<sup>14</sup> "Seguí, ¿por qué parás?"

<sup>15</sup> Que me digas si te acordás de algún juguete que te gustó mucho, el que más te gustó... de los que te compró tu mama."

<sup>16</sup> "No, una muñeca bien rubia, con trenzas, y que abría y cerraba los ojos, vestida de tirolesa."

misfortune to end up in your cell” (223).<sup>17</sup> When Valentin protests that he has certainly laughed before, Molina clarifies, saying, “Yes, but it’s always been when the lights were already out. I swear I never *saw* you laugh before” (223).<sup>18</sup> Laughter here is fundamental<sup>19</sup> – it exists in the space between the two men, nurtured and made possible by their growing relationship, which in turn was begun through their mutual engagement with the popular culture Molina spends most of the novel describing to Valentin. That is to say, this moment when Valentin laughs becomes the culmination of the liberatory transformation the novel engages with throughout the plot and text. It is here that they are both seen – for even though it is Valentin who is seen, seeing itself presupposes the see-er and brings both into being, especially in a text that forgoes almost all physical markers of the characters – and that includes both their personal and political ontologies. It is here, in the multi-faceted engagement with the world that popular culture engenders rather than in Valentin’s political study, that political liberation from the oppressive regimes of Argentina becomes possible.

We see here the ways in which this kind of engagement with popular culture, precisely because of its wide-ranging reach, mobilizes “idiolects which function within a culture or subculture” for the expansion of identities “whose frame[s] of reference [are] ordinarily restricted and whose range of meaning is severely limited” (Cohen 18). It is the “popular” part of “popular culture” that gives oppressed subjectivities access to liberatory cultural networks that are cordoned off in other forms of media. Mass produced culture is, by definition, easily accessible and difficult to gatekeep, allowing for characters like Molina and Valentin, who are confined both physically and in terms of their respective identities, to generate new “myths from bits and pieces of previous readings in given universe of culture” (Echaverren 583). These, in turn, create “a common world of speech and action from which they are forcibly eliminated and invest their dismal, isolated existence in the prison cell with a sense of reality” (Amin 191). In this way, these characters “appropriate fragments of a code of

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<sup>17</sup> Me parece que es la primera vez que te reís desde que tuve la mala suerte de entrar en tu celda.”

<sup>18</sup> “Sí, pero ha sido siempre cuando está la luz apagada. Te lo juro: nunca te había visto reírte.”

<sup>19</sup> Many philosophers have commented on laughter and its place in the human experience. For more, see: *Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy* (2019), edited by Pierre Destrée and Franco V. Trivigno; *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987) by John Morreall; and *Enjoyment From Laughter to Delight in Philosophy, Literature, the Fine Arts, and Aesthetics* (1998), edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka.

representation in order to” both survive their imprisonment and, through that survival, find a path through the paradoxes of their positions in Argentine society (Echaverren 582). The liberatory, transformative success of these engagements with popular culture can be seen in two moments in the novel (beyond those already described above): Valentin and Molina’s sexual relationship and Molina’s choice, after he gets out of prison, to defy the government by attempting to help Valentin and his revolutionary friends. Both of these moments have been written about extensively elsewhere. For my purposes, it suffices to say that the former, the fact that the two prisoners have sex, speaks to the ways in which their coming together transcends the boundaries generally implicit in all fascist governments and specifically at work in Argentina in the 1970s. Think back to the purposeful formulation of the Argentinian identity and the emphasis on purity noted in the first part of this article. In particular, it is Valentin, a heterosexual male, who bursts through these boundaries and categorizations to realize a new version of himself that exists within a broader network of possibilities. The latter, Molina’s political engagement once he is out of prison and at the behest of Valentin, signals a similar transformation; Molina, throughout the novel, is actively not political in his thinking, and yet he chooses, at great personal risk (which is actualized in his death), to become involved. Both of these moments speak to the liberatory possibilities the characters access through their engagements with popular culture, which is to say through their engagements with each other, thereby arguing for a broader understanding of the political uses of such mass produced culture.

## Conclusion

Manuel Puig was prescient in his emphasis on popular culture in the political imaginations of the people. The processes that were beginning, during the period in which he wrote *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, to spread popular culture far and wide have, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reached a kind of apotheosis of influence. Puig saw the transformative power of popular culture early and made this power an important element in his fiction, at once exploring and displaying the possibilities of mass media to make change in the world. Puig’s prescience is in full display in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as entertainment media has crossed over into all aspects of modern life, including the formation of identity. According to Douglas Kellner, media and entertainment have “helped produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and

providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities” (1) and therefore are “not innocent entertainment, but are thoroughly ideological products bound up with political rhetoric, struggles, agendas, and policies” that have “political significance and effects” (52). This observation lends still more importance to Puig’s imaginings of the potential power of popular culture for transformative social ends and strengthens the need for further academic study into these potentialities, work this article begins. As we look both forwards and backwards for ways to remake the world in increasingly more just and equitable forms, it is clear that popular culture has been and remains an important part of the construction and realization of those possibilities.

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# The De-Animating of an Ideology: The Mockery and Celebration of the Disney Ideology as Experienced Through Cognitive Dissonance in Disney's *Enchanted*

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The bright, other-worldly features that characterize popular animated films have been enchanting and swaying audiences for nearly a century through the largely undetected persuasion of powerful ideological messaging. Dynamic color palettes, unique voices, anthropomorphized creatures, sanitized violence, and exaggerated human forms create an entertaining alternate world in which societal norms and laws of science are fluid. These animated worlds do not seem real, so viewers are able to set aside their beliefs and expectations of reality and enjoy whatever the captivating animation has to offer.

Animation is a fantastic form of artistic expression and entertainment, but it can also be deceptive. The danger of animation lies in the potential for viewers to be less critical of what they are consuming as the animated style acts as a camouflage, distracting viewers from underlying messages. This risk is heightened by the fact that the average audience member views a movie simply as a form of entertainment and escape (Sun and Scharrer). The escapism of film is exponentially increased by animation due to the increased separation from reality. While the viewer's intention may be to turn off their brain or escape reality for a couple of hours, this does not mean that the production companies have that same goal in mind. This means that viewers are exposed to a variety of agenda-laden messages that influence their beliefs, purchases, behaviors, and relationships without their necessarily realizing it.

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This phenomenon becomes much more concerning when one considers how this ignorant consumption and subliminal influence is being executed upon impressionable youth. Adults are lulled into a false sense of security by the same bright, entertaining voices, colors, and music that keep the children so entranced. There is an inaccurate assumption that because something is developed for children it must be okay for them to consume without the oversight of an adult (Muller-Hartmann; Giroux; Giroux and Pollock). As this topic relates to Disney, Giroux justly claims that Disney films have gone under the radar because they have been classified as “politics of innocence” (28), resulting in little consideration for the potential negative effects on young consumers (Hefner et al.). Giroux further explains this issue of unconcern, stating “under the rubric of fun, entertainment, and escape, massive public spheres are being produced which appear to be too ‘innocent’ to be worthy of political analysis” (28).

The combination of adults' perspectives of youth-centric content, the embrace of escapism through film, and the naivety of young viewers results in the potential for children to unknowingly consume all sorts of things. It is the culmination of these factors that allows for much of Disney's content to be consumed without question or hesitation. More specifically, the vibrant colors, sweet-looking animals, beautiful princesses, catchy tunes, and PG-guaranteed happy endings have made Disney Princess films the go-to, worry-free entertainment choice for children (Sun and Scharrer).

### The Power of Disney's Animation

Disney Princess films have always played an active role in the influence of society, as the fairytale genre was intended to pass on warnings and cultural values. As a result, these films have affected how audience members view themselves, their relationships, their societal roles, and the world, hence the abundance of discussions of the negative effects on viewers' perceptions of race (Potgieter and Potgieter; Buescher and Ono), body image (Coyne et al.; Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn), and romantic love (Tanner; Garlen and Sandlin; Hefner et al.). Several generations have grown up watching Disney films, but considerable effects can be seen in the younger generations due to the introduction of the second and third-wave princesses, the increase of social and digital media, and the

creation of the Disney Princess franchise (est. 2001) with all its associated merchandise. The children of today are consuming media at a high rate, which means that during their most formative years, they are learning who they are and how the world works primarily through their screens. This places an extraordinary amount of power into Disney's hands, as the company is one of the top producers of children's television shows and movies. This shaping of young minds is something that Walt Disney himself was keenly aware of, stating "I think of a child's mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly" (Walt Disney, as cited by Giroux and Pollock 17).

Giroux and Pollock go on to label Disney as a "teaching machine" that "exerts influence over consumers but also wages an aggressive campaign to peddle its political and cultural influence" (18, xiv). This machine is spitting out a proliferation of ideologically loaded media that train viewers from the youngest of ages to be mindless devotees who eagerly buy into the idealized world that Disney proffers. In addition to the issue of these media teaching youth romanticized versions of life and love, children do not know enough about real life to know how to separate fantasy from reality. This leads young viewers to act like the characters they see and to believe in "once upon a time" and "happily ever after." As children age, this can negatively affect how they handle romantic relationships in a variety of ways, since True Love is not as easy to find in real life as it is in the movies, and the resemblances are few (Berlant; Whelan).

Furthermore, when it comes to Disney, one of the most powerful factors in the company's success is the nostalgia that is constantly evoked in older viewers (Sun and Scharrer). Adult fans associate Disney's iconography and music with the joys of their youth and the development of their identities. This deep connection leads adults to eagerly introduce children to the Disney catalog without additional thought or critique, making it that much easier for any amount or type of messaging to be speedily consumed and embodied. This process can create a circle of indoctrination wherein viewers are conditioned to love the Disney ideology and related content without concern for criticism or underlying messages (Muller-Hartmann; Sun and Scharrer). This powerful cycle of influence is cloaked in the brilliant, eye-catching animation style, catchy songs, and polished ideology of Disney's most iconic films.



### *An Enchanted Overview*

A live-action-2D animation hybrid, *Enchanted* is a fantasy musical romantic comedy that follows the story of Giselle, a stereotypical fairytale princess, as she is separated from her True Love and tricked into leaving her animated home of Andalasia for real-life New York City. As she awaits rescue by Prince Edward, Giselle is taken in by NYC lawyer Robert, who attempts to reconcile Giselle's fairytale personality with his no-nonsense view of the world. While Giselle adjusts to reality, Prince Edward travels to the modern dimension to find her. Through a series of magical mishaps and musical numbers, Prince Edward searches for Giselle as she adapts to the real world and wins over the people of New York, including Robert.

*Enchanted* stands out from other fairytale movies because a great deal of effort was put into incorporating as many different elements of other iconic Disney films as possible without becoming kitschy, including the inspiration for characters and plot devices, cameos of beloved characters, and the design of the musical numbers. The film was praised upon release for using classic Disney tropes in a comedic and self-deprecating fashion, and for finding a way to bring animated character types into the real world. This latter aspect is what makes the film unique from all other Disney princess movies – making a mockery of Disney fairytale stereotypes by pulling them out of a fantasy land and placing them in reality. *Enchanted* was immediately a fan favorite and is considered one of the best modern movie musicals. The impact of the film was great enough to garner a passionate fan following for over fifteen years, resulting in the release of a much-anticipated sequel, *Disenchanted*, in November 2022.

### The Classic Disney Ideology

The classic Disney ideology was established by the company's founder, Walt Disney, whose interests and beliefs guided the production of the early films (May). Disney's personal beliefs were slowly developed into an unshakeable ideology as his films "establish[ed] as norm a gendered rhetoric to which all of the subsequent [...] films have been obliged to respond in one way or another"

(Potgieter and Potgieter 50). In part because of the era in which they were produced, many of the early films follow a rags-to-riches pattern reminiscent of the American Dream that is focused on the characters' virtue (Potgieter and Potgieter; Wood; Garlen and Sandlin). This ideology is best illustrated through the classic Disney princess films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, which were developed by Walt Disney during his lifetime, and were therefore heavily influenced by him. The prince and princess characters in these films embody the values and qualities that Walt Disney, and society at that time, believed to be the most desirable. Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora are all mistreated and demoted in some way, yet they remain happy and content with their lot in life as patient, forgiving young women who are pleased to serve others. In these stories, the characters are granted love, happiness, and status after they have proven themselves through characteristics such as hard work, kindness, selflessness, and perseverance (Potgieter and Potgieter).

Another key aspect of the Disney ideology is the goal of making dreams come true. Through overt and subliminal messaging, love and romance are established as the characters' predominant dream and the goal that viewers should pursue. For the princesses, their only true dream is to be loved, presenting love as something that "provides life's magical meaning, requires suffering and transformation, and is inevitable" (Potgieter and Potgieter; Garlen and Sandlin 958). Love is considered something that is destined, and that, if true, will hold firm against all odds. Furthermore, the romance between the prince and princess characters is always presented as a life-changing, life-saving event that makes the characters complete. By ending the princesses' stories with a happily ever after that always grants them their wish through marriage to a prince, these films impress on the viewer the message that they are worthy of love and status if their actions and characteristics mirror those of the Disney princess (Potgieter and Potgieter). These themes ultimately convey to the viewer that they too should search for their perfect match so that, by their rising status through marriage or the discovery of a noble birthright, all of life's problems will be solved and they will find happiness (Caldwell). Over the years, aspects of this ideology have evolved in response to changing societal norms, but the tenets of the classic ideology remain paramount to this day.

### Classic Disney Ideology in *Enchanted*

In *Enchanted*, Giselle and Prince Edward act as the stereotypical princess-in-waiting and prince charming characters, illustrating the ideological values established by the early princess films. Giselle, while never officially a princess, embodies the classic Disney princess from the Walt Disney-managed era, as a combination of Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora. Giselle perfectly fits the criteria of a traditional princess, possessing all the desired qualities that were valued when the first three princesses were created. Giselle has a very idealized, fantastical view of love, and, typical of a classic princess, she is helpless in dangerous and unknown situations, requiring rescuing by both Prince Edward and Robert within the first twenty minutes of the film. Meanwhile, Prince Edward is predictably romantic and heroic, as he fearlessly races through NYC and conquers a variety of obstacles to save his beloved.

Of course, Disney's ideology is present through more than just the characters' personality traits. The comments made by Giselle and Prince Edward throughout the film are focused on true love's kiss, but this concept relies upon the belief in the existence of true love. They, like their Disney brethren, believe that there is someone in existence who is destined specifically for them who they will magically find, marry, and thereby achieve happily ever after. Giselle wholly believes that her person is out there somewhere and that they will someday be united, referring to him as "My one true love, my prince, my dream come true" (*Enchanted*, 00:01:55). She sings about her dream of experiencing true love's kiss and how she hopes that the kiss will be delivered by a prince. Luckily for Giselle, minutes later Prince Edward rescues her and exclaims "We shall be married in the morning!" (00:07:04). This indicates that the full extent of the fairytale dream is to be married to one's True Love, who is preferably someone of status. In the fantasy world of Andalasia, this is the dream, the great motivator, the way the world works.

Their deep-seated belief in True Love is what carries Giselle and Prince Edward through their trials in reality. They find comfort and strength in what they believe to be a universal truth: True Love will always save the day and result in a happy ending. The phrase "happily ever after" is not just about the hope (and inherent promise) of spending forever with one's True Love but is also about the

assurance that by the end of the story, love will conquer all and the heroes will be perpetually happy. Giselle carries the fantastical expectations of the fairytale world into reality, so she has complete faith that Edward is on his way to rescue her and that he will be successful.

## Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is a theory that explains the discomfort people experience when trying to reconcile conflicting information or values (Festinger 1957). When someone is presented with information that contradicts a particular belief, they experience dissonance as the two views clash. According to the theory's founder, the motivation behind cognitive dissonance is that humans desire and rely upon internal consistency, which is threatened when presented with contradictory information (Festinger 1962). To resolve or lessen the uncomfortable feeling, an individual must find ways to explain away the new information, find new points of support for the original belief, or rationalize the presence of both pieces of information (Festinger).

In the setting of *Enchanted*, cognitive dissonance arises when a character that the viewer enjoys and relates to, such as Giselle, does something or is presented in a way that conflicts with the viewer's beliefs. In the case of Giselle, because she represents all the other Disney princesses, the dissonance calls into question Giselle's actions as well as all of the associated princesses and their actions. For viewers who strongly relate to these characters, grew up watching them, or want to be like them, this dissonance can be incredibly disorienting. Through these instances, the viewer is forced to consider whether they still support certain characters, behaviors, and belief systems, as well as the implications of what they choose to support.

Typically, this mental distress is not recognized, but it is still a serious internal problem that must be dealt with in some way. The viewer may try to explain away this dissonance by reasoning that "it's just a movie, don't take it seriously" or "this was written a long time ago, so, of course, it's not PC" (Muller-Hartmann; Sun and Scharrer). The cognitive dissonance that is so strongly established throughout *Enchanted* is also very effectively cleared up through the story's resolution, making it the perfect film to study when uncovering the ideological messages

behind Disney's animation. In addition to the hybrid style of *Enchanted* making it easier for viewers to compare the beliefs within animation and reality, this is also efficient because of the prolific use of Disney archetypes and gags. When Giselle, Prince Edward, the forest creatures, the musical numbers, the rescue sequences, or any other fairytale plot devices are used, their critique can easily be applied to other stories that employ those elements. Therefore, the analysis of *Enchanted* is a gateway critique of all the other Disney princesses and their films.

Animation can be used to dampen the effects of cognitive dissonance, but in *Enchanted* viewers are not given this opportunity. By stripping away the animation, the contradictory frameworks of Disney and the audience members are revealed. The recontextualization of the Disney ideology through the lens of reality provides viewers with some distance from the mechanisms of the fantasy world, granting them perspective with which they can begin to consider how what they have been casually consuming and promoting may or may not align with what they actually believe.

### The Giselle Conundrum

As a fairytale princess character, Giselle's appearance and behaviors are predictably princess-esque. One of the first things she does in NYC is handcraft outfits with ribbons and silhouettes that more closely resemble a costume or adult-sized children's clothing. In Andalasia, Giselle's style ranges somewhere between commonplace and trendsetting, yet in reality her outfits are received differently. She certainly catches the attention of many, but the stares are out of confusion or mockery, rather than appreciation or envy. Of course, this reception is caused by more than Giselle's otherworldly attire. What really attracts attention is how strangely Giselle moves and speaks compared to the women of reality. While no longer in her 2D fairytale world, Giselle's gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflection remain in the over-the-top style of an animated princess. She sighs with her entire body, twirls about the room, and speaks in the style of someone play-acting as a princess. Many of her motions seem choreographed as she moves in a gentle and expressive way, making large gestures with her arms and holding her fingers just so. While readily accepted and celebrated when

animated, these behaviors are received differently when the person performing them looks like a real woman rather than an animated figure.

Giselle's qualities are exactly the same in the animated world and in reality, yet they have a very different effect on the audience. When animated, Giselle has the appearance and personality of a classic, well-known character that is never second-guessed. Once in reality, Giselle begins to feel more like a regular woman who is acting as a stereotypical princess, rather than the genuine article. Within this new context, the viewer is presented with questions: Do the fairytale princess qualities make sense in real life? Are these qualities actually attractive? If I were to see a woman looking or behaving like Giselle, what would I think?

This line of questioning aligns with a broader phenomenon that occurs when watching film or television, as audience members have a subconscious need to identify with the characters, especially the protagonist (Zeglin). Mulvey explains that the viewer "demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (46). Meaning, to truly enjoy or connect with the content that is consumed, audiences need to see something within the main character(s) that they relate to. This is the relationship that Disney has been profiting from for decades, as the studio leaders realized early on that the more effective their animation is at communicating emotion, personality, and motivation, the more the characters and film resonate with the viewer (Wood). Despite her otherworldly beauty and charm, the Disney Princess is intended for audiences to aspire to and feel a sort of kinship with because they share the burden of being misunderstood, mistreated, or brushed aside (Whelan; Potgieter and Potgieter).

Furthermore, Gershon posits that animated characters are designed as "conventionalized markers" without much ascribed detail or backstory so that viewers can "project an affective connection and various social complexities onto the character," and effectively become a co-creator (2). This statement rings especially true for the Disney princesses whose identities are influenced by the creation of the other characters in the franchise and continuously developed by viewers' relationships with the franchise (Potgieter and Potgieter). Due to this intertextual entanglement, Giselle is a character who is defined by much more than the story presented on the screen. As an ideological representative, Giselle's character is established by the viewer's knowledge of and experiences with the

other Disney princesses as well as the fairytale genre, so the more of this intertextual knowledge a viewer has the more they will enjoy *Enchanted*. Most importantly, because Giselle is a representative of the Disney princesses, the viewer's perceptions of Giselle have an amplifying impact on how they view the franchise moving forward. The deep connection that viewers have developed with the Disney Princess figures causes significant cognitive dissonance when Giselle enters reality because the character that the viewer has established in their mind is subverted by the changing world around her.

The audience's perception of Giselle can be further contextualized through Hall's reception theory which uses a viewer's interpretation of a given work to categorize them into the dominant, oppositional, or negotiated audience. Generally speaking, dominant audience members accept the work, oppositional members reject the work, and the negotiated audience both accepts and rejects it (Hall). Those who watch *Enchanted* naturally fall into one of these categories based on a variety of factors, primarily their relationship with Disney and the Disney Princess franchise and their perceptions of the film's genre and general production. When it comes to Disney princesses, the issues that tend to place viewers in the categories of oppositional or negotiated audience are related to race, gender studies, and body representation. Since viewer-character alignment is closely linked to an audience's enjoyment of a film, their perception of a story's protagonist plays an exceptional role in determining which reception category they become party to. Due to the intertextual nature of *Enchanted*, especially in Giselle's case, the application of reception theory bears significance to the larger context of the film and the characters in the franchise. In fact, the characters' responses to Giselle within the film are, first, representative of the multifaceted opinions of the viewers, and second, reflective of public sentiment surrounding the Disney princesses as a whole. While all three audiences are portrayed in *Enchanted*, the group that is most salient to this analysis is the negotiated audience.

Many Disney Princess viewers fall into the negotiated audience, including this very analysis, and even *Enchanted* is part of this audience, as evidenced by its self-deprecation (Pratiwi and Primasita). Negotiated audience members are often fans, but they also have concerns and opposing views about what they are consuming. Those in this category tend to experience the greatest cognitive

dissonance as they struggle to reconcile their joy and criticism. With Giselle, there is entertainment and even admiration found in her exuberance, kindness, and faith but objections to her thoughts on True Love and her dependence on Edward and Robert. Many characters in *Enchanted* fall into this reception category as they want to see the world as Giselle does but their desires are hampered by their knowledge of reality. While many of these conflicting sentiments are impossible to reconcile, those in the negotiated audience are committed to the juggling act because of the joy that the characters and stories bring them.

This complex relationship between the viewer and the characters is part of what makes *Enchanted* so interesting because the viewer-character peace is continually challenged. Giselle in her real-world form complicates this long-established relationship as older viewers are given a character who begins to appear more helpless and silly, rather than humble and romantically tragic. Parents are presented with questions like: Is this really the sort of character that they want their children to be mimicking? Is this the sort of character that they have spent their lives idolizing? As this viewer-character phenomenon relates to cognitive dissonance, Zeglin explains: "consonance [peace] can only be achieved if the viewer is willing to accept the character as an iteration of his own self" (52). For the fans of Giselle, this means that to find peace with themselves, with Giselle, and with *Enchanted* as a whole, they must come to relate to Giselle as she appears in reality. Unfortunately for the viewer, this is not an easy accomplishment, as Giselle creates much more discomfort before she generates peace.

### Happy Working Song

Some form of a work or cleaning scene is a staple in Disney Princess films, and *Enchanted* is no exception. "Happy Working Song" stands out for a variety of reasons, particularly the catchy tune and allusions to iconic Disney Princess cleaning songs. Viewers who have seen other films in the franchise will find this scene in *Enchanted* to feel incredibly familiar. Most notable are the resemblances between "Happy Working Song" and *Snow White's* "Whistle While You Work." Once again, *Enchanted* provides the viewer with an opportunity to look at staples of the genre in a different light once the animation has been stripped away. In the



typical Disney Princess films, house chores are generally presented – through the songs, animation, and attitudes of the characters – as fun, fulfilling, entrancing, and easily achievable tasks, but when placed in the realistic context of *Enchanted*, these activities become upsetting.

In *Snow White*, the princess is assisted by cute forest creatures who eagerly take on the household chores. This scene is fun and pleasing to watch despite the animals' unsanitary cleaning methods, such as deer licking plates and using their tails to dust the furniture. Similarly, in *Enchanted*, Giselle calls upon the animals of NYC to help her clean Robert's apartment in a scene that is equal parts funny and absolutely disgusting. While the cleanup and assistance from the animals in *Snow White* and *Cinderella* are charming and oddly effective, the animals Giselle summons are rodents and bugs from around the city that end up making things cleaner only in the loosest of terms. In contrast to her cheery attitude and dancing, Giselle sings of cleaning up toilets and mildew as the animals eat through the grime on the bathtub and dishes.

This positive attitude becomes much stranger and more impressive in this scene because the viewer can see the realism of the filth that Giselle is combating. In *Cinderella*, the soon-to-be princess sings a beautiful song while gracefully scrubbing the floor. This scene evolves into a dream-like sequence, and, despite the exhausting task, the viewer does not pay much attention to the work being done because of the beautiful music and visually pleasing animation. With *Enchanted*, this disassociation is not possible for the viewer because the cleaning process is in no way visually pleasing. The reality and grossness of the situation make Giselle's excitement seem inappropriate, even though this perky attitude is barely an afterthought when watching *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. With the animation and cute, anthropomorphic animals out of the way, "Happy Working Song" reveals the underlying horror of the iconic cleaning scenes.

Viewers experience stronger dissonance in this scene because it is so reminiscent of the well-loved songs the early princesses sing, but is set in reality, and is therefore horrifying, as the viewer imagines a horde of rats crawling into their kitchen and using their tails to clean their microwave. Potgieter and Potgieter sum up the overall effect of this scene well, stating "Giselle's 'Happy Working Song' is offset against the realities of decidedly unpleasant domestic tasks and the vermin that come to assist her in it – she still dressed in her voluminous wedding

dress since the previous day – so that its relentless cheerfulness takes on an element of the ridiculous” (66). It is at this point in the film, when placed in the context of reality, that the fairytale approach to the world begins to look truly foolish.

### Prince Edward: Romantic Language and Heroism

As the stereotypical fairytale prince, Edward seems as if he should be a capable and dependable character, yet, in reality, he behaves more ignorant and childlike than heroic. When Edward arrives in NYC, he leaps onto a bus and stabs his sword through the roof, nearly striking a woman seated inside but believing that he has saved the passengers from a beast. Giselle’s chipmunk friend tries to mime directions to the prince, but he frequently misinterprets the message as something ridiculous and unwittingly passes by Giselle several times. Many more such mishaps occur, and Edward's tenacity is commendable – endearing him to the audience – but the prince is also frustrating to watch because he has no sense of how the world works and makes few attempts to learn, unlike Giselle. Beyond how he responds to obstacles encountered in reality, Prince Edward also creates dissonance for the viewer through his romantic vocabulary. The prince is first introduced in Andalasia as he captures a troll and expresses discontent with his conquest because his heart “longs to be joined in song” (*Enchanted*, 00:04:40). Once he hears Giselle singing from afar, he exclaims “Oh! I must find the maiden that belongs to that sweet voice,” before riding off to rescue her (00:04:57). His expressive vocabulary is appropriate and attractive in the fairytale world of Andalasia, but Edward carries this language into reality, frequently referring to Giselle as his “heart’s duet,” “heart’s true desire,” and “one coquette.” He also introduces her to Robert and Nancy as “the love of my life, my heart’s true desire” which Nancy finds surprisingly romantic and charming (01:19:42).

As a character from a fairytale world, especially a prince, Edward’s vocabulary and behavior are not surprising, and rather are expected, as a quantitative analysis of twelve Disney Princess films revealed that the male characters are almost always the characters that pursue the romantic relationship (Hefner et al.). The same study found that in the films of the classic Disney era, three-fourths of romantic statements are idealized and that these statements present romantic partners and love as perfect, powerful, or destined (Hefner et

al.). Unfortunately for Prince Edward, his perfect love – and his need to declare it to anyone who will listen – does not translate well into reality. When used in other princess films, declarations of love are viewed as endearing, exciting, and perhaps even desirable by the viewer, but when proclaimed in reality, Edward's words tend to have a more unsettling effect. Suddenly “my heart's true desire” feels cheesy and awkward (*Enchanted*, 01:19:44). While the prince's behavior may initially be amusing, his declarations quickly begin to feel surface-level and uncomfortable to watch, ultimately subverting a cornerstone stereotype.

The cognitive dissonance the viewer experiences from watching Prince Edward is greater than feeling a little uncomfortable because his presence in reality threatens a deeply entrenched archetype. This archetype has many labels – hero, male-rescuer, princely image, redeemer – but these figures are all centered around the same qualities, behaviors, and purposes or dreams (Rodríguez). The prince characters in the Disney Princess films, and the greater fairytale genre, are designed to be heroic, passionate, and to prevail against all odds. This archetype has been established for centuries as the perfect man, just as the princess figure has been idealized. Audiences have been taught to trust the prince and his decisions implicitly and to find comfort in his dashing good looks, physical prowess, and fearlessness. Even by fairytale standards, Disney's princes are especially perfect, as they are youthful, valiant heroes of good breeding who demonstrate unyielding faithfulness to their princesses, as well as a general brightness of spirit and commitment to family and society (Rodríguez).

Prince Edward exhibits all these characteristics, yet the prince figure is received differently in the new context. Essentially, Prince Edward's perfection becomes an insurmountable flaw because he is now in a world where quintessential heroes are not viewed as such. Drawing from McCorkle's story “Sleeping Beauty, Revised,” Rodríguez aptly explains that the male-rescuer archetype is not nearly as appealing in reality as it is in fairytales, stating, “[The protagonist] discovered the insubstantiality of [the prince] ... [and] feels utterly repelled by it ... [because] he is but a trivial image torn out of an illustrated fairy-tale book ... she is not blinded by the outwardly appearance of the traditional male rescuer, but is ... getting a glimpse into the vacuity of this kind of redeemer whose existence can only be materialized on a piece of paper (63). Now that the “insubstantial” Edward is flesh and blood instead of a 2D animated figure, he becomes peer-like to the viewer due to the similarities of form, which emphasizes how different his character is from the standards of reality.

Unfortunately for the prince, archetypes are rooted in myths – the power and meaning of which lie in humans’ ability to recognize themselves within the characters (Dürrenmatt; Novak). Like Giselle, Prince Edward is supposed to be a character that viewers can see parts of themselves in, but when he behaves in such an over-the-top and clueless manner, the audience becomes uninterested, and even embarrassed, at the thought of being similar to the prince. The prince’s power over the viewer is threatened by this new lack of appeal, but his archetype loses all significance in reality because the rules, threats, and objectives of the world are so different. In a contemporary society of rationalism, individualism, and bureaucracy there is no time for believing in fantastical heroes (Novak; Steiner). There are no beasts to slay or maidens to catch, and there is no kingdom to run. Prince Edward has no credibility, commands no respect, and is viewed as a joke or a crazy, dangerous person. His heroic contributions are decidedly ineffective and laughable. In sum, the prince is no longer an awe-inspiring hero, but an odd, pitiable figure of amusement and frustration – certainly not the sort of hero that the viewer expects will rescue Giselle when the time comes, or the hero who will live happily ever after with her. As a result, viewers are left with ever-increasing dissonance with the prince archetype and its promises as the foundational figure is repeatedly made a mockery of.

### The Cruel Reality of Fairytale Love

Cruel optimism, as coined by Berlant, is the phenomenon of attachment to the potential of something that is “*impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic*” (24, emphasis in original). These attachments are considered cruel because they are deeper than a casual interest or preoccupation; the cruelty lies in how the fantasy is intertwined with identity so that the object of attachment is linked to “the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 24). Disney’s brand of love has already been placed within the context of Berlant’s cruel optimism as something that holds girls and women under the spell of a perfect, destined, magical love that leaves them vulnerable to the agenda of the patriarchy (Garlen and Sandlin). Disney’s cruel spell – described by Garlen and Sandlin as something that “not only fostered a profound and pervasive love of Disney but also an equally profound love for love itself” (967) – has become integrated into audiences’ identities and collective

“social memories” through “bounded sets of symbolizations (texts, images, songs, monuments, and rituals) and associated emotions” (Simon et al. 3).

In *Enchanted*, the cruel optimism of Disney’s romantic rhetoric operates as a force that keeps viewers invested in a fairytale mindset of fantastical romantic standards, despite knowing that True Love does not exist in reality and, more importantly, seeing that fairytale love and romantic figures are not as appealing as advertised. Outside of the animated world, the true nature of Disney love that is tucked away within the animated princess films becomes inescapable. This new lens forces Giselle and the viewer to confront the realities of fairytale love as Giselle is introduced to the painful reality that exists outside of her animated world. As Giselle and the audience are forced to face their insensible fairytale notions, cognitive dissonance takes over, resulting in dissatisfaction with what, by all fairytale standards, should be happily ever after.

While Prince Edward’s behavior generates dissatisfaction within the viewer because he does not live up to his heroic reputation, the prince simultaneously becomes unappealing to Giselle because he is *too* stereotypically princely. When Prince Edward rescues her at their first meeting in Andalasia, Giselle is starry-eyed and instantly in love. She carries her devotion into reality, but it wanes as she grows closer to Robert, despite his pessimism and marked distaste for virtually everything that she holds dear. The emotional disconnect between Giselle and Prince Edward is uncomfortably palpable once they are finally reunited. Back in Andalasia, the pair sang a duet about being the other’s long-awaited True Love and when Edward locates Giselle in NYC he sings his half of the duet once more, but Giselle does not reply and only looks at him in confusion. At this moment it becomes painfully clear that the “perfect” prince charming character is not actually the epitome of male partners. Rather, he is simply a fun and intriguing, yet fleeting, concept – not the type of man that a typical modern woman wants to emotionally invest in or incorporate into her life.

The implications of this distinction between Prince Edward and Robert come to a head at a themed ball near the end of the film. A romantic, life-changing ball is a quintessential fairytale device, and in many ways, this holds true in *Enchanted*. The film brings the animated fairytale staple of a dreamy dance with one’s True Love – complete with sweeping music, flawless footwork, and beautiful attire – to life, making it feel very real and attainable for the viewer. As audience members live vicariously through their dance, the ball becomes more than a fantasy, and magic is re-instilled into the idea of a real-life ball. Where

*Enchanted* begins to deviate from the typical fairytale ball is during Giselle and Robert's intimate dance (in which the rest of the world literally disappears) when Edward cuts in to take Giselle back to Andalasia, ruining the perfection of the moment. The remaining magic of the evening is completely destroyed when Giselle looks back and sees Robert finishing the dance with Nancy and kissing her. At this point, the sanctity of the classic fairytale ball is compromised, as Giselle says goodbye to the man that she loves, sees that he loves someone else, and her faith in fairytale love is finally broken. It is at this moment that Giselle experiences the devastating effect of love and finally understands the cynical, self-protective romantic tendencies of the people in reality.

Giselle's distress is acutely felt by the viewer, since they were just as swept up in the magic of the evening, making the conclusion of this scene even harder to watch. The figurative ambush of this scene gives the viewer emotional whiplash and breeds a bitter sentiment because the magic of the fairytale ball is sacrosanct. In *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, the dances are special moments in which the heroines' mundane and taxing lives briefly fade away so that the characters and the audience can have a blissful moment of refuge, but in *Enchanted*, this refuge is disrupted by none other than the prince himself! This is a shock to the system that, combined with the agony of seeing her True Love with someone else, proves to be more than Giselle can bear – driving her to accept a poisoned apple so that she can escape her miserable reality.

## Resolution

The resolution of cognitive dissonance within *Enchanted* is representative of a larger movement in the world of Disney and fairytales. This resolution begins right after Giselle is poisoned as Prince Edward finally proves himself to be a true hero. Once he is informed of the evil queen's plot he springs into action and confronts her before rushing to Giselle's side to administer true love's kiss. When kissing Giselle does nothing to revive her, he quickly realizes that he must not be her True Love and encourages Robert to kiss her instead. By doing so, the prince honorably saves Giselle from death and unites her with her True Love. Of course, the successful administration of true love's kiss confirms True Love as something magical that can exist in reality, which allows the viewer to hold out hope for finding their own happily ever after.

If the emotional relief from these events is not enough, all remaining dissonance caused by Giselle is resolved as she stands up against the evil queen-turned-dragon and rescues Robert from her clutches. Giselle's time in reality tempered her otherworldly nature by exposing her to new ideas and darker emotions, resulting in newfound self-sufficiency and bravery. While this aspect of her development has been observable, the final confrontation is the first evidence of Giselle's evolution from helpless maiden to bold hero. By Disney's habits, it is feasible that a different writer could have made Giselle the type of hero with immediate acumen and magic for support, which is part of why Giselle's impromptu, unskilled efforts are striking. In fact, Pratiwi and Primasita's analysis of *Mulan* (2020) through the lens of Hall's reception theory indicates that Disney audiences prefer conflict resolution and female character empowerment to be based on earned skills, character development, independence, and bravery rather than reliance on magic or immediate aptitude. Audiences do not want infinitely skilled heroes because those characters are less relatable, making their achievements less fulfilling. Instead, viewers are eager for characters with average skills, intelligence, and resources who can overcome great odds because they symbolize the potential for anyone to be a hero (Pratiwi and Primasita). As Giselle clammers along a skyscraper in the pouring rain – determined to slay a dragon with a sword she has never wielded – she proves that being a hero has nothing to do with skill or magic and everything to do with the heart. Finally, the viewer is watching a heroine they can truly admire.

This resolution of the plot acts as a resolution of the cognitive dissonance that plagued the viewer throughout the entire film. What makes this conclusion so satisfying and significant is that it demonstrates the potential coexistence of reality and fairytales, which justifies the viewers' love of the Disney ideology. Sure, reality exposes Disney's fantasy-inducing rhetoric, but this context also creates an opportunity for the fairytale concepts to be reinforced, in conjunction with the values of the modern world. Initially, the mockery of the fairytale mentality is subconsciously interpreted as a threat, but what is actually happening is more complex. What is perceived as an attack is, in a roundabout way, a means of bolstering what is under scrutiny. This process of subversion and dissonance is not an effort to demonize the Disney ideology. Rather the aim is to strip away the animated lens so the ideological framework can be assessed in its most relatable form. In the case of *Enchanted*, this process undoubtedly strengthens the viewer's original belief in Disney's ideology while also confirming the need for some

modern adjustments. As a result, cognitive dissonance is finally resolved, and the viewer is able to confidently support the classic Disney ideology without compromising their modern sensibilities.

While cognitive dissonance is unsettling, it can create a truly revelatory experience for viewers, making it something that future films will be wise not to shy away from. For proof of the market for such multi-faceted, subconsciously challenging content, one need look no further than *Enchanted*. With its fun, self-deprecating style, *Enchanted* is a uniquely enjoyable film. Its bold mockery has established a special place in the hearts of Disney Princess fans and a key position in Disney's evolution into the modern era. Furthermore, through its clever use of subversion and dissonance, *Enchanted* has illustrated that there is not necessarily something wrong with happily consuming a dated or personally incongruous ideology when the viewer is also given the opportunity to consider how their beliefs align or conflict with what they are watching. These experiences enable viewers to hold firm to their personal values while enjoying stories that contradict those values. This balance that *Enchanted* strikes is what needs to become commonplace in storytelling, especially for Disney and other companies that are producing content rooted in dated or "traditional" belief systems, such as fairytales, for modern audiences.

While an argument has been made to assert the potentially deceptive nature of animation, the medium also has the ability to be an invaluable tool. When it comes to developing animated content, the power of the medium lies in its heightened capacity for nuanced messaging and analysis of challenging frameworks. The artificial context creates a separation from reality, which allows animated content to employ elements of both the real and invented worlds (e.g., objects, cultural issues, social structures), resulting in more complex and thought-provoking viewing experiences. Animation is the perfect setting for scrutinizing typically overlooked rhetoric, adapting familiar frameworks, and encountering new ideological interpretations because the animated format softens the dissonance, making it bearable. For the Disney Princess franchise, the contemporary era was galvanized through *Enchanted's* implementation of the subversion-dissonance-evolution process. This franchise-wide ideological exploration began in *Enchanted* by simply removing the animated style, with the residual fairytale tone and artifacts of the animated world working to ease the viewer through the dissonance. Disney's flawless execution of such an earnest parody established *Enchanted* in the Disney Princess zeitgeist and reaffirmed the



need for fairytales within the modern era of storytelling. Future productions that can similarly utilize animation to criticize and celebrate their ideological roots are likely to find themselves in a comparable position of popularity, power, and cultural significance.

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# *Kenobi*: Star Wars Fan Films and How Embodiment Influences Fan Perspectives on Canon

DAVIT HOVAKIMIAN

Fans of media franchises like Star Wars or Doctor Who actively participate in shaping the views of other fans through fan creations like fan films. Star Wars fans have created fan films, depicting events seen in movies like *A New Hope* or creating new characters and plots to show previously unexplored parts of the universe. One of the earliest examples is *Hardware Wars*, a 1978 parody fan film of *A New Hope*, that reimagined famous scenes of the film with low-budget props (Crow). However, as fan creations, fan films automatically become non-canon material because Disney, which owns Lucasfilm and the Star Wars IP, does not commission fan films and therefore a barrier is raised between fan creations and official creations. Official creations, as I define them, have official backing and authorization from Disney, giving them copyright protections and the assumption that the presented material is canon. This barrier is not unwarranted as fan films typically introduce elements that contradict canon and inviting two separate interpretations into the cultural discourse of Star Wars fandom would likely convolute how fans view characters and events. Still, discovering the merits of fans watching fan films and then reshaping their interpretation of canon, even though fan films are non-canonical, is interesting. One of these merits includes a new way for Disney and Lucasfilm to engage with and learn from their fans as fan films centralize discussions on platforms like YouTube in a free and open manner.

Canon represents the true narrative of a fictional universe that fans or official creators believe is authentic (Booth 27). Booth's definition provides a general overview of what canon is, but I will frame my arguments around a more specific definition of canon from Ahuvia Kahane. In Star Wars, canon material includes the nine "Skywalker Saga" films (e.g. *Revenge of the Sith* and *Return of the Jedi*), TV shows (e.g. *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*), numerous books and comics, along

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with other sources such as video games. Each piece of canon material mentioned above is an official creation because Lucasfilm, under Disney (since 2012) or beforehand when it was independent and owned by George Lucas, created the material and marketed it through official channels. From this point on, “official creators” will be a way I refer to individuals at Disney and Lucasfilm. Lucasfilm also helped to curate and build a database called the Jedi Holocron, detailing numerous events and characters across all Star Wars media to help its creators manage an extensive amount of information (Canavan 279).

Gerry Canavan, in “Fandom Edits *Rogue One* and the New Star Wars,” argues that the Star Wars anthology film, *Rogue One*, shows Disney engaging in a paradoxical relationship with its own content. Disney’s handling of Star Wars canon, in contrast to Lucas’ vision, displays that different creators now have the power to shape the creative license of the franchise (Canavan 280-1). This fractured structure results in *Rogue One* simultaneously adhering to canon, drawing its plot from *A New Hope* and featuring famous characters, but also deviating from it, featuring new characters and events that are not mentioned in the following film, *A New Hope*, and making fans wonder why the movie’s events are forgotten, conveying a lack of narrative unity (Canavan 282-3). Canavan notes that *Rogue One*’s paratext material (interviews, fans discovering what was cut from trailers, etc.) leads both creators and fans to speculate about the state of *Rogue One*, obscuring who made the film the way it was because, in the past, George Lucas, would be the usual answer (284). This case already reveals some issues when creating canon Star Wars content and how multiple creators now influence Star Wars canon. Fans participate in these discussions, and official creators trying to make appealing content to fans loosens the barrier between creators and fans but not entirely. Other creators shaped Star Wars when Lucas owned the franchise, but the emphasized focus on Lucas typically minimized their presence in the wider fandom. Either way, the creators of *Rogue One* left their mark on canon material that used to be considered part of Lucas’ vision, but fans, in contrast, cannot leave any similar type of mark with any authority or legitimacy. This does not mean that fan films should be considered (or made) canonical, but these fan films offer divergences from canon that broaden what the limited number of official creators can muster relative to millions of fans. These millions of fans do not create millions of fan films, so even with this discrepancy the number of fan films compared to canon films is much closer than it would first appear.

With this context in mind, the applicable nature of fan films like *Kenobi* comes from their ability to give official creators direct access to (online) fan perspectives. The division between fans and official creators, or the hierarchy of canon, favors IP owners and reinforces the barrier that makes canon material more legitimate than fan material. Regardless of this legitimacy, treating fan discourse as a viable method for explaining how canon material can adapt to fan interpretations of characters like Kenobi would signal the importance of fan discussions. Not in the sense that fan material would alter or become canon, but it would generate reasons for official creators to value these conversations in how they reshape one's understanding of a particular character or plotline.

Even though fan films may lack official backing (legitimacy) and resources, that does not mean that they cannot provide a similar number of ideas to official creators. Star Wars fan film creators will generally include statements that their film is not associated with Disney or Lucasfilm to prevent copyright infringement issues. For example, the fan film I am analyzing in this paper, *Kenobi*, mentions in its YouTube description that it "is a fan film with no official affiliation to Lucasfilm/Disney" (Costa). The non-canon nature of fan films places them under canon material and canon interpretations prevail over non-canon ones. However, the conversations found in YouTube comment sections indicate that fans discuss different canon implications that fan films present. Even if the creators of fan films do not intend to spark these arguments, they nonetheless occur and show that non-canon material provides a similar level of discussion that canon material does. These fan films, such as *Kenobi*, offer new interpretations of Star Wars that form a fan-influenced canon that will exist until canon covers the same area and determines how the story unfolds.

Obi-Wan Kenobi is a notable character within Star Wars, first featured in 1977's *A New Hope*, acting as Luke Skywalker's mentor. I chose this fan film because Kenobi's long history has allowed many (official) interpretations of the character and seeing how fans compare a fan's rendition of Kenobi's canonical characterization and even judging the creator's execution on its own merits brings many avenues of discussion. My analysis of *Kenobi* only covers one version of the character during one instance of Kenobi's existence. Another fan film about Kenobi would depict him differently and comments responding to the film would similarly be different.

Concerning my methodology to explore these concepts, I collected hundreds of comments from *Kenobi*. Recording different types of comments helped me see

what commenters focused on. I found that comments revolved around general praise, embodiment, canon, authenticity, and comparisons between the fan film and the canon *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022) TV show. Discovering what commenters found important helped guide my research toward analyzing viewers' perceptions of the fan material and comparisons to canon. Factoring in a hierarchy of canon will also challenge how fans use these comparisons to choose which interpretation they prefer, even though most recognize that their interpretations will remain non-canonical. Some aspects of Kenobi's canonical story and character, specifically that he oversees Luke Skywalker on the planet Tatooine and protects him from the Empire, are well established and cannot be (easily) changed. Ultimately, these decisions do not change Star Wars canon as fans do not possess any authority over what is or is not canon, but recognizing that fan films create an environment where official creators can learn from different fan perspectives on characters like Obi-Wan Kenobi and the nature of lightsabers improves the relationship between the two groups.

### Canonicity of Fan Films

One of the major aspects this paper will analyze regarding comments on Star Wars fan films is canon and how fans determine how closely a fan film adheres to or diverges from canon. Ahuvia Kahane's "Fan Fiction, Early Greece, and the Historicity of Canon" analyzes fandoms and how they interact with canon in the digital age. Kahane describes canon as "not as any particular fact, storyline, or set of characters nor as an object, but, more flexibly, as the text's (sometimes self-chosen) containment practice that is invoked by the perception of superabundant potential...." Fan fiction, in turn, becomes a sign of a structured system where fans create material, known as fanon, which works around the boundaries of canon or sometimes in line with canon (Kahane). The superabundant potential of canon, consisting of all the material fans can create (especially in the digital age), is therefore restricted because separating canon and fanon allows creators and fans to separate their work and discuss it with a common frame of reference (Kahane). Comparing the treatment of canon in Ancient Greece, specifically the *Iliad* and an inscription on Nestor's Cup that tells a non-canon story about Nestor, a Greek hero featured in the original text, and the modern digital age, where fans can make thousands of non-canon creations on the internet, shows a connection between thousands of years of history. Kahane notes

that this connection displays that, no matter the difference in technology or historical context, canon acts as a restrictor but does not silence or erase fan material.

Using Kahane's definition of canon, this abundant potential that causes self-containment is seen through fan films. Creators and fans can produce their own interpretations in a multitude of ways, driving the need to set one canonical version (in this case, by Disney, the current owner of Star Wars IP) that is separated from everything else or the abundant potential. Stringent copyright enforcement could be one way to deter fans from viewing fan films as canonical. Forming two different worlds between fans and official creators may result in varying canon; however, developing a mutually beneficial relationship between the two groups is possible and would avoid the disintegration of canon.

Star Wars fans, who outnumber the number of official creators, will be able to produce more material outright, but they do not hold a collective power because each fan has their own understanding. There is no system in place where Star Wars fans can pick and choose which fan films may be canonized or not. Such a system would lead fans into the same position as Disney and Lucasfilm, who impose canon limitations as described by Kahane, leading to disagreements over which fan films occupy a space in their canon. Making more material would likely cause a fractured fandom as fans would select different fan interpretations to represent what they believe in, and no unanimous choice would present itself. Consequently, canon is maintained because a divided fandom cannot easily proclaim fan material as canon.

Similar to the existence of Nestor's Cup and its relation to its canonical story, fan film creators post on sites like YouTube, entering them into the digital record and allowing their version to exist simultaneously with Star Wars canon. The ideas displayed in fan films may derive from canon, and the comments I discuss reveal that fans' expectations of the film itself can also derive from canon. Fans influencing each other might intrigue official creators to understand why fan creations cause certain conversations that their own creations might not. Fans who compare Star Wars movies to fan films invite discussions about the perceived quality between them and official creators could learn why fans think as they do. Analyzing these comparisons puts adherence to and divergence from canon into focus.

The first type of comparison commenters discussed was the quality of the fan film to official Star Wars productions. One commenter, Wajibu Wynn, stated that



they “thought this was a professional film. It looked way better than the Disney ones.” Noting the “professional” quality of the fan film shows one factor of how viewers judge the canonicity of fan films. With hundreds of millions of dollars spent on Star Wars movies like *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, audience expectations are primarily based on the financial investment Hollywood studios make when producing blockbusters. Fan films, on the other hand, do not enjoy the same luxuries when it comes to budgeting, so it would be unlikely to see the same quality of visual effects or costuming. This stark contrast plays into resourceful official productions that reestablish a canon hierarchy where fan films have fewer resources and overall viewers. Advancements in technology for personal use, like personal computers, have provided new tools for fans to interact with the media they like (Jenkins 146). Fan filmmakers can also share their films with more people on the internet, connecting fans through their similar interest in Star Wars (Jenkins 147). Jenkins’ explanation of the history and progression of Star Wars fan films can explain why Wajibu Wynn mentions the quality of *Kenobi*. Noticing these fan films introduce new elements and look visually impressive allows fans another way to experience “high-quality” Star Wars without the need for official creators. Official creators, however, could conclude that the creators of the fan film employed filmmaking techniques that appealed to some fans, and learning why would improve their understanding for the better.

Fan films and the stories told in them exist outside of canon, but the ultimate reason why they cannot be considered canonical is because of the fans making them. Wajibu Wynn does not mention canon or the canonicity of the fan film, but others made a connection. Talon says that *Kenobi* has great production values, and that “If you didn't know certain actors, you'd swear this Star Wars/*Kenobi* film depiction is actual canon.” Talon shares similar feelings as Wajibu Wynn as they praise the film’s quality, but also mention the canonicity of the creation through knowledge of the actors. Saying that the actor portraying Kenobi, Jamie Costa, can match Ewan McGregor’s performance of Kenobi and essentially trick someone who does not pay attention to who plays the character in canon, advances the idea that making higher quality fan films would allow official creators to more easily gather relevant information as fan films try to reflect movie productions with much less money.

Another way to consider fans assembling to discuss fan films may be through recreating the feeling of sitting together in a movie theater and watching a new Star Wars movie. Jenkins’ analysis of new technologies allowing fans more

opportunities to interact with media, putting fan films on YouTube, and gathering everyone to talk about them brings a sort of theatrical experience to fans' homes. Fans of musicians who go to concerts for a particular type of experience increasingly use their phones to record that experience and show it to those who are not there physically (Bennett 127). This premium experience exists for concertgoers, but for Star Wars fans who may want to have a similar occasion, which could involve going to a movie theater to watch a fan film with other fans, that does not exist. Putting together Star Wars fans into a shared, collective experience (digitally, physically, or both), fosters more productive fan discussion and does not undermine canon.

For some fans, the problem of canonization still exists, but fan films achieving a closer resemblance to canon productions allows fans to then argue about *Kenobi*'s story decisions and acting performances within the confines of canon. Even without considering canon, Wajibu Wynn believes in the fan film's quality and shows a way for fan films to reach equal footing with official creations. This belief seems to be that a fan film can and should emulate the standards of a professional film. High-quality fan films set the stage for more fans to deliver stories that remind fans of official Star Wars movies but with the knowledge that a fan conceived of the creation. Having that knowledge helps fans to discuss their opinions and makes their fanon an evolution of how they perceive canon.

The embodiment seen in the fan film more than makes up for any lack of Hollywood money in the eyes of the commenter. A comment regarding canon could be made here to say that if the commenter believes that the quality of the fan film is comparable to official and canonical Star Wars media, they might be suggesting that the fan film itself be seen as canonical. Fans creating media that is perceived as professional may start to conflict with official media, and Kahane's analysis of digital media allowing for abundant potential is certainly in play here.

Fan media can assert itself when there are gaps in the timeline of a fictional universe, and fans can theoretically insert whatever they desire. As mentioned in Kahane's article, Fanon is fan-produced media or ideas that are seen as canonical within a fandom because it adds to canon and does not contradict it. As a result, fan films like *Kenobi* provide an opportunity for fans to make their own stories. There are 19 in-universe years between the prequel and original trilogies of Star Wars, making it possible for both fans and official creators to place hundreds of different stories within that time. While fan stories are not canon, their existence helps to imagine how a potential canon story may navigate the story of *Kenobi*,

and the TV show, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, presented that canon reality. Another commenter, Pillars of Light, states that “these short films help expand the imagination, and for Canon.” Providing a window into the lives of characters, whether it is fan-made or official, offers more ways to think about canon and the stories that comprise it. It is difficult to say if the commenter is specifically referring to expanding canon in terms of believing that the fan film itself is canonical. Regardless, Pillars of Light’s comment gives way for Star Wars fanon to further reinvent itself through new fan creations.

Intertextuality and intra-textuality from Paul Booth’s *Digital Fandom 2.0: New Media Studies* explores how fan fiction can contribute to not only canonical texts but also to developing a fandom. As defined by Booth, intertextuality is a discussion between different texts and how they fit together, while intra-textuality is a discussion occurring within texts (11). Booth’s fourth characteristic of intra-textuality is meta-knowledge, which references the ways fans exhibit their understanding of both canonical texts and fan fiction pieces to inform their perspective through intertextuality and intra-textuality (70). Going back to Wajibu Wynn’s comment and the quality of fan films, this discourse shapes how some fans believe that they respect canon better than official creators. Citing Henry Jenkins, Booth further elaborates that fans conform to canon while also encouraging new interpretations of canon to legitimize what is created (qtd. in 71). Another comment, made by Travelling Storyteller, states that “this shows far more respect for Star Wars than Disney has yet to show. Amazing!” Compared to Wajibu Wynn’s comment, Travelling Storyteller more directly questions the legitimacy that Disney and Lucasfilm have if a fan film can surpass them. Showing respect to Star Wars can be interpreted as Star Wars canon that fans, within their own intra-textual discussions on YouTube, can seem to show more respect to because there is an intimate discussion occurring. Social media makes it easier for official creators to join online fan conversations, and, while tensions may arise, having a direct line to fanon should clarify some fan perspectives and construct a more productive dialogue.

Authorial ownership of canon during the age of social media and online interactions between fans and creators seems to muddle the line of canonicity. Cailean Alexander McBride’s, “The Fight for Creative Ownership in Franchise Fiction,” analyzes how creators have tried to manage the canon of fictional universes as fans have become involved in the creative process, establishing a creative hierarchy. McBride describes this hierarchy as motivating tensions

between fans and official creators because creators make canonical decisions when writing, and fans who disagree engage in online criticism to voice their opinions on what is made canon or not. Fan reaction to *Kenobi* points to what individuals hope is considered canon, indicating that fanon can influence canon through the collaboration of fans (e.g., discussing and liking comments) and the indirect involvement of official creators who would brainstorm ideas from these discussions. From the creator's perspective, taking in fan interpretation from fan films and their respective discourses can modify the franchise's storytelling in potentially unforeseen ways. The audiovisual format of fan films also allows them to more closely resemble the blockbuster productions they draw inspiration from, displaying an evolution in the production techniques of fan works. Authorial ownership, therefore, creates a hierarchy between creators and fans, but the existence of YouTube and the discursive gathering it provides to fans grants a potential solution to maintain canon while increasing fan involvement. The following comment highlights a prominent element of Star Wars, lightsabers, and acknowledging how fans comprehended *Kenobi*'s representation of lightsabers can help inform canon material.

LiquidSpiral comments on the topic of canon and shared creative spaces: "Someone explain to me how this isn't canon - the lightsaber scene was a work of art." LiquidSpiral's perception, after watching the fan film, is that it is unexplainable that *Kenobi* is not considered Star Wars canon. Considering McBride's analysis, a low-lying tension may be present here if there is an outcry for the fan film to be made canonical. Fans play an important role in shaping non-canonical interpretations in the digital age and question how their perspectives can be canonized. To remedy this divide, an official Star Wars creator can look and analyze what fans say, using LiquidSpiral's comment as an example, and understand how canon may implement what they proposed. The second part of the comment, regarding the lightsaber scene, reflects a way that some viewers want fan films to be legitimized through canon imitation. Creating a visually captivating lightsaber scene seems to prove the credibility of the fan film and its creators to LiquidSpiral. Lightsabers are one of the most recognizable symbols of Star Wars, so it is not surprising that a skillfully done lightsaber scene would be praised. In turn, this skillful showing increases the legitimacy of *Kenobi* being viewed as canon because it proves, at least in some fashion, that it can measure up to professional creations. LiquidSpiral's mention of canon and calling *Kenobi* a "work of art" points to a potential interpretation that fan films that reach

a certain level of (Hollywood) quality should be considered canonical. However, focusing on this interpretation ignores the immense difficulty in making a fan film canonical (if it were even possible), and instead discerning how and why fans reach their respective conclusions will provide much more useful information for the development of future canon.

## Embodiment and Portrayal

Understanding how Star Wars fans comprehend fan films through their knowledge of canon helps to also better understand why fans want authentic embodiments and portrayals of Star Wars characters even in non-canon material. Linking fan studies and performance studies is one way to do that. Before doing so, however, broadly defining performance will help establish why there is a connection. Richard Schechner defines performance as the ever-present actions and behaviors someone exhibits and performance arts as one type of performance where performers highlight their own actions for others to view (3-7). Some important concepts of Schechner's theory of performance include restored behavior, detailing how certain actions have and will persist because they exist as part of a culture, and people who live in a certain culture will know the meanings and usages of those behaviors more than those who do not (10). Star Wars fandom exists as one of these cultures and fans know how Star Wars is "performed." These expectations of performance fuel discussions centered around meeting or diverting from those expectations. Noting the differences between each performance helps observers realize the particular contexts and decisions of performers and what they show (Schechner 11-12). Avoiding generalizations in one actor's performance, especially in a fan film where an actor has to portray an established character, should limit false perceptions of their performance.

Performance grounds certain actions in cultures and, continuing from that, performance studies tries to discern how performances interact and shape the world around them (Schechner 26). My research of how fans react to *Kenobi* ties directly to performance studies. Each comment reflects a fan's performance as they share their opinion on the quality of the film, the acting, or compare it to canon material. These discussions display different viewpoints of Star Wars, and each perspective originates from the fan film itself showing a performance to

those who watch it. Having fan films provoke lengthy conversations about the nature of canon and performance offers a much greater view into the fandom.

Considering the reality that each fan has a unique perspective, Kahane's superabundant potential of canon and the multitude of fan creations that can exist make fan performance harder to predict. When fans only have one canonical version to interpret, they can discuss that particular version, and, in the case of *Kenobi*, the fan film presents its version of the character. An "authentic" embodiment then may derive from canon, establishing that fans revolve their perspectives around canon and attempt to judge Costa's performance through their own fanon.

To potentially solve this problem of what makes an authentic embodiment, one look into fandom as a performance may help. Nicolle Lamerichs in *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* argues that fan textual productivity, the different ways fans produce meaning through numerous forms (performances, fashion, etc.), and affectivity, how fans express their feelings (positive or negative) and draw themselves closer to texts they like, shows how fans give new meanings to texts instead of simply reconfiguring them (17-9). Lamerichs' research into cosplay, where fans dress as characters from their favorite media, involves the concept of embodiment and how fans display their deep connection to media (200). Lamerichs interviewed cosplayers portraying characters from Japanese video games, noticing that they cared about learning the characters they portray, their appearances, how closely they resemble who they are, understanding the narrative context of those characters, and creating the costume itself (220-2). These elements may fit well together or not at all, leading to different outcomes for cosplayers and how fulfilling their experience feels (223). Lamerichs mentions a "problem" where some cosplayers portrayed characters but had not played the games those characters originated from, giving observers a new source to learn about those characters that was not from the source text (226). Inspecting an authentic embodiment then seems possible, at least when it comes to comparing the source text of *Star Wars* and Costa's portrayal of Kenobi. Fans may judge Kenobi's costume, for example, evaluating how evocative his attire is of canon and thus the authenticity of Costa's cosplay to canon.

The canon TV show, *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022), is centered around Kenobi and provides a comparison between canon and fan material of the same broad area of the story. However, I am discussing comments made before the release of the

show and any direct comparisons were not available outside of expectations for the show and its portrayal of Kenobi.

The comments I analyzed derive from each fan's understanding of the text (for example, no comments mention that the individual had never seen Star Wars in any capacity before) and this would probably avoid the problem of divergence from the source text and what constitutes something authentic. In the case of Obi-Wan Kenobi and the fan film, fans judge Costa's performance because Costa tries to embody Kenobi as the character fans canonically perceive him as. Kevin Rytter comments, "The actor is an impressionist by craft. He had a few moments where is sounded very similar to Ewan McGregor, but also, Alex Guinness." Rytter compares Costa's performance to his canon counterparts and the way they sound, speaking to one aspect of his performance and how he embodies Kenobi. Sounding similar to McGregor and Guinness enhanced the performance for Rytter as it reminded them of something familiar in canon. Rytter views Kenobi and Costa's performance through canonical performances, altering their perception of Costa. Costa cannot choose how viewers will judge him, so the fact that Costa resembled McGregor and Guinness's performances to the point where a fan thinks he is doing an impression of them is either deliberate or a coincidence. I did not find a comment from Costa where he might have stated his "decision" to mimic their voices, but either way Rytter's reaction is one example of how fans variably interpret performances that the actor may not even intend to elicit.

Applying this concept to fans who recognize Kenobi's literal body and voice is quite simple and certain comments mention similarities and differences between Costa and McGregor's performance. An authentic performance can be reached if Costa closely matches what fans expect his performance to be, allowing his performance to be recognized as imitating canon. Francesca Coppa's article, "Writing Bodies in Space," analyzes fan fiction and how fans create a theatrical performance from their creations. Coppa explains that "Readers come to fan fiction with extratextual knowledge, mostly of characters' bodies and voices" (228). Coppa references Richard Schechner's theory of performance that performance is the repetition of past behaviors and never unique (qtd. in 222). Using Schechner's theory, Coppa posits that fan fiction writers transform characters from their original sources into updated versions that align with how they see certain characters (223). An actor performing Obi-Wan Kenobi, as one of those constantly reimagined characters, changes how fans perceive Kenobi as his character's "body" is placed in new situations. While canon remains in place,

having Costa's interpretation allows for enhanced fan discussions that may then show why fans believe that, for example, sounding like the canon version of Kenobi is important.

This combination of focusing on the body (performance studies) and fan fiction (fan studies) changes how fan film performances can be judged. Coppa continues and describes productions of Hamlet, which introduce new interpretations of Hamlet as different actors embody the character (229). When considering theatrical scripts and the performances that derive from those scripts, some meaning is either lost or added in the performance itself and this variability instead supports the idea that different productions promote varying and unlimited interpretations (Coppa 231). Applying this idea to fan fiction, Coppa argues that fan fiction stories help to add to canon and these stories do not become redundant (231). Kenobi, as fan fiction, exemplifies this idea through its addition of a new version of Kenobi. Fans understand how Costa performs the character and then either judge the performance on its own or compare it to canon. It would be hard to say that Costa, even if some fans think he is doing an impression of McGregor, is capturing a redundant performance because other features of his work speak to unique aspects. For example, Hevi Tevi says, "I absolutely love that scene where he throws the lightsaber. I feel like I did this because the saber was like a constant reminder that anakin is gone and he failed him." Hevi Tevi's comment mentions a particular scene where Kenobi throws a lightsaber, highlighting Kenobi's frustrations with his past failures in letting down Anakin Skywalker and him becoming Darth Vader. As a result, these new interpretations arise from watching *Kenobi*, causing an enhanced understanding of canon through fan material.

The more unique part of Costa's performance is the narrative situation he is put into. The theatrical script is only one part of the overall production and Costa's Kenobi faces a threat not seen in canon. In the fan film, Kenobi has to protect Luke Skywalker, who is still a child, so the fan film stands on its own. However, the canon Disney+ show, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, also showed moments where Kenobi, played by McGregor, showed grief over the same failures and while it may be easy to say that the fan film got to show these moments of regret "first," it would be better to say that both versions, fan and canon, work together to provide different interpretations. Ultimately, canon material holds power over fan material as discussed previously but the additional material, especially if fans view it as authentic, only supports the overall fandom and its relation to official creators.



In Star Wars fan films, viewers imagine the embodiment of characters as ethnographic fragments that resemble canonical material. Jen Gunnels and Carrie J. Cole's study, "Culturally mapping universes: Fan production as ethnographic fragments," explores how fan creators use source material to form their interpretations of the source material through dramaturgy and ethnography. According to Gunnels and Cole, fans select characters to portray them in specific scenarios externally, through ethnographic observation, and internally, through dramaturgical portrayals that conform to fans' needs. Analyzing fan commentary through ethnography and dramaturgy allows for a deeper understanding of fan expectations.

Concerning *Kenobi*, Xavier Destremau comments that "his face doesn't scream Obi Wan Kenobi, but his voice and mannerism are on point. This is Obi Wan Kenobi." Fans expecting authenticity to canon in the actor's portrayal of Kenobi shows why actors might have to play to those expectations. Using Ewan McGregor, who played Obi-Wan in the prequel trilogy, would be authentic to canon and not clash with fan expectations. Jamie Costa plays Kenobi, and the comment above shows that Costa, even without McGregor's facial appearance, can meet a viewer's expectations through his performance. Costa's performance embodies the voice and mannerisms that the commenter most likely saw from McGregor in the prequel trilogy. It is difficult to discern what specific voice imitations or characteristics the commenter is referencing, but Xavier Destremau is satisfied with the portrayal. The creators of *Kenobi* were able to ethnographically and dramaturgically influence Obi-Wan Kenobi's portrayal, resulting in a fan creation that balances the line between imitation and originality. This balancing act can help official creators to analyze fanon and learn why Costa's performance resonated with fans.

Performance studies and what a performance is may reveal how these portrayals captivate viewers. *The Performance Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Bial, offers multiple ways to recognize how authentic embodiment can boost the canonical perception of a fan's performance. Marvin Carlson's introduction "What is Performance?" defines one aspect of performance as individuals who can expertly portray others through their talent (71). Carlson cites Richard Bauman's *International Encyclopedia of Communications* and introduces Bauman's consciousness of doubleness, comparing a standardized action (typically an ideal model) and what is performed in reality (qtd. in 73). These comparisons, either done individually or by someone else, can validate

performances (qtd. in 73). Xavier Destremau's comment describes how an observer can affirm an actor's portrayal of an established character if the actor showcases their skills. A performer can train those skills, voice, and mannerisms to emulate what was achieved before. However, performances in fan films remain within the realm of live theater performances and not Hollywood film performances, so Costa's performance will never fully compare to McGregor's. Dramaturgy relates to the performer's interpretation, and Costa's portrayal of Obi-Wan Kenobi may be interpreted as a self-affirmation to perform a character with great expectations for whoever portrays him. Any Star Wars fan film has to contend with actors not looking the exact same as the actors in official films. Certainly, Xavier Destremau's praise validates Costa's performance and similar comments suggest the skill set required for an authentic performance.

Alex Venter comments that Costa "did an amazing job of capturing the spirit and voice of Obi-Wan." Alex Venter also mentions the voice of Obi-Wan, but the mention of his spirit is different. Is it possible to portray the spirit of a character that would be more abstract than the character's mannerisms? The "spirit" may refer to Obi-Wan's greater mythos and understanding as a character throughout his multiple appearances. Costa's portrayal may be seen as an amalgamation of decades of Obi-Wan's character that has informed fan perspectives. Reaching a high level of canonical perception would then be a combination of physical and mental attributes that form the canonical Obi-Wan. Fan perception influences what may be considered more important, but Xavier Destremau and Alex Venter's comments offer a good estimation of what is valued in the fandom.

Jerry Grotowski's "The Actor's Technique" explores different types of acting methods that help show how authentic embodiment can develop a performance that does not become canonical, but motivates fans to rethink Kenobi's character. Grotowski's concept of an actor's score is an encounter that forces actors to confront their own beliefs and respond to what is given to them (226-7). Actors must find a way to be free during their performances and not objectify themselves to spectators but be open to others to achieve authenticity (Grotowski 227). Costa's performance, therefore, can be read as an authentic performance from the perspective of some fans. An actor's interpretation is compared to the original, canonical film version primarily because authenticity is seen through how closely that actor emulates the original. Straying too far may make some fans apprehensive of the quality of the performance, and one particular comment voices this fear. Ein flinkes Wiesel comments, "when I saw this was not Ewan

McGregor as Obi Wan: Oh not good...,” indicating another perspective that not having the canonical actor for Obi-Wan would be a detriment to the fan film. In addition to Xavier Destremau’s initial apprehension of the actor’s face not matching McGregor’s, Ein flinkes Wiesel’s comment points to a grander apprehension regarding Costa as Ein flinkes Wiesel did not think Costa could portray Obi-Wan. Watching the fan film, Ein flinkes Wiesel would have had to be convinced of Costa’s authenticity to what Ein flinkes Wiesel saw on screen, judging multiple aspects of imitation. Then, the second part of Ein flinkes Wiesel’s comment continues with “Me, halfway through the movie: It is... acceptable.” As Ein flinkes Wiesel watches the fan film, their changed stance on Costa’s performance shows a willingness to adjust their opinion and accept the portrayal as a product that compares to the original. Grotowski’s beliefs clarify why actors in fan films can base their performance on canon because, while fan expectations may unfairly judge a fan’s performance, the resulting interaction between fanon and the performance adds to both sides’ knowledge of canon and what can be created from that knowledge.

Eugenio Barba’s “The Deep Order Called Turbulence: The Three Faces of Dramaturgy” shows how actors in fan films can interpret the work of original actors to forge something new. Barba explains that doing theater is challenging because it relies on convincing others that one’s performance is satisfactory and that theater is one way to form one’s identity (300). Performing a Star Wars character reveals a certain level of attachment to the character that others will notice. What the audience sees in a film is the most critical part, so creating a unique identity that satisfies viewers becomes the most difficult part. Barba’s idea of coherence in dramaturgy expresses that actors’ performances must be logical when devoid of their original context (305). That transfer would be more difficult for fan films and Costa’s performance because knowing who Obi-Wan is within the Star Wars universe is encouraged due to the little background exposition presented in the fan film itself. As noted by commenters, Costa’s performance emulates certain aspects of Obi-Wan from canonical movies, adding to the layers of material a viewer needs to know. Gunnels and Cole similarly express that fan material works as a more extensive offering to canon material that provides more details surrounding events. However, this does not make any actor portraying Star Wars characters stoic figures; instead, performers like Costa employ their own fanon and fan perspectives judging his performance becomes fanon that may expand Star Wars fan discourse to new areas never considered before.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed the canonicity of *Kenobi* and the performance of fans in a digital space. Using *Kenobi* to link fan and performance studies can show the transference of someone being a Star Wars fan and then how they express their fan interest. These various fan performances showcase different fan interpretations of how the fan film interacts with Star Wars canon. Canon is an overarching part of my research because fan films typically interact with canon material, especially one that handles the story of Obi-Wan Kenobi and the canonical background information one must consider when making a fan film about the character. Some comments mentioned canon directly and the desire to have *Kenobi* canonized outright. Others praised the fan film's production quality and how it reminded them of Star Wars movies. Comments discussing Costa's performance and how he embodied Kenobi convey the importance of fulfilling fan expectations based on what a fan has seen of a significant character like Kenobi. The interplay between Costa's performance and fans reacting to and judging his performance through their knowledge of canon turn this single creation into a potent environment for fans to interpret and argue among themselves. However, it would be unfortunate if official Star Wars creators ignored such environments and discussions because the non-canonical nature of fan films and the fanon that spawns from them still reinforce certain canonical elements, and learning from these perspectives would help create unique canonical portrayals of Kenobi and other characters.

Fans will always create and modify canon material into new forms (superabundant potential), and *Kenobi*, as discussed in this paper, remains as fan material (even though it resembled canon to some fans) because it was not made with the necessary legitimacy or authority from Disney and Lucasfilm. Therefore, the superabundant potential of Star Wars canon could be organized around the creators of Disney and Lucasfilm recognizing and drawing inspiration from fan discourse to produce a dialogue that supports the authority of canon while utilizing that fan discourse to align some parts of canon with fanon. Whether fan film creators want or need to reach Hollywood production levels to be taken, in the eyes of some fans, as canonical material is not relevant to my argument because trying to elevate fanon to canon ignores more beneficial uses for fan interpretations that I have mentioned. Examining fan films through performance

and authentic embodiment introduces new methods for exploring how fans could assist future Star Wars canon material through the process of creating and recreating fanon.

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# Humor-Driven Test Prep: Helping Students Study Via In-Class Game Shows

MATTHEW T. MCKEAGUE

Review sessions are often offered by college educators to prepare their students for exams while reducing test apprehension. These additional sessions, sometimes scheduled outside of the allocated class time, may be poorly attended or filled with anxiety as students worry if every word of the review will appear on the test. This instructional article discusses an alternative approach to ease test apprehension and encourage attendance through in-class trivia gameshows grounded in applied humor theory.

## Introduction

Students throughout time have feared tests, their performance anxiety sometimes impacting their ability to recall information and focus during examination periods (Doctor and Altman 563; Keogh et al. 241). To reduce apprehension and aid the learning process, many educators have tried alternative approaches with testing such as take-home, open book, or online examinations that can be retaken without penalty (Bengtsson 267; Green et al. 19; Kortemeyer et al. 235). Furthermore, educators may also offer optional test review days where students ask questions and discuss material with the instructor without any new material introduced (Gilbert 164). However, on such review days with no assignments due or points rewarded, attendance can be lower than standard class periods (Menz et al. 74; Gottfried and Kirksey 119).

This article discusses my strategy in helping students prepare for examinations, a team-based trivia game “Prepardy” that is driven by applied classic humor theories, roleplay, and active participation. Uses of humor in the classroom have been shown to create enjoyable experiences, stimulate

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enthusiasm, and foster positive teacher-student relationships by reducing stress (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 259; Makewa et al. 1). It is my belief that these light-hearted and interactive sessions not only reduce student test anxiety in a similar manner to prior research, but also increase students' understanding of class content through the creative nature of the trivia questions.

### Enhancing Student Participation During Reviews

Student participation in classrooms has traditionally been reported as less than desired by instructors despite its positive benefits in discussion and test review (Johnson and Johnson 22; Fleck and Zhu 5). Possible remedies to low participation rates, such as crossword puzzles and short quizzes preceding exams, have been found to be effective preparation techniques (Weisskirch 198; McDermott et al. 3). However, such exercises do not always foster student excitement or positivity about education at the same levels that roleplaying exercises can provide in active learning classrooms (Stone 1). With similar improvements for student engagement, technology such as clickers used during classroom review has also been found to create interactive classrooms and overall higher test scores than those without it (Hubbard and Couch 2).

In-class reviews face other challenges such as recall-oriented questions lacking critical thinking, unequal participation of all students, and minimal student-to-student interaction. When instructors hold review sessions, students may focus on asking clarifying questions instead of seeking information on how the material connects to the “bigger picture” (Wininger 164). These review sessions are also prone to be dominated by extroverted or outspoken students as participation is typically not required by everyone attending (Dancer and Kamvounias 445). Similarly, prior research has shown that students are less likely to come to class prepared if they know that their instructor will not ask them direct questions about class content, thus traditional lecture-based reviews may not be the most effective approach to prepare students for large assessments (Karp and Yoels 421).

Building on this research, I propose an interactive approach to in-class review that encourages students to not only attend, but also prepare for the roleplaying trivia game. By evolving test reviews beyond their typical lecture or conversation formats, I have aligned this exercise with active learning approaches that require students to speak effectively, think critically, roleplay scenarios, and take risks



(Peterson 187). A trivia game approach to class review incorporates all of those prior elements described by Peterson: they must speak and think effectively to answer questions; they must roleplay as gameshow contestants; and, during the final round where they must wager points on a last question, they must take risks to try and win the game.

The game scenario also succeeds in overcoming challenges of any student dominating a review session while others remain silent. As every student plays the game over multiple questions, each participant has an equal opportunity to think critically and speak. Students therefore arrive at the session with an understanding that participation is required, thus encouraging them to study in advance of the session to be confident in their performance. Though there is a gap in the research regarding gameshow style trivia sessions during in-class instruction, my innovation also takes inspiration from a prior Good Behavior Game (Cheatham et al. 277). In this game, a teacher splits the class into teams throughout the term. The instructor then informs the class that all behaviors perceived as good, such as raising a hand to participate and not being distracted by a smartphone, will be tracked until a prize is awarded to the winning team at a later date.

The last way in which my trivia game Prepardy evolves the standard review approach is its inclusion of humor throughout the session, my performance as the gameshow host, and the classroom roleplaying as if they were participating in a real gameshow with clickers. Because students often avoid asking questions as they fear embarrassment, the humor included in this gameshow reduces apprehension through creating a positive atmosphere with additional classroom management benefits (Powers 1). Much like how interactive experiences and breathing exercises can reduce anxiety in days leading up to tests (Clinton et al. 92), this humor-driven Prepardy attempts to ease students' participation apprehension while helping them actively learn.

Through my cheesy gameshow host delivery, I am able to create positive connotations of learning while also providing formative feedback on answers that serve as a necessary component of assessment (Tekyiswa 5). This comedic energy seems to enhance constructive criticism that students can sometimes find to be uncomfortable. As humor's incorporation in the classroom has shown to increase student's motivation to learn and participate (Bakar 137), a comedic game therefore serves to foster an interactive and engaging method for test review.

In the next section, I will review the specific setup and execution of Preparady to prepare students for exams as well as its connections to leading humor theories.

### Preparady Trivia Game and Humor Connections

One week prior to every test in my classes, a mandatory trivia game is conducted during the regular meeting time. I split students into groups of three to four to make the game more manageable, all teams competing in the same room for irrelevant prizes such as candy or fruit. Each team picks a question and then has 30 seconds to answer before another group may steal the point by offering the correct response. A group may only answer two correct questions in a row, and only non-dichotomous trivia questions may be stolen by rival teams via clickers. Once the rules are introduced, I then morph into the role of a gameshow host who navigates the class through 50 trivia questions covering past content. Trivia games have been used in a variety of fields such as Chemistry and Management (Adair and McAfee 416; Swain et al. 210), and I have seen similarly successful results with Preparady in my media classes over the last 15 years as well.

As I make my way around the room throughout the performance, I ask students where they are from and how their trip was to the show set that day. Students are actively encouraged to play along and answer if they desire participation points. This concept of agreeable playing, sometimes referred to as a “yes...and” approach in improv comedy, is another connection to the humor-driven nature of this classroom exercise (Benjamin and Kline 130). Though play studies have predominantly focused on preschool and K-12 children (Ashiabi 200), research also shows that its incorporation in the college classroom can lead to increased engagement and assist with attention (Tews et al. 16; Reddington 22). This improv component enlivens my classroom as students visibly become less stressed. At the same time, the silliness seems to diminish the potentially heated competition for candy or fruit prizes that I have experienced when hosting trivia review sessions without it in the past.

Once the introductions end, a customized PowerPoint of an interactive gameboard is displayed on a projector screen. The questions are arranged into two rounds of five humorous categories containing five questions hidden by point values. While it is less time intensive to copy and paste example test questions into the prompt areas, I find that students appreciate the creative thinking required to locate comedic connections to different concepts throughout the semester. To

illustrate this strategic design, I will briefly review two example categories implemented in all of my Preparady sessions: (1) Real or Onion and (2) Might Have Messed Up. Both example categories are grounded in leading humor theories to create goodwill with comedy's ability to alleviate stress for those experiencing it (Ocobock et al. 436).

For example, in my Real or Onion category questions, I write a headline and students must evaluate its accuracy in describing an event or development in my Intro to Mass Communication class. One such headline is as follows: Aliens Kinda Invade Earth with Mixed Effects. This headline accurately represents the events of Orson Wells' original radio broadcast on October 30, 1938 when his troupe performed an audio play while acting like extraterrestrials invaded Earth (Heyer 149). Panic set in with some listeners who did not perform external data checks while others remained calm, leading to a new concept of how media impact us at the individual level. This understanding is referred to as the Mixed Effects model rather than the previous mass effects approach known as the Hypodermic Needle Theory (Thibault 67).

Students playing Preparady who receive this prompt must then recall if we talked about this topic and then, if so, evaluate the headline to judge if it accurately conveys the news story. If students believe the headline is based on a real development, they will lock in their answer as "Real." If they believe it to be fabricated, then they must answer "Onion" like the satirical news website. The type of humor grounding this category is referred to as Incongruity Theory, based on the element of surprise. As the human brain is led down one pathway and then shocked with an unexpected twist, the switch leads to a playful trick that encourages laughter (Aristotle 81). Summarizing important ideas into such clickbait-like news titles is surprising, as well as the double meaning wordplay throughout the War of the Worlds example.

In my second question category titled Might Have Messed Up, I provide a short scenario of a notable person in media using a term from the class. Students must then evaluate if that figure properly used the term and, if not, provide the correct answer. For example, in my Intro to Mass Communication class, I discuss Forced Perspective as a media production concept. Forced Perspective is a visual trick through the placement of objects close to or far from a camera that causes skewed interpretations of the true size of those objects (Zettl 160). My Preparady question that includes this term is as follows: "In an interview about The Lord of the Rings film trilogy, director Peter Jackson said that he used Forced Perspective

to allow the films to play back at 24 fps during the epic orc fights. Did he mess up when describing that? If so, correct it.”

Students presented with this question are then challenged to use both recall and critical thinking to develop the proper answer. To be correct, students must respond that Peter Jackson made a mistake in my imaginary interview and provide the correct definition for Forced Perspective. When students experience the opportunity to play along and judge such a famous director for making a mistake, they may laugh from this temporary glory that aligns with a second leading theory of humor, Superiority Theory. In this theory, humorous moments can emerge from taking joy in others' failure or pain when those individuals deserve it (Kant 306).

## Conclusion

As students have been shown to better perform information recall after learning from instructors who use humor and rate such classroom experiences as more engaging than those that do not (Smith and Wortley 18), humor and test review seem to be an effective combination. My suggested tactic of creating a Prepardy review session aligns with such research on humor's positive impacts in the classroom. This engaging and comedic approach to test preparation creates a lively experience for students, allowing them to review material in a manner that reaps the benefits of comedy and play in the classroom. With required attendance, only one or two students are typically absent on these review days, a number similar to my average attendance for lectures. Those who skip Prepardy tend to perform worse on the exam than those who attended as much as one full letter grade on average. Additionally, those students who participate seem to be far less anxious about the test in days following Prepardy than those who were absent.

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# Introduction

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

The current special issue of the journal focuses primarily on examining queer Black experiences within the matrix of popular culture, but it also considers how a variety of other intersectional identities are represented in media. The reviews included in this issue also introduce readers to monographs, memoirs, anthologies, and other texts that explore and portray a multitude of identities and issues from various perspectives. From game studies to streaming video to the abortion debate, and from Paris Hilton to Godzilla to Harry Belafonte, the reviews gathered in this issue look at numerous books, films, games, and TV series that present and/or interrogate several identities and experiences.

Books reviewed in this issue include *Splice: The Novelization*, which adapts the 2009 film of the same name and, according to Christopher J. Olson, offers increased insight into the characters' inner worlds while also helping to pull back the curtain on neurodivergence. Jennifer A. Zenovich, meanwhile, reviews *Portable Postsocialisms: New Cuban Mediascapes after the End of History* by Paloma Duong, who endeavors to demystify Cuban representation onscreen. Mickey Randle discusses Sonia Fizek's *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*, which analyzes the different ways that players interact with games. Shifting from video games to music, Megan Powell informs readers about Jörg Heiser's *Double Lives in Art and Pop Music*, which considers the relationships between art and pop music and the impulses that lead people to create both. Elsewhere, Amy Absher argues that *Paris: The Memoir* offers more than just an account of the world-famous socialite's tumultuous life; it also functions as a critical examination of how American popular culture treats women. Bia Cassano writes about author Cary Millsap-Spears's *Star Trek Discovery and the Female Gothic: Tell Fear No*, which explores the connection between *Star Trek: Discovery* and feminist Gothic literature of the 1800s. Daniel Cunningham discusses Jeff Sharlet's *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War*, a timely book that considers the wider sociopolitical implications of singer and actor Harry Belafonte's efforts to advance social justice.

This issue also features reviews of edited anthologies devoted to collecting scholarship on relevant topics and critical debates. For instance, Lori Roles alerts

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readers to editors Brenda Boudreau and Kelli Maloy's urgent collection *Abortion in Popular Culture: A Call to Action*, which collects essays that analyze how media contribute to public perception on the topic of reproductive choice. Turning to the less politically charged but nevertheless significant topic of streaming video, Christine F. Smith reviews Arienne Ferchaud and Jennifer M. Proffitt's *Television's Streaming Wars*, a collection that explores the struggles for power within the contemporary media ecology. Finally, Melissa Beattie offers her thoughts on *Women We Love: Femininities and the Korean Wave* from editors SooJin Lee, Kate Korroch, and Khiun, Liew Kai, who have gathered writings that provide readers with a comprehensive introduction to Hallyu (aka the Korean Wave) specifically and feminist media studies more generally.

In addition to books, this issue also features reviews of films, TV series, and video games, all of which could be useful in pedagogical or scholarly situations. First, Elizabeth Shiller discusses the video-game-to-film adaptation *Five Nights at Freddy's*, focusing on the importance of imagery to both the game and its big-screen iteration. Following this, Carlos Tkacz reviews the worldwide cultural phenomenon *Godzilla Minus One*, arguing that the film highlights the title character's malleability and enduring popularity with audiences everywhere. Dennis Owen Frohlich turns his attention to the world of tabletop gaming with his review of the board game *Legacy of Yu*, which Frohlich argues transports to a world of adventure thanks to exquisite art, immersive gameplay, and a gripping story rooted in historical events. Lastly, Kendall Belopavlovich considers how the recently canceled streaming series *Reservation Dogs* helps viewers understand and explore the contemporary experiences of Indigenous Americans.

As always, I want to thank my assistant reviews editor, Casey O'Ceallaigh, for helping to ensure that these reviews are ready for publication. Without their feedback and keen eye for detail, these reviews would likely be riddled with errors. I also want to thank all the reviewers who contributed their thoughts about books and other media texts; without them this section would be a barren wasteland. Finally, I want to thank all the readers who take time out of their busy schedules to read these reviews. I hope we have pointed you toward some texts that prove useful in your own research. If any of you want to contribute a review of a book, movie, game, or some other media text to the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, please reach out to me via email at [reviews@mpcaaca.org](mailto:reviews@mpcaaca.org). Until next time, take care.

Boudreau, Brenda, and Kelli Maloy (eds.). *Abortion in Popular Culture: A Call to Action*. Lexington, 2023.

*Abortion in Popular Culture: A Call to Action*, reveals in three parts how media reflects, rejects, and/or reinvents the narratives surrounding the people, places, and sociocultural codes inherent in the exercise of reproductive choice. With an interdisciplinary collection of essays, editors Brenda Boudreau and Kelli Maloy delve deeply into the historical and present-day circumstances of onscreen characters contemplating and participating in this reproductive decision. More importantly, the closing chapters serve as a call to action for the networks, writers, and consumers of media to normalize abortion as a private health care decision. This book could not have been published during a more opportune time than with the overturn of *Roe V. Wade* in the summer of 2023, and the fallout from that decision now resting directly at our doorsteps in America.

Part 1 of the book includes an essay from Karen Weingarten acknowledging how the home pregnancy test changed the landscape for discussion about abortion in American television and film. Weingarten suggests that the test opened the possibilities, if not the onscreen discourse, surrounding this choice. Caryn Murphy's essay reviews the role of the doctor in 1960s television dramas and notes that oftentimes the fundamental discourse centered around the male physician's absolute control over choice rather than accounting for the needs and wishes of his patient. Murphy insightfully concludes that our modern-day onscreen representations of individual circumstance colliding with institutional forces may begin to seem eerily familiar to those pre-Roe episodes as we are faced with the legal, medical, and personal impact of Roe's overturn.

Any analysis of current social views in popular culture surrounding reproductive choice would be exceedingly remiss in neglecting to consider the effects of social media content on socially divisive issues like reproductive freedom, which is why Kelli Maloy's essay is the perfect resolution to Part 1. Maloy analyzes social media content along with the content-providers who tweeted, instagrammed, and facebooked opposition to the repeal of Ireland's eighth amendment. As Maloy explains, the repeal was successful, even with constant, sometimes contemptible messaging from both the Catholic church's religious majority in Ireland as well as the evangelical churches in the United States. Maloy frames the resistance to anti-repeal social media messaging in

Ireland as a road map for U.S. citizens to follow to regain the rights *Roe* once provided pregnant people in America.

Part 2, "Creating Spaces for Alternative Narratives," engages the reader in reflections of reproductive choice viewed first through the genre of dystopian reality in Heather Latimer's essay "Abortion Politics and the Dystopic Imagination." The section takes readers through the elements of time and place for pregnant people compelled to travel across state lines to avail themselves of reproductive healthcare in Jaime Leigh Gray's essay, "The Labors of Abortion Access." Finally, Part 2 explores how cable networks form symbiotic relationships with popular culture in Laura S. Witherington's essay "I'm Offended by All the Supposed-To's: HBO's Pro-Choice Influence." Gray adroitly suggests that cable networks both feed from and directly influence popular culture to offer a much broader representation of abortion. While this reflection and cultivation process may result in a more honest portrayal of this choice by cable networks like HBO, it perhaps more importantly frames abortion as a personal healthcare decision rather than an angst-ridden plot point so common in abortion episodes on regular network TV.

The final part of this comprehensive view of the representation of abortion in popular culture begins with a historical reckoning of race and (lack of) reproductive freedom in Patrick Allen's essay "'I Gave Her Life:' Black Women, Abortion and Healing in Brit Bennett's *The Mothers*." It continues with a discussion about the role of television storytelling in a post-Roe world. Stephanie Herold and Gretchen Sisson explore the ethical responsibilities as well as the storytelling opportunities popular media can extrapolate from the re-criminalization of abortion in "When Stories Are All We Have, The Role of Television when Abortion is Illegal." Meanwhile, in "The Abortion Pill and Other Myths, Medication Abortion on Screen," Cordelia Freeman notes the prominence of abortion on screen but questions its portrayal as a surgical process on television while most real-world abortions are accomplished with medication. Brenda Boudreau extends this analysis of how TV can change the socially constructed "good vs. bad" framing around abortion by including characters who more resemble those who typically make this choice: those who are already mothers; those who are not financially stable; those who do not have the resources they need; and, finally, those who do not want to be mothers to one (or more) children. Boudreau suggests that TV's ability to show abortion as a decision made by a

woman for her family's sake and for her own, is paramount to cultural understanding of reproductive choice.

The collected essays in this book seem to strategically coalesce, exposing popular culture as a conduit for media creators, producers, and consumers to reflect and act upon the ways abortion is represented, portrayed, and threaded through our personal narratives on screen. *Abortion In Popular Culture, A Call to Action* is perhaps the genesis of a changing social consciousness regarding reproductive freedom. With the overturn of Roe, these changes will continue to prove essential to framing the public narratives concerning abortion and reproductive choice to a more realistic representation.

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Donner, Claire. *Splice: The Novelization*. Encyclopocalypse Publications, 2024.

Movie novelizations, or novels based on films that flesh out the narrative “with a greater attention to character backstory and more descriptive action sequences,” date back to the early years of cinema (Suskind). Silent films such as *Sparrows* (William Beaudine and Tom McNamara, 1926) and *London After Midnight* (Tod Browning, 1927) and early talkies like *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) all spawned tie-in novelizations. The visibility and popularity of movie novelizations declined somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s, likely due to the advent of home video, which radically altered how films were watched (and re-watched). Prior to the development of home video, “films were released in the theater and often not heard from again,” meaning that the “best way to relive those original memories was to read them in book format” (Suskind). Home video technologies such as Betamax and VHS – and later DVD, Blu-ray, and 4K – changed all that, as they allowed viewers to repeatedly revisit films from the comfort of their own homes. Streaming technologies, which provide users with instant access to a wealth of films produced throughout cinematic history, have only pushed movie novelizations further into the realm of niche media. Yet, as Alex Suskind of *Vanity Fair* points out, authors continue to

write movie novelizations, publishers continue to publish them, and readers continue to purchase and read them well into the 21st century.

Encyclopocalypse Publications is one publisher devoted to keeping movie novelizations alive in the streaming era. Over the years the company has released books based on the screenplays of low-budget genre films of the past, including *Re-Animator* (Stuart Gordon, 1985), *Vamp* (Richard Wenk, 1986), and *Creature aka Titan Find* (William Malone, 1985). Encyclopocalypse continues this tradition with a novelization of director Vincenzo Natali's *Splice* (2009), a throwback of sorts to the gonzo sci-fi horror flicks of the 80s and 90s. Featuring a screenplay co-written by Natali along with Antoinette Terry Bryant and Doug Taylor, the film follows Clive (Adrien Brody) and Elsa (Sarah Polley), a pair of romantically entangled punk-rock geneticists who specialize in splicing the DNA of different animals to create hybrid creatures intended for medical experimentation by the corporate laboratory Nucleic Exchange Research and Development aka N.E.R.D. The two fame-hungry scientists announce their plan to create a revolutionary human-animal hybrid, but their superiors at N.E.R.D. forbid them from moving forward with the experiment. Undaunted, Clive and Elsa secretly develop a viable hybrid that Elsa refuses to terminate. She convinces a reluctant Clive to spare the creature, which develops much faster than a human and soon matures into a humanoid female that Elsa names Dren ("nerd" spelled backwards). To keep their illegal experiment from being discovered, Clive and Elsa clandestinely transport Dren (played as an adult by Delphine Chanéac) to the abandoned farm where Elsa grew up. There, they continue monitoring Dren, who quickly proves far more inscrutable and dangerous than Clive and Elsa could have ever imagined.

Despite earning critical praise, *Splice* flopped at the box office, earning just \$27,127,620 worldwide against a \$30,000,000 budget. Yet the film has since garnered a cult following thanks to its quirky lead characters, unconventional narrative, convincing effects, and shocking climax. The novelization by author Claire Donner adapts all these elements, but it also gives readers more insight into the interiority of the characters, most notably Elsa and Dren. More importantly, perhaps, it shines a light on Elsa's neurodivergence and on Clive's efforts to understand and accept his partner's cognition. Donner, who serves as the New York City branch Director of the Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies, offers readers an unfettered glimpse into Elsa's thoughts in a way that the film cannot – or, perhaps more accurately, does not. She illuminates Elsa's internal struggles with what is likely autism, which impacts every aspect of the character's life as

she attempts to navigate an overwhelmingly neurotypical world that often leaves her feeling alone. Donner posits that Elsa created Dren – who contains elements of Elsa’s own DNA – largely out of a desire to bring into the world someone who might comprehend her. As Donner writes:

Maybe she was playing God in the grandest sense, creating life in her own image. Or maybe it was all just a matter of loneliness, pure and simple. A strange, irresistible compulsion to bring another Elsa into the world, someone who could understand her. Would make her feel not so different anymore. (135-36)

Donner emphasizes this theme throughout the book, and it helps to flesh out Elsa’s character beyond what was seen in the movie.

Similarly, Donner pulls back the curtain on Dren’s thoughts and feelings as the hybrid learns about the world, which often leaves her feeling perplexed, frightened, and infuriated. Throughout the novel, readers gain insight into Dren’s inner monologue as she strains to make sense of the disciplinary punishments imposed by Clive and Elsa, her ersatz parents, or marvels at everyday objects that could easily be taken for granted, such as wooden building blocks. Doing so reveals even more starkly Dren’s differences and subsequent sense of isolation. In the book, Dren’s discovery of a cat, a totally alien creature in her eyes, becomes an exercise in wonder as Dren tries to understand this tiny being that is the same size as the rabbit she killed and ate the night before but is completely different in appearance and attitude.

At the same time, readers are also given a greater window into the primal instincts that drive Dren, instincts that cause her to spurn Elsa’s affections following a bout of punishment and send the hybrid running into Clive’s arms as she succumbs to biological urges. Here, Dren’s journey through the world echoes that of Elsa, just to a greater degree. According to Donner, “Patterns helped Dren learn patience” (94), an idea that will likely resonate with anyone who views the world through a neurodivergent lens and relies on familiar and comforting repetitions to deal with the chaos of everyday life. As such, Donner’s expansion of Elsa’s and Dren’s efforts to make sense of their surroundings provides a valuable contribution to contemporary discourses on neurodivergence and mental health.

*Splice: The Novelization* is well-written and does an exemplary job of translating the story from the screen to the page. In fact, if one complaint could be leveled against Donner’s novelization, it could be that the book hews a bit too

closely to the film and fails to deviate in significant ways, even as it gives readers a deeper peek into Elsa's and Dren's thoughts. Sometimes when novelizations diverge from the films on which they are based, they can provide a richer experience, one that exists separate from but alongside the primary text. Such is the case with Orson Scott Card's novelization of *The Abyss* (James Cameron, 1989), which not only develops intricate backstories for the characters but also fleshes out the motivations and societal structures of Cameron's aquatic aliens, known as NTI's in the film. *Splice: The Novelization* flirts with such ambitious world building but more often plays it safe and presents a one-to-one adaptation of the film.

Of course, this is a minor complaint, and the novel gives fans of *Splice* what they no doubt want: a direct translation of the film with the occasional glance into the characters' interior worlds. Overall, *Splice: The Novelization* would likely prove useful in a class on adaptation. It might even be of interest to those teaching psychology courses, as the book could help students better understand how people living with autism or other forms of neurodivergence think about and interact with the world around them. To paraphrase Donner's words, *Splice: The Novelization* could help to reveal an explanation, an exhibit A, that might decode the unspoken thoughts and feelings of those living with neurodivergence.

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Duong, Paloma. *Portable Postsocialisms: New Cuban Mediascapes after the End of History*. U Texas P, 2024.

In *Portable Postsocialisms*, Paloma Duong traces and articulates gossamer Cuban social and political realities imagined through media. Duong demonstrates how

competing international and intranational discursive claims about what constitutes Cuba as a nation-state as an imaginary political projection, and as a postsocialist context all animate shared meanings of Cuban media. Duong's work is complex, as parsing through the layers of representation, double-speak, and lived experiences projected onto Cuban mediascapes is oftentimes convoluted. Yet in pulling disparate strings of shared meaning together, Duong provides a timely and necessary conjunctural analysis of postsocialist Cuba. Duong uses Cuba as a case study of "actually existing socialisms" and postsocialism to reinvigorate critical studies of capitalism, Cuban and Latin American studies, and leftist theory (4).

Postsocialism as a term is a geopolitical marker that has evolved into a field of study to critique inequity and precarity produced by socialism and capitalism. Duong situates postsocialism as a shared condition of global capitalism wherein a lack of imagination outside the socialism/capitalism binary traps humanity. This argument is not new, but Duong's focus on Cuba and the failures of the Cuban state is an apt critique of New Leftist socialist imaginaries. Contemporary anti-capitalist desire provides Duong justification for the book and both Cuba and Cuban popular culture provide the vehicle to enter Old Left/New Left debates. Duong delineates the debates by analyzing forms of red-washing and red-baiting that define and distribute Cuban representation for production and consumption. Leveling critique on idolization of Cuban socialism (red-washing), Duong explains how Cuban socialism was a patriarchal and militaristic project that relied on capital-determined modes of production underwritten by foreign governments. Duong simultaneously critiques the demonization of Cuban socialism (red-baiting) as a system of inevitable corruption and state-mandated poverty by pointing to foreign embargos and extractivist capitalism.

Duong straddles temporal, economic, and geographic mediascapes as they contend with the reverberating effects of the 1959 revolution, economic embargoes, the birth of the internet, the fall of the Berlin Wall, privatization, and Cuban diaspora. Through these mediascapes, Duong analyzes Cuban socio-political ruptures that shape material ways in which folks interact with, access, and form positionalities within media used individually and collectively. Portability, the book's main theme, describes the ability of the Cuban image (as floating signifier) to be made relevant in relation to those who construct the sign, often rendering meaning contradictory in international and intranational screens.

To describe this mediated reality as it travels, Duong grounds the analysis in numerous representative examples: travelogue writing, Cuban music, women's



fashion, and screens. Chapter 1 analyzes how travel writing about Cuba becomes an export for international consumption imagined as a trip to the socialist past. Noting how tourists travel to Cuba to see it before it changes, Duong outlines Cuban socialist exceptionalism in New Left travel writing and Cuban fetishization in shows like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Cuban revolution rhetoric is seductive because it does not challenge socialist idealism like failed Eastern Bloc Socialism. However, this writing often fails to account for the lived experiences of actual Cubans. Focusing on two expat travelogues, Duong explores this contradiction.

Chapter 2 asks what is and was the sound of Cuba? Duong traverses time and space to locate the portability of this sound by comparing independent and state-sponsored music as it is heard transnationally. Focusing on the popularity of reggaeton and punk, Duong explains how these genres agitate against state-sponsored music and nationalist narratives by comparing two songs, “Sucky Sucky” and “Don’t be such a cocksucker, Commander” (89). While Duong notes the misogynistic and racialized undertones of these songs, there is not adequate analysis of the racist, sexist, and homophobic conditions that produce them. In imagining a world beyond the socialist/capitalist binary that does not reproduce sexism or racism, feminist critiques of patriarchal postsocialism are warranted. Yet this might be space for other scholars to delve deep, given the extensive examples Duong provides. Duong contends that the flawed mediascape allows individuals to resist state-controlled media and potentially author voices from below. Lastly, demonstrating the portability of Cuba as an object of desire, Duong notes how punk critiques of the Cuban government are co-opted by the political right and deployed against socialism in general.

Chapter 3 takes up women’s fashion to discuss consumption and portability of images of femininity. Providing the Cuban woman of fashion and the Cuban woman entrepreneur as the two major archetypes offered to Cuban women in the postsocialist context, Duong notes how these images fail Cuban women. The concept of “poor images” illustrates how neither role fits cleanly into state-represented propaganda nor liberatory politics, rather these consumable images of women appease neoliberalism (66). Building on poor images, Chapter 4 analyzes images in the public sphere on screens in pockets, in art, and in TV. Duong understands screens metaphorically and literally to reflect, project, and construct Cuban reality. Screens open portability as they invite connectivity and surveillance and point to the messy ways in which binaries such as private/public

and contradictions of postsocialist/capitalist are obscured and enacted. Duong critiques state-sponsored digital networks that regulate Cuban expression while offering promises of liberation. Alternatively, non-state-sponsored digital networks provide Cubans a form of agency but not liberation nor the promise of liberation from cultural contexts.

The conclusion sees Duong ask what postsocialism is; here she aims to demystify Cuban representation to reimagine the future by redefining the past. In doing so, Duong urges that there is no anti-capitalist or anti-consumer center which holds in Cuba, there is no longer a viable socialism/capitalism binary to rest leftist theory upon, nor a utopian socialist Cuba on which to base it. Critically looking back can restructure how people symbolize and talk about these realities. Duong offers reprieve for Cuba's overdetermined position by pointing to how Cubans have engaged with digital media to narrate themselves as postsocialist subjects within the capitalist condition of the world. As such, Duong's book offers rich conceptual analysis from which to build.

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Ferchaud, Arienne, and Jennifer M. Proffitt (eds.). *Television's Streaming Wars*. Routledge. 2024.

*Television's Streaming Wars*, a new collection edited by Arienne Ferchaud and Jennifer M. Proffitt, opens on the "streaming wars" which, not unlike true wars, are grounded in struggles for power. Setting the stage for the warfare to follow, Ferchaud and Proffitt's introductory chapter provides a succinct summary of the history of television in the United States, bringing the reader up to the present-day streaming wars. This historical foundation provides a strong background against which the text projects the current unfolding reality as continued by Helena Vanhala who, in the second chapter, analyzes streaming through the lens of critical political economy. Grounded in the oligarchical history of U.S. television, Vanhala takes a deep dive into the ever-evolving current period in which big-name streaming power players continue to dominate the U.S. markets.

With the battlelines drawn, Krishna Jayakar and Euna Park outline in Chapter 3 the military-esque tactics taken by media companies in response to the advent and popularity of audiovisual over-the-top (OTT) services with actions centering around curtailment, competition, and collaboration. In providing this structure, Jayakar and Park juxtapose the current landscape against those that preceded, when providers “controlled both the content and the channel” (27). While holding a solid place in this book, the chapter could also be an excellent stand-alone primer for those seeking to get a strong fundamental understanding of current OTT media, as it provides a solid overview of content, delivery method, revenue, and business models, as well as ownership structures.

Framed by its preceding chapter, Rangga Saptya Mohamad Permana, Jimi Narotama Mahameruaji, and Sri Seti Indriani provide the details of a specific streaming media battle in Chapter 4. The authors outline a case study of strategies taken to adapt to current trends in media usage and developments in Indonesia with a focus on media power-player NET.TV. As Indonesian society has moved away from broadcast media (closing its analogue nationwide television in only 2022) and toward a more cellphone-based new-media landscape, privately owned television companies like NET.TV have had to adapt to stay afloat. The chapter’s case study is grounded in refinement theory and highlights the history of NET.TV through the larger lens of media convergence and technology growth in Indonesia, an interesting approach when following the more theoretical preceding chapters.

Closing out the first part of the book, Sunah Lee and Jennifer M. Proffitt frame Chapter 5 in a more covert battle, as their chapter title queries, “Netflix in South Korea: Patron of Creativity or Imperialistic Conqueror?” Here, the authors argue that U.S.-based streaming platforms are creating a new era of imperialism, beyond just cultural imperialism into that of “platform imperialism” (55). Using a critical political economic approach, Lee and Proffitt suggest that imperialism has intensified due to the market saturation on OTT platforms, and they delve into specifics regarding Netflix’s presence in South Korea to illustrate the point, drawing unique and refined attention to the local content being acquired by Netflix – content that, reflecting the voice of modern South Korean media, is critical of current political and capitalistic structures (e.g. *Squid Game* and *Hellbound*). While the chapter notes that certain scholars find this to be a contraflow of South Korean ideas and content, the authors posit that the imperialistic practices bring both “opportunity and threat to local TV industries”

and aptly call it “imperialism under the guise of transcultural community and flow” (62,64).

Following this unique and well-constructed narrative, Parts 2 and 3 of the book go beyond the power players and tactics of the streaming wars to the human aspects of these battles. While the first part discusses theories and paradigms in streaming media distribution, the latter portions focus not on the companies and infrastructures, but rather on the content and people affected, covering topics of representation, nostalgia, and user experience.

While streaming media may have caused imperialist conquering in the eyes of Lee and Proffitt, in Chapter 6, Meghan S. Sanders finds such technologies a tool to facilitate representation, social transformation, and social justice, specifically among and in support of those in the Black and Asian communities. Similarly, Victor Evans’s work in Chapter 7 positions the diversity of content available in the new streaming landscape to allow for LGBTQ+ individuals as a “sacred space to explore their identity and feel a connection with the community in the comfort of their own homes” (100). Significantly, one’s identity does not need to be limited to sexual or racial; in Chapters 8-10, Leigh H. Edwards, Colin P. Kearney, and Kyle Moody each speak of the power of, and intentionality behind, streaming platforms’ use of nostalgic content to connect with identities and memories of viewer, be it nostalgia of the MTV generation, rerun watchers, or horror lovers.

From the fictional horror cited by Moody, the text goes on to highlight eerie truths about streaming’s influence on culture and humanity as the final part of this book focuses on the impacts and effects that streaming has on those who consume said media.

Upon initial review, the structure of the text seems disjointed, with parts, subsections, and chapters, but the strength of the narrative that ran through the volume makes more sense once completed. From the macro of political theories to the granularity of how media companies are intentionally crafting nostalgia among their viewers, the book provides a holistic view of the current media landscape. While the “streaming wars” do not have the bloody battlefields of true wars, this text illustrates that they have made and will continue to make strong marks on the political, technological, and human experiences of those living through this time.

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Fizek, Sonia. *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. The MIT Press, 2022.

As the field of game studies begins to emerge, it is significant that those who choose to study media arts (including but not limited to cinema) must reckon with gaming and the ways it positions the player/spectator. In fact, gaming has the potential to change how we consume content. In her book *Playing at a Distance*, Sonia Fizek discusses how the player interacts with computers in the form of play. Focusing specifically on the ambient aesthetics and formats, Fizek determines that the agency games appear to give the player does not, in fact, exist as is commonly thought.

Fizek carefully examines different types of interaction with games. She argues that while gaming activity can appear in everyday scenarios, they have the power to greatly impact society. Fizek begins by debunking interactivity as the pivotal concept to understand in gaming. She demonstrates examples of games that continue to be played despite player absence. These games can run easily on a desktop while the player completes other tasks, returning to the game when convenient. Meanwhile the game plays itself with no change in the gameplay. These include *FarmVille* (2009), in which the player is responsible for planting and harvesting crops, but the crops continue to grow while the player is away. Fizek uses independent games as examples when discussing other types of play, including but not limited to spectator play (such as game streaming on Twitch, etc.) and automated play (games that play themselves), but mentions mainstream games like Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* in her discussion of ambient play, which is meant to be generally peaceful. Like other ambient games, the popular title is full of calming sounds and beautiful depictions of lush environments, and it includes options for players to easily avoid combat along with other narrative features.

As the field of game studies continues to expand and is thereby forced to reckon with cinema studies, Fizek's concepts of inter- and intra-activity are especially important, as she clarifies that "what games offer is the *illusion* of freedom" (5, italics in original). Fizek notes that interactivity is often predicated upon rules that "do not necessarily empower all human beings" but instead privilege certain identities over others (12). Fizek's ideas are significant in that

they reveal an important and new way of looking at identity politics in game studies.

Regarding intra-activity, Fizek states that “games change us as much as we change them” (78). She entreats the philosophy of Karan Barad to further drive home her point that the game and player are not externally separate, but they are rather two things that are constantly changing and “becoming” (80). For instance, a player working with a flying simulation/game may be overtaken by a cutscene that presents the game’s narrative arc when, say, crashing, at which point the player is no longer the “acting subject” (73). Essentially, Fizek contends that game systems, in their design and record of measurements (most games capture some version of game analytics) also play the player.

Throughout *Playing at a Distance*, Fizek’s discussion of ambient gaming adds further significance to the conversation. Those unfamiliar with this style of gaming will find it in games intended for ambience like *Everything* in which the player lives in an aquarium of sorts, where they are allowed to inhabit any creature or object. Likewise, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* utilizes ambient aesthetics in creating a beautiful, walkable, and playable world that allows the audience to simply relax. Fizek writes that because ambient play is usually slow (as compared to traditional games), these games can usually be played in the background and therefore function as part of the player’s “daily rhythm” (xx). Thus, ambient games highlight both the computational processes by which games are made and “encompass all other artforms” (49).

Fizek’s thoughts on ambient games are significant to cinema studies in that they demonstrate how traditionally passive forms of entertainment are used (keeping a “comfort” show on in the background), but also note that ambient games add a new, more immersive element in that they require more player interaction. These games can bring a heightened sense of the comfort many have previously garnered from television. Since many ambient games do not require the player’s complete attention all the time, ambient gaming has a strong potential to become the dominant source of relaxation entertainment. As we have seen in the success of Netflix’s casual programming and the merger of HBO and Discovery brands to eliminate some of the former’s notion of prestige as a way of attracting casual viewers (see Brandon), the desire for relaxing/ambient entertainment is prominent.

Overall, Fizek’s analysis provides an imperative viewpoint for how we should be looking at both game studies and cinema. I was compelled by the fact that, in

addition to other concepts like ambience and spectatorship, Fizek's perspective on gaming points out that cinema is more like gaming than we think. Both media engage with the spectator in inter- and intra-active ways. Fizek's conclusions about the relationship between audience and media will likely be used as an important framework in the future, especially as cinema becomes more interactive. Early film games like "Bandersnatch" and "The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy Vs. The Reverend" and game films like *Until Dawn* and *The Quarry* are evidentiary of a future of the blurring of lines between cinema and gaming. As games become more like movies and movies become more like games, the spectator/consumer deserves to know how and when they are being manipulated, especially if it is the mechanism doing the work, rather than the narrative.

In *The Imaginary Signifier*, Christian Metz theorized that the fetishism of cinema is in its "physical state" (17). If this is true of cinema, it is even truer of gaming. The physical state of gaming requires its patrons to be aware of its mechanism, which only serves to immerse them even more. Fizek's argument in relation to Metz's leads to the conclusion that gaming, especially ambient and the like, not only functions similarly to cinema but also has even greater potential to convey messages and emotions.

If there were any criticism of this book to be had, it is only that it would be useful to hear Fizek expound her thoughts on cinematic interactivity to a greater extent. She does briefly mention the topic's broad scope and even discusses some of Netflix's interactive work like the *Black Mirror* episode "Bandersnatch," but given the gravity of her research a little bit more would have been a fantastic addition to the book.

Fizek's research is not only extremely interesting, but also appears to be on the cutting edge of new technologies and the ways we think about gaming. If Plato's age-old allegory of the cave tells us anything, it is that we should certainly be aware of what we are playing, watching, and consuming, even if it is just a game.

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Heiser, Jörg. *Double Lives in Art and Pop Music*. Sternberg Press, 2019.

Throughout *Double Lives in Art and Pop Music*, Jörg Heiser traces the multidisciplinary relationship between art and pop music to demonstrate an essential fulfillment within cultural production. When it comes to artistic careers, there is often a merging of disciplines that develops the career and/or social status of the artist. The necessary blend of talents is frequently met with a mutual understanding of a crossover between the artist and the musician. Whether that boundary is blurred or distinctly separated, Heiser defines the process as "context switching," a term that concerns *Double Lives in Art and Pop Music*. As the title implies, the career of an artist has an inherent doubleness in the remit of cultural production. Heiser's research explores how this duality is fulfilled against historical contradictions. He explores whether the drive is for a sociopolitical need or a requisite for creative longevity.

Heiser's research examines the overlap with examples from the 1960s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, uncovering the historical connection between art and pop music. This appears as an anticipatory project for the survival of the arts today with the increase of hyper mediatization. Heiser hypothesizes: "facing aesthetic, social, and economic contradictions in one context of production, circulation, and reception, an artist or musician attempts to look for solutions of these contradictions in another context" (21). In presenting this research, Heiser distinguishes that in adhering to this duality, the forms remain distinctive. Through a global understanding, Heiser provides evidence for how the context switching was achieved with detailed examples from Andy Warhol's Factory to Fatima Al Qadiri's contemporary continuation – with the latter



advancing the contemporary relevance of the author's study and exemplifying the recurrent relationship between art and pop music.

The introduction is essential in describing what the "context" is, suggesting that the variability of definition follows an oscillated continuum of societal development with the reception of art and pop music. Thus, it sets up the essential framework to organizing Heiser's research in a thematic and chronological approach. This is an endeavor that is placed against the backdrop of Thierry de Duve's "whatever," facilitating the double life within artistic activity, coinciding with the notion that art is arbitrary, "breaking through any kind of tautological justification of art to arrive at a third position" (13). The third position involves alternate contexts to bring art to the audience, aligning to the reception of music. Heiser is thorough in introducing the research and switches himself from present to past tense at the beginning of the first two chapters to transport the reader into the contexts he describes. Initially, the reader will find themselves on Kai Althoff's *Ashley's* (1996) LP cover before moving to Warhol's Factory in the 1960s; a creative context switch in and of itself to present the research.

The next two chapters provide concrete evidence to assess how an artist switches between art and pop music, exploring the varying necessity for why this was enacted among artists. For Warhol, he provides the physical embodiment of context switching, while consistently ensuring that it was achieved on his own terms, enriching his personal agency in swapping between art and pop music to essentially become the pop artist in a more literal sense and making it "a *social technique* of art" (Heiser 56, italics in original). The Factory, being an expressive, anti-mimetic utopia, displayed Warhol's independent need to context switch for personal attainment of combining the pop persona with his art, leading to the acquisition of managing The Velvet Underground.

For Yoko Ono and John Lennon, Heiser rethinks the dogmatic attitude that perpetuates the history of examining Ono's influence over Lennon and thus "remove[s] the layers of reception that obscure our view of Ono's artistic and musical oeuvre" (22). The author rightly establishes Ono's artistic entity as an avant-garde artist within her own right before the relationship with Lennon began, allowing the context switching to be evidenced. The couple appeared to oscillate into each other's discipline as Heiser quotes Ono: "we crossed over into each other's fields [...] from avant-garde left field to rock 'n' roll left field" (93). Heiser argues that in doing so Lennon and Ono "developed the utopian potential of context switching" (108) and explains that the political repercussions of their

role reversals became their main success, which exposed the socialization and stigmatization of their status as celebrities.

Continuing the chronology, in Chapter 3 Heiser examines the dissonance between art and pop music in 1960s West Germany, finding an inability to context switch within the society as “there was no absolute necessity for a simultaneity of art and pop music” (117). Although not as compelling as the previous examples, Heiser globalizes his concern and continues to conceptualize how the eventual context switch found its way into society in the 1980s. This demonstrates the importance of the given contexts as being enablers of the switching. The motive behind the examples of double life within this chapter exposes the political provocations that hindered immediate “simultaneity” but paved the way for the likes of Michaela Melián to do so, albeit with a continued attitude of “conceptual segregation between art and band activities” (173). Then, finally, bringing the research up to date in Chapter 4, Heiser explores the development of technology to advance (or hinder) the creation and consumption of art and pop music, identifying a utopian and dystopian discourse with application to Brian Eno, through to Fatimi Al Qadiri.

When concluding the research, Heiser admits the direction of his research was different from conceiving the idea in 1995 to publication in 2019, due to the changing attitude toward art and pop music “in economic terms” (261). Technological advancements posed a threat to the decline in pop music, enabling a boom in the art market, which further prolongs the relevance of the authors’ research for our current society. With the rise of artificial intelligence, Heiser’s assessment is more than evident of suggesting the “constellation of art/pop music thus anticipates that of art/neoliberal economy” (273), with the need for “artists and musicians to combine the power of aesthetic judgment with sociopolitically aware action” (280). Heiser’s work sets a firm foundation for others to follow, and the continued relevance opens new avenues for research to assess double lives within growing societal contradictions.

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Hilton, Paris. *Paris: The Memoir*. Dey Street Books, 2023.

As a teenager, Paris Hilton tried to explain to her worried parents that she felt safe when the paparazzi were following her. Hilton's parents should have asked why she felt so unsafe, but they did not. In *Paris: The Memoir*, the world-famous socialite explains how the paparazzi were a guarantee that she would not be raped. *Paris: The Memoir* is not the average celebrity tell-all. Instead, it stands out because Hilton builds off her experience with abuse to create an argument-driven work that critically analyzes American popular culture and concludes that the cruelty that happens to the "It Girl" happens "to all girls" (262).

Hilton organizes her memoir in a personalized, pop culture-spinning timeline. At the center is her girlhood entrance into the popular culture framework through the sexuality expressed in *Beverly Hills, 90210* and Calvin Klein commercials. From there, the line spins into an ADHD-affected adolescence and the darkness of a middle school teacher grooming her to become his secret girlfriend. To deal with her sneaking out and their fears, Hilton's parents shipped her off to live with various grandparents. Pushing her away made Hilton feel blamed for the teacher's actions and contributed to her urge to sneak out, which ended up with her being roofied and raped. From there, she turned toward parties and the need to be recorded by paparazzi. In the ultimate blaming of the child, her parents chose to have their then high school-age daughter sent to a lockdown CEDU (pronounced Cee-doo) facility, a daytime-talk-show-promoted corporation that made millions pretending to run schools and correction facilities for "troubled teens." Matriculation into the CEDU system began with Hilton being abducted in the middle of the night from her own bedroom. She screamed for her parents to save her, but they did not. Hilton's book joins many others about this type of child abuse, such as journalists Janet Hemlich's *Breaking Their Will* as well as books by survivors, including Alex Cooper's *Saving Alex*.

Hilton went through a sham CEDU graduation and re-entered a society filled with flip-phones, paparazzi, and selfies. It is no wonder that she only felt safe when the paparazzi were following her: if they were recording her every move, she knew nothing like the CEDU abduction or rape could happen to her again. Hilton's narration explaining the significance of phones, films, and music serve as compelling examples of how she can marry her life story to the popular culture landmarks that altered the way everyone saw themselves and lived their lives, adding strength to her argument about the "It Girls" being "all the girls." The use

of popular culture as the book's timeline also permits her to explain how she became an icon in a culture that wanted to turn her life (and the lives of others like Selena Gomez, Britney Spears, and Lindsay Lohan) into a national pastime of girl shaming. It was in this culture defined by multi-platform storytelling, a concept discussed by Leigh Edwards in the Spring 2023 issue of this journal, that Hilton decided to become a brand by turning "Paris Hilton" into a business.

Hilton's book contributes significantly to a long history of the abused "It Girl" that chronicles how a society elevates and then devours young women. Hilton cites Marilyn Monroe's *My Story* (1974) as a cornerstone of this bibliography. More recent memoirs include Pamela Anderson's *Love, Pamela* (2023), which is framed by a biographical narrative poem, Britney Spears's prison memoir *The Woman in Me* (2023), and *Glimmer* (2023) by Kimberly Shannon Murphy, stunt woman and body double for Cameron Diaz. Murphy's book explains that surviving abuse requires a "glimmer," a deeply rooted self-worth. It is the glimmer deep down inside that saves Anderson, Spears, and Murphy. For Paris Hilton, she knew she was valuable. Her grandmother always said she was not a cheap knock-off handbag, she was a Birkin. In other words, she is a commodity, but she is the best commodity.

What were these blonde icons surviving? In her writing, Hilton identifies the elements of the masculine gaze and the patriarchy, because her rapes always had an audience. Hilton outlines the backlash against the successful women, which Susan Faludi wrote about in 1991 and Molly Fischer, writing for the *New Yorker* in 2022, argued never went away. She explains how and why onlookers distrust the "It Girl" because of the circular logic that commodities consent to being commodified, to build off Kyle Hammond's argument in his Spring 2023 article for this journal. Hilton argues that if the "It Girl" is blamed for being raped, be it in-person or virtually, like the recent AI photos of Taylor Swift, then so too is the every-girl.

Because the blonde memoirs concern a white, golden-haired, and, in Hilton's case, wealthy experience, it may seem they do not matter in a world where women of color are imprisoned at a rate of 1.6 times more than white women, according to Monazzam and Budd writing for *The Sentencing Project* in 2023. Moreover, as Morgan Jenkins argues in *This Will Be My Undoing* (2018), when a human is both black and a woman the mostly white mainstream feminism is one of the perpetrators of silencing and devastation. Hilton agrees there is power in a "glimmer" born from the pop culture value of skin color and blonde hair, be it

from a bottle or not. Hilton purposefully adds that her “glimmer” originated in the grandmother who partly raised her: it is a generational inheritance. Yet being blonde did not save Hilton from abuse. She asks the reader to consider the pervasiveness of that abuse.

Hilton did not invent the paparazzi or the selfie. What she did was demand that the rise of “selfie culture isn’t about vanity; it’s about women taking back control of our images – and our self-image” (249). The selfie is about them feeling safe in their own bodies.

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Lee, SooJin, Korroch, Kate, and Khiun, Liew Kai (eds.). *Women We Love: Femininities and the Korean Wave*. Hong Kong UP, 2023.

Although I loved my (academic) year living in Korea and have a great affection for its culture, I confess that I have not been able to get into K-Pop, K-drama, or other aspects of Korean popular culture, despite the concerted efforts of friends and students both within Korea and abroad. That said, I find the Hallyu (Korean Wave) to be absolutely fascinating as a subject of study, and the edited volume *Women We Love: Femininities and the Korean Wave* provides readers with a good introduction to Hallyu specifically and feminist media studies more generally. All the chapters in this collection are strong and offer different insights to the reader. My focus is drawn by my own interests in representation and transnational popular culture, especially under repressive regimes.

Part 1 of the book is titled “Characters We Love” and it focuses on analyzing specific characters from Korean series. Kate Korroch’s chapter examining representations of female embodiment of “soft” masculinity in K-dramas in the context of problematizing hegemonic femininity is quite thorough, as is Maud Lavin’s examination of transnational reception of *Coffee Prince* and its lead “tomboy.” However, SooJin Lee’s chapter on the satire *God of the Workplace*, which analyzes the series’ representation of women as temporary workers, is one of the strongest chapters in the book. Miss Kim, the titular god, works solely to make a living rather than because she enjoys her work or believes in any long-term benefit. Lee contextualizes the series within Korea’s wider labor market, especially regarding ingrained Confucianist hierarchies and the change from expected lifelong employment prior to the 1997 monetary crisis to a more casualized form of employment following the crisis, something still very much in evidence today. Lee then moves from the general context of work to how the series plays with gender and gendered performance, observing that Miss Kim’s office attire is drab while her outside attire is exceedingly bold. As Lee notes, the character “thoroughly minimizes her gender and sexual identity to emphasize her

efficiency and productivity as an office worker” (63). Yet the playing with gender culminates in Kim saving her male nemesis from an explosion “aimed at unraveling and exposing irrationalities in contemporary Korean society and workplace culture” (65). Lee’s textual analysis is extremely thorough, which makes it a valuable resource not just for researchers looking at Korean media but also as an example that teachers could show students who are learning how to analyze a text.

Part 2 of the book, “More Than Girl Groups,” shifts the focus from characters to the trainee idol system and its impact on mixed-race representation and controversies (Lee and Abidin), as well as the turn toward strong female roles (“strong sisters” in K-Pop; Lee and Yi). Though the chapters in this section cover a wide range of critically important topics – one follows a child influencer through to adulthood while another traces the history of strong women in K-Pop – Douglas Gabriel’s chapter on North Korean pop band Moranbong Band stands out, as he analyzes both the pop group and its Japanese fans, the “Military-First Girls.” Gabriel argues that, rather than lacking in critical thought, the band’s fans demonstrate a nuanced engagement with the group that contrasts the “oversimplified conception [of the band that] ignores the unruly ways in which North Korean popular culture has proliferated domestically and globally” (96). The amount of material that Gabriel includes could easily fill a book in its own right; that is not meant as a criticism of the chapter’s breadth but instead as an appreciation of how he brings together these seemingly disparate strands as a starting point for other scholars looking to study NK-Pop in all its nuances rather than as a monolithic propaganda arm of the DPRK.

The final part of the book focuses on “Fans and Fan-Producers.” Of great importance are Stephanie Jiyun Choi’s chapter on how homoerotic performance is used to support heteronormativity; Liew Kai Khiun, Malinee Khumsupa, and Atchareeya Saisin’s chapter on Hallyu fans as activists protesting the Thai government (another topic deserving more academic work); and Erik Paolo Capistrano and Kathlyn Ramirez’s chapter on moving from objectification to empowerment of girl groups in K-pop. However, I find myself most interested in Gi Yeon Koo’s chapter looking at Iranian fans. Koo links the increasing use of social media as an “alternative public sphere” (176) for women to the engagement of Iranian fans with Korean dramas; as Korean culture is non-Western and, consequently, has been the subject of less study, Koo’s chapter provides a much-needed reminder that social-media-driven social empowerment and

autonomy for women is not an exclusively Western purview. Through qualitative and ethnographic interviews, Koo finds that the openness of K-dramas, especially about love and gender relations, are major draws for Iranian fans because such topics are heavily constrained and censored in Iran. According to Koo, online fan spaces also allow Iranian women to take positions of authority (literal and subcultural) that they are denied offline. Her point about Korean culture as being perceived as more “neutral” than Western culture is important and serves as a valid point of entry into research on Hallyu in other regions as well.

The brief span of a book review can rarely do justice to an edited volume and this review is no exception. Lee, Korroch, and Khiun have done a masterful job at collecting important, well-theorized, and incredibly interesting chapters and combining them into a valuable resource for scholars looking to understand and expand academic studies of Hallyu, regardless of whether they are fans of K-pop, K-drama, or other aspects of the Korean Wave. I think we can all love that.

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Millsap-Spears, Carey. *Star Trek Discovery and the Female Gothic: Tell Fear No*. Lexington, 2023.

Numerous analyses of how popular television fits into the literary Gothic form have been published in recent years. *Hannibal* (2013-2015) has been re-read as an adaptation of *Dracula* (Bacon 213), *Supernatural* (2005-2020) was picked apart for Gothic influences (Edmundson), and even the *Star Trek* universe’s Borg were examined as a Gothically twisted mirror of the kind of imperial domination generally accepted as normal (Mousoutzani 67; Millette 1202). Carey Millsap-Spears’s *Star Trek Discovery and the Female Gothic: Tell Fear No* is a timely addition to this literature. *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-2024), the first of the most recent wave of *Star Trek* series, is set to end this year. Given the cultural power of the *Star Trek* franchise, a monograph like this one is an appropriate sendoff.

Millsap-Spears grounds her argument in Ellen Moers’s “Female Gothic” (1974), and in comparisons with works of Female Gothic literature, mainly the works of Ann Radcliffe, as well as *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Jane Eyre* (1847).



Millsap-Spears distinguishes Female Gothic as a genre defined by specific conventions and tropes: the courageous Gothic Heroine; the mysterious elements that Heroine must rationalize (the Explained Supernatural); the duplicitous and sexually threatening Gothic Villain who menaces the heroine; the fantastically heightened version of patriarchal confinement which the Heroine must escape from (the Escape Narrative); the Sublime experiences that sweep the Heroine up in emotion; the Ineffectual Gothic Hero who attempts to save the Heroine but fails, leaving her to save herself; the final reintegration back into patriarchal normative society (the Circular Narrative); and others. Millsap-Spears successfully argues that *Star Trek: Discovery* contains and relies on these tropes to the point of itself being an example of the Female Gothic genre.

The first season of *Star Trek: Discovery* has its main character, Commander Michael Burnham, experiencing confinement (in literal incarceration after being stripped of her rank) and then escaping, first being mentally seduced by then being forced to escape from a devious villain who is sexually obsessed with her (Captain Lorca), saving herself from that villain (rather than her love interest saving her), and finally returning to her place in the patriarchal order (being pardoned and having her rank restored). All this happens against a backdrop of traditional Gothic elements such as cannibalism, incest, labyrinthine places filled with secret rooms, awe-inspiring nature, and dark secrets. Millsap-Spears rightly points out that despite the *Star Trek* title, these elements clearly mark *Star Trek: Discovery* as a Female Gothic story, according to her framework.

Nearly every element of the show can fit into this framework, according to Millsap-Spears. She reframes the secrecy and conspiracism that permeates *Star Trek: Discovery's* first season as a Supernatural element that Burnham must use rationality to explain. She shows how bright lights are used in the visual language of *Star Trek: Discovery* to denote the Sublime. She discusses how the first scene of the series – Burnham, along with her mentor and commanding officer Captain Philippa Georgiou, escapes from a desert planet – sets up the themes of an Escape Narrative. Dozens of small examples like this act as pillars of Millsap-Spears's persuasive argument.

Millsap-Spears also situates all of *Star Trek* inside the Female Gothic tradition. The franchise is science fiction, and therefore, she argues, inherently exists within the literary bloodline of *Frankenstein*, the first science fiction novel and a landmark Female Gothic text. Yet the franchise also contains many Gothic elements. Millsap-Spears plucks examples from fifty years of film and television,

showing how Khan, *Star Trek's* most iconic villain, is a Gothic Villain whose portrayal fits into a tradition of literary nineteenth century Orientalism, and how Counselor Troi displays the bravery of the Gothic Heroine in the face of sexual danger in both *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002). In this way she positions *Star Trek: Discovery* as a kind of realization of the franchise's genre destiny.

Although Millsap-Spears's argument is well-supported, there are places where I would like to see more depth. Specifically, in discussions of race and colonialism, Millsap-Spears rarely goes beyond mentioning that Burnham is breaking ground by being *Star Trek's* first Black female protagonist. She discusses *Star Trek's* colonialist roots as a connection to the Gothic genre, but she never fully explores the colonialist roots of the Gothic genre itself outside of arguing that some Gothic works "problematically deal with race" (72). Furthermore, while Millsap-Spears is aware of issues of race in *Star Trek*, she fails to develop this theme to its full potential. Race is not completely ignored, however; the author does discuss how Burnham's incarceration at the beginning of the series racializes her in contrast to *Star Trek's* theoretical post-racist ideals. She also mentions how Lorca's obsession with possessing Burnham sexually is inflected not just by the gender power dynamics between them but also by the racial ones, and how his behavior towards her calls to mind slavery. Yet there is less analysis on this topic than one might want. For example, Millsap-Spears does not present the fact that *Star Trek: Discovery's* Klingons, played by (mainly) white actors in racially coded makeup, cannibalize human characters as anything other than an example of a Gothic trope.

At this point, more than fifty years after its debut, *Star Trek* is a scholarly discipline unto itself. *Star Trek Discovery and the Female Gothic: Tell Fear No* draws attention to a newer element of the franchise and robustly connects *Star Trek* scholarship to the Gothic tradition. Those with a research interest in *Star Trek* or in the Gothic in popular media would do well to read this volume. Pedagogically, a chapter of this work would help situate modern science fiction in broader literary traditions, as well as explaining basic Gothic tropes.

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Sharlet, Jeff. *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War*. Norton, 2023.

*The Undertow* takes readers on a tour through some of the darkest corners of contemporary American culture. Sharlet has written extensively on the American far right, on religion, and on their often-perverse convergences, and that experience shows in this timely gem of literary nonfiction. The book begins in a surprising way: with an essay about singer, actor, and civil rights icon Harry Belafonte. This opening reflection draws on the author's personal acquaintance with Belafonte to bring him vibrantly to life by flashing back and forth between a portrait of him shortly before his death in April 2022 – "this still-beautiful, still-raging old man" (29) – and an ode to the underappreciated artistic genius and unflappable freedom fighter he was in his prime.

Sharlet leaves it to the reader to figure out why this book about the American far right today begins with a portrait of a singer and actor who was most politically active in the mid-20th century. Part of the answer, I think, is that a civil war must have at least two sides, and Sharlet wanted to tarry with the "good side" – to remind us of the good worth fighting for – before commencing the self-imposed nightmare of trying to understand the other side. To the same purpose, the short second chapter nostalgically recounts the author's experiences mingling with the Occupy Wall Street protesters in 2011, leaving the reader with

the image of a streetlamp's mellow light filtering through the leaves above a sleepy, smelly huddle of good intentions.

Yet Sharlet could have chosen more obvious, more current protagonists of the fight for social justice. Why Belafonte? Two reasons come to my mind. First is the embodiment of stubborn political militancy Sharlet finds in Belafonte. As the invocation of the Occupy movement also exemplifies, Sharlet is wary of identifying himself with – and thereby of comparing his far-right subjects to – the centrist, multiculturalist liberalism of the Democratic Party's mainstream. The book does not make clear where the author's specific political allegiance lies, and perhaps doing so would have diminished its literary value, but its framing division is not between, for example, Obama/Clinton/Biden and Donald Trump. It is between an astonishingly diverse array of characters whom Trump managed to coalesce into a unified movement and what Belafonte represents. That, in Sharlet's portrayal, is not so much the nonviolent progressivism popularly (though problematically) associated with Belafonte's close friend, Martin Luther King, Jr., as it is the seething desire to fight oppression that was instilled in Belafonte as a boy – a child of poor Jamaican immigrants to New York City – and never ceased animating his art and activism.

The second reason Sharlet chooses Belafonte as his emblem of righteousness is precisely Belafonte's seeming anachronism, or, to put the same thing more generously, his survival. Sharlet movingly depicts Belafonte mourning his friend, Reverend King, whose death still pains Belafonte more than half a century later (28-29). Yet the image also communicates that Belafonte survived and kept fighting: through bottomless pain and against ever-renewed opposition, his artistry largely forgotten except for one misunderstood song, he remained tough, stubborn, and militant. His person connects the struggle against today's far-right white supremacy with the struggle against yesterday's mainstream white supremacy, reminding us of how little time separates them and making us question, as the book does throughout, whether white supremacy ever really was relegated to the fringes of American culture, as the progressive historiography underlying centrist liberalism nervously implies.

The structure of *The Undertow*, to substitute one aquatic metaphor for another, resembles a whirlpool, at its center the "Slow Civil War" (not a metaphor) identified in the subtitle. For seven chapters, Sharlet bobs around the whirlpool's edges, guiding readers in a sometimes Gonzo-esque first-person voice through Trump rallies, a men's rights convention, and a "mini-mega" church in Miami

where wealthy Christian hipsters rock out for a savior who is, they repeatedly affirm, “so good” (71-72). (The latter chapter, called “Ministry of Fun,” is in my view the book’s most entertaining.) Along the way, readers meet QAnon “researchers” and disgruntled war veterans, self-justifying sex offenders and devoted couples whose love warms in the exhaust of Donald Trump’s private plane. Finally, of course, readers encounter many, many people with guns.

Then comes the plunge: the book’s central chapter, also called “The Undertow” and occupying nearly half of its length, recounts a solitary road trip from California back to the author’s home in Vermont, beginning at a rally in belligerent memorial of Ashli Babbitt, the 35-year-old woman who was killed by U.S. Capitol police on January 6, 2021. At the periphery of the rally – which features, on stage, Babbitt’s tearful, furious mother – participants and sympathetic local police fight off Antifa activists, one of the few times in the book when we see the left side of the “Slow Civil War” assume any agency. As he drives from west to east, Sharlet attends several homegrown churches, where he finds charismatic preachers spreading the gospel of liberal pedophilia. He visits the restaurant owned by Colorado Congresswoman Lauren Boebert, “Shooters” (like Hooters but with guns). He meets heavily armed militia members whose whole personalities seem to be consumed with the threats to their way of life they perceive lurking around every corner, even when they live in the desert, hundreds of miles from the cities they believe are the malignant sources of such threats.

Sharlet says that this cross-country journey is guided by the pursuit of “the ghost of Ashli Babbitt” (200), but this is a literary conceit he cannot, and does not try to, sustain. It is a useful way of imposing an imagined unity on what was really a task too diffuse and open-ended to be clearly defined at the outset: to find out what’s wrong, to articulate, from a position of deep personal investment, the pathologies of a big, complicated nation at a perilous point in its history. Sharlet’s tone, which lingers with the reader to darken their outlook and depress their mood, conveys mourning, bewilderment, and insomniac paranoia. But is it paranoia or not? How much danger are we really in? That is the overarching question Sharlet leaves open, seeming implicitly to recognize that it is still possible to ignore all this ugliness if one chooses to, and that he has found it because he looked for it, driven by a fevered curiosity that he never really interrogates, which he presumes as the spirit of the age.

*The Undertow* begins with an unexpected profile of an American musician and civil rights activist, and it ends in just the same way, though the closing

chapter features not Belafonte but 20th century folk singer Lee Hays. While Sharlet's portrayal of Belafonte is triumphant, celebrating his artistic prowess and the defiant strength of personality he maintained into old age, the concluding discussion of Hays is deeply sad. His story is not that of someone, like Belafonte, who overcame injustice to become exactly who he wanted to be but rather of a talent that crumbled under the weight of lonely self-denial: Sharlet strongly suggests a connection between Hays' decline and his unacknowledged homosexuality. Hays is best known for his rendition of "Goodnight, Irene." He collaborated with Leadbelly, Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie. Yet the image with which Sharlet leaves us shows Hays as old and alone, both legs lost to diabetes, wiling away his last days with liquor and cigarettes. Just as with the opening essay on Belafonte, readers are left to their own resources to answer various questions: Why this? Why this person? Why this portrayal of him? Why this mood?

One answer is that what Sharlet has found to be most deeply wrong with American society, beneath the many eddies of discontent through which he has been drifting, is a refusal or an incapacity on the part of the nation to look at itself honestly, at its history and at the true extent of violence and division therein – an insistence on ignoring the ugliness. Several times in the book Sharlet invokes the analogy of a "body-politic" to a human body, asking, "How does a body come apart?" (237) He leaves us with a specific body that answers that question: how did Lee Hays' body come apart? Most immediately, it succumbed to addiction and disease. More fundamentally, in Sharlet's telling, it disintegrated because of Hays' inability to look at himself honestly and because of his society's refusal to let him.

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*Five Nights at Freddy's*. Dir. Emma Tammi. Screenplay by Scott Cawthon, Seth Cuddeback, and Emma Tammi. Perf. Josh Hutcherson, Matthew Lillard, Piper Rubio. Universal Pictures, 2023.

*Five Nights at Freddy's*, or *FNAF*, may be full of animatronic nostalgia and nightmares, but there is more behind the film adaptation than it seems. The film stems from Scott Cawthon's 2014 video game series about the abandoned Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria and the unspeakable horrors that occurred there (Universal Pictures). As someone who went into this film with a limited knowledge of the lore and completely unaware of the cult following, I expected to be scared – and I was thanks to the Balloon Boy jump scares – but I did not expect to sympathize with the murderous animatronics: Freddy, Chica, Foxy, and Bonnie.

Calling back to the earlier *FNAF* video games, the film demonstrates the importance of imagery and how people use pictures to communicate, sometimes in ways words cannot. This takeaway comes from the character Dr. Lillian, who states:

You know, pictures hold tremendous power for children. Before we learn to speak, images are the most important tool we have for understanding the world around us. What's real, what matters to us most. These are things children learn to communicate almost exclusively through pictures. This film is full of imagery, all of which is most evidently used to drive the plot forward (Miyamoto). So, with this review, I focus on the role imagery has in how *Five Nights at Freddy's* visually tells the story of Mike Schmidt (Josh Hutcherson) saving his sister, Abby (Piper Rubio), from William Afton's (Matthew Lillard) Pizzeria of Peril.

Imagery is used in the film's title sequence to provide a backstory into the events leading up to where the narrative begins. The title sequence mirrors the 8-bit video game format to explain exactly how the characters got to the present story (Wolf). A man dons a yellow rabbit suit and takes the five children, one-by-one, offscreen. This seems unimportant to the unfamiliar viewer until the end of the film when it is revealed that the yellow rabbit kidnapped and killed the children, stuffing their bodies inside the animatronics.

The title sequence also foreshadows the story by lingering on a child's drawing depicting five children holding hands with a yellow rabbit. However, this drawing covers up another drawing, thus foreshadowing that something within the

story is not as it seems. By the end, viewers know this to be true when the yellow rabbit turns out to be William Afton, the man who murdered the children. The foreshadowing of William being the yellow rabbit is also represented with yellow hues. When viewers first meet William, even though the film introduces him by another name, he is wearing a yellow shirt (Lee). More foreshadowing occurs when Matthew Lillard's name flashes on screen just as the man in the yellow rabbit suit dons the rabbit head in the video game-esque title sequence.

Children's drawings play a huge role in the plot as a Chekov's gun of sorts (Perelman). Abby spends much of the film drawing pictures that initially seem unimportant, but they ultimately allow Abby to communicate with the ghost children possessing the animatronics and to save the day. The ghost children consider the yellow rabbit their friend because of the drawings on the wall. Viewers are shown these drawings at the beginning of the film and Mike, figuring out what happened, tells Abby, "The drawings. The yellow rabbit hurt your friends. Show them what really happened." Abby then removes the false drawing and replaces it with the truth, a drawing that shows the yellow rabbit killing the ghost children. Abby's drawing sparks their memory of what really happened to them, making them turn on the yellow rabbit.

While the drawings are mainly used to move the plot forward, their double function as a device to communicate with the ghost children helps to remind viewers that these characters have endured trauma. Those who experience trauma sometimes cannot use words to express themselves and have difficulty understanding what is said to them ("How Trauma Can Affect Communication"). This idea plays out in the film; early on, Abby, who had to grow up without her parents, was unable to articulate her love for Mike via words. Yet, as Dr. Lillian points out, Abby can draw how much he means to her. As such, it is not unreasonable to see the ghost children as likewise unable to verbally communicate or make sense of their feelings.

Overall, I enjoyed watching the film even though it is catered more toward the loyal fanbase. Despite not knowing a lot about FNAF going into this film, I still thought it told an interesting story that has compelled me to learn more about the video games and the lore behind them.

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*Godzilla Minus One*. Dir. Takashi Yamazaki. Screenplay by Takashi Yamazaki. Perf. Ryunosuke Kamiki, Minami Hamabe, and Sakura Andô. Toho Studios, 2023.

*Godzilla Minus One*, released in 2023, was written and directed by Takashi Yamazaki, who also oversaw the special effects. It stars Ryunosuke Kamiki, Minami Hamabe, Yuki Yamada, Munetaka Aoki, Hidetaka Yoshioka, Sakura Ando and Kuranosuke Sasaki. The film is produced by Toho, the studio that produced the very first *Godzilla* film in 1954 as well as some of Japan’s most famous cinematic masterpieces, including *Seven Samurai* from 1954 and *Ran* from 1985 (Rawle 48). *Minus One* is the 33rd *Godzilla* film produced by the company and the fifth from Toho in the Reiwa era, which includes *Shin Godzilla* (2016) and three anime *Godzilla* films. *Minus One* is a standalone prequel that rides on the previous success of *Shin*, which, while receiving mixed reviews outside of Japan despite positive reviews within the country, made \$78 million against its production budget of \$15 million, making it one of the most successful *Godzilla* films ever made (Rawle 234). *Minus One*, which has received generally better reviews outside Japan (Hamedy), is set to outpace *Shin*, already making

around \$100 million from a similar production budget. I start here to foreground an important point: *Minus One* has been commercially successful, speaking to the continuing power of the Godzilla character and its ability to adapt to contemporary audiences.

*Godzilla Minus One* tells the story of Godzilla's emergence and first attack on postwar Japan through the eyes of Kōichi Shikishima (Kamiki), an ex-kamikaze pilot who failed to go through with his suicide mission during the war. Near the end of the war, Shikishima witnesses Godzilla, named after a local legend, attack a garrison on Odo Island. Only Shikishima and one other spectator survive the assault. Later, while navigating the crumbling economy and infrastructure of war-ravaged Japan, a nuclear-bomb-mutated Godzilla attacks several warships on its way to the mainland. Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union mean that the Japanese are on their own, and only Shikishima and a group of Japanese navy veterans are left to protect Japan from Godzilla.

The film folds several complex themes into its narrative. At its center is the trauma and the survivor's guilt Shikishima feels due to not completing his mission and outliving his parents, who were killed in the bombing of Tokyo. Shikishima's inner torment mirrors the trauma of the nation as it rebuilds after the war. Related themes include reckoning with the treatment of the public and the soldiers by the imperial government in their handling of the war as well as government ineffectiveness in its aftermath. Shikishima, trying to find meaning after his own experiences in the war, navigates a Japan destroyed: rubble, hunger, poverty, and suffering are rampant in the Japan he returns to. In this film, the Japanese empire's desire to become a world power, at any cost, is one of the true villains, the effects of which echo down through the generations. At the same time, the film narrates the growing tensions between the world's new, postwar superpowers: the U.S. and Russia.

Ultimately, the Japanese people are caught between all four of these monsters – the traumas left from the imperial government's handling of the end of the war, the U.S., Russia, and Godzilla. Already we begin to see how *Minus One*, continuing from *Shin*, differentiates itself from the American versions of Godzilla depicted in recent MonsterVerse films like *Godzilla* (2014), *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), and *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021). In those films, which all hinge on more typical instances of action movie sequences and which heavily imbed American conspiracy culture into their narratives, Godzilla is portrayed as a sympathetic character who works to protect earth and humanity from various

threats. This reframing of the monster strips it of its original, metaphorical power, in which Godzilla represents anxieties surrounding the violent transition to modernity that World War II continued from the colonial period, by putting the monster to work for humans, thus reproducing the hubris the development of Godzilla was originally meant to criticize. This hubris was tackled in the form of nuclear arms in the first Godzilla film; *Shin* added nuclear power and governmental inefficiency to the list of threats the kaiju represents, and *Minus One* adds superpower politics and fascist histories to the mix.

There is one aesthetic choice from the filmmakers I want to emphasize, as I think it represents, cogently, this return to form. *Minus One* reinscribes the environment by denaturalizing its depiction of Godzilla, who becomes increasingly less “natural,” particularly in its movements, as the film continues. The first Godzilla film is commonly read as having a heavy emphasis on environmental concerns, particularly as they intersect with nuclear anxieties. When the U.S. made its first Godzilla film in 1998, viewers saw a new style of monster, clearly inspired by *Jurassic Park* (1992). Here, Godzilla moves and acts like an animal. Later, as we get to the MonsterVerse, Godzilla begins to take on motivations and becomes tied to the geologic deep time history of the earth, and the narratives take on a stronger emphasis on conspiracy theories. In other words, as Godzilla is naturalized, the narratives in which he exists move toward more specifically U.S. political themes.

In *Minus One*, however, we see a Godzilla that, at first reveal, moves something like the T-rex from *Jurassic Park* but that, as the film progresses, becomes stiffer, more upright, and less recognizable as an animal. This evolution reaches its apotheosis at the film’s climax, as it is revealed in Godzilla’s demise that he is no longer fully operating under the biological constraints of death. This move towards an unnatural Godzilla highlights the environmental degradations that come with the new, nuclear modernity being awakened in the world as the U.S. and Russia square off under the political rules of mutually assured destruction.

In the end, *Godzilla Minus One* continues a trend started by *Shin Godzilla*: a welcome return to form, a retaking of a Japanese icon by a Japanese filmmaker seeking to reinscribe substance into the spectacle of the kaiju film genre. *Minus One* makes it clear that the potential for the genre to address contemporary anxieties has not been exhausted and that the visual metaphor of the giant monster still carries weight. Perhaps even more weight, as issues like climate change

“[exceed] our framings of the world and [press] chaos, complexity, and nonlinearity upon us” (Bould 14) and put to the fore “the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene” (Trexler 14).

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Today’s board games are diverse in mechanisms and presentation, richly imagined and appealing to a wide audience. They provide an escape, for an hour or two (or more), into locations, times, and professions far removed from one’s contemporary experience. *Legacy of Yu* tasks players with assuming the role of the legendary Yu the Great, the first emperor of the Xia dynasty of ancient China. The instruction book establishes the setting as follows:

During the reign of Emperor Yao, the people of ancient China were constantly plagued by deadly floods along the Yellow River. Eager to put an end to the devastation, Yao selected Gun, one of his officials, to devise a plan. After nine years of failed attempts using dams and dikes, Gun’s

employment came to a questionable end. After his passing, Yu inherited his father's work. Learning from Gun's failures, Yu set out to construct a series of canals to direct the surging river into nearby fields and smaller waterways.

Yu is a mythical figure dating back to 2,200 B.C., and he succeeded in controlling the river after 13 long years of work. Yu is revered as a principled, morally upright individual who provided a model for future emperors. Because no contemporaneous records exist of Yu, the story has many variations. The following sources provide different sketches of this person: Augustyn, 2023; Colville, 2020; National Geographic Society, 2023; Travel China Guide, 2023.

Like many great board games, history is simply a jumping off point into another world. Developed by Shem Phillips of New Zealand-based Garphill Games, *Legacy of Yu* is a single-player legacy game. Legacy games, popularized by *Risk Legacy* (2011), are board games in which the game itself changes with each playthrough: new mechanisms might be added between games, a story might be developed, and even the board itself might permanently change. As a single-player experience, *Legacy of Yu* takes about one hour to play through, with the goal of constructing enough canals along the river before barbarians overwhelm the player characters. Players can lose by failing to build enough canals before an ever-moving flood washes them away, or by taking too much damage from attacking barbarians. Win or lose, the campaign continues until the player has either lost seven times or won seven times. The campaign, then, might last a minimum of seven games (seven straight wins or seven straight losses) up to a maximum of 13 games (e.g., six losses and seven wins).

As a single-player experience, the player is tasked with managing resources, recruiting townsfolk, fighting barbarians, constructing buildings, and building canal segments. The game board is relatively small, depicting a river along with farms, outposts, and huts. The top of the board is lined with townsfolk and barbarian cards. As the game progresses, ever more barbarian cards are added in each round, providing an escalating challenge to the player. The player, meanwhile, recruits townsfolk cards into a draw deck. Each round begins with a harvest, gaining various supplies and workers, while also drawing townsfolk cards. When cards are played, they yield more supplies, workers, or fighters, which can then be used to construct buildings, build canals, or fight barbarians. Game pieces include a mix of wooden and punchboard pieces, along with a range of cards.

The first few playthroughs, I found the mechanisms a bit overwhelming because there are so many possible things to do each round before the barbarians regroup or the flood advances. It is entirely possible I missed a few actions or even played the game incorrectly at times. By the third game, and after yet another reading of the rule book, I finally grasped the flow of the game.

To make this a legacy game, there is also a story deck and story book. Sometimes, cards are marked with a numbered, golden turtle in the corner. When that card is played, the reader is called to open the story book to the appropriate entry. Written like journal entries by Benedict Hewetson in the voice of Yu, these story segments provide color to the game's proceedings. For example, there is a mini storyline that plays out across three games regarding missing food from the camp's provision stores; at the conclusion of the story, it is revealed that a monkey has stolen the food, who then becomes a permanent addition to the townsfolk deck. Other storylines revolve around conflicts with the barbarians: periodically, new groups of barbarians are added to the barbarian deck, often more difficult to defeat than the standard barbarian. These extra cards come from the story deck. Old cards are retired into the history pile, never to be used again for the remainder of the campaign. None of these changes, thankfully, are permanent; the campaign is fully resettable.

At the conclusion of each game, whether the player has won or lost, they will read another entry from the story book. Here, Yu writes to his wife, Tushanshi, recounting his successes and failures. If the player is defeated by barbarians, they will read one entry, and if they are defeated by the flood, another. Victory and Defeat cards randomize the order these story segments are read, adding interest and variety to the game. The campaign is self-balancing, becoming easier or harder depending on the conclusion of each game. If a player loses, they start the next game with additional bonuses, like extra resources or protections from the barbarians. If the player wins, new barbarians are often added to the deck, along with other features like a fortress, which protects the barbarians and makes them even harder to defeat, or the canal gets harder to construct. It is a beautiful system that makes each playthrough fresh and unique.

As a longtime board gamer, I was drawn to this game for one big reason: I am currently in a stage of life where playing board games with other people is nigh impossible. I have a two-year-old daughter and another baby on the way, making my free time extremely limited. My wife and I are so exhausted by the end of the day that we only have a little time to ourselves after putting our daughter to bed.

While I one day look forward to gaming with my children, that will be a few years away. A single player legacy game, then, provided an accessible way for me to get back into board gaming, to escape to another world for 16 or 17 hours over the course of six weeks. The art and graphic design (by Sam Phillips) are exquisite, transporting me to a world of adventure. The storybook entries, coupled with the varied card designs for the townsfolk and barbarians, helped me imagine what it may have been like to live at this time, performing this work. I do not know enough about ancient China to judge the accuracy of this game's portrayal of Yu or the work of controlling the Yellow River. Perhaps nobody can say with certainty who he was or what he did. While the game features no magic or monsters, it's a fantasy portrayal through and through.

This game was genuinely difficult. I lost in my first three playthroughs. Each time I lost, I started the next game with more and more benefits. After a string of five wins in a row, I thought the game was getting too easy, so I voluntarily discarded my extra bonuses. Then I promptly lost the ninth game. I started the 10th game with another bonus, which was short-lived, as the barbarians were becoming harder and harder to defeat. I lost games 11 and 12 quite quickly, which was a little embarrassing as I thought I had a handle on this game's mechanisms by this point. This led me to the 13th game, the final game of the campaign: I would either lose my seventh game, or win my seventh game, triggering the final journal entry in the story book. This final game was close, but a series of fortuitous card draws kept me abreast of the barbarians and flood, ending in a final victory. The last diary entry was the longest yet, providing a fitting end to Yu's 13-year task of taming the Yellow River. It was then that I learned that if I finished the campaign with three or less defeats, it would trigger another story segment, perhaps an even greater victory. Alas, I did not earn that, so I refrained from peaking in the book. The instructions claim that the player will only have seen 40-60% of the hidden content at the conclusion of a campaign, providing incentive to play the campaign again.

For now, I will loan the game to my brother, then return to it in three to four years once the mechanisms, strategies, and story have begun to fade and I can see the game with fresh eyes again. Perhaps in a decade, I will introduce the game to my kids, and we will live this story again.

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*Reservation Dogs*. Created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi. FX Productions, 2021-2023. Hulu.

*Reservation Dogs* is a critically acclaimed, groundbreaking Indigenous television series – the first to be produced by a full Indigenous crew. From the moment TV screens were graced with streaming privileges, *Reservation Dogs* has been an intentionally executed story. For example, the pilot episode of the series, "F\*ckin' Rez Dogs," aired on International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, August 9, 2021. The series, which consists of three seasons and 28 episodes, wrapped up with its finale funeral episode "Dig" in September 2023. For the first time in Fourth World cinema, a mainstream Indigenous-led television series has shown audiences the humor and heartbreak that constitutes generational storytelling with a tenor of humility and pride. *Reservation Dogs* is a comedy television series that uses popular culture as a vehicle for storytelling, allowing viewers to be taken on an otherwise difficult journey with gentle direction. The show is an entrance point for academics considering how to understand the intersection of Indigenous storytelling, mainstream media, and popular culture.

Showrunners Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi are well known in the entertainment industry. Harjo is a citizen of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma,



USA; Waititi, a New Zealander, identifies with his Maori and Jewish ancestry. Both men are prolific filmmakers and industry professionals.

The series' main cast follows Elora (Devery Jacobs), Bear (D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai), Cheese (Lane Factor), and Willie Jack (Paulina Alexis), as they search for ways to connect with their friend Daniel, whose suicide changed their world overnight. These five are the Reservation Dog gang, the youngest generation of the braided story of an Oklahoma reservation's memories whose petty crime is all in pursuit of traveling to Daniel's dream destination of California, which the remaining four achieve at the end of the second season. In the third season, the gang is mentored by their older generational family members and friends on the reservation, which prepares them for navigating life as Indigenous Americans. The rural backdrop of Okmulgee, Oklahoma is an homage to Harjo's childhood living on an Oklahoma Reservation. The supporting cast includes three break-out Indian Country stars, the twin rappers Mose and Mekko, and Nathan Apodaca of "Dreams" TikTok fame.

The series is an act of resistance against misinformation, mediated stereotypes, and injustice, which have long caused harm to Indigenous communities. A recurring fixture of the series, Bear's spirit guide is a subverted Hollywood Indian stereotype character. "Spirit" (Dallas Goldtooth) died at the Battle of Little Bighorn, though he did not die from fighting. His warrior attire consists of an 1800s buckskin and beaded visage, complete with twin turkey feathers fixed into his long flowing hair. Spirit appears to Bear throughout the storyline to provide meditations on life with succinct and snappy self-awareness like "Hey, listen up, little fucker. I'm trying to give you some ancestor teachings here" ("Mabel"). Harjo notes that "If I asked most people in the world to draw a Native American, that's what they would draw. They would draw an Indian that was dressed in buckskins from the 1800s. They wouldn't draw me. They wouldn't draw any of the characters on the show. So, it was almost like giving people some familiar territory and then turning it on its head" (qtd. in Gross). Yet Spirit is not the only character who takes the audience into familiar territory, only to subvert expectations.

The third episode of Season 3, "Deer Lady," masterfully tells the story of the boarding school experience through the fictional setting of St. Nicholas Training School. This episode converses with horror genre conventions, appealing to the sensibilities set in precedent by television horror genre series like *American Horror Story* and 1970s films (Schneider), with specific camera angles and

effects, language and sound effects, and the gory “Deer Lady” character (Kaniehtiio Horn). This episode responds to recent years’ global news coverage of mass graves discovered at Indian Boarding Schools in the U.S. and Canada. Children were sent to one of the 523 active schools during the 19th and 20th century in America. According to an interview with *Variety* magazine writer Michael Schneider, Harjo wanted to take an opportunity to tell the truth of the boarding school experience in a matter-of-fact way:

I just wanted to make something that represented that experience, to show people what the reality was. To show people how it must have felt, to show people what it felt like sitting in those cafeterias and having people yell at you for speaking your language. We all have family that went through this. All of our uncles, all of our grandmas and grandpas. These stories were told to us in a very matter of fact way and that’s how I wanted to tell this story. Instead of reading it in a history book, I wanted to put it in this way so you could understand what it might feel like... reminding people that these were young kids that were abused and sometimes killed (qtd. in Schneider).

Furthermore, *Reservation Dogs* is an entry into the open conversation of the state of popular culture at the beginning of the 20s. The title of the series is a nod to Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), which Harjo and Waititi came up with together. In an interview with NPR, Harjo continues “And then it was, well, if we’re going to have this show where these kids are living through and constantly referencing pop culture, like we have to tip our hat to the master of that” (qtd. in Gross). The references to popular culture are numerous and give the audience a sense of Indigenous American popular culture through the inclusion of social media influencers such as in the Season 2, Episode 6 installment “Decolonativization.” The characters are also thoughtfully curated with popular culture references in mind. Cheese’s impressive t-shirt collection, for example, includes everything from *Naruto* (2002-2007), a Japanese anime series popular in the early 2000s, to the American rock band Rage Against the Machine (Zuckerman).

While the series concluded on a satisfying note, the *Reservation Dogs*-verse is still open and rife with possibilities. Here is a television series that invites viewers in through the lens of comedy to understand and explore the contemporary experiences of Indigenous Americans. Positioned as part of mainstream popular

culture, *Reservation Dogs* is a generative series with many angles to approach for study, education, outreach, and enjoyment.

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# POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

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The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is an academic, peer-reviewed, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study popular culture. The journal serves the MPCA/ACA membership, as well as scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world. To learn more, visit [www.mpcaaca.org/popular-culture-studies-journal](http://www.mpcaaca.org/popular-culture-studies-journal).

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### TOPICS COVERED:

Based on analysis of the proceedings of the Midwest PCA/ACA and the national organization reveals that most popular culture scholars are interested in American-based:

- Film
- Music and Dance
- Television
- Sports
- Celebrities and Brands
- Literature
- Comics/Graphic Novels
- Games
- Animation
- Theater
- Fashion
- Computers
- Social Media
- World Wide Web
- Mobile Computers
- Professional Wrestling
- Archives and Museums
- Food and Drink
- Fairs, Festivals, and Carnivals
- Toys
- DIY and Crafting

However, many scholars approach these topics from an interdisciplinary perspective, which adds significant value over single-issue or more focused/specialized journals.

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